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Political Mobilization on Caste and Development in Bihar: Some Observations

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Abstract

This article attempts to analyze the different dynamics of politics in the past two decades of the contemporary Bihar. The prominence of caste factor and development is seen in the political mobilization during this period. This assertive phase of politics in Bihar also brings regional parties with individual popular leaders as major political force putting the major political parties to the margins. The caste-community combinations of OBCs, Dalits and minorities influenced electoral performance of political parties heavily. The shifting alliances among these political parties indicate that the development planks have influenced to certain extent whereas caste factors have been playing a predominant role.

Keywords: Caste, Development, Bihar Politics and Regional Parties.

Introduction

The electoral politics in Bihar in past two decades has witnessed considerable mobilization on two defining factors i.e. caste and development. First, political mobilization on caste has been so predominant in the elections that any explanation on the politics in Bihar seems to be incomplete without the use of caste factor[1]. Historically, there have been instances even in pre-independence period to believe that caste was a determining factor in electoral politics in Bihar. However it was basically strategic affairs adopted by Indian National Congress at the time of distribution of tickets during Provincial Assemblies elections of 1926 and 1937. Looking at the caste configuration of constituencies, tickets were given on the basis of numerical strength of the caste of candidates by passing popular leaders from caste groups who were minority in numbers[2]. In past two decades, there has been a paradigm shift in the way caste mobilizations have played a decisive role in Bihar politics. Now its caste based mobilization which is adopted by political parties in Bihar to attract masses to vote in their favour. Thus it is more or less a tool to expand their support base. Political

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Parties have applied various methods like awareness, education, campaign and assertion to garner socio-political support. At times Political Parties also used caste-centric sloganeering to mobilize their caste supporters and also work out an alignment of castes. In recent years, caste has become such a dominant category that even the mass leaders are much popularly known as caste leaders. The rise and fall of political parties in Bihar politics seems to depend on the management of vote through caste mobilization, sometimes explicit and sometimes may be implicit.

Second, in the context of the economic indicators, the state is caught up the lowest figures during this period on the overall state of development. Consequently developmental issues became a competing category to caste-based mobilization. No doubt caste-based electoral politics has resulted in higher participation and more intense politicization of the hither to marginalized groups. However it seems that the social engineering in Bihar, in consequence, has cost dearly its economic development which had been put in complete abeyance. These parties have been working on a caste mobilization formula for electoral success notwithstanding the fact that the state has been found wanting on the plank of development. It is reflected in the poor supply of electricity, lack of proper roads and transport, absence of law and order, a degrading educational system, lack of primary health facilities, increasing unemployment, lack of new industrial investment and prevalence of sick industries. However, the use of primordial category like caste, religion, language etc. in Indian politics is widespread among the different states. But it has not influenced their development on equal terms? There have been states like Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra that have fared well on development indicators despite the use of the above said categories. However, states like Bihar and UP have experienced rampant underdevelopment. It needs a serious explanation, how the political parties have functioned in Bihar evading issues of development? And how the existing Party System fails to capture and explain the relation between the issues of development and cased based mobilization in Bihar.

Understanding the Linkage

Since March 1990, the rise of non-congress parties as dominant players in the political process of Bihar seems to be a complete break from the past. Several state parties came up with their leader constantly opposing national parties with an alternative. The Janta Dal snatched power from the Congress Party in 1990 under the leadership of Lalu Prasad Yadav who, then, broke away from Janata Dal in 1997 to form the Rashtriya Janta Dal as a new party. Since 1995 the RJD with Rabri Devi as Chief Minister ruled the state till 2005. Apart from Rashtriya Janata Dal, the other two parties who have influenced and determined the political outcome in Bihar are Samta-JD (U) under the leadership of Nitish Kumar who had been the Chief Minister since 2005 and Lok Janshakti Party under the leadership of Ram Vilas Paswan. These political parties have risen basically by mobilizing two large sections of the society, namely, the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and the Dalits whose democratic upsurge in the political process has been at large scale and have entered into alliances as per

requirements of government formations. They have pushed the Congress Party out of power in Bihar politics. In doing so, they have reflected new patterns of leadership and mass mobilization at different levels of parties hierarchy while interacting with the masses. The victory of OBCs and Dalits based political parties was made possible through various kinds of caste mobilization along with symbolic alignment with upper castes and minority vote bank. They asserted to champion the cause of different caste groups and build a rapport with the local people. This has resulted in a charismatic leadership for state party with mass base.

