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Casteism in Indian Politics: A Major Impediment to Democracy

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The caste system evolved in India and has been prevalent since ancient times. The caste system originated from functional groups better known as Varna which was observed in early Aryan societies. This hierarchical system was established by the Brahmins who were at the top to continue to hold power and perpetuate their dominance. Over time, this caste system had formalized into four major groups, each with its own laws, rules, and conduct of behavior. Caste is a notable foundation of social stratification and Indian Politics is affected by that. Caste politics has been prevalent in Indian society for ages. Even in today's contemporary society, we notice the influence of caste in politics. This is a unique salient feature of the Indian democracy. This research paper provides an overview of casteism in Indian Politics along with its historical perspective. This paper further analyses its uniqueness to India and Indian politics. Additionally, it showcases the role played by caste in our politics. It gives an understanding of several small caste-based political parties in India and their role in promoting regional casteism. Lastly, the paper gives an insight into the legislative and the judicial measures taken along with highlighting the impact of caste politics in the society. Finally, the paper will conclude with the present scenario of casteism in Indian politics and how it impedes democracy.

Keywords: *caste, democracy, judicial, politics, and system*

INTRODUCTION

Caste is widely recognized as a unique Indian and Hindu social system. It is typically regarded as a closed system of social stratification in sociological writings in which social groups, often segregated by their jobs; closely adhere to a code of conduct. Caste groups are unequal in nature, classified from pure to impurity on a hierarchical level on the basis of their religious status. According to MacIver and Page, "When the status is wholly predetermined so that men are born to their lot without any hope of changing it, then the class takes the extreme form of caste."¹The Indian caste system is historically one of the fundamental dimensions of the social distinction between class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. The Indian Caste System is recognized as a closed stratification system, which indicates that the social standing of a person is bound to the caste he was born in and interaction with people of different social ranks is constrained. The past is very closely linked to one of India's leading Hindu religions and changed in various ways during the Buddhist and British revolutions.²

CASTEISM IN INDIAN POLITICS

The substance of Indian politics has been largely modeled by its social, economic, religious, and geographical conditions and these special conditions have further provided a clear-cut shape to Indian politics that is dominantly marked by caste politics. Caste in politics means how the caste factor is used in politics to the advantage of candidates who are countering the elections. The British Imperialists used religion as well as caste for the political division of the nation. Unfortunately, India could not prevent caste from being an influencing factor in politics even after independence. Though the Indian Constitution has outlawed caste-based discrimination, the caste system, in various forms continues to play a major role in Indian society and politics. Caste associations have emerged in several parts of India with the aim of pursuing not only economic and social status but also political power. As a result, the welfare and advancement of lower castes were taken into account by most political parties. Caste has

¹ C.N. Shankar Rao, *Principles of Sociology with an Introduction to Sociological Thought* (6thedn, S. Chand 2017)

² Manali S. Deshpande, 'History of the Indian Caste System and its impact on India today' (*Digital Commons*, Dec 2010) <<https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1043&context=socssp>> accessed 13 April 2022

thus become a major hurdle in the establishment of casteless society and has paved communal connections. Even the politicians are caught in the network and they are using the same as a vote bank. The structure of Indian politics has been largely influenced by its social, economic, religious, and geographic circumstances, making it easier to define Indian politics, which is dominated by caste.³ Caste in politics means how caste in politics is used for the benefit of candidates who are contesting the elections. British Imperialists used caste for political divide; unfortunately, India could not prevent caste from dominating politics even after independence. While caste-based discrimination is forbidden by the Indian Constitution, in several aspects the caste system still plays an important role in Indian society and politics. Caste organizations have arisen in several places in India with the goal of not just pursuing social and financial interests but also attaining political influence. The welfare and development of lower castes were thus taken into account by the majority of political parties. Caste, therefore, has become a fundamental barrier to the formation of a casteless society.

