

GOVERNMENT, POLITICS, DALITS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN INDIA – AN OVER VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article on issues and conflict between Ambedkarite consciousness and Hindutva over religion, politics and society has become even more violent with the intrusion of state power. The paper stress on the Bharatiya Janata Party's relations with the Dalits are tense and complex. For the party, Dalit assertiveness has become hard to comprehend. The BJP is showing an interest in accommodating Dalit groups, but it knows that this embrace is not palatable for its core supporters. The BJP in its strongholds in northern and western India has been seen as a party of the urban middle class, the Baniyas, and a section of Brahmins. Over time, the party also brought the Other Backward Classes and the Most Backward Classes within its fold. With the retreat of socialist politics, the rural neo-rich from the backward castes began feeling marginalised in national politics and moved towards Hindutva politics. From the 1970s to 1990s, this community purchased rural land at a much faster rate and emerged as a landed community. On the one hand, this affluent group appears to be part of the new political leadership for post-Mandal Hindutva politics; on the other, being the landed community, it is also perceived to be the oppressor of Dalits in everyday rural life.

Communalisation and saffronisation of public spaces is a new strategy adopted by the BJP to mobilise each Dalit caste individually by evoking its unique caste identity. The party reinterpreted and recreated the cultural resources of Dalits at the local level, including their caste histories and heroes, with the aim of saffronising the Dalit psyche and memory, ultimately transforming them into sites for political control. The local heroes of various castes, particularly Dalits, have been selected by the party in different regions for incorporation into one unified Hindutva metanarrative.

Keywords: *Ambedkarite consciousness, Hindutva, religion, politics, society, state power, Bharatiya Janata Party's, Dalits, Other Backward Classes, Most Backward Classes.*

INTRODUCTION:

A big dilemma of the RSS and BJP is that they are willing to assimilate Dalits within their fold but just in form of a vote bank. For this, the Sangh Parivar is trying hard to incorporate the Dalit identity in the Hindutva ideology, but wants those from the forward castes and middle castes to remain leaders. Till now, Dalits have not been given any crucial role under the BJP and RSS leadership. After Independence, due to various state-led developmental efforts, a literate, critical Dalit leadership has emerged. These leaders are inspired by the writings of Periyar E.V. Ramasami, Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar, and their consciousness is informed by criticism of Hindu religion and Hindutva ideology. Though a small part of this group is under the BJP's influence, it is also influenced by Ambedkarite thought. The RSS has not come to terms with this. Ever since erstwhile champions of secular values have begun differentiating between Hindu and Hindutvawadi, a whole lot of intellectuals are bristling. They are arguing how these nuanced metaphysical differentiations hold no relevance on the street. Mostly from the Hindu elite, these are the same scholars who will argue that Islam

should be separated from Islamism, and clarify that invaders of India should be described as Persianised Turks and not Muslim warlords.

Religion as a word found favour in the 19th century. It referred to monotheistic mythology, which deemed god as a fact, despite the growing influence of science. For most colonisers, there was only one religion — their version of Christianity, either Catholic or Protestant. They saw Judaism as outdated and Islam as heresy, despite their common roots. Beliefs of the populations in the nations they colonised were deemed pagan and idolatrous, hence invalid, as superstitions and not religion. Then, however, it became difficult to access Japanese markets as the Emperor of Japan did not appreciate missionary activities. That is when the idea of ‘respecting other people’s religion’ gained political currency. In other words, in the 19th century, it was the market that forced Europeans to acknowledge the validity of multiple religions.

INDIAN IDENTITY

It is not a coincidence, therefore, that during this period, Buddha was ‘discovered’ by Europe and widely appreciated. Indians were told that Buddhism was a better idea to emerge from India, a counter to casteist Hinduism. This is when words like Hinduism and Hindutva were invented, the former in the early 19th century by Raja Rammohan Roy who believed in social reform, and the latter in the late 19th century by Chandranath Basu who opposed social reform.