The Assembly or parliamentary election in Bihar has become a battleground for its three leaders, namely, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Nitish Kumar and Ram Vilas Paswan. There is more than one way to compare them; the most recent is that all of them have been Railway Ministers of India during the past two decades. It will not be an exaggeration to say that they watch each other keenly while moving forward in their political career. Two of them have been Chief Ministers and the third one is aspiring for it. The rise of these leaders can be traced to the JP movement of 1974 and the Mandal Commission has proved to be a life-line for them. They have been undisputed leaders of their respective castes (OBCs and Dalits) ever since. Career-wise, the past two decades have been the best time for them. The crucial issues that have been applied by these leaders in socio-political mobilization in their favour were primarily social justice, secularism, empowerment of weaker sections of the society and of late development issues.

Mapping the Social Churning Process: Castes or Development

The numerical strength of different castes and communities in Bihar has directly influenced electoral performance of political parties. The assembly elections of 1990, 1995, and 2000 and parliamentary elections of 1991, 1996[3], 1998 and 2004 have seen the churning of Muslims (16.5%) and Yadav (12.7%) along with some supports from rest of the OBCs castes and dalits. This can be considered as first phase of social churning in Bihar which had the impact of Mandal Commission. However the assembly election 2005 saw the second phase of social churning with the rise of the extremely backward classes or EBCs. The EBCs are mainly self-employed, poor, landless and largely unrepresented people – constitute one in three voters in Bihar. These are caste like Kewats, Dhobis and Nishads. This churning had a decisive role in the victory for Nitish Kumar in 2005[4]. Evidently, Mr. Lalu Prasad Yadav has been defeated by a rainbow coalition of the lowest castes, or Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs), upper castes and breakaway Muslim and Dalit voters, many of whom had voted faithfully for Mr. Yadav over the past 15 years. The Backward politics in Bihar has displayed a special characteristic. That is, the fight is between two combinations, one, led by RJD and other by JD (U)[5]. Such political situation seems to continue since past decade and a half and should continue subsequent years.

The assembly election 2005 has been claimed by many analysts to be a breaking point. That is to say, development has ultimately influenced voters in Bihar. Mahesh Rangarajan said on the conclusion of assembly election 2005 that "It points to an

immense churning in India's rural heartland. It is a positive vote for change. Most of the voters were disappointed with lack of development." Similar opinion came from Professor Nil Ratan at Bihar's AN Sinha Institute of Social Sciences when he said "The results reflect the Bihar people's desire for restoration of governance and law and order above their caste and community." Whereas analysts like Shaibal Gupta of the Bihar-based Asian Development Research Institute say, caste also sealed Mr. Yadav's fate and asserts that "Politics without caste in Bihar is simply incomplete".

So the turning point during this election was the decision of the extremely backward castes to vote for Mr. Nitish Kumar. Mr. Kumar was shrewd enough to give party tickets to some 23 candidates belonging to this caste-group to contest in the elections. However Shaibal Gupta agrees that "the biggest change is that development will finally get its place in Bihar. The middle class will again start taking interest in Bihar". "The EBCs have always been a hidden vote bank in Bihar of sorts. They used to vote for Mr. Yadav, but he never really publicized it. Mr. Yadav's coalition was mostly known to be one of his own Yadav community and the Muslims," says Professor Nil Ratan.

