
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE INDIAN POLITICAL PROCESS (1920-2018)

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Abstract

"Throughout Indian history, starting with the Mauryas, through the Guptas, the Sultanat, the Mughals and lastly the British, social justice remained the nucleus of Indian politics. British government brought revolutionary changes in the Indian politics in late colonial era (1930-1947), which marked the development of Provincial autonomy and the introduction of limited franchise to the Provinces. During 1937-39 "popular" ministries were formed and attention was paid for the upliftment of lower castes, but the question of OBCs and Minorities was not tackled by the popular ministries and British administrators simultaneously, even no powerful leaders come forward to launch any strong movement and to raise the question of OBCs among Hindus and Muslims at the national level before partition. In late colonial period during 1930-1947, caste question among the Muslims was not raised in Uttar Pradesh, because of the communal problems and the demand of the Muslim League for the partition of the country was at that time quite prominent, thus Muslim leaders focused their whole attention on the partition and the problem was remained intact until it was raised by Momin Conference under the leadership of Abdul Qaiyum Ansari (1905-74) and later on implementation of the Mandal Commission (1990). The lower caste movement in the Southern and Western India started much before independence. Polarization of caste affiliations was easier in the south, given the absence of a complex caste middle order in the region. Also, the anti-brahmin movement coincided with an anti-Aryan movement. Ashok Mehta is quite significant in the annals of caste movement in India. They were influenced by the socialist ideas of Marx and Gandhi and they strove hard for the democratic socialism and its dissemination and inculcation in the Indian politics, and more particularly in Uttar Pradesh. Nehru was seen as the champion of socialism in India. He was an ideologue of socialism, secularism and economic development. He was also seen as the champion of equality, social justice and freedom. Ram Manohar Lohia highlighted the concepts of equality, freedom and social justice. He insisted on the democratic decentralization of economic and political power. It was he who for the first time raised the demand of preferential treatment for the backward castes in independent India. He advocated that democratic planning would root out the differences and disparities. Ashok Mehta put emphasis on economic planning to remove social and economic disparities from our society. He also emphasized on planned development, social reforms and democratic decentralization to attain social justice. In Western India, Phule (1827-1890), B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), Prakash Ambedkar presents the Dalit Movement in strong way, in southern India anti Brahmin movement started in colonial era and in Eastern India like Bengal rose up the Namasudra Movements. But in Northern India, particularly in the region of Uttar Pradesh, the question of caste remains."

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Four distinct phases can be identified in the politics of the Dalit Caste in Uttar Pradesh.

1. From 1930 to 1947, studies on identity formation of SCs in the United Provinces rooted in the quest for tracing the roots of Dalit assertion. In these studies, emphasis has been given to role of important personalities and their contribution for making Dalits a powerful political force.
2. From 1947 to 1969, when after an initial period of accommodation in the immediate post-independence period with the dominant Congress party, SCs decided to form their own party, viz., the Republican Party of India (RPI).
3. The failure of this experiment led to co-option into the Congress under the leadership of Indira Gandhi. As a result, up to 1977, SCs supported the Congress

with its radical doctrines of 'Garibi Hatao' under which a number of welfare schemes were put forward to help Scheduled Castes.

4. Since the early 1980s to 2018, the SC movement has entered into a period of revolt leading to the formation of a separate party, ideology and identity. There has been criticism of, and movement away from Hinduism, though this phase has been more political than social.

I. Colonial Period: Pattern of Delayed Political Consciousness

The first signs of political awakening among the SCs were manifest among the Chamars of Agra, although they called themselves Jatavs ostensibly to set their upwardly mobile status apart from their impecunious brothers in central and eastern U.P. This disparity is located in a specific context in a report of the Census of India, 1911, XV, United Provinces of Agra and Awadh: 'Whenever a caste is spread over the whole province, the western branches are invariably regarded as higher in the social scale than the eastern'.

According to the 1931 Census-the last in which caste breakups were recorded- Chamars formed the largest caste grouping in U.P., and accounted for 12.7% of the population. Chamars were followed by Brahmins (9.2%) and then Yadav (8.7%). However, SCs as a whole constituted only 21% of the population, being only one percent higher than the upper castes, which also included the non-cultivating castes like the Kayastha, Banias and Kurmis.