HISTORY OF CASTEISM

Caste inherited in the Indian society around the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of caste made a sideways transition from the colonialist discourse. In the operations of major government agencies in India, the British cemented the system of castes. The principal beneficiaries of this indiscriminate rule were the upper castes who retained their supremacy and domination over government institutions even after their independence from the English. The post-colonial Indian state promised growth, rule of law, and development of the nation, but in reality, it was an intricate network of patronage systems that consolidated the upper caste position of domination on government agencies. This contradicted the basic promises made by post-colonial India to develop the nation. A distinct representation was made for communities such as Dalit, Muslims, Sikhs, Indians, Anglo-Indians, and Christians in August 1932, by the then Prime Minister of Britain, Ramsay MacDonald. These impoverished classes received a number of seats for special electoral districts in which only voters from these classes could vote. A shift in caste politics began in the early 1990s. The continuation of a one-party

³ Md Kamal Hossain, 'Significance of Caste in Indian Politics' (2021) 18 (1) Palarch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology, 3815 <<https://archives.palarch.nl/index.php/jae/article/view/5960>> accessed 13 April 2022

system consisting mainly of upper caste management, which is the Congress Party, came to an end. Before the 2012 elections to the Assembly in India, the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)-Mayawati did not name the individual candidates but broke down the party in terms of its caste composition- 85 Scheduled Castes, 113 Other Backward Classes, 85 religious minorities (primarily Muslims),117 upper castes of which 74 were Brahmins and 33 Thakurs.⁴ In the 1970s under Kanshi Ram, the mentor of Mayawati- the party was first identified as the Backward and Minority Class Federations (BAMCEF) and later Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (BSP). Political parties and candidates are constantly attempting to unite voters on a caste basis, but their success depends heavily on the combination of many local circumstances. The arena in which caste plays the most important political role is that of backward class reservations. Rajni Kothari (1970) examined the relationship between caste and politics by analyzing the issue of what happens to the political system because of the vote of castes. He found that three factors- education, government patronage and slowly expanding franchise- have penetrated the caste system because which caste system has come to affect democratic politics in the country.⁵

UNIQUE NATURE OF CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS

The Indian caste system and the social stratification structures of the other regions of the world were completely distinct from each other. The Indian caste system was proposed to comprise several distinctive qualities that differentiated it from other societies. The Indian caste system consists of caste hierarchies, and at the same time, we must take into account the reasons behind the distinctive nature of the Indian caste system-

1. Indian theological works like Manusmriti provided the 'ideal' form of society, which was seen as dominated by different caste hierarchies. This idealistic notion of society does not necessarily provide realistic representations.⁶

⁴ 'Maya clean-up: 110 MLAs denied ticket' (*The Indian Express*, 16 January 2012)

<<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/maya-cleanup-110-mlas-denied-ticket/>> accessed 15 April 2022

⁵ Ram Ahuja, *Society in India* (first published 1999, 2ndedn, Rawat Publications 2020)

⁶ Ashwin Kumar, 'Theory of Uniqueness of Indian Caste System' (2005) 2 (2) *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 01

2. Social taboos, customs, and traditions are some other characteristics that give an illusion of the unique nature of the Indian caste system.
3. An exaggerated approach to other concerns on the planet rendered Indian social institutions completely philosophical and without any materialistic aspirations. This showed that Indians placed too much emphasis on spiritual aspirations instead of meeting their material requirements.

ROLE PLAYED BY CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS

Caste in Leadership and Political Socialization

Different caste groups have affiliations and philosophies behind various political parties. A citizen of India has inherited a caste right from birth and grows up into a particular caste group and he either belongs to a higher caste or any scheduled castes. The caste ideals and the caste interests have an impact on the socialization and therefore on the political thought, conscience, and involvement of a particular individual.

Caste as a Divisive and Cohesive factor

Caste acts in Indian politics as a dividing and coherent factor. It is the basis for the creation of different interest groups in the Indian system each competing for power. Sometimes this leads to unhealthy power struggles and operates as a split force. It does, however, create solidarity between members of different groups and works as a cohesive force. However, it also leads to factionalism because of the existence of three or more caste groups.

