

REVIEW OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT OF DEPRESSED CLASSES IN BIHAR: A SYNOPTIC UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract: This article is an effort to unveil synoptic understanding of political participation and empowerment of Dalits in Bihar. The article will primarily figure out political consciousness and awareness of Dalits, (Scheduled Castes), their political participation with others and their political status regarding socio-political hierarchy in the state level. In this regard, it will focus on how political participation has brought a sense of empowerment in terms of their power-sharing and access to the decision-making process through their participation especially in the state level political organizations mainly on reserved seats.

Keywords: Dalits, Political Consciousness, Empowerment, Political Participation, Decision Making.

Introduction

Dalits who are constitutionally known as Scheduled Castes constitute one of the most important sections of population in Indian society. Prior to India's independence, these population groups were generally referred as 'Depressed Classes' (used by British Officials). The term 'Dalit' was first used in journalistic writings as back as 1931 to connote the Untouchables and popularized in the early 1970s with the Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra. As now used, it deals with a condition of being underprivileged and deprived of basic rights for those people who are suppressed on account of their lowly birth. (Ram, 1995, 24; Michael, 1999, 16). These castes are scattered in all the states, except Nagaland, Andaman Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep. Bihar is one of the most populous states with regards to Dalit population even after its division and formation of the newly state of Jharkhand in 2000. Archaeologically, Dalits have been the most subordinated communities in India in general and Bihar in particular. They are socially, economically, educationally and politically most backward as compared to the people of other castes and communities. They are stigmatized people and suffer from numerous disabilities which are regulated through the religious belief and practice. Most of them have low economic status, lack of political power, low of literacy and educational level and social mobility (Ram, 2018).

In view of the above, the present article is an attempt to explore a synoptic understanding of political participation and empowerment of Dalits or Scheduled Castes in Bihar in the context of their political participation in political awareness, policy-making process, voting behaviour and their empowerment through

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participating in the state legislature, Parliament and local level organizations. To begin with, let us argue that there is a general agreement among scholars that there has been a widespread ideological awakening among various Dalit communities.

It is stated that the criteria for measuring this ideological change are related to a new awareness of pain and self-respect to a greater active participation in the various socio-political movements (Franco, 2002, 23). Recent writings on this topic suggest similar indicators of a change in identity. Michael (1999, 113), for example, acknowledges that an emerging Dalit identity and social consciousness has created a new political consciousness among poor rural Dalits. Likewise, Beteille (2000) speaks of a process of uneven development and addresses the question of whether rapid changes in the ideological, symbolic components of identity due to political mobilization have translated into structural changes in the pattern of resources ownership. In this regard, we need to understand the definitional meaning of political participation. According to Conway (2000, 3), political participation may be defined as “those activities of citizens that attempt to influence the structure of government, the selection of government authorities or the policies of government”. Now, Beteille (1999, 589-90) analyses empowerment to certain context in Indian society. It is a “nutshell that context is the contradiction between a hierarchical social order and a democratic political system.” He opines further that the “idea of empowerment may be involved in virtually any context: in speaking about human rights, about basic needs, about economic security, about capacity building, about skill formation or about the conditions in a dignified social existence.” But Jogdand (2003) views that empowerment is to be understood in terms of bringing Dalits out of their degraded social status, accurate poverty, and deprivation. In other words, empowerment of weaker sections means progress in their overall socio-economic conditions and upward enhancement in their status and addressing their genuine issues in a more organized fashion and putting pressure on the states for its effective intervention in the future. Here, we shall analyze below political consciousness and a sense of empowerment among Dalits through different phases of development in the state of Bihar.

