

Caste and politics in contemporary India (part -1)

Caste has been a controversial issue in Indian Hindu society since ancient times. Despite various revolutionary efforts, the Indian caste system is still playing an important role in society at present. This research aims to analyse how caste politics has evolved in contemporary Indian politics. This study also examines how the varna system in ancient India and now the turning into vote bank politics. This article analyses the practice of caste system which is very prevalent in India, especially in rural areas, in which the problem of untouchability still remains a serious issue which is taking the Indian society, into an era of darkness. In ancient times, the concept of varna system was introduced through Manu Smriti written by Svayambhuva Manu. The caste system was started in which there were four varnas – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. On the basis of varna system, occupational division has been done in most of the societies of India since ancient times, which has been severely criticized by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in his book Annihilation of Caste which was published in 1936.

Theoretically speaking caste and democratic political system stand for opposite value systems. Caste is hierarchical. Status of an individual in caste-oriented social system is determined by birth. It has religious sanction by various holy texts, reinforced by priests and rituals. Traditionally, upper castes enjoy certain privileges not only in religious sphere but also in economic, education and political spheres. Customary laws differentiate individual by birth and sex. That is, certain rules are harsh to women and Shudras and soft to males and Brahmins. On the other hand, democratic political system advocates freedom to an individual and equality of status. It stands for rule of Law. No one irrespective of status is above law. Indian democratic system under the Constitution stands for liberty, equality and fraternity among all citizens. It strives to build egalitarian social order.

However, politics notwithstanding the ideals in any society does not function in vacuum. It operates within social milieu. Therefore, it cannot be devoid of the prevailing social forces. At societal level, politics is related to struggle for and distribution of political power and resources. One of the important functions of politics is to govern society. It calls for resolving conflict among various interests. It identifies needs of society at a given point of time. Needs are prioritised: what is important and immediate to attain and what can wait. In order to meet the needs of society, nature of production system has to be decided - whether the factories, farms or mines are owned privately by individual for profit or they be owned and managed by community or state or combination of the both. For that rules are made and executed. In short who gets what, when and how in society is the central concern of politics. Though such, decisions are taken by the state, people get involved in decision making process in democratic system. They elect their rulers. While electing their representatives people express their material and non-material needs, expectations and aspirations for today and tomorrow. Their expectations are for themselves and also for community -

immediate primordial group, caste and larger society that include region, and country. People also build pressure on decision-makers through organised or unorganised struggles, personal contacts and inally other ways. Political leaders cannot ignore social forces, as they themselves are part of them. It is imperative for the decisionmakers in democratic system to seek and extend support of the constituents for obtaining and preserving their political power.