Caste and Political Parties

The caste factor plays an important role in the Indian system. There are so many caste-based political parties in India that aim to foster and defend a specific caste's interest. The regional political parties mostly focus on caste issues and are a means to get votes. The DMK and AIADMK are political parties of Tamil Nadu, concerning the Brahmins and non-Brahmins

respectively. The community identity of Akali Dal is in Punjab which focuses on the problem of jats and non-jats. BSP relies on Scheduled Castes, whereas the BJP mostly relies on its popularity among the Hindu community. In West Bengal, the political party mainly focuses on the Muslim vote bank and uses the community for electoral benefit.

Caste in Government Making

Caste influences the policy-making of the government. The programs, policies, and declarations of political parties are made while keeping in view caste factors. The caste factor shapes the formation of the council of ministers and making appointments to the various political positions in the government. Politicians bargain votes on caste lines.⁷

Caste Violence

Crimes by the upper caste against traditionally marginalized castes and scheduled tribes are considered an extreme type of discrimination. These communities have remained victims of crimes and atrocities due to their poor identity like rape, police abuse, harassment, unlawful land invasions, and forced expulsions perpetrated by the upper caste people. The increasing brutality by higher castes or even the intermediate castes of the lower castes became a part of the political realities of rural India.

REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES AND REGIONAL CASTEISM

There are several political parties in India, which are built on the basis of a particular caste or community. The sole objective of these parties is to demand reservation and they strive to get some recognition not only just regionally. Dominant communities and castes get representation in the mainstream media, but the small caste-based parties which represent the rural realities of India often get ignored. Bihar is a state which is known for its different caste-based regional political parties, and most of them developed post-Mandal Commission Reports. The story of the VikassheelInsaan Party or VIP, a party of the Nishad community in Bihar, is an important caste-based political party whose only agenda is reservation and

⁷ Md Kamal Hossain (n 3)

representation. Lalu Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (Yadav and Muslim), Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party (Yadav and Muslim), Nitish Kumar's erstwhile Samata Party (Kurmi), and Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (Paswan) are all instances which represent that caste groups proclaim their numeric inclusion and use their political representation to access state government resources.⁸ Some of them have been successful in gaining power and even monopolizing it for a long time. However, other caste-based parties are mainly limited to a few sub-regional influences where their caste populations dominate numerically. The state of West Bengal was not known for its caste politics, but recently before the regional elections, the politicians of the ruling party TMC (Trinamool Congress) were seen targeting and utilizing that aspect. Separate conventions were organized for the people belonging to the lower castes such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Some important administrative positions were given to the people belonging to the lower castes before the elections and promises were made in the rallies for their development. However, from all these, we can conclude that TMC which is a regional political party of West Bengal uses caste as a mere vote bank before the elections.⁹ The established dominant political parties of Tamil Nadu faced tough competition from the small-scale caste-based political parties Viduthalaichiruthaigalkatchi (VCK) and Puthiya Tamilagam (PT). Both these parties are popular among the Dalit communities and the main is on their development and proper representation. Bahujan Samaj Party was founded in 1984 and the main objective of this party is to work for the representation and development of lower castes such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Dalit, and to ensure they get their basic constitutional rights. BSP was most influential in UP, however, it also had support in other states, in Punjab and Maharashtra in particular. They performed a helpful role in bringing voice and agency to subordinate, oppressed communities.

⁸ Sarthak Bagchi, 'Understanding Small Caste-Based Political Parties in India' (*The India Forum*, 7 August 2019) <<https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/making-vip-understanding-small-caste-based-parties-india>> accessed 16 April 2022

⁹ Himadri Ghosh, 'West Bengal's Landscape Is Shifting from 'Party Society' to 'Caste Politics'' (*The Wire*, 12 February 2021) <<https://thewire.in/politics/west-bengals-landscape-shift-party-society-caste-politics>> accessed 16 April 2022

LEGISLATIVE AND JUDICIAL INVOLVEMENT

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989

This was very powerful legislation made for the protection of the backward classes and also to ensure they get the proper justice in the eyes of law. The act also establishes Special Courts and Exclusive Special Courts to hear cases involving atrocities done against members of the SC and ST communities. This legislation clearly mentioned that the law will only be applicable to the offenders who are not from the backward classes, thus clearly making segregation between castes. The most important and controversial provision of this legislation is that it does not allow for anticipatory bail for offenders who committed atrocities against the backward classes.¹⁰

