Politics of caste, ethnicity and language

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Indian politics is deeply rooted in social stratification rather than ideological orientation. In other words, the politics of identity transcends nationalist narrative and asserts the claims of different communities for rightful distribution of the social and economic opportunities.

Gandhiji felt that if the Indian national movement were to succeed all people in this country should participate in the freedom struggle. He understood that caste is a barrier to it. So Gandhiji's programme included not only political, but also social. It consisted of programmes against untouchability and right to temple entry for all castes. That is how Gandhiji came to Vaikom in Kerala to support temple entry agitation. Thus, the anti-caste campaign was made an integral part of national movement.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar felt that the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes should have important role in decision making. He himself formed a political party called Indian Labour party. The other backward classes (OBCs) like Yadav's also claimed for greater representation in legislatures. They also demanded reservation in government jobs. To achieve such demands the backward class leaders formed political parties of their own. These parties were mainly based on caste. This is called caste politics. Among the caste politics, Dalit politics is more articulate.

Dalit means oppressed. In Indian society the oppressed are mainly those who belong to the last strata of caste system. Even before Independence, by 1930's Dr. B.R.Ambedkar argued for separate constituencies for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes to legislative Assemblies and Parliament. Separate constituencies mean only SCs and STs can contest in certain constituencies, but everyone can vote in such constituencies. He formed a Scheduled Caste Federation to organize the SC's and STs to raise these demands.

When India became independent and a new constitution was formed Reserved constituencies were fixed for legislative Assemblies and parliament in proportion to their population. Thus, in all states scheduled caste MLAs could win from reserved constituencies and enter Assemblies. Similarly, Many MPs were elected to the Parliament. The voice of the depressed classes was thus assured in Assemblies and Parliament. The Constitution also assured reservation in jobs for SC's and STs in government jobs.

By 1980's political parties such as Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), mainly consisting of SC's and STs were formed. A Dalit leader Kanshi Ram was the main organizer of this movement. In Uttar Pradesh they came to power in several times with Mayawati as Chief Minister. Later it became a national party with MPs from several states. Besides BSP, several small parties with Dalit identity are in existence in India.

Politics of ethnicity

Politics of ethnicity is a universal phenomenon. Ethnic group is a category of the population bound together by race. In many countries of the world ethnic social groups live along with majority dominant population. The blacks came to America as slaves and they were called African Americans.

In France and other European countries also, the blacks were brought in as slaves. Though there was discrimination against these ethnic groups, in modern periods they were assimilated into their new nation. For example, for the first time an African American, Barack Obama became the president of United States.

There are also people who arrived for business needs and settled in other countries. In many countries they are given full citizenship. For example, an Indian origin, Rishi Sunak became the Prime minister of England. But in some countries in past the ethnic population were not treated well and sometimes with cruelty. For example, during Hitlers' time in Germany one million Jews were killed and persecuted. But now Germany is one country that accepted migrants from other countries in large scale.

There are also who had gone to other countries as laborers. During colonial period The Tamils in large number went to Sri Lanka to work in the plantations. During that period there was migration to Malaya (now Malasia) from Kerala to work in the rubber plantations. They later became citizens of that country.

There are also many challenges based on ethnicity. Though most of the ethnic groups are assimilated in their new places there are also demands for cessation(separation). For example, When Soviet Union was formed in 1917 there had been many ethnic communities joined as one nation. But in 1991 the Soviet Union was disintegrated into sixteen states. One of the reasons was ethnic nationalism. Now there is no nation known as Soviet Union. The largest state separated after the disintegration is Russia.

In India there are many ethnic groups bound together by feature of their race. In our country they live with peace and recognition. Many states in North East India are of ethnic groups. For example, the Mizo's, The Nagas etc. Separate states were formed for them like Nagaland and Mizoram. There also problems in some areas bit our democracy has the strength to resolve it through dialogues. Thus, political and cultural aspirations of the ethnic groups and their expressions are known as politics of ethnicity.

Dravidian politics.

As north India was influenced by Aryan culture, the south India was dominated by Dravidian culture. The Dravidians were proud of their culture and language. For example, Tamil is considered as one of the ancients of the languages. The Dravidian politics emerged demanding more representation for Dravidians in government jobs. They also demanded more representation in Legislative Assemblies. It also aimed at social reform.

