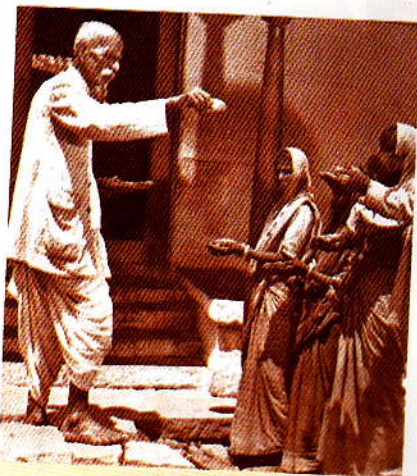


Creating Casteism Free India

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Hope we Indians will rise to the occasion and contribute in building a nation based on values of freedom, equality, justice and fraternity leading to a society where all have appropriate access to livelihood, health care, education and opportunities to develop their personality. That is the India the founding fathers of our Constitution envisaged and that we are still looking for after 70 years of independence

Casteism is one of the greatest social evils plaguing the socio-economic development of India as well as its unity. At a time when we are looking towards an India that is united, dignified and developed it is acting as a powerful social and political divisive force, causing social conflicts, effecting stability, peace and harmony, manipulating electoral outcomes and effecting sound legislative and executive decision making. The problem has become so severe that not only Hindus, with whom caste system is generally associated, all Indians whether Sikhs, Muslims, Jains, Buddhists even Christians carry some vestige of caste system. There is a general agreement among statesmen, policy makers, observers and meaningful political leaders that for making an India that is strong, self-reliant, free of poverty, illiteracy, and diseases, occupying a place of honour in world community, elimination of casteism is among the essential needs of the time. For that, first it is important to understand some misconceptions about caste system, reasons behind emergence and growth of casteism and its present role.

Caste System

There are numerous differences among observers and scholars about the exact definition of caste system, its

origin and role in different periods. In its most general fundamental aspects it can be described as a scriptive system of status and hierarchy. It is a type of social stratification system based gradation of endogamous kinship group with certain considerations of ritual purity reflected in restrictions on commensality and pollution and associated with traditional occupational specialization. Though, at times caste system is linked with *Varana* system its origin is not traced to religious scriptures. Researchers trace the origin of caste system to about 2000 years back in economic, political and material processes of evolution. It has never been a fixed fact of Indian life but evolving in prevailing socio-political and historical milieus. Before British rule caste affiliations were loose and fluid.

Caste in Colonial Period

While caste has been a social reality, for quite long it was the British colonial rule that treated caste as the institutional key stone of Indian society. Beginning with the first decennial census of 1871, the census became the main instrument of gathering information about the caste system and classifying it. The measurement of caste and sub-castes, according to the numbers in census, Neerja Jayal (2006) points out contributed to the fixing of caste identities in ways hitherto

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unknown. Enumeration of population into rigid categories, particularly with 1901 and 1911 census resulted in hardening of caste identities.

British rulers themselves used caste system as one of the instruments of divide and rule. They enforced caste affiliations rigorously. They institutionalised caste into the working of governmental institutions. Some castes were treated preferentially for certain jobs, like in police and army, whereas some were branded as criminal. Some laws were also passed keeping in view caste affiliations and making those allies of the regime. The immediate effect of this, according to Srinivas, was that it increased caste consciousness and inter-caste competition, because now it was possible for caste relations to outgrow its regional constraints and develop caste associations to bargain some concessions from the British government. The arbiters of caste system as Jayal writes were, thus, no longer part of the ritual order, but rather external to it in politics and also in the national movement. The national leaders attempted to reduce the differences and subsume the social justice issues in national struggle but could not succeed much.

Caste in Independent India

As discussed above, during Colonial rule, caste groups had become

identity conscious and organised. At the time of independence some of them were quite vocal in their concerns and demands. The framers of the constitution were committed to the formation of an egalitarian, equitable, fraternal and just society. The 1950 Constitution, therefore, eliminated caste system, as instrument of discrimination, restrictions of any kind, particularly the practice of untouchability, through fundamental rights of equality, liberty and freedom. At the same time, in accordance with the need of positive actions to eliminate age old deprivation of some sections provisions for affirmative action for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled tribes and backward classes were also incorporated in the Constitution. It was expected that, in due course, with socio-economic development and transformation society will be socially integrated.

During seven decades of independence while the influence of caste has been decreasing in social and economic spheres it has been gaining a stranglehold over the field of politics. There has emerged new caste based organisations, growing polarisation on caste lines, violence and reservation conflicts. Caste has embedded itself firmly in the politico-economic fabric of the country. With the introduction of democracy with

universal adult franchise the need to mobilize illiterate and not so much politically conscious people who can understand politics in terms of economic programmes, performance or ideologies, caste, religion and such like community ties became relevant inputs. The caste system, therefore, began to play a significant role in determining the content and direction of political socialisation, mobilisation and institutionalisation within the framework of democracy. This in turn has given rise to what is known as casteism.

