

STUDY MATERIALS (LONG QUESTION AND SHORT NOTES)

Analysis on the Role of Caste in Indian Politics

1. Introduction

The best evidence that political competition is good for economic outcomes comes from looking at sub-national jurisdictions within large federal states. While political competition has steadily intensified over the past 20 years, sound economic policy – at least as measured by a staunch commitment to growth-enhancing and poverty-reducing economic reform – has proceeded in fits and starts, at best, and at present appears to be all but moribund.

Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership decided by birth. Members of such local group are endogamous, i.e. they tend to enter into marital relationships among themselves. It was institutionalized into government organizations by British colonizers. The removal of the boundaries between “civil society” and “political society” meant that caste now played a huge role in the political arena and also influenced other government-run institutions such as police and the judicial system. Though caste seemed to dictate one’s access to such institutions, the location of that caste also played a pivotal role. If a lower caste were concentrated enough in one area, it could then translate that pocket of concentration of its caste members into political power and then challenge the hegemony of locally dominant upper caste.

2. Nature of Caste

In India caste identity and solidarities are the primary channels through which electoral and political support is mobilized within the political system.

The caste plank is used more extensively in rural areas and the political parties find it easier to mobilize support directly from the members of a caste community by appealing to them.

The present political System encourages the use of caste as a means of mustering support as well as a means to enable the illiterate and politically ignorant masses of India to participate in the modern democratic process where the caste structure provides one of the most important organizational clusters in which the population is bound to live, politics must- strive to organize through such a structure.

Politics finds material for its articulation by drawing the caste system into its web and moulding it into its own design. Caste by making politics their sphere of activity asserts their identity. Politicians mobilize caste groupings and identities in order to organize their power.

In the context of interactions between caste and politics Rajni Kothari has pointed out three major aspects of caste system.

Firstly, the secular dimension by which it is evident that caste as a stratified system has not received much attention. In fact caste system is predominated by factionalism and caste cleavages, patterns of alignment and realignment among the various strata and a continuous striving for social mobility.

Secondly, the integration dimension by which the caste system not only determines the individual's social status on the basis of the group to which he is born but also differentials and assigns occupational and economic roles. It thus gives a place to every individual from the highest to the lowest and makes for a high degree of identification and integration.

Thirdly, the dimension of consciousness by which as Rani Kathari puts it, "It is not politics that gets caste ridden it is caste that gets politicized."

3. Propagation of Casteism

The election procedures done much to encourage the caste system because the candidates want to achieve their ends by propagating casteism among the others. People are asked to vote for their caste candidate and his casteism is maintained by the elected leaders after elections are over.

The political behaviour of the people of the members of different political parties and of the members of the government is caste oriented. Their attitudes and values are caste based.

People of a caste vote embolic for a candidate of the same of different caste either in pursuance of the decision of the caste panchayat or of a meeting of caste members or even

without a formal decision. Even when they do not vote en bloc, they prefer a candidate of their own caste to other candidates irrespective of the merits or demerits of the candidates.

The selection of the candidates for a constituency is based on whether he will be able to get the support of a particular caste or castes. Even the caste of those recommending a candidate plays an important role.

When a single caste is not likely to be effective alliance are formed on caste basis by the candidates or by the voters: Even the office bearers of a party are appointed on the basis of caste to please a caste group in the party and in the constituency.

If the caste candidate happens to belong to the caste in majority having large voters it is presumed that he will be selected because of his association with such a caste.

4. Caste in Indian Politics

Caste has influenced the policy-making of the government, for example the policy of reservation in favor of certain castes.

The programmes, policies and declarations of political parties are made, keeping in view the caste factor. Even different positions within a political party are distributed in terms of caste configurations.

Caste plays a very important role in elections and voting. Political parties select their candidates on the basis of caste composition in the constituency. The voting in elections and mobilization of political support from top to bottom moves on the caste lines.

The caste factor also influences the formation of the council of ministers and making appointments to various political positions in the government.

Caste also functions, as a pressure group in politics. Political bargaining is also done on the caste lines. Caste organizations have emerged to organize caste members for collective bargaining with each other.

The administration has not escaped the influence of the caste in India. The postings, transfers and appointments of public officials are influenced by caste considerations.

Even the behavior of public officials in carrying out administrative duties gets influenced by caste considerations.

The political leadership in many political parties emerges and survives in politics on the basis of the support of certain caste groups.

There are many political experts who consider the increasing influence of caste in politics as a negative tendency, not helpful in the development of democracy.

5. Caste Politics in Different States

Bihar occupies the first position where caste basis predominates over its politics. The recent politics in Bihar is articulated in terms of the backward vs the forward.

In Kerala also caste considerations have played an important role. It is generally held that four major groups are contending for a dominant place in the political life of the states; Nairs, Ezhavas, Christians and Muslims.

Ezhavas number 26.4 percent followed by Christians with 21.17 percent, Muslims number 19.5 percent and Nairs with 12.5 percent. Each of them dominates a particular region of Kerala. Malabar area is exclusively dominated by Muslims, the Christians dominate Ernakulam and Kottayam districts, Nairs from the dominant community in Trivandrum district and Ezhavas are particularly strong in palghat.

In Andhra Pradesh caste politics is reflected the Kammas and Reddys. The important castes in the state are the Brahmins, the Reddys, the Kammas the Harijans, the Velamas, the Rajus and the Kapus, Reddys and the Kammas are politically dominant and numerically strongest in the state.

In Haryana jats form the dominant political force as they constitute about 23 percent of the total population. The jats are followed by scheduled castes constituted of Chamars weavers and sweepers. Even Brahmins occupy powerful positions in the state disproportionate to their population due to their class and literal superiority.

In other states like Karnataka the buttle is mainly between two dominant castes Lingayats and Okkliga. In Maharashtra the caste politics is played amongst three main castes Marathas, Brahmins and Maha. In Punjab the conflict is one of religious communities not of caste the Hindus and Sikhs.

6. Conclusion

The caste system played a significant role in determining the content and direction of the processes of political socialization, political mobilization and institutionalization within the framework of modern democracy. The dynamics of caste and class were at the root of the complexity of Indian politics in its functioning.