The Adi Hindu ideology was formulated in 1920 by a new generation of literate untouchables. Some untouchables had acquired elementary literacy from Christian missionaries in the cantonments or civil stations. Others, born in the 1880s and 1890s to the untouchable parents who had migrated to the towns, were sent to municipal schools, in so far as their parents could afford the expenses.

In December, 1927 the leaders of the Adi Hindu Mahasabha in UP made claim for a more inclusive achhut or untouches identity to unite disparate Dalits castes. The Mahasabhas laid out its agenda in a conference held on 27 and 28 December 1927 in Allahabad, an event that was widely reported and discussed in contemporary newspapers in UP. The conference was proclaimed as the first All India organization.

Adi Hindu conference, and was attended by 25,000 Dalits from UP in April 1927. Another 350 delegates participated from Punjab, Bihar, Delhi, and Central Provinces, Poona, Bengal, Madras and Hyderabad. Simultaneously, the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha raised these issue in a petition submitted to Simon Commission during its tour of India in 1928. The Simon Commission received the similar petitions from Dalit association in different parts of UP and India. They provide us with useful material to understand various facts of Dalit agenda that were being assembled during this time. What is striking is that most Dalit association which submitted petition to the Simon commission unanimously claimed separate achhut identity, making this a marked feature of Dalit politics of the time.

II. Dalit and the 1950 Constitution

The Constitution of India followed on from a four year period when various groups involved in the making of a modern India thought out loud about what that India should look like. The Constituent Assembly debates of 1946-49 give a remarkable insight into the founding of a postcolonial polity, as indeed does the Constitution proposed for adoption by the Assembly on "this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949.

The Constitution of India is wedded to the concept of social justice. It aims to foster the goal of socio-economic revolution by creating the necessary environment for its achievement. By demolishing the hierarchical social order of socio-economic privileges, it directs the state to build up a new just society promising the justice- social, economic and political- to all, along with the other basic provisions of the Constitution.

This report was adopted by the Constitution published in February 1948. However, the partition of the country and subsequent events⁵⁴ turned the tide against the Muslims. A series of amendments adopted to each of these articles during the discussions of the Draft Constitution in October 1949 effectively removed the religious minorities from the purview of these safeguards and restricted the scope of these articles mainly to the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes. Although some of the minority leaders made vehement appeals for such provisions, they were roundly isolated by the majority opinion which was against any kind of special safeguards for the religious minorities.

III. The Republican Party of India (RPI) in Uttar Pradesh

The Dalit movement in UP has specific characteristics which distinguish it from the Ambedkarite movements in other regions, particularly Maharashtra. Political consciousness and participation in politics by the Schedule Castes (SCs) in UP have traditionally been lower castes. The state witnessed no anti-upper caste movement as in western and southern parts of India during the colonial period. It was only in the immediate post-colonial period that a small, upwardly mobile section of the community, influenced by the ideas of Ambedkar and under the Republican Party of India, was able to mobilize SCs for a short period of time.

The formation of the RPI in 1957 inaugurated a new and 'separatist' phase in the SC movement in Uttar Pradesh, but it proved to be short-lived. The main architect of the RPI in UP was Chhedi Lal Sathi, Ambedkar attracted him into the SCF in 1952-64 and he became the first president of the RPI in UP, a post he was to occupy till 1964.⁶⁵ In Uttar Pradesh the RPI polled well among Muslims who were distrustful of the Congress in the wake of the 1961 Aligarh riot, when the government had been lenient towards the Hindu assailants. The Muslims' response was to ally themselves with the scheduled castes against the upper castes that traditionally supported the Congress and the Jan Sangh.

In the 1960s, the RPI described itself as an 'Ambedkarite' party and used a combination of caste and class mobilization in order to win votes. It used the former to unite the entire SC community and the latter for demanding distribution of land to landless laborers, adequate distribution of food-grains, control over rising prices, full implementation of the Wages Act 1948 and reservation in the services for SCs and STs. These demands listed in the election manifestos and resolutions presented to the government enhanced its appeal both among the urban-educated SC groups and traditional rural voters in the countryside. Apart from these demands and the goal of upliftment of Dalits, it had no clear ideology or strategy.

The 1970s can be described as a phase of integration and a hiatus between two periods of separatist political activity by Scheduled Castes in Uttar Pradesh. Following the 1969 state assembly elections, the Republican Party of India and the SC movement as a whole lost its distinct identity and entered into a phase of long-term decline. During this phase, SCs moved closer to the upper castes and the Congress who were able to co-opt them and again their support.