Political Consciousness among Dalits

If we adhere political consciousness among Dalits in the state of Bihar, it is true that there was no clear-cut political organization among the Dalits in Bihar before Independence. There was caste Panchayat in each Dalit caste that appears to have had a somewhat defined form and proper structural shape. Yet, it had neither traditional office-bearer nor a well-defined hierarchy among them. Elderly persons of the particular caste used to decide its social and religious matters. There was also a traditional village Panchayat to discuss questions or settle differences or disparities that aroused in the village community. In this way, Vidarthi and Mishra (1977) have observed that the Scheduled Castes belonging to different caste groups

were in close contact with the village Panchayat. This was the only way in which the Scheduled Castes were taking an active part in all village activities. Regarding democratic structure and functioning of the village Panchayat, Singh (1996) points out that change took place in it in Bihar after implementation of the Bihar Panchayat Act, 1993, followed by the Bihar Panchayat Elections Rule 1995. He opines that the forthcoming Panchayat elections in Bihar ought to be a decisive battle for social justice. It was, no doubt, to bring about change the pattern in the power distribution in the rural society of Bihar. Power was likely to be shifted to the elected leaders of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and of Other Backward Castes (OBCs). Thus, he hypothesized that an increase of power of the weaker sections was corresponding loss of power of stronger sections. In a similar fashion, Lai (1997) analyses the political renaissance and power structure in Bihar. Earlier, it was not allowed to percolate downwards in the caste hierarchy. It was at the top with the lower castes remaining vertically tied to be the upper castes in a patron-client relationship. This unnatural dominance lasted long in the absence of a movement for resisting the discrimination. In his own words, "Everything seemed to be lost. But eventually there was a massive upheaval that led to a consolidation among the forces that had so far remained deprived. The emerging power structure is loaded in the favour of lower castes. It has been effective in ensuring political presentation to the new social strata. Inducted recently in the political arena, the elsewhere excluded have now acquired a locale in power structure that was earlier denied to them" (ibid, 34).

Thus, the political scenario of the state of Bihar is getting changed. The Scheduled Castes have become politically conscious. It has been noticed that they know their political rights and do not take things lying down. They are also divided into several political parties such as Congress, BJP, CPI, JDU, RJD, LJP and so on. It has also been observed that they are well acquainted with the worth qualities of a political party. They also know which of the political parties is likely to help them. In other words, they do not believe in one political leader but believe in different political parties and leaders. So is the case of Dalits in other states also. For instance, Pai (2000) and Kumar (2002) notice the political development of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh after formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984 by Kanshi Ram. However, the Dalits in Bihar and other states in the country, Dalits in U.P. have emerged as dominant castes. The reasons underlying this development are: protective discrimination, rapid democratization of the party leading to heightened social awareness and politicization and economic development in the state. But such development has not taken place among the Dalits in Bihar. After Independence, the Indian Constitution stipulated that the State could make special provisions for the safeguards of any socially and educationally backward classes of citizenships and particularly for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Further, the Constitution provides for reservation in education, services and political institutions in favour of progress and development of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled

Tribes. In accordance with the provisions of the Constitution, special measures for the development and welfare of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes have been undertaken on a massive scale throughout the country. A few legislations have also been enacted. Because of that, the steady growth of political consciousness among the Dalit communities has taken place in Bihar also in the post-Independence period.

It has already been mentioned that the upper backward castes have emerged as politically conscious force in Bihar. In the late 1970's, Karpooi Thakur's reservation policy is indicative of a sea change in the structure in Bihar's political economy. Observing on social change in Bihar, Blair (1980, 67) writes, "The forwards or twice born" caste groups that had been dominant in Bihar since independence and before are being replaced by the 'backward castes 'as the dominant stratum in the state". Further, the hegemony and dominance of the twice born castes has now been challenged by the emerging upper backward castes. Even Dalits have become socially conscious and politically assertive in Bihar. They have begun to be organized by different of political parties. Their demands are centered on the various issues of rural caste and class structure, i.e., account of honour, opposition to oppression and exploitation, enforcement of minimum wages laws, recognition of sharecropper's right abolition of the bonded labour and so on (Chauhan and Singh, 1980, 521-22). According to Sachchidananda (2001, 26-7), political means are another avenue whereby lower castes have striven to raise their economic and social status. The dilemma for the lower castes has been whether to work along with the upper castes or separate from them under the banner of Scheduled Caste parties. Economic demands by deprived groups have politically consequences. Reservation quota for Scheduled Castes in political representation and in job has reinforced caste consciousness in the politics of Bihar. On the other hand, it is also true that the unprivileged caste groups have succeeded in breaking through the social barriers and affecting an entry into the political realm. In this way, they come across many difficulties in their path of upward social mobility, but this is attributable, by and large, to the leveling effect of democratic politics and the compulsions. It itself indicates that they are politically active and more consciousness about their rights (Roy, 1970).

