Understanding Caste in Uttar Pradesh Politics

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Abstract: Caste has always been important in Indian society from ancient times. Its impact can be traced in all aspects of society such as- cultural, economic, social and political. In this research paper, the role of caste in Uttar Pradesh politics is being analysed. It is said that Uttar Pradesh is the political king maker in Indian politics, so caste is the king in Uttar Pradesh. This shows the importance of caste in politics. Many political parties have been formed on the basis of caste based ideology and vote bank. The dynamics of caste and politics is quite visible. Upper castes, untouchables and several dominant castes of the state are important from a political point of view. Here is an attempt to understand this equation from pre-independence to after independence and so far, how politicians have used caste to gain legitimate power to rule.

Keywords: Caste, Politics, Dominant Caste, Vote Bank

Introduction

Caste system is a unique feature of Indian society from ancient times. An eminent sociologist, G.S. Ghurye identified six features of the caste system: segmental division of society, hierarchy, restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disabilities, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation and restrictions on marriage. It is an embodiment. But significant changes occurred with the onset of British rule in India. Modern education system brought in discourse on rights, liberty and equality. Many intellectuals like Phule, Ranade, Periyar, Ambedkar and Gandhi ji struggled for granting recognition and safeguarding their rights. Jyotiba Phule went to the extent of creating an alternative history of shudras and untouchables-highlighted the Aryan conquest and their domination over the aboriginals – *sudras*. The question of participation started in Indian politics from the time of Phule. At that point British authorities intervened in caste order in three important ways:

1. Gave Brahmins precedence by asking for their advice, which led to resentment and anti-brahmanical movement (South India and Maharashtra) and formation of caste associations (Ahir Yadav Mahasabha) to resist Brahmin domination. 2. Morley Minto Reforms (1909) which introduced separate electorates for depressed classes. 3. Missionary education system started by the British Government which educated them towards their rights. Caste politics expressed itself in the form of politics of resistance in front of anti Brahmin movements. There were intra and inter-caste competitions for status and power. Rajni Kothari argued that the quest for influence within the caste groups or amongst the castes led to politicisation of caste. During these times caste associations and sabhas pressed for higher status in census records and everyday interaction.

In the opinion of many thinkers castes assumed new functions like influencing politics and their role in political dynamics like an effective pressure or interest group. Caste provided an extensive basis for organisation of democratic politics. Caste identity and solidarity became the primary channel through which electoral and political support was mobilised. Caste was used more extensively in mobilising rural than urban support. Political parties found it easier to mobilise support directly from a member of the caste community by appealing. The political system used to encourage the use of caste as a means of breeding followers. Caste enabled the illiterate and ignorant to politically participate in democratic process. The communication of ideas within caste is strong as members of the same caste share similar views. Nehru said that political democracy and caste can not exist together. Similarly Ambedkar argued, 'you can't build anything on the foundation of caste.' Caste as expected did not disappear. Political parties use the category of caste for the mobilisation (Ambedkar, 1936).

Kothari wrote that politisation of caste brought both caste and politics nearer and their interaction changed their forms (Kothari, 1970). When politics draws the caste system into the web of its organisation, it finds material for its articulation, and when caste makes politics its sphere of activity, caste gets a chance to assert its identity and to strive for position. The relationship between caste and politics is basically a relationship for the specific purpose of organising public activity. Rajni Kothari argues that democratic politics in post– colonial India led to the involvement of traditional structure and its leadership. The caste system played an important role in the structural and ideological basis of political mobilisation. He proposes three aspects of caste system for special attention:
1.   Secular Dimension
2.   Integration Dimension

3. Dimension of Consciousness

He emphasised caste as a stratification system in which distances are rigidly maintained through endogamy, pollution and legitimacy of rituals. Yet the fact is that factionalism and caste cleavages, patterns of alignment and realignment among various strata and continuous striving for social mobility have always been a prominent feature of the caste system. The caste system not only determines the individual's station on the basis of the group to which he is born into but also differentiates and assigns occupational and economic roles. Caste enters politics through the consciousness aspect highlighted by symbolism or value structure. This is where symbolic gestures for cultural mobility such as sanskritisation, westernisation and secularisation assume political overtone in their manifestation.

Castes are divided broadly into several categories for political purposes like- forward castes, Other Backward Classes (OBC), Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST). Official lists are compiled by states recognising the OBC, SC, and ST. This pattern of categorisation has led to the practice of vote banking, where voters back only candidates that are in their caste. Historically, it has been difficult to change the structure of caste politics in India. In present times, there is a flux in caste politics, mainly caused by economic liberalisation in India. This 'equalising' of playing between caste and politics has not been without controversy. Traditionally the caste system distributes different social, economic and cultural and political power. In North India the caste system has a crucial role in politics. Political lines in north India especially in Uttar Pradesh have often been drawn along caste lines; however this is one part of the story. Caste is often specific to a particular area. Locally dominant castes are being created by these caste pockets.

