



An analysis of Role of Caste in Politics of Bihar



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ABSTRACT

History testifies the fact that Bihar has been at the centre of politics in India for a very long time. Getting its name from Vihar to Bihar has a political history. This place has given many true leaders to India- Jaiprakash Narayan (also known as JP), Ram Manohar Lohia, Anugrah Narayan Singh, Rajendra Prasad and many more. Many significant changes have taken place in the politics of Bihar. According to Christopher Jeffrelot- 'Caste forms the Mosaic of Indian Politics.' However in the Indian Constitution, under Art.15, it states that there should be no discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste, sex and place of birth. Despite, we use caste and religion in politics for serving our vested interests. The use of caste and religion in politics is detrimental to the growth of society and it also leads to social division in the society. This is the reason why politics in Bihar has been categorized in to ascriptive and development politics.

Keywords - Analysis, Caste, Politics, Bihar.

According to M.N.Srinivas- Caste is so tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including those worst vocal in condemning it that it is everywhere the unit of social action. The report of Centre for Study of Developing Societies states that out of the total population of Bihar, the upper castes account for 15%, the other backward castes in Bihar, which is further divided into extremely backward castes and backward castes constitutes about 52% of the population. The Dalit and Mahadalit population comprises of 15% of the population. The Muslims constitute 16.9%, Adivasis- 1.3% and others-0.4%.

The caste politics in Bihar can be understood under the following phases –

- 1.1947-1967
- 2.1967-89

3.1989-2004

4.2004 Onwards

The phase of 1947- 1967

After independence, the major political party which came on the fore front was the Congress Party. Indian National Congress was the only dominant party in the politics of Bihar as well as India. The upper castes played a dominant role during this phase. The Congress party also gained the support of other castes as well. It was mainly due to the programs of Gandhi towards Harijan and reservation provided to different castes as an affirmative action. Besides this, the Muslim population was not adequately represented; still Muslims supported the Congress Party as they don't have any alternative. However in Bihar, the dominance of upper castes can be seen, but they enacted land reforms which was against the interest of dominant caste group. In the words of Rajni Kothari- Caste led to deepening of democracy.

The phase of 1967-1989

During this period, the other backward castes emerged with leadership roles. The backward castes came as a unifying party. They demanded their rights and actively participated in politics. This phase is also known as Bullock cart Capitalism. Prof Yogendra Yadav has analyzed the increased role of caste as democratic upsurge. This phase of democratic phase has been described by him as first democratic upsurge where the Bullock Capitalists (Rudolf and Rudolf) came into politics. This marked the breakdown of Congress Party. After the land reforms, the social fabric of society was getting back on track. Caste became one of the main issues in elections from here on. This is the reason why middle class emerged on screen as well as the backward castes took the centre stage. Many Chief Minister came as the leader of backward castes. V.P.Mandal from OBC (Other Backward Castes) and Bhola Paswan Shashtri from Dalit caste are the prime examples of showcasing caste in politics of Bihar.

However, the governments formed under the leadership of these were for a short duration but the major achievement was that their presence was felt at such position. This was a major change for the politics of Bihar. During the same period, J.P.Narayan took the leadership in Bihar and called for a clarion call in Bihar against Indira Gandhi government. His Total Revolution gave a united strength to the other backward castes which led to emergence of two famous leaders of Bihar- Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar, both belonging from backward castes.

After the dark days of emergency (1975-1977), the party which emerged at the central level was the Janta Party. This party formed a committee under the chairmanship of V.P.Mandal (Mandal Commission). In 1980, V.P.Mandal submitted its report and demanded for reservation of OBCs. However the report was not considered at that moment.

The phase of 1989-2004

The 1990s was a phase of change. On the one hand, the demand for reservation was gaining momentum with each passing day; while on the other hand, polarization of religion was also reaching its height. Prof Yogendra Yadav has described this phase as the Second Democratic Upsurge, where the implementation of Mandal report led to rise of Dalit Politics and the subaltern class entered into the domain of politics. The Muslim population also got the signs of remaining aloof from getting any concrete recognition from Congress Party. During this phase, the Shah Bano Case came to the limelight and the verdict of the Supreme Court faced strong opposition from the Muslim Community. In return the Congress Party passed the Muslim Personal Law in public domain which served as an appeasement policy for the Muslims. The congress was not in favor of applying the Mandal report's recommendation; this is the reason for deterioration of faith of people from the Congress Party. However, the Mandal Report, after 10 years of being neglected got into force by the National Front Government led by V.P.Singh. With all these happening at the centre level, Lalu Yadav seized the opportunity with his MY (Muslim+ Yadav) alliance as a candidate in Bihar elections. Despite being dipped in corrupt practices, he became the face of Bihar for a very long time.

The phase from 2004 onwards

After 2005 elections, the inclination of Bihar politics from ascriptive politics to development politics can be seen. Now the motto of election was not based on caste and religion rather, it was based on development model. Much has changed in Bihar's political landscape since 2010, when Janta Dal (United) was in alliance with Bhartiya Janta Party under the National Democratic Alliance banner. This coalition party went on to sweep the state elections, winning 206/243 seats, since then Bihar has seen a reconfiguration of party alliances. Nitish Kumar is widely credited as turning around Bihar's economy and strengthening law and order. His long lasting popularity among diverse section of people testifies that Indian politics today primarily revolves around development politics. This phase also left indelible mark in Bihar politics, with the chiefministership of Jeetan Ram Manjhi for a short duration. The RBI estimates that Bihar was the only state by fiscal year 2013-2014, where the sum of development expenditure, social sector expenditure and capital outlays exceeded 40% of GSDP, whereas the average among non special category states in India stood at a little less than 24%.

It is often apprehended that voters of Bihar cannot comprehend the impact of economic policy choices. However Bihar has a very mobile population due to labor migration across India and abroad, and people are able to observe very different models of development and their consequence, while many states in India have urbanized at a rapid rate in recent decades, Bihar remains the second least urbanized. Joblessness, low private investments and weak urbanization are just as observable to voters as states benefits.

For all the talk of role of caste and religion in politics, economic policy is rapidly emerging as most important axis along which parties and politicians are differentiating themselves. In 2014 elections, for instance, Modi came to power on promise of replicating Gujarat model across India in contrast to previous long- led government, which prioritized centrally-sponsored benefits like those under MGNREGA. The rising middle-class has comparatively less interest in ascriptive politics.

However, the focus has shifted once again from descriptive to ascriptive politics. The Grand Alliance of JD (U), RJD and Congress, swept to power in 2015 where caste consideration played a dominant role. Caste politics especially dominate in rural areas during local election. Hate speech, social media campaigns targeting any particular community is still seen. Caste and religious identity is deeply ingrained in Indian political milieu. It is still visible in political campaign, ticket distribution etc.

CONCLUSION

Scholars distinguish between two types of party appeals to voters- those that target a party's committed core voters and the other one appeal to its core base of voters. In volatile, undecided elections with many floating voters, as in Bihar 2015 election, the optimal strategy is to convince enough floating voters to win the elections. It is generally seen that the promises of VIKAS were not attractive to floating voters. The Bihar politics provides an important snapshot of larger trends in Indian Political System. Electoral volatility has now become a fundamental characteristic of Indian Political System, with shifting party coalitions and change in electoral support over campaign. The Bihar electorate is increasingly deciding between economic policies that will shape its future and much more effort is needed to understand how voters make their decisions in such a volatile environment. As Pratap Bhanu Mehta says, there is need to move away from caste as yardstick of politics as it would be of lasting benefit to the nation.

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