Thus in 1944 E.V.Ramaswamy Naikar and C.N.Annadurai together formed the Dravida Kazhakam. It criticized the cultural, economic and political domination of North India over south India. It resisted the imposition of Hindi in Tamil Nadu. Many anti Hindu agitations took place in Tamil Nadu since the founding of Dravida Kazhakam.

Later there was a split in Dravida Kazhakam and a new party was formed by C.N.Annadurai. it was called Dravida Munnetta Kazhakam (DMK). In 1965 the agitation led by DMK against the imposition of Hindi as the official language gained massive support. In the elections to the Tamil Nadu Assembly in 1967 the DMK got majority and C.N Annadurai became the Chief Minister. There was again a split in DMK resulting in the formation of All India Anna Dravida Munnetta Kazhakam(AIADMK). Since then, the electoral competition is between these two Dravidian parties and national parties have lost their base.

Politics of Language

One important issue that India met at the time of independence was the language issue. People speaking different languages in India aspired for states based on languages. The first agitation in this regard happened in South India. Madras was a large state that included present day Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The people of that region were speaking Telugu. They demanded a Telugu speaking state. In 1952 the agitation there grew very strong. Thus in 1952 Jawahar Lal Nehru's government agreed to partition Madras to form a Telugu speaking state called Andhra. This was the first state to be formed along the language lines by the central government. This state came into being in October 1953.

Agitation for linguistic states was also voiced from other regions also. Demand for linguistic reorganization became so strong that in 1954 the Government od India appointed a Linguistic Reorganization Commission. This Commission heard the demands of various section and submitted its report in October 1955. This report called for reorganizing India's twenty-seven states into fourteen. based on linguistic lines. This report was implemented on November 1, 1956.

For example, till then Tamil speaking Taluks in South Kerala from Parassala to Kanyakumari were part of Travancore. The Reorganization Commission recommended merger of these taluks with Madras. Thus, a new state, Kerala with exclusively Malayalam speaking people was formed on that day. Thus, Kerala day is celebrated on November 1, 1956.

The demands for states based on languages again surfaced after some time. The Gujarati speaking people demanded a separate state. So, the state of Bombay was divided into Maratha speaking areas called Maharashtra and Gujarati speaking areas called Gujarat. The Punjabi speaking people demanded a state based on their language and thus the state of Punjab was formed since then. Thus, the political demands based on languages is called the politics of Language.

Minority politics

Minority is a culturally, religiously or racially distinct group that co exists with majority population. All these types of minorities harmoniously live and exist together in India. Some of the linguistic minorities in India are Tulu speaking people in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi, Konkani speaking people in Goa and Bodo speaking people in Assam. The Indian constitution recognizes the rights of these linguistic minorities and provides safeguards for their languages. Article 29 guarantees the right to conserve distinct languages and scripts. These minorities demanded the inclusion of the above languages in the official language list of government of India. This is one aspect of minority politics.

The religious minorities in India are Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists and Parsis. These communities though small play a vital role in shaping the social and political fabric of the nation. The Indian constitution guarantees equality and freedom of religion. Besides, the Indian constitution provides guarantees to protect the cultural and educational rights of the minorities. For more representation in legislatures and parliament some minority groups have formed political parties. For example, the popular base of Akali Dal party in Punjab is consisted of Sikhs. This is another aspect of minority politics.

The racial minorities are mainly found in North Eastern states of India. Most of them have Mongoloid features. (Like fair skin). India's racial diversity is a testament to its cultural amalgamation. There were agitations in North East India for separate state like Bodoland. This is also part of minority (racial minority) politics.

Tribal politics

Tribes in India have a distinct identity with customs, language and worship. The most important issue in tribal politics is the exploitation of natural resources. Tribal lands are rich in natural resources

including minerals, forests and waterbodies. The tribals' philosophy is reverence for life, human, animals and trees. But exploitation of these resources during colonial period and after urged them to organize themselves. In India new states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh were formed on the basis of demands for separate states by tribals. The most important party with tribal base is Jharkhand Mukthi Morcha.

Thus Dalit, ethnic, linguistic, regional, tribal and minority politics have made profound influence on India society and politics in recent decades.

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