

Governing Caste and Managing Conflict - Bihar

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Abstract : This paper will try to demonstrate how against the background of the changing contours of caste in Bihar, tactful management and administration of caste and community have proved to be one of the defining markers of success in representational democracy. Drawing from facts relating to the processes of political agenda setting, configurations and reconfigurations of caste alliances, uses of slogans and symbols, policies and programmes, and allocation of politico-administrative patronage, it attempts to analyse strategies and the craft of caste management and administration by two different political regimes. Divided in three sections, the paper analyses in the first section how the conceptualisation of caste as a political category has changed over the decades and how it has impacted the democratic polity.

Keyword : Caste politics, Bihar, Background.

Introduction

For the past one century, Bihar has been the scene of massive peasant movements, violent mobilisations, suppression of popular solidarities, and continuous restlessness in society. It is also the ultimate instance of mis-governance. At times it has appeared that the state is going to crumble, and only through authority or authoritarian rule the state can become governable. Bihar has been held also as a classic case of a 'failed state' much in the same way in which the phrase is used in international politics literature. It is considered again as an example of why liberal democracy cannot institutionalise itself in India. One of the factors related to this supposed state of affairs is considered to be the salience of caste in politics. Caste prevents the modernisation and democratisation of politics. It prevents resolution of social conflicts. To be sure, it makes it impossible to govern Bihar. This has now become part of the common sense of the Indian political class and the elite theorists of democracy.

Is there any ground for propounding a different view, namely that it is caste that makes it possible to govern Bihar? Can we say that governance of caste is the clue to governing Bihar well – much in the way democracy theorists would like to connect the word governance with democracy and popular sovereignty? Can we say that in the history of caste governance we have the key to the governance in Bihar, and the management of conflicts that are bound to arise in the wake of the introduction of electoral democracy?

Caste as we know has refused to vanish from the society and politics of Bihar. Its capacity to impact politics and democracy in a dynamic manner speaks of its resilience as a category and as an institution. The history of the state is replete with innumerable instances of caste alliances, networks and mobilisations. Caste is the form in which claim as a significant interest group takes shape. The state and the government try to manage and administer caste in a manner whereby the ruling elite can gain legitimacy of its rule and enjoy the support of majority sections of the society. From the formation of the Kisan Sabha and the emergence of Triveni Sangh in the colonial era to the rainbow coalition of castes by the Congress in the

postcolonial era, from Karpoori Thakur's reservation formula to the more substantive backward-caste politics of Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar in more recent periods, caste management has been a fascinating and fundamental preoccupation for political governance in Bihar. Bihar's electoral politics was by and large dominated by four upper castes (Brahmin, Bhumihar, Rajput, and Kayastha) till 1980s in the post-independence republic era. Political mobilisation of the dominated and 'governed' castes and gradual economic progress of a section amongst the backward castes saw the rise of backward politics in the state which finally has come to stay in power since 1990 and thus by now is in place for more than two decades.

Positioning Caste in Politics in Bihar

In a democracy, governed by the apparatuses of the modern juridical-administrative-political state machinery, caste has paradoxically come to occupy the centre stage as a means of claiming a share in socio-political and economic resources, particularly by the underprivileged and the marginalised. In the Nehruvian vision of modern India, caste in democratic politics symbolises defeat of 'liberal' democracy that should have dealt a decisive blow to any 'pre-modern' ascription like caste. So tumultuous and rapid have been the trajectories of different castes in the realm of both economy and politics that it has become necessary to distinguish between the 'caste social' and 'caste political'.

Caste social is closer to the scriptural foundations of hierarchy that evolved in ancient and medieval periods. It sought to bring social, economic and political hierarchy and community relations in a vertical order so much so that at the beginning of the previous century, in many instances, it was difficult to distinguish between caste and class. 'Caste social' signified various practices that ritualised the low status of certain castes, institutionalised humiliation and contempt, such as the practice of untouchability, and tied them tightly to economic bondage to make escape difficult, if not impossible. It spilled over into the politics of the freedom struggle, led by the Congress, which ensured that hardly a few leaders from the marginalised groups could find place in the upper echelons of the party. The vast toiling masses, belonging to the lower castes, remained under their tight control whether in their paddy fields or in the street fights against the British rule. 'Caste social' had its own forms and expressions of dissent and defiance, frequently expressed through efforts towards Sanskritisation, imitating and emulating the rituals and practices of the upper castes. Their movements against landlords for land and wages and against social oppressions would hardly bring any change in the configuration of 'caste social' and would focus on improving material conditions of their existence. Local institutions of power remained in the firm grip of the upper-caste landlords. In this situation, most of the organisational efforts of the Left tried to transform the 'caste social' into 'class political'.