Issue at Large

The interconnect between Caste and Politics in India has attracted many social and political theorists ranging from M.N Srinivas, Andre Beteille, Rajni Kothari[6], Anil Bhatt, Walter Hauser, Dipankar Gupta[7], Francine R. Frankel[8], Ramashray Roy[9] and others. They have tried to conceptualize from various perspectives. M.N Srinivas opined that the role played by caste in politics is in close approximation to that of the pressure group. The modernizing forces will however reduce the influence of caste over the politics. Andre Beteille holds that while westernization is taking individual away from caste identity, the role of caste in politics is taking the people towards the caste identity and thereby strengthening it. Rajni Kothari studied the nature of relationship between caste and politics. He has also examined the type of changes that have taken place in the political system as a result of the involvement of caste organization. Caste has three important indigenous elements–secular which refers to relevance of caste in politics in terms of the relations within and between castes. Integrative which refers to castes being relevant to politics through differentiation and integration and ideological which is heightened by its value structure. Anil Bhatt in his analysis of Dominant Caste and political process reveals the crucial role played by castes in politics and awareness of the lower castes of their political gains. He found that the higher caste groups had lower political interest and low castes have higher political interests. Political awareness was high among the higher castes and was low among the lower castes. Lower castes by organizing themselves in pursuit of collective interest were able to emerge successfully. The involvement of these castes organization in politics has changed their position in hierarchical pattern of Hindu society. Caste solidarity and political power helped them to achieve higher social, economic and political success.

This was highlighted by the studies conducted by Rudolf and Rudolf. The same was highlighted by Andre Beteille's study of Tanjore district in Tamil Nadu. Caste has

become one of the most formidable elements of group formation within political parties in India. The patronage and pecuniary resources available to the political leaders enable them to create a coalition of factions on caste basis, whose leaders are bound to political elites in power in a complex network of personal obligational ties. Each of these leaders had a group of followers tied to him in accordance with the same set of caste principles. The personnel of these castes factions may vary but whatever may be their social composition they demand and to a higher degree receive from their members' full support. Political parties mobilize caste support in various ways. According to Andre Beteille two kinds of changes seem to be taking place in relation between caste and politics - power shifts from one dominant caste to another and the focus of power shifts from one caste itself to another on caste basis. He maintains that loyalties of castes are exploited in voting. New alliances cutting across castes are also formed.

Rudolph is of the opinion that caste association has given caste a new vitality and democracy has enabled caste to play an important political role in India. Caste federations are formed not of one caste but many. His further observation pointed out that caste enters the political process by making appeals to caste loyalties in a general way. Also by activating networks of inter-personal relation both during elections and at other times for mobilizing support along caste lines and by articulating caste interests in an organized manner. Beteille has also pointed that the political process has a dual effect on the caste system. To the extent that caste and sub-caste loyalties are consistently exploited, the traditional structure is strengthened and to the extent that it leads to new alliance cutting across caste, it loosens the traditional structure. Political parties utilize the support of caste for their functioning and seek their support in winning elections. Grass-root political arenas as well as political parties have always remained and continue to remain dominated by elites of castes which compete with each other to form caste coalitions of supporters strong enough to maximize control over local resources and enhance opportunities to become players in political system.

Conclusions

Bihar is among the least developed states of India. The economy is mainly based on agricultural and trading activities. The mainstream writings on electoral politics in Bihar had single focal point i.e. caste until recent years to explain state politics, of late development has also been used. It is suggestive that caste is at the core of explanation to understand the party politics in Bihar; however one can find some sporadic appearances of explanation in terms of developmental issues and others on class category, There is growing dissatisfaction among scholars from this explanation and contradicted that the numerical strength of neither caste is enough to get them to power but they have accepted the importance of alliances of caste as a determining factor. Howsoever the alliance of caste during election keeps changing to meet the demand of winning situation. It not difficult to conclude that caste is the only factor which has capacity to mobilize political society in Bihar. Caste mobilization has been historically rooted and it has been nurtured throughout. The past two decades has

seen its penultimate growth. The category like development can be one of the issues which will have only temporal significance. Whereas caste has performed like an ideology throughout, that is rooted in the mindset. As Swami Sahajan and conviction on this phenomenon from his statement 'that there is very little difference between nationalism and casteism, and it is a difference which disappears at a certain stage…. The only real difference is that caste covers a relatively smaller field whereas nationalism functions in a wider area'.[10] This is to suggest that a framework using caste to explain electoral politics of Bihar is basic. What is interesting to note is that despite Bihar being the most backward state and even when it is sliding down continuously on the development scale, the politics of Bihar kept revolving around caste.

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