Caste in Uttar Pradesh Politics

Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) has an important status among the states of the Indian union. Many crucial posts in the national political system such as Prime-minister, President and defense minister have been taken up by Uttar Pradesh's politicians from time to time. While politics in other states can be described as 'segmented' i.e., affecting life within their own borders, political happenings in Uttar Pradesh affect national politics (Sudha Pai, 1994). In Uttar Pradesh politics, issues are being taken care of but caste is always successful in doing political mobilisation. Different political parties plan their strategies around caste- equations. For this reason it is said that if Uttar Pradesh is the political king maker, caste is the king. This paper is an attempt to analyse the role of caste in the political system of Uttar Pradesh and

how caste in political mobilisation is being used by different political parties; which have shaped electoral politics in the state. Population density of the U.P. is 829 per square kilometer. Around 77.73 per cent of the population lives in rural areas and 22.27 per cent of the population lives in urban areas. The state is divided into 75 districts that show wide variations in both area and population. As per 2011 census, the literacy rate is 67.68 per cent. Female literacy rate is 57.18 per cent which is low compared to other states. Hindus are 79.73 per cent, Muslims 19.26 per cent, Sikhs are 0.32 per cent, Christians 0.18 per cent, Jains are 0.11 per cent and Buddhists are 0.10 per cent and approximately 0.29 per cent stated no particular religion.

A study in late 1990s showed that the upper castes constitute only 20-22 per cent and the backward castes 40-42 per cent of the population. But traditionally, there was dominance of upper castes in all spheres of life, but since last few years the backward and scheduled castes have challenged it effectively. Thus caste based mobilisation has been a central feature of U.P. politics. As per 2011 census, 14.2 per cent Upper Castes, 44 per cent OBCs, 20.8 per cent SCs are in U.P. Amongst which 8.50 per cent Yadavs, 3 per cent Kurmis, 11.50 per cent Jatavs, 10 per cent Brahmins, 8.50 per cent Thakurs are found in U.P. It's obvious that Brahmins, Thakurs, Rajputs, Kurmi, Yadavs, Jats, and Baniyas are the major castes of the state. Because of wide disparities among its region, U.P. has always been described as one of the economically backward states. However, from 1975 and onwards the general rate of economic growth has been higher than the national average in both agriculture and industry. Although U.P. ranks third in industrialisation amongst the other states, there has been greater progress in the former than the latter. U.P. produces almost 20.3 per cent of the nation's food grains and ranks first among the states. It is also the largest producer of potato. Net irrigated area as per centage of total cropped area in 1998 was 57 per cent as against the national average of 32.5 per cent. The per centage of agricultural workers to total workers (1991 census) was also higher (72.1 per cent) than the national average of 64.9 per cent (Sudha Pai, 1995: 308). Since that time U.P. has witnessed development in all areas; modernisation and economic growth has been rapid in recent years. This factor led caste based mobilisation of lower castes into politics. Because legitimate authority gives them power instead of the fact that they belong to lower strata of society. The BKD (Bhartiya Kranti Dal) formed by Charan Singh in 1967 went through many changes; a section of it formed the Janata Party in 1977, the JD (Janta Dal) in 1989 and SJD in 1991. The success of this group lies in the fact that in class terms it represents the rich peasants and big landowners and in caste terms the backward and other backward category in Uttar Pradesh,

thereby successfully combining horizontal and vertical mobilisation at different points of time.