Political Participation

Before going into detail of political participation, let us clarify by mentioning that political participation has been used in the context of power-sharing of Dalits and access to the decision-making process through their participation especially in the state level political organizations mainly on reserved seats. From pre-independence to post- independence, political participation among Dalits has been arisen, would be analyzed in this regard. As we know that political participation in India was only limited to a few upper castes during the pre-Independence period. The Britishers

introduced Western education and established speedier means of communication and extended franchise to cover ever-increasing number of the people in India. The leadership provided by lower castes (Dalits) during the national movement for political freedom of the country was the proof of the increasing participation by these castes in politics. However, the rate and number of participation of people belonging to all castes and communities increased after Independence (Singh, 1990, 34). Nowadays, the caste system is responding to the representational process in politics. It may be stated that the caste structure has grown stronger under the impact of adult franchise. It has resulted in the development of a new sense of self-respect and account of power among the lower castes, particularly the Dalits, who have seats reserved for them in all elected bodies from the village to the union Parliament. Further, it has been mentioned that the power has passed in many parts of rural India into the hands of the numerically large land-owning peasant castes; it is likely to remain there for some time except in villages where Dalits are numerically strong and are also taking advantage of the new educational and other opportunities recently made available to them (Srinivas, 1982, 11). Due to this, they are getting the benefits of the politicization of caste which, in return, has helped them in their upward mobility. Earlier, they did not have their political representatives in the state, but after 1947, due to the protective discrimination policy, the political consciousness has come among them, and they have started participating in the political domain of the State.

After Independence, it is also true that the Dalit representatives have been elected both in state legislature and in Parliament for a long time. But it has brought a little change in the small section of the Scheduled Castes and still majority of them are deprived of their political participation vis-a-vis power sharing in the state. Because those who are representatives of these castes or communities pay attention only on their kin and kins after coming in power. In this regard, Human Rights Watch (1999, 34) reports that due to a growing number of lower caste-based political parties and human rights movements, Dalits have taken part in struggles against the state and their upper-caste counterparts since the 1960s to claim their rights. On the other hand, Indu Bharti (1990, 980-81) stated that the Dalits got *Izzat* (honour or respect or dignity) after the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. Some years ago, the Dalits and even backward caste people were not allowed to vote in the villages except in the constituencies reserved for them. But after 1990, the election scenario of the state of Bihar got changed. It has been stated that the Dalits in Bihar in large number voted in the Lok Sabha elections. This has given to the Dalits a new *Izzat* (dignity). It may be said that those who belong to town or city, they are more active in politics. But in rural areas, it is quite different scenario. The Dalits in villages are not much aware about the role of policy-making process and the power sharing due to lack of education and socio-political awareness.

Rising Dalits in Bihar

After analysis of political participation among various Dalit castes above, now, let us briefly trace out the rise of Dalits in the context of social and political spheres in the state of Bihar. Social and political awakening of the Scheduled Castes started to take shape at the turn of the 20th century. It is said that the Dusadhs among the Scheduled Castes were in Bihar the first to grasp the importance of collective efforts to improve their political status. They formed the first Dusadh Sabha in 1911 after being inspired by so many caste *sabhas* councils like Kayastha Mahasabha (1887), Pradhan Bhumihar Brahman Sabha (1905), Rajput Sabha (1906), and possibly the first backward castes *sabha* the Ravani Kahar Sabha (1906). This was followed by the formation of Ravidas Sabha in 1928 by Shri Jagjivan Ram who became an important leader in due course of time. In 1930, the “Anti-Untouchability Association” was renamed as Harijan Sevak Sangh and Jagjivan Ram was appointed its secretary in a conference at Bhagalpur. The first annual meeting of the Ravidas Mahasabha was held in Calcutta in 1934. Then after, Jagjivan Ram established the “League of Depressed Classes”. It was officially formed at Kanpur in 1935 with Rasiklal Biswas as president and Jagjivan Ram and P.N. Rajbhoj as secretaries (Planning Commission, 2006).