The once popular and successful RPI leader from western UP, B.P. Maurya joined the Congress party at a time when Indira Gandhi started appealing to the Dalits and other marginalized sections with her antipoverty slogans. Although Dalit voters strongly supported Indira Gandhi and helped her reach power in 1971, it was they who suffered the most from state violence on the poor (such as male sterilizations and destructions of slums) under the Emergency that she imposed in 1975.

The North Indian Dalit politician Jagjivan Ram, who became a regular minister in the central government as well as Indira's trusted lieutenant during the Emergency, precipitated the end of the Emergency when he criticized its excesses and left the government in 1977. Having been a key advocate of Dalit government employees' interests, his departure symbolizes the end of this subaltern elites' traditional support to the Congress. Despite the electoral promise made to Dalits in order to garner their support, he failed to become the prime minister of the new Janata Party central government.

IV. Dalit movement in the 1980s

a. The Bahujan Samaj Party

In the 1980s, the SC movement in UP entered a new phase of separation from and hostility to the mainstream parties and the upper caste Hindu community under the leadership of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Its emergence and establishment as an important political force can be traced to two interlinked developments in the state. The first is the steady decay and in fact a collapse of the 'Congress system' in UP (Stone 1988). Centralization of power by Indira Gandhi and increasing central intervention in the 1970s destroyed local leadership, created rampant factionalism and led to disintegration of both the social base and the machinery of the party. Still dominated by upper-caste leaders, it failed to throw up BC or SC leaders and therefore became increasingly marginalized in a society where these caste groups had become important.

This created a political vacuum in the state, leaving space for parties representing social groups hitherto not mobilized. A parallel development was a number of significant changes within the SC communities in 1980s. Many studies point to improvements in the condition of SCs although only in the parts of the state; the pace of change was slow and poverty remained. The Green Revolution increased investment in agriculture while urbanization increased employment opportunities on farms, brick kilns, construction activities and rickshaw pulling in the cities. As a result, absolute dependence on landowners and old patron-client relations disappeared. Less prepared to suffer indignities, SCs gave up carrying and skinning of dead animals and adopted 'Sanskritisation' which reflected in their wearing of the sacred thread and abstinence from meat.

The catalyst for change was education and spread of the electoral process while welfare programmes of the government, in backward areas particularly, had a negligible impact. A small urban elite had also arisen, primarily among Chamars, in the post-independence period, who were the first to gain education and avail of reservations, leading to a white-collar middle class and small entrepreneurs. Some of them prospered in their traditional leather business.

b. Kanshi Ram's Political Strategy for Shaping the Bahujan Samaj

Kanshi Ram was born in 1932 in a Scheduled Caste family in rural Punjab-his native village Khwaspur is situated in the district of Ropar. His exact origin is subject to controversy but he seems to have been originally from a Ramdasia jati - Chamars converted to Sikhism. Without talking of his religious affiliation, he underlines that his early environment was not as oppressive as the one Untouchable suffered elsewhere:

Because of the Sikh religion, also because most of the Chamars have adopted the Sikh religion, there was some upward mobility. The teaching of the (Sikh) gurus is more egalitarian. Like Ambedkar's family, Kanshi Ram's benefited from the military jobs that the British reserved for Untouchables. His father was the only man of the family who did not leave for the front during World War II because at least one man had to stay behind.

The army not only provided a good salary, it also raised the self-esteem of the Untouchable soldiers. This social and family context, which one generally does not find in the Hindi belt, explains why Kanshi Ram was able to attend college.

Conclusion

This Research paper has attempted to give a comprehensive historical account of Uttar Pradesh caste politics as a whole during the 1930-2018. It provides a comparative perspective on why the lower caste movement did not develop earlier in Colonial UP, as it did in the other parts of the country. It argues that the numerical strength of the upper castes in the Uttar Pradesh prepared the grounds for the development of "conservative" ideologies in politics. The Research paper has attempted to explore a history of the political fortunes of three different and historically underprivileged social groups in Uttar Pradesh viz. the exUntouchables, officially named Scheduled Castes by India's constitution, and often also called the Dalits; the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) among the Hindus and Backward classes among the Muslims, who, of late have started calling themselves, Pasmanda.

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