The Jan Sangh is the only party which did not emerge from within the Congress, formed in 1951. The leadership and base of the party shifted over time from an elite upper caste party in the 1960s, mainly in Oudh and central U.P., to one supported by the Hindu trading community in towns and big landlords in rural areas by the 1970s. The Jan Sangh doubled its strength between 1951 and 1967. The rise of BKD relegated it to third place and it began to decline, as the 1969 and 1974 elections result show. From the mid- 1980s, it shed its earlier middle course between conservation and radicalism and attempted to capture power by mobilising the majority community on a strident Hindutva platform and achieved success in 1991 State Assembly elections. The BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) formed in 1984, is a party of the Scheduled Castes (SC) which also seeks the support of backward class and minorities. Traditionally, SC parties such as Republican Party of India (RPI) which had a following in west U.P. was small and often co-opted by the Congress. Unlike them, the BSP has a clear identity base and militant ideology. The BSP is the political expression of a social action movement founded by Kashi Ram, the Backward and Minority Community Employees' Federation (BAMCEF) and an agitation wing, the Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti in 1982, which has greater presence in rural areas. He has described it as an Ambedhkaritic rather than Gandhian party i.e. it believes in confrontation with the upper caste to gain their share of power. He argued that the depressed sections and minorities had been denied a share in economic and political power, which was in the hands of an elite Brahmin minority. The former could change the system and seize power by voting for the BSP. That is why BSP hoped to get support from the backwards class and schedule castes in U.P. The party has managed to expand its base rapidly and was instrumental in defeating the BJP in November, 1993 Assembly elections. Socialist parties such as SSP and PSP were important up to 1967 and finally disappeared after merging into the Janata Party in 1977. The two communist parties – whose pockets of strength were limited mainly to East U.P., had never been important electorally. Their base had been mainly confined to the agricultural laborers. It took advantage of the rapid caste based mobilisation simultaneously occurring in the state by forming the AJGAR (Ahir, Jat, Gujjar. Rajput) caste alliance, to strengthen its backward class base, while at the same time preventing the consolidation of the Hindu votes under the BJP.

Mandal Commission report accepted by the V.P. Singh's government on August 7 at the center added a new dimension to the tense political scene. By granting

reservations to other backward classes (OBC), it divided the Hindu community and its support base to BJP. On September 20, 1990 to cover this damage of Mandal report the BJP, under the leadership of L.K. Advani, decided on a Rath Yatra, from Somnath to Ayodhya which would cover ten states and 10,000 kilometers. It was an alternative point of national consolidation to arrest caste cleavages, arising from the reservation policy. The Yatra successfully mobilised people in both rural and urban areas and led to serious disturbances in several parts of India. Advani was arrested before it reached Ayodhya and the Yatra was stopped on October 30, 1990. On that day a large number of Kar Sevaks (volunteers) in Ayodhya were killed in police firing. These events led to the BJP withdrawing its support and the fall of the V.P. Singh government at the centre. The JD government in U.P. fell in January 1991 after the Congress party withdrew its support from the minority government of Mulayam Singh. In elections, held on May 20 and 26, 1991, 45-50 per cent of polling was reported for assembly seats. The BJP secured 211 seats and polled 33 per cent of votes, gaining a slender majority.

Two factions ; JD- the Samajwadi Janta Dal (SJP) and the Janata Dal (JD), won 30 and 91 seats respectively. The Congress with 46 seats and 18 per cent of the votes secured even less than in the 1977 elections. The BJP was successful in mobilising a large chunk of the Hindu vote across the state. It gained not only the votes of the upper and lower castes from the Congress, but also of the dominant backward category such as the Kurmis, Lodhas and Sainis, who had traditionally opted for the JD/ LD. It also showed that Muslim votes were not needed to gain a majority in U.P. The victory of BJP was possible due to convergence of a number of political factors. The bulk of the voters of the upper castes shifted their support to the BJP, whereas most voters of the middle and backward castes were divided between the BJP, SJP and JD. Voters of the lower castes in many areas preferred the BSP. But the success of SP and BSP in the November 1993 state assembly elections surprised most observers. It was a victory for secular values in the country which had combined against the BJP's communal mobilisation. In U.P.'s electoral politics, caste rather than communal mobilisation has proved more significant and capable of uniting the middle and lower castes. However, there are major differences between backward and lower castes in U.P.

Through such mobilisations, by empowering marginalised groups and giving them a state in the continuation of the system, can work in practice to strengthen democracy. The mobilisation of one group takes the form of aggression against another. However, the resultant conflicts at the social and political level put a serious strain on the durability and legitimacy of a democratic system. Given

that ethnic identity in the form of caste and religion is not likely to disappear from state politics, the key question now is whether ethnic mobilisation can be successfully separated from ethnic polarisation. In those assembly elections, the identification of the ethnic 'other' in the last few years, proved a highly successful strategy in U.P. politics, was conspicuously absent. The Bahujan Samaj Party tried to win over dalits, Muslims and backward castes, but without crusading against upper castes as their common oppressor. The BJP sought votes from across the spectrum of Hindu caste groups but did not attempt this time to consolidate Hindus by mobilising them against Muslims. The Samajwadi Party was far from deepening the wedge between the 'minority forwards' and 'majority backwards' that it had driven earlier. The Janta Dal president once said that political parties were not a congregation of saints. They were in politics to attain power. Though they showed that they had moved beyond caste- based politics but covertly they still maintained their vote- bank on the basis of caste and religion. This can be seen in alliance behaviour, candidate selection and the election campaign. When discussing the election campaign, we focus exclusively on the generalised message that political parties send out at the state level through newspapers, rallies and other media platforms.

