

Politics of Caste and Future of Democratic System in India

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Abstract

The constitution is the fundamental document of any system that functions as a guiding tool, a protecting frame and a supporting instrument to maintain the peace and harmony of democracy. Built on the idealized concepts of human welfare and citizen's security, the constitution suggests methods of life and norms and thereby divides the actions of the government and the citizens in to two: constitutional and unconstitutional. Fundamental rights, obligations and directive principles form the three tier system of Indian Democracy erected on the pillars of liberty, equality and fraternity. The peculiar Indian situations, though demand unity in diversity, could not put this superlative agenda into practice, due to the social stratification legitimized in Indian history and exercised without a good deal of threat even in the current scenario. Religion serves as a cultural instrument in the Indian context: it specifies the behavioural patterns, selections, prioritizations and rejections of the people, in addition to projecting the difference in favour of existence. While on the one side emphasize on the

idea of existence called the attention and invited agreement from every sphere of life in India, on the other, the demand for equality was not underlined by this appeal. Those occupying higher territories in the strata of caste hierarchies found these pleas as redundant, as either they believe in the maintenance of this stratification for their welfare or they consider the call for transformation of society and equality of individuals as unnecessary and the goals, according to them, are already attained. This attitude is not devoid of politics. The underlying politics of caste is one among the prominent deterrents that curtail the rights of the marginalized castes. The current paper examines the different channels in which the politics of caste prevails in India posing challenges to democracy.

Key words: *democracy, caste, fundamental rights, equality*

In a paper titled, “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” presented in Columbia University in 1916, B.R. Ambedkar remarked about the peculiarity of the institution of caste as never “un-understood”, but as a domain “unexplained”(Ambedkar 1) . Even after a century, the validity of statement remains in currency, or better its validity is intensified, and the intricacies urge intellectual and realistic deliberations on caste. Caste is understood in two perspectives: firstly as the continuation of the ancient social division on the basis of the tasks maintained by communities and secondly as an ethnic category of stratification. Both

these viewpoints envisage caste as a part of structure of the society. Caste is the sub categorization of the religions existed in India; being influential in several areas where it occupies a decisive terrain, caste has been instrumental in making the country as a landscape of graded inequalities. The crucial fact about caste in Indian existence is the insidious presence of it, not only in the consciousness of the society, but its subtle operations that produce politics in the cultural locale of India. One cannot resist the fact that caste is one of the sole reasons for diversity in India. Along with that there are facts that contribute to this fundamental truth about caste; one such knowledge is that the presence of caste and its operations could not be perceived in an innocent manner, as it is a slot for discrimination and it has the dimensions of superiority and inferiority ascribed to the value system that castes uphold. Recognition of the graded nature of privileges and limits would enable the objective understanding of caste and its inherent politics.

The roots of the caste lies in the stratification of ancient Indian society based on Varna, as Brahmin, Kshathriya, Vaishya and Sudra, taking the occupation of the people involved into consideration. Though, if one reflect, it could be identified as a practical classification for effortless identification, when this classification remained permanent, irrespective of the occupation, it was forming a new theory of existence where a certain groups by virtue of their birth, enjoyed the benefits

and others due to the same reason were compelled to suffer from graded inequality not only in history but also in the current times. The most striking aspect of this social evolution is that, this act of marginalization is evaluated as a step of the formation of a well structured civil society. The articulations on this transformed society were the ones of the upper caste people, benefitted out of education, and hence identified as the harbingers of modernity. The politics of knowledge obviously prevented any other readings on this condition and normalized the disparity, ironically planted the seeds of inevitable revolt. The frictions arising out of disappointment, even though were defeated initially, the minority at the centre of caste circle failed to identify the crucial strengths of the majority at the margins and they either exaggerated the actions of those occupied lower strata in the caste line or considered the resistance as a myth and ignored. Not only the resistance, but also the culture, myths, narratives, customs etc. of the marginalized castes were subjected to the castelistic camouflage of the elite. Ambedkar's contributions to pose a threat to this imposed invisibility is worthy of commendation in this context of injustice and inequality.

In the last speech delivered in the Constituent Assembly on 25th November 1949, Abbedkar highlighted on the need to have a democratic government for the people, that functions with the awareness of the evils in the society:

If we wish to preserve the Constitution in which we have sought to enshrine the principle of Government of the people, for the people and by the people, let us resolve not to be tardy in the recognition of the evils that lie across our path and which induce people to prefer Government for the people to Government by the people, nor to be weak in our initiative to remove them. That is the only way to serve the country. I know of no better (Ambedkar 15).

The preamble of Indian Constitution directed the state to ensure and the citizens to fulfill the values of equality of status and opportunity in addition to safeguarding dignity of life of Indians. These ideals are emerged from the awareness of the prevalence of inequality and injustice across the country, legitimized by class and caste superiority. While Article 14 of the Constitution guarantees that rights of Indians would not be denied and protected against all odds, Article 16 offered a balanced treatment in the case of opportunities for appointment and employment. (7) Article 15 has made an elaborate description about the areas where the constitution interferes to avoid discrimination, access to public spaces and use of primary provisions related to water or food. Presumably, later when he was aware of the misuse of provisions to curtail or deny special considerations offered to the challenging categories such as caste or gender minorities response was articulated through Amendments. The Amendments included along

with Article 15 and 16 stating that the statements of equality should not be interpreted in such a way as to make them as tools to deny the special support provided to Scheduled Castes formulate equality a reality (7). Untouchability normalized and legitimized was banned by Article 17 and practicing it was recognized as punishable under this article (8). Again Article 19 recommended freedom of speech and expression and liberty to visit any place in the country which could be put adjacent to the above mentioned articles, as one could not separate equality from liberty. Article 30, stating about the right of minorities to start institutions, Article 46, ensuring the protection to the scheduled castes from exploitation and injustice, and Part XVI identifying special clauses related to certain classes-regarding reservation and Commissions to take care of the interests of Scheduled Castes and Tribes are also constitutional measures in favour of the deprived castes. Along with celebrating secularism, the concern with which the crucial issues of lower castes are addressed, is what makes Indian Constitution a unique document. The less rigid nature of the constitution is what made it as a favourable document to the down trodden castes. Thus constitution acted as a document that promoted the fundamental politics of inclusiveness and affirmed in a written mode that state has the obligation to safeguard the rights of all, in addition to providing extra care to the socially challenged categories.