Before this period, identity in India was based on caste, tribe, and region. One saw fishermen as belonging to the fisherman caste. It did not matter who they worshipped. Landlords were landlords — some Muslim, some Rajput, some Brahmin, some Thakur, some Kayastha. The British successfully formalised religion as a category through the medium of census. Hindus never had a centralised religion until the British told them they did. It was constructed as a creation of Brahmins to enforce caste hierarchy, just as prophets and priests enforced divine law in Christianity. This new vocabulary of religion enabled Britain to justify its rule of India, and ‘save’ Hindus from Muslim rulers, and ‘lower’ caste Hindus from the ‘upper’ caste elite. Later, it enabled elite Muslims to divide India and ‘protect’ Muslims from the now powerful Hindu elite. And it is now being used to ‘unite’ India from the so-called ‘Marxist’ anti-caste forces that want to divide Hindus, and hence India itself.

Seen through the lens of religion, even pre-Partition India was a Hindu majority state. Seen through the lens of caste, India has always been a land of many minorities. Religion makes more sense than caste for the politician because democracy is based on numbers. As long as they were fighting elite Hindus, the Muslim politician could unite Muslim elites of North India to create Pakistan. But then the Bengali elite refused to bow to the Punjabi elite, and this led to the division of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The fear of further division plagues both countries, for everyone knows the people of South Asia have strong caste and tribal roots, religion notwithstanding. However, both Pakistan and Bangladesh will resist conversations around caste in their respective Muslim communities, insisting caste is a Hindu and not a South Asian word. Academicians rarely push back despite vast evidence to the contrary. Is there anything Hindu outside of caste? If you do not talk about caste, a Hindu is accused of being an elite Hindu who uses privilege to deny caste. If a Hindu talks about caste, then they must only talk about it in terms of oppression and its annihilation. Any other conversation about caste, say, in terms of cultural and vocational diversity makes a Hindu a caste-admiring bigot. Thus, conversations are cleverly gagged to reinforce the idea that Hinduism is nothing but caste.

POLITICAL INSTIGATION

Politicians never had a problem evoking caste, as it generates vote banks, and they can always justify it by appealing to minority rights. When it came to Islam, politicians could invoke religion and justify it by appealing to minority rights once again. But when it came to Hinduism, evoking religion did not really help. Other than Islamophobia, there was nothing really uniting Hindus. The Mandal Commission changed that. It acknowledged that over 50% of Indian castes are actually backward communities, neither elite nor scheduled, neither savarna nor avarna. Hindutva became a powerful force when these backward communities were reminded of their caste histories, and made to feel proud of their Hindu heritage. This was the Hindutva masterstroke; it now speaks of Hinduism by speaking to the neglected middle of the bell curve of caste. At one end, hundreds of thousands of Indians have been told that they are being denied access to an institute or a job, not because of merit, but because their ancestors instituted and benefited from the caste hierarchy. They are paying for the crimes of their ancestors. It is social justice. Sounds rational and moral and ethical. But it does not take away the rage. It does not make you give up your caste, it makes you cling to it even more defiantly.

HINDU VOTE BANKS

Caste embarrassed elite Hindus. The idea of annihilating caste made many intellectuals feel morally superior just as annihilating religion made 19th century intellectuals feel morally superior, and annihilating gender makes 21st century intellectuals feel morally superior. But anti-caste movements seemed increasingly anti-Hindu, and by extension anti Hindu Rashtira hence anti-national. Meanwhile, Hindutva has successfully strengthened Hindu vote banks by acknowledging the reality of caste as well as the underlying Islamophobia and unabashedly equating it with nationalism. Most politicians now acknowledge that secularism does not win the heart of the Hindus who make up the largest vote share. They can sense a new vote bank emerging among those Hindus who do not identify themselves through Islamophobia or caste. As they go about creating this new vote bank, Hindutva ideologues are obviously alarmed. But so are secular intellectuals who had once granted themselves the exclusive privilege of defining Hinduism through the straitjacket of caste. Activists in the U.S. are now working to add caste as a protected identity category, not at the UN, but at the level of workplace and university. The most recent win on this front comes from Harvard, where the Harvard Graduate Students Union (HGSU) successfully added caste as a protected category in their contract with the richest university in the world.

CASTE IDENTITY

Harvard isn't the first university to recognise caste; Brandeis (Massachusetts) did it in 2019, while the University of California, Davis, and Colby College (Maine) did it earlier this year. What is significant about Harvard's move, though, is that it includes caste not in a university policy, a student handbook or an employee code of conduct but in a worker-negotiated, legally-enforceable labour union contract. Including caste in a union struggle correctly recognises it as a system that has long conferred material advantage and disadvantage beyond just "prejudice" or "bias". A 2016 survey by Equality Labs found that 60% of Dalit respondents had experienced caste-based denigration through jokes and slurs; 67% had experienced caste discrimination at their workplaces. Attacks on Dalits' dignity, then, seemed to go hand in hand with attacks on their livelihood.