The principal 'polarising' strategy available to the BSP would have been to lay greater emphasis on social justice and caste polarisation mobilising the 'bahujan samaj' against the upper caste, as it has done in previous campaigns. As a party that professed the ideology of Hindu nationalism, however, it was in the interests of BJP to make efforts to expand its support among Scheduled Castes and so enforce its image of a party for all Hindus regardless of caste or creed. But to create this image the party gave tickets to dalit candidates. That was also a reinforcement of caste- system in other way. It conducted a diffuse election campaign that gave equal emphasis to a laundry list of issues like development, anti- corruption, law and order, construction of the Ram temple. But those dalit candidates, who left BJP and joined other political parties, are continuously complaining about discrimination due to their caste. As a party trying to project itself, as a responsible party of the government, the BJP, needs to address this issue of discrimination within the party. Congress may ignore the upper caste in its overt campaign in order to rebuild its base among dalits and minorities, but as a party it still has a predominantly upper caste leadership in north India especially Uttar Pradesh. After having a brief analysis of the political history of the U.P. politics, it can be understood that caste has always played a crucial role in politics. Many political parties are being formed on caste ideology.

Conclusion

Caste in India works at a conscious level and it churns the social consciousness of people. Though the modern constitution abolished untouchability, also in 1976 (the Protection of Civil Rights Act), reservation of seats ultimately resulted in further caste. Caste and casteism never disappeared in U.P. politics. In this context Myron Weiner's concept of 'political co-optation' is very relevant. The kind of social engineering being used by political parties for political mobilisation resulted in co-optation of many lower castes into the party. The demolition of the moral basis of caste, the self imposed barrier to protest by the lower castes was also eroded. Therefore some middle and lower castes sought equality with upper castes through the process of sanskritisation (by emulating the orthopraxy of the higher castes), thus claiming more political power. Rajni Kothari (1970), also argued that politicisation of caste in India played a very important role in developing party politics, so in Uttar Pradesh too. Politicisation of caste is a double process. Politics needs castes the way caste needs politics. Political parties have made caste groupings their sphere of activities. Caste groups also get a chance to assert their identity and to strive for position. The concept of dominant caste is also used by M.N. Srinivas (1959). A dominant caste is a caste which dominates numerically; due its numeric preponderance it also enjoys political power. Politicians find caste a convenient and handy instrument for use during elections. Politics in Uttar Pradesh has also been viewed in terms of competition among major caste- groups for political power. Caste has fractionalised state politics of U.P. Dominant castes, which gain political and economic power through sanskritisation, enter the political sphere. Some way or the other, it is a reinforcement of caste in society.

Thus, all castes aspire for dominant position in every sphere due to the development of adult franchise and Panchayati Raj system. All these processes together have strengthened the caste-system rather than weakened it. As Christophe Jaffrelot (2005) stated that, with time class started transforming caste relations in India. Thus caste and class co-exist in our society. Caste slowly converted into class because of social stigma of being pure and impure. Reservation helped certain castes within dalits to catch up with OBCs and other dominant castes in terms of acquiring revenues. Caste is a 'lived in social reality' as argued by Myron Weiner (1968). Caste became an instrument of social change which resulted in rise of casteism, there also happened co-optation of previously excluded groups and this political mobilisation gave rise to ' messy identity politics.' Sharpening of group identities, also the scheme of reservations 'taken hold as a mantra' (Marc Galanter, 1989) facilitated the lower

caste groups to rise to political power. Myron Weiner (1966) also said that there is a complex and cross cutting relationship between class and caste, overlapping identities so the struggle for status and the quest for equality continued. That makes caste a more potent form of social identity than class. So the social order remained egalitarian. Mandal framework led to 'egregious consequences' (Marc Galanter, 1989) because it identified OBCs in terms of castes. It made a heterogeneous vast diverse category of OBCs. Thus caste became the basis of a scheme of permanent protection.

As Rajni Kothari (1970) argued 'curious cognitive hiatus' which explains the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, also the symbolism of castes for social and economic positions of different groups. In this way, caste as a traditional social structure has changed its functions and roles, maintaining itself in process. The way caste is changing and influencing the politics, in the same way politics is also influencing and changing the caste system. Sanskritisation as status urge turned as a 'mirage'(Kothari, 2005), status turned ambivalent, unsettled also westernisation and secularisation led for economic wellbeing, liberal education gave rise to rationality and also political power for more institutions drew caste into politics(Saheli Samaddar, 2021). Thus caste identities took to new forms of articulation thus changing the very ethics of the social system diminished the importance of ascriptive and ritualistic basis. On the other hand, the process of 'ethnicisation' (Christophe Jaffrelot, 2005) and positive discrimination of caste has been the result of transformation of caste into interest groups.

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