What changed during the 1990s was the transformation of caste social into caste political. Before explaining this great transformation, we would like to explain what is different as far as caste political is concerned. Historically, the process began with reservations of seats in the provincial assemblies in the colonial era for the socially and economically backward sections of the society, and continued in the form of identification and reservation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the postcolonial era. In little less than four decades since the adoption of the Constitution, establishment of democracy, electoral representation, and the first general elections in the country, caste transformed into a political category.

Ambedkar's prophecy in 1950 that Indians would live with the dichotomy of political equality exercised through the 'one person-one vote' principle on the one hand, and gross inequality in social and economic sphere, in turn compromising the political equality in the long run, on the other, stands contradicted in the light of the empirical data on the democratic experience of India. Social castes and political groupings of castes discovered the strength of numbers in a representational system. For the first time backward castes in late 1960s exhibited their potential to control the government, though it was another two decades before Bihar saw them stabilising their power.

In the representational game they were also able to forge internal solidarity and convert it into numerical superiority. A disjunction between economic power and political power seemed possible for the first time when economic dominance no longer guaranteed dominance in politics. 'Caste political' created opportunity for domination in politics without commensurate domination in social and economic sphere. The number of MLAs and MPs belonging to the OBCs, particularly the upper OBCs like Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris went up dramatically, and surpassed the number of upper caste elected representatives with a big margin (see Appendix I). Caste appeared in a new avatar, 'caste political', which has increasingly been used as an instrument of political assertion. Assertion in politics brought returns in other spheres too. Class was a difficult route, caste was handy. 'Caste political' magnifies caste within the class and actively pursues caste-conflict to challenge the dominance of upper castes in electoral politics. This was impressively articulated by the idiom of *ijjat* (dignity). It pursues the path of conflict by keeping caste at the centre of contention. Caste political is not so much about ascription, but more about aspiration, dominance, aggression and reaping the resources of governance. Scriptural caste has less relevance here as it now tends to reside more in the hurt pride and lost game of the upper castes. Political caste does not allow the same practice of derogation, contempt, humiliation and subjugation. It uplifts the social caste (of lower castes) by celebrating it rather than being ashamed of it. This is what Michelluti³ calls "vernacularisation of democracy" in India in relation to caste.

In much of the post-colonial developing world, including India, social and economic conditions have connived to limit the capacity of subordinate groups to effectively exercise their rights and to secure substantive gains. With ritualised exclusions and deeply embedded hierarchical relations, the caste system had reinforced political marginalisation and socio-economic inequalities for a fairly long time even when affirmative action was executed by post-colonial national and state governments. However, the changed trajectory of caste dominance through the gains of backward-caste politics in Bihar has revealed the emancipatory potential of hitherto backward sections of society. Innovation in the art of political strategisation that brought shift in the caste and class profile of political and administrative elite along with government policies and programmes facilitated the process of giving voice to silent population.

References :

- [1] Triveni Sangh was founded in 1933 and it claimed to represent the socio-political interest of Yadav, Koeri and Kurmi caste. The stated objective of this formation was to promote the welfare of the oppressed and suppressed class of the state of Bihar. Within two years of its formation, the Sangh had a membership of ten lakh backward caste people. It contested the provincial election in Bihar in 1937. By 1939, it started demanding reservation for backward castes and Dalits.
- [2] Arvind N. Das. 1992. *The Republic of Bihar*. New Delhi, Penguin Books, p. 136
- [3] Witsoe. 2006. "Social Justice and Stalled Development", p. 13
- [4] Subrata K. Mitra. 2006. *The Puzzle of India's Governance: Culture, context and comparative theory*. London: Routledge, p. 103
- [5] V. Krishna Ananth. 2005. "Bihar: Dawn of New Caste Battle", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40 no. 49, p. 5142
- [6] Purnima Tripathi. 2005. "Bihar on the edge", *Frontline*, October 21