Recent high-profile cases have highlighted caste as a livelihood issue. In 2020, dominant-caste Indians at IT conglomerate Cisco were revealed to have discriminated against a Dalit co-worker who was given "the lowest status within a team of higher-caste colleagues,

receiving less pay, fewer opportunities, and other inferior terms and conditions of employment.” Since then, Dalit women at Apple, Google, and Microsoft have come forward with similar accounts of discrimination. Beyond Silicon Valley, there have been news reports of egregious abuses such as caste-based slavery in a New Jersey temple, untouchability in a California restaurant, and the ostracisation of Dalit students at universities across the U.S. Such caste discrimination has a real cost. In Equality Labs’ survey, over 30% of Dalit households reported earning less than \$24,999 per year while the same percentage of Brahmin households made between \$100,000 and \$249,999 per year.

COMBATING CASTEISM

If caste is a labour problem, then our efforts to combat casteism must put workers at the helm of any proposed solution. This is why where caste protections are added might be even more important than the addition itself. Adding caste to a company policy is fundamentally different from adding it to a labour contract. The former is enforced at the whim of employers; the latter is wielded as a weapon of workers. The word ‘caste’ appearing in Cisco’s internal policy could hardly be expected to prevent discrimination; it is not like dominant-caste people checked the employee handbook before mistreating their colleague. Companies, too, rarely bother to check their policies before declaring, as Cisco did, that their internal investigation found no evidence of discrimination. In short, it is not enough to improve non-discrimination language without changing who has the power to enforce that language.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, a conflict between Ambedkarite consciousness and Hindutva consciousness over religion, politics and society has become even more violent with the intrusion of the power of the state. After coming to power, the BJP wants to crush through government interference every idea that opposes its own. The biggest challenge before the Sangh Parivar in the politics of Dalit appropriation is the clash of ideas. In the process of the RSS and the BJP trying to subsume Dalit ideas under bigger narratives of development and nationalism, it is not only the young Ambedkarites who are being attacked; the Sangh organisations are also hurting themselves. More than seven decades since Independence, in many villages of India the nature of certain social equations has not changed from what they have been for centuries. Such villages continue to remain what Dr. B.R. Ambedkar called “sinks of localism, dens of ignorance and narrow-mindedness”. How else could one see certain recent incidents reported from Tumakuru in Karnataka about village barber shops denying haircuts for Dalits, temple festivities remaining out-of-bounds for Dalit families, and other forms of prevalent discrimination? By all accounts these are not isolated incidents. Discrimination against Dalits is widespread and ingrained in the psyche across India, in rural settings in particular. In some places it takes the form of violent oppression, in others it is disguised yet omnipresent. To be fair, when the incidents in Tumakuru came to notice, the administration took corrective steps immediately. This suggests responsiveness on the part of the state to issues of social justice at least in some cases. But recurring acts and persisting practices against the Dalit community beg the question whether state response and constitutionalism alone are enough to overcome longstanding social injustice and prejudices in India’s villages.

In other words, has political justice achieved in some respects over time by means of affirmative action managed to overcome social injustice at all? The alacrity shown by state authorities in the Tumakuru cases reflects to some extent the political power gained by Dalits in India and the efficacy of the rule of law. After all, the Constitution guarantees the right to equality of all citizens and affirmative action for Dalits. Years of following the policy of

affirmative action has yielded a high degree of participation and representation of Dalits in politics and in governance. But without progressive social consciousness permeating society at large, constitutionalism, state actions and political equations simply do not suffice. It would help if the political actors who have accommodated Dalits among their party and governance structures, due to their sheer weight of numbers as a representative section, also believed in and worked as conduits for social transformation. Perhaps if Dalits were not merely accommodated but were accorded leadership roles in parties, that could aid this process of social activism. A recent study pointed out that barring exceptions such as the Bahujan Samaj Party, the leadership of major political parties suffered from a clear diversity deficit, with Dalits being severely under-represented in the leadership across parties. Being made part of the political leadership one way of being among the elite in the country will not by itself guarantee the eradication of social prejudice, but it will be a step in the right direction.

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