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"SIGNIFICANCE OF CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS"

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ABSTRACT
Caste refers to a broad hierarchical institutional arrangement along which basic social factors like birth, marriage, food-sharing etc. are arranged in a hierarchy of rank and status. These sub-divisions are traditionally link to occupations and decide the social relation with respect to other upper and lower castes. The traditional hierarchical ordering of castes was based on the distinction between 'purity' and 'pollution'. While the manifestation of the order has changed to a large extent in recent times, the system itself has not changed much. The word 'Caste' is derived from Spanish word caste which means race. People born in particular race have their separate caste. It defines all social, economic and political relationships for individual. Caste determines the nature, organisation and working of political parties, interest groups and all political structures and their functions. The aim of this paper is to analyse the role of caste in Indian politics and how it becomes an obstacle to the true working of parliamentary democracy and to the national integration. Caste is a social stratification system is a salient feature of Indian society which has influenced the structure of society in socio economic and political scenario. Caste values and caste interests influence persons' political thinking, awareness and participation. Due to this process of political socialisation of caste, caste consciousness arouses among the people. While nominating their candidates from different constituencies the political parties keep in mind the caste of candidates and caste of the voters in that particular constituency. It in turn affects democratic ideals of equality, justice. At time it leads to an unhealthy struggle for power and acts as a divisive force. But at the same time prevalence of caste politics has resulted in the welfare of development of marginalised sections of society. Though prevalence of caste politics in India has contributed in some way to modernize political attitude it does not indicate that it is the way through which welfare of marginalised and disadvantaged sections can be achieved.

Introduction:
The substance of Indian politics has been largely modelled 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 the caste politics. The caste system in India is a complex social structure where in social roles like one's profession became hereditary resulted in restricted social mobility and fixed status hierarchies. Caste in politics means how the caste factor is used in politics to the advantage to candidates who are countering the elections. Politics in caste means the way politics is played over the issue of caste. A recent wealth distributed survey titled, 'Wealth ownership and Inequality in India: A socio religious analysis' reportedly revealed that just 22 percent of upper caste Hindus own a whopping 41 percent of most of the total asset with people in India. While the upper caste Hindus form the richest communities in India, the Hindu scheduled tribes in India account for the lowest share in terms of assets at 3.7 percent. Castes in Indian society refer to a social group where membership decided by birth. Members of such local groups are endogamous, that is they tend to enter into marital relationships among themselves. They often have related political preferences. For political purposes the castes are broadly divided into – Forward class 30.80 percent Other Backward Classes (OBC) about 41 percent, Scheduled castes about 19.7 percent, Schedules Tribes about 8.5 percent of the population. The use of caste for gaining political benefits is not a new phenomenon and Indian post independence politics continually used caste and abused in different ways. The British Imperialist used religion as well as caste for political division of the nation. Unfortunately even after independence India could not stop caste as a factor from influencing politics. Independent India introduced the universal adult franchise. This brought in a new socio political transformation, in this new environment, caste got a new dimension in the politics of India. 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. A striking feature of the Indian democratic experiment has been the increasing use of reservations to achieve greater social justice and equality of opportunity. Much of these had occurred due to the shifting balance of power across demographics. Since 1950s, political power has been shifting away from upper caste Hindus to the rest, who are more numerous. By the 1970s many backward castes – located above the out-castes had gained enough economic and political clout to become a powerful 'vote bank'. They now aspired to a larger share of administrative and educational opportunities, where they were under-represented. Some of the largest and best - organised backward castes were the Yadavs in Uttarpradesh and Bihar, Jats in Haryana and Panjab, Marathas in Maharashtra, Vokkaligas in Karnataka and Gounders in Tamilnadu. The franchise system in India brought in the importance of numbers. Those who were placed in the lower ladder of social hierarchy got an opportunity to assert themselves by using their numerical strength. In many parts of India, caste associations have emerged with aim of pursuing not only social status and economic interest but political power as well. As a result of this most of the political parties have had to consider the welfare and development of lower castes. In political term, caste has a basic role in the decision making process that even the reorganisation of Sates in India had to struggle with it so that no caste group dominates a particular territory. Although untouchability has been forbidden under the Constitution. Harijans and Adivasis have also been given legal safeguard as a positive measure. Government made an attempt to create economic and social impartiality but these reservations have

affected Indians in an unpleasant manner. Groups declared backward are now not prepared to relinquish the concessions that accumulate to them by the level of backwardness. Caste has thus become a major hurdle in the establishment of casteless society and has paved communal connections. Even the politicians are caught in the network. On the one hand, they would like the differences and preferences based on caste to be abolished and on the other, are well aware that these are helpful in securing the vote.

Caste based behaviour and caste based decisions and policies constitute casteism in India. The nature and role of caste can be discussed as follows:

Caste and leadership:

The process of leadership recruitment if we look at the Nehruvian era, a vast majority of Chief Ministers were Brahmins. It was an empirical fact that leadership of all political parties, from Left to Right consisted of Brahmins. Caste conscious people of states like Haryana, Bihar, Tamilnadu and Andhrapradesh recruit state leaders on the demand of dominant castes.