Constitution is a document that projected the realization that caste is a reality and a source of social and cultural inequality. From the realm of rule, adherence to the constitution will safeguard the lower caste people from degradation, shame and stigma. But the cultural inhibitions, taboos and prejudices sometimes went beyond this idealized manner of perceiving caste. So the constitutional rights are documented and legally implemented, but their social validity is remained under threat due to the politics of caste working in the socio-cultural context of India. Caste is essentially conceived in two ways in the Indian context : firstly, caste is a subdivision of particular religion, and the norms of mingling and relationships of people belonging to different castes as well as rules related to marriage and birth and death rituals etc. will be under the discretion of that religion ,within the structure of religion and castes under that religion , and secondly caste is a part of social stratification and irrespective of religious differences caste hierarchies are a part and parcel of society's unconscious .If one subscribes to the second conception, any idea that discrimination is restricted to the level of religion where the particular caste is situated is found faulty. This conception about caste makes the existence of lower caste people in India as horrifying because it thwarted the legal claim for equality and respectability of certain groups by the subtle operations of social knowledge that was propagated as traditional understanding, not as the outdated

norms of orthodox religions, nullifying any kind of reforms that constitution envisages.

The social text of this discourse of dalits and other minorities is to be kept for meticulous scrutiny to identify the subtle way of working of the politics of caste. Sunny M.Kapikkad opined that the discussions on religious conflicts are the epic narratives sought to subside caste debates which are more prominent subjects to be addressed in the peculiar Indian context of plurality. This is a solution emerged from the logic of nationalism that conveniently exiled or hidden the presence of the underprivileged groups. The inevitable consequence of this intentional othering is the arrival of Dalit movements such as 'Dalit Panther', or 'Bheem Army' to establish the subject position of the downtrodden (Kapikkad 349). The text was expanded with the direct entry of the marginalized groups into the spheres of politics and to the ruling territories. This, in turn, opened a new chapter of the politics, of representation, not as ordinary citizens but as representative stakeholder. Again, the intellectual capital of the country was restrained to a certain groups through sanskritisation of knowledge and denial of knowledge to the people belonging to margins. When British colonizers offered education to all irrespective of caste, it opened new visas of learning to the hitherto segregated. The inaccessible turned accessible promoted the journey of lower caste people to the world of visibility. The sphere of education has

provided a platform for them to display their intelligence and paved the way for the intellectual and theoretical understanding of caste existence from within. In addition to this, education supported the marginalized economically also.

Contrary to the significant achievements that the marginalized categories have, they still suffer from the degradation under the caste designations. The suicide of the dalit research scholar named Rohit Chakravarti Vemula at University of Hyderabad is a 2016 incident of the failure of education to safeguard the respectability of the lower caste people. As per the data provided by International Dalit Solidarity Network, the number of dalits in India presumably exceeded 200 millions. Here lies the real paradox: the increase in the number, access to facilities and jobs, opportunities and visibility could not offer dignity even to those who were educated. The answer to this paradoxical question is not vested with Dalits, instead the answerable would be the community except the marginalized. The fundamental reason is not the victim consciousness of the marginalized, but the superior consciousness of the other cultural communities that are reluctant to accommodate the marginalized as normal.

In order to recognize what could be done to eradicate its evil nature, caste is to be identified as a solid presence that can make and demolish political structures. This is particularly an important mission if one initiates deliberations on democracy,

specifically on the future of it. The power to purposefully articulate the requirements is indispensable to enjoy the status to be heard. Recently the lower caste people began political alliances against Brahminical orientations in the ruling circle. The entry of Dalits into the realm of forming political parties such as BSP was a welcoming move though that is yet to attain the goals of bringing improvement to the status of the group. The most interesting turn in the political climate of India is the recognition of Ambedkar as the most prominent intellectual and political leader to be followed than anyone else especially to the marginalized who sought both theoretical and practical solutions to the humiliation and cultural inequality through his thoughts rejecting Gandhian paternalism and Nehruvian Centralism. Amidst the struggles a few notable names like the one of Rohit Vemula and of Chandrasekhar Asad provided better insights about the future of Indian Democracy contextualizing and problematizing democracy as related to the marginalized. Voices of public intellectuals like T.M. Krishna have offered an interdisciplinary pathway to deal with eliticism and marginalization based on caste. The survival of democracy is vested in the hands of young minds who could visualize that unless caste structure is demolished constitutional values of democracy could not be attained. The politics of knowledge that preserved the graded structure is to be combated with the recognition of historical contributions of lower caste people, the understanding of the vision

behind reservations, the initiation of cultural activities that are inclusive and a reconfiguration of Indian mindset. This is important to establish and maintain justice for the prevalence of democracy in India in future.

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Textual Criticism: A Process of Monarchy

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What is Textual criticism?