*Subhash Kashinath Mahajan v State of Maharashtra*¹¹

In this landmark case, the petitioner challenged the provision of not providing anticipatory bail under the SC & ST (Atrocities) Act which violated Articles 14, 19, and 21¹² of the Indian Constitution. The petitioners urged that the power of arrest be used only when all of the constraints set forth in the Cr.P.C., such as scrutiny, credible information, and a just and fair procedure, have been fulfilled. The two-judge bench of The Supreme Court in 2018 diluted the Act because of its stringent nature and instead gave some directives that needed to be followed. The Apex Court held that provisions of immediate arrest are not permitted; it will only be valid once it's approved by the higher authorities. The Supreme Court also lifted the provision of a blanket ban on anticipatory bail in cases registered under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. It ruled that if the court hearing the matter finds prima facie that there is no case or finds that the complaint could be mala fide in nature, anticipatory bail may be granted to the accused.¹³ This judgement was criticized

¹⁰ Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, ss 02 and 14

¹¹ *Dr. Subhash Kashinath Mahajan v State of Maharashtra* (2018) Criminal Appeal No. 416/2018

¹² Constitution of India, 1950, art. 14, art. 19, and art. 21

¹³ Ayan Guha, 'Recent debate on landmark anti-caste legislation in India' (2018) 19 (1) International Journal of Discrimination and the Law, 48 <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1358229118814467>> accessed 19 April 2022

among the backward classes and Dalit groups and organizations. The protests started rising and some of the public outbursts were even violent in nature. The amendment bill of SC & ST (Atrocities) Act, 1989 was passed in the year 2018 and asked the Court to consider the previous judgement. Later, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of the act and changed a few provisions like the court can reject an FIR, an immediate arrest can be made without the approval of higher authorities and anticipatory bail is only available in extraordinary situations.

CASTE AS AN IMPEDIMENT TO DEMOCRACY

India's caste politics persists, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is making a strategic deliberate attempt to win over lower castes' votes by revisiting social justice initiatives, reconsidering job reservations, and sub-categorizing lower castes. These policies would eventually strengthen India's caste politics and the caste system, which is the world's oldest surviving social hierarchy.¹⁴ As a result, the BJP's political success can be linked to its perseverance in meticulously building social coalitions by including politically important castes and sub-castes in its political representation. We continue to hear reports of Dalit students being humiliated or abused by Dalit women in several regions of the country. Caste is a persistent factor that is at the base of all social problems and prevents upward social mobility. The caste system has an impact on society by exposing people to prejudice, stereotyping, and other forms of discrimination. The caste system is the reason behind the lower status of women and communal violence by continuously suppressing a section of people. Naxalite and Maoist movements are just aggression of lower caste people on economic disparity.¹⁵ It is undeniable that the politicization of caste has benefited the lower castes and other marginalized groups. We must transform our political democracy into a social democracy. Political democracy will exist only if there is a foundation of social democracy.

¹⁴ Afroz Alam, 'The caste politics curse that India just can't shake off' (*The Conversation*, 6 October 2017) <<https://theconversation.com/the-caste-politics-curse-that-india-just-cant-shake-off-84216>> accessed 20 April 2022

¹⁵ Dr. N. Veemaraja, 'Impact of Caste System in Indian Democracy' (2015) 2 (3) *International Journal of Management Research and Social Science*, 91 <https://irdp.info/journals/j2/volume2/IJMRSS_218.pdf> accessed 22 April 2022

Liberty, equality, and fraternity are the guiding principles of social democracy. It means an associated living among people without any discrimination. The caste system is filled with inequity and injustice and is thus an impediment to democracy.

CONCLUSION

In India, caste and politics have a close link, and both impact one another. Caste is a crucial social institution in India, and it occupies a distinctive position in the Indian political system at numerous levels. Caste politics, which is centered on the caste mobility principle, can impede democracy. The whole spirit of democracy will be lost if people begin voting based on caste rather than the abilities of a candidate. Caste is a social stigma that cannot be changed but the only way to get rid of caste politics is to eliminate the caste system as a whole.