Political Parties and Caste:

The caste-based mobilisation is one of the most important tools of voter mobilisation for all political parties today in India. Most of the political parties have direct or indirect caste base. In Bihar, almost all regional parties have their own caste-base support, the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) of Ram Vilas Paswan for example. In Uttarpradesh where the Samajwadi Party is closely identified as a Yadav Party, while Bahujan Samaj Party is identified as the party of Dalits. The JD(s) of Karnataka is known to be a part of the dominant peasant community, the Vokkaligs, while the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra is identified as party mainly for Marathas. The BJP has traditionally been supported by upper caste Hindus and commercial communities.

Caste and Political Socialisation:

Caste has been present in the political sphere of India all the time. Different caste groups have their loyalties behind completely different political parties and their ideologies. Right from the birth people inherit a caste and grow up as the members of a specific caste cluster. They belong to either high caste or backward caste. Caste values and caste interests eventually start influencing socialisation and consequently individual's political thinking, awareness and participations.

Caste in Government Making:

Caste influences the policy making of the government. The programmes, policies and declarations of political parties are made while keeping in view caste factor. 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.

Caste and Local Politics:

It is evident that the upper castes who have been controlling the affairs of the village and the community and the rural economy can not tolerate the changes that are being brought about by the decentralized democratic institutions. Therefore, from the beginning of the implementation of the Panchayat system tensions, violence and killing have been taken place in order to resist the transformation. The elections to the local government bodies have been first and foremost point of attack by the casteist groups. From the very first election under the new system, the rights of the

lower castes to participate in the democratic process and hold positions were questioned by upper castes. One of the basic objectives of the decentralized system is to give opportunities to the marginalised groups and thus try and bring them on par with the people from higher castes.

Caste Violence:

Crime against the historically marginalised scheduled castes and schedule tribes by the upper caste represents an extreme form of prejudice and discrimination. Similar to the hate crime in other parts of the world, these groups have remained target to the crimes and atrocities at the hands of the upper caste people mainly on account of their low caste identity in the form of rape, abuse by the police personnel, harassment, illegal land encroachments, forced evictions and so on. The growing terrorisation of the lower castes by the higher or even intermediary castes, has been becoming a part of rural India's political reality. In states like Maharashtra, Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan and Utter Pradesh caste violence has raised its head even in some urban areas.

Caste in Electoral Politics:

Elections in India seeks overwhelming popular participation, where electoral candidates try to woo the voters by promising long term reforms such as better governance, greater socio-economic equity, poverty elevation etc. However, corrupt politicians with criminal records, caste and religion-based politics and allegation of vote-buying have defeated the very purpose of such democratic process. Caste politics in the last three decades have been marked by the desire for power on the caste lines rather than a substantial agenda for social reform of the downtrodden.

Caste and Indian Constitution:

During independence of India the scheduled castes (lower castes) renamed economically dependent, politically powerless and culturally subjugated to the upper castes. This impacted their overall life style and access to food, education and health. As per article 46 of the Constitution of India, States will have to promote and protect the educational and economic interests of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. It shall protect SC and ST from social injustice and all forms of exploitation, Article 330 provides for the reservation of the seats in the Lok Sabha for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, Article 332 makes sure there should be reservation of seats for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the Legislative Assemblies of States.

Conclusion:

Like religion some politicians use the issue of caste to divide voters. Many political parties take advantage of the caste sentiments and fracture the society in such a manner that they gain from such divisions. Caste leaders appeal to the sentiments of the voters of their respective caste groups and try to mobilise votes on that basis so as to capture and retain political power. Not only this, politicians have also managed to divert the attention of its voters from issues relating to development etc. by engaging them in caste related issues. Over the years the negative role of caste has found prominence in Indian politics and considered one of the dangerous unhealthy trends towards our democracy more important on Inclusive development. There is a close relationship between caste and politics in India and both influence each other. Casteism is the biggest challenge for Indian democracy. Democracy and casteism are opposed to each other. India has adopted the liberal democratic system,

which is mainly based on equality, freedom and justice. Caste stands for inequality based on birth and maintained irrationally on the basis of certain evil traditions. Since politics has become caste-ridden and castes have got politicised. Caste groups use politics as the means of to secure their benefits. Caste is only an identity mark. It should not enjoy any undue importance in our life and relations. Faith in social, economic and justice must replace the blind love for caste and casteism. The recognition of caste-based political parties should be withdrawn. The politician should rise above the politics of caste. The basis of reservation should be economic not caste so that all poor sections of society are benefited to it. Our education system must inculcate the values of equality and fraternal bonds among all young men and women for securing complete integration of all as equal partners in nation building. The government should ensure that operation of political practices and system are just and equal to all groups, religions and communities. The political leadership and political parties should also rise above narrow interests to face the challenges of national unity and integrity.

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