

Changing face of Caste System

The role of caste has changed over the years. Its functional and structural formations have changed dramatically especially in the Post-Mandal recommendations era. Its significant impact can be seen in political and social behaviour of the people. The negative fallout of the caste system is that casteism is increasing day by day which reinforces divisive tendencies in the society. It has started corrupting the minds of the people which lead to rigid and biased social attitudes affecting the normal social relations.

We can trace the caste system in our ancient hierarchichal social order under 'Varna System' where the whole society was divided into four rigid varnas. At the top of the hierarchy was Brahmins followed by Kshatriyas then Vaishyas followed by the Shudras, the lowest in the hierarchy. Castes are basically Jatis having different Sub-Jatis. Castes formed one endogamous group specific to one particular region or locality. Food habits and marriages were restricted within their own Jatis only. The norms of pollution and purity were followed very rigidly. But subsequently the form of caste system changed due to urbanization caused by industrialization and modernization. Metros witnessed lessening of caste rigidities due to frequent interaction with variety of people from different caste backgrounds. As a result Inter-dining and Inter-caste marriages was on the rise.

The transformation of caste system can be seen at various levels in different forms. The caste system represented unequal social order with deep prejudices and stereotypes. A feeling of backward versus forward castes developed over the years. It was marked by rising caste-consciousness and caste solidarity among different castes. Thus caste solidarity started manifesting in vote banks for various political parties. Political parties utilized this traditional loyalty to further their own ends.

Two processes were evident in the caste transformation. One was of Sanskritisation which meant imitation of life styles and values of the higher castes by lower castes. The second which is not quite old is the caste consolidation of their own castes instead of imitating the higher castes, e.g., emergence and dominance of Intermediate Castes like Yadvas, Kurmis in north India; and Reddys, Kammas in Andhra Pradesh; and Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka.

The rising consciousness of caste manifested into backward versus forward was first articulated by leaders of anti-Brahmin Movements in South and self respect movements again in South. It revolutionized the thinking and life styles of lower

castes in South. Its direct impact was assertion of these castes into politics. The politics of reservation started on a large scale in education and jobs.

In North it was a late start. In 1977 for the first time Centre had non-Congress government and some of the states too followed the same. In Bihar and U.P., non-Congress governments started playing the politics of backward versus forward. It paid them rich dividends. In the meantime Mandal Commission was appointed. It submitted its recommendations in 1980 favouring for 27% reservations to Other Backward Castes (OBCs) in government jobs.

Earlier since independence due to universal adult franchise and rising literacy levels, the number of people coming from lower castes and intermediate castes was already on rise in the Parliament and State Assemblies. The Mandal Commission recommendations added one more feather in their cap. The ascendance and dominance of Intermediate castes in politics is evident today. Today the caste factor is such a dominant factor in politics that all the political parties while selecting a candidate for election give top priority to the caste having taken into consideration the social composition of that particular constituency. Not even BJP is spared of it which is a cadre based party. The rise of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in recent years is really phenomenal. Its appeal is increasing day by day among Dalits. Dalits and OBCs constitute bigger chunk of the total electorate. That is why they are going to exercise decisive influence in Indian politics in coming years.

The caste system which was on decline due to urbanization and industrialization is again on ascent. Even in Metros everyone becomes conscious of his caste and is curious to know about one's caste. The influence of politics is all pervasive. Politics affects other walks of life. It directly touches social life and interaction. Mandal Commission's recommendations and implementation met heavy retaliation and divided people and especially youth of this country. Even Supreme Court justified it. The floodgates for tension and turmoil have been left open. Social tensions can manifest into caste riots. The people are being divided for one reason or the other which is really dangerous for the unity of this country. We cannot deny that one is not born to a caste but the caste factor should not be manipulated for vote banks, jobs and opportunities. It can impede the social interactions. Inter-caste marriages should be encouraged. Real moral education should be encouraged which can remove the stereotypes and attitudes hampering the social relations.