Before independence, in Bihar, when the Congress Party came to power in 1937, Jaglal Choudhary, a Pasi by caste, was made a Cabinet minister and Jagjivan Ram was appointed parliamentary secretary. After Independence, Jagjivan Ram remained labour minister at the center. In 1977, he became the Deputy Prime Minister of India. He was elected to Parliament from 1952 to 1984. Two other Dalit leaders, i.e., Bhola Paswan Shastri and Ram Sunder Das also were representatives of the Scheduled Castes. Bhola Paswan Sastri became the Chief Minister of Bihar thrice between March 1968 and June 1971. Ram Sunder Das was also the chief minister of Bihar from April 1979 to February 1980. During the political instability and dissolution of the Congress Party rule, a new Dalit leader Ram Vilas Paswan emerged from Bihar. He won the Lok Sabha seat from the Hajipur with record margin and became a minister in the first non-Congress government under the Prime Ministership of Morarji Desai (Planning Commission, 2006).

If we analyze general elections in 1989 that happened to be the re-emergence of the backwards and Dalits together under the platform of the Janata Dal. In this election, the first phase of political rule helped Laloo Yadav to consolidate the social support for the Janata Dal among the Backwards, minorities and Dalits. They supported him due to oppressed by the upper castes in the state. This brought political hegemony of the *Shudras* (Backwards and Dalits) for the first time (Barik, 2006, 217-18). As regards to the Dalits, Laloo Prasad Yadav as Chief Minister adopted a double-edged sword against the Brahminic caste system in state of Bihar. On the other end, he commenced the budgetary allocation under the Indira Awas Yojana which was got implemented and completed with the help of the district

administration. Moreover, he pleased the Dalits for getting them converted to Buddhism which was the main item of Ambedkar's agenda. Even he named Bihar University as Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Bihar University which is in the heart belt of Bhumihar caste. After that, he became the *Massiah* of Dalits in Bihar (Barik, 2006, 222). Now, the *Yadavs*, *Kurmis*, and *Koeris* are enjoying power with the support of Scheduled Castes or Dalits in the state. As of now, if we trace out political participation regarding Chief Minister of Dalit community in the state, after Bhola Paswan Shastri and Ram Sunder Das, Jitan Ram Manjhi, by caste 'Musahar', became the last Chief Minister of Bihar with the support of Nitish Kumar. But this political partnership failed for a long time and finally he resigned from the Chief ministership due to political conflict in terms of leadership aroused.

Summary

In summing up, after independence, political scenario in the state of Bihar has got rapid change in terms of political structure, political consciousness, political participation, and participation in the policy-making process. In the policy-making process, Dalits were in meager number earlier. Even, they were not allowed to participate in any such process where some policies were taken and implemented even for the 'welfare' of marginalized groups of the people. But after independence, due to political consciousness and impact of reservation, people of the deprived sections have started to play their role in at least the discussion making about certain affairs pertaining to the state of Bihar. It is also true that the reservation policy vis-à-vis their political participation has enhanced the political status at least of some Dalits in Bihar. Further, the reservation policy has helped to some extent Scheduled Castes also to come out of the age-old social degradation and oppression and facilitated to them to participate in socio- economic and political activities both in the State and the Centre. This shows that Dalits have empowered in various domains through political participation.

Acknowledgment: I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Nandu Ram for his guidance and advice on this article. It is based on my M.Phil. Dissertation submitted in Jawaharlal Nehru University.

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