Casteism

The term casteism, in general means the tendency of caste or sub-caste groups to maximise economic, social and political advantages of its members to the detriment of the other caste members and society as a whole. It is also an ideology of political allegiance to a caste group as primary and decisive, leading to blind group loyalty towards one's own caste believing that social, economic and political interests will be fulfilled through that. At times it amounts to hatred of one caste by the other. As already mentioned, in the absence of well-developed political infrastructure of secondary groups the readymade primary caste groups emerged as the principal contenders for power and divisible benefits. Politicians in their bid to mobilize support have been exploiting the caste loyalties. Many of these are least concerned with development. They view democracy and elections merely as a way to gain power and control over state.

Apart from participating in and influencing elections, caste is being used also as a pressure group to receive due or undue benefits. An important aspect of this has been pressure for and against quotas. These, many a times, lead to violent protests causing loss of public property and diversion of resources towards maintenance of law and order instead of on welfare and development. In this sense politicisation of caste is creating a new cohesion which is making caste perform roles which are new and

secular. As Myron Weiner (2006) points out, paradoxically as caste has become somewhat less important in determining individual life chances, it has become more salient as a political identity and as an institutionalized element of civil society. There are now caste based educational institutions, hostels, housing societies etc. Yes, some of these are playing the important role of bringing the deprived into the mainstream and fulfil their aspirations. In general casteism is causing social disharmony. It is seriously effecting the task of socio-economic development and building of a new modern India.

Need for Elimination

As discussed above, casteism has been eating into the socio-economic and political fabric of our society. Yes, in social spheres caste is slowly dying. Modern conditions of life and work have rendered many rigid rituals, beliefs and practices obsolete. Inter-dining, even inter-caste marriages, are no more taboos, at least in most urban areas. In fact, among most educated people and educational institutions, particularly in metropolitan cities practices associated with caste system are ridiculed. Another positive aspect is that during the last few years in elections, particularly for Lok Sabha, caste has been put on a back seat. Parties are putting forward issues of development, corruption, performance, governance etc. as major concerns. Yet there are parties and groups for whom caste remains the main plank for mobilisation and campaign. They remain engaged in expanding and consolidating caste support. In a way, while issues of development and governance have entered elections in a big way the role of caste in politics has been reduced only in a limited way, particularly at state and lower levels. Therefore, task of elimination, or at least to begin with reduction, of casteism is the need of the hour.

The first step towards reducing casteism is Education. Education does not mean only formal literacy or school education. It includes generation and dissemination of awareness about myths associated with the caste system.

As said in the beginning, many a times caste is considered as part of religion or religious practices which is not correct. Voters need to be educated about how they are exploited by caste leaders without any developmental benefits either to a particular caste or society at large. In schools, teachers need to encourage students to eat and play together.

Removal of socio-cultural inequalities is essential to bring society out of primordial ties. Treating any caste as polluting or low provides a cause for leaders to mobilise them to rise against discrimination. In some cases social and economic inequalities coincide. Most Scheduled Castes, for instance are poor and deprived. In democracy this provides a legitimate reason to unite and participate in political process as such. When determined groups remain discriminated or unequal they have reason to act collectively, notwithstanding leaders using that for ulterior motives or vested interests.

Civil society has a great and significant role in social and political reforms. They have to create awareness and mobilise voters on non-caste, non-religion basis, inform them about the imperatives of development, abuse of caste and religion in elections, and negative effects of that on social disharmony and conflicts. Civil society can also play a useful role in encouraging and arranging inter-caste marriages, dining and other social interactions to highlight the myths of separation.


An important role is that of the Election Commission. As already mentioned, the most important cause of casteism is electoral politics. Election Commission will have to find ways to curb the use of caste. State funding of elections, strict imposition of code of conduct, voter's education etc. can be some means for that.

Most important is political will and consensus. While almost all political parties are critical of the use and exploitation of caste in elections, yet, at the time of giving tickets and mobilising voters they co-opt caste leaders. Recent

trends in elections suggest that voters are rising above caste and community considerations and giving importance to performances of governments, leadership, and developmental issues. This trend needs to be strengthened. Political parties should rise above politics of short term gains and think in terms of long term task of nation-building to which they claim to be committed. Democracy is not merely winning or losing elections. It is much more than that.

For meaningful working of democracy it is important that the participants including voters need to be rational individuals, whose self-appreciation depends on the assessment of his/her own individual merit and not on the merit of any social group to which he or she may belong. They must exercise their vote according to their free will and not muffled by caste, community or communal considerations or pressures. Hope we Indians will rise to the occasion and contribute in building a nation based on values of freedom, equality, justice and fraternity leading to a society where all have appropriate access to livelihood, health care, education and opportunities to develop their personality. That is the India the founding fathers of our Constitution envisaged and that we are still looking for after 70 years of independence.

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