

Structure

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22.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to acquaint you with (a) nature and role of caste in Indian politics and (b) in the process how both caste and politics undergo changes. After going through this unit, you should be able to understand:

- To what extent and in what ways caste influences politics;
- Interrelationship between caste and politics; and
- How politics influences caste.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

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. This 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 many other ways. Political leaders cannot ignore social forces, as they themselves are part of them. It is imperative for the decision-makers in democratic system to seek and extend support of the constituents for obtaining and preserving their political power.

It however, does not mean that politics is just a proxy or a blueprint of societal forces. It sets goal and priorities. It has a vision for change, a better social order than the existing for the larger good. Politics introduces new values such as equality and freedom; institutions such as political parties and trade unions; government policies like abolition of zamindari system or untouchability undermines the traditional social order and value system. It shifts location of power in society from one group to another. Moreover competitive politics like elections encourage several individuals from a group to aspire for political positions. They compete among themselves so the caste members also get divided. In the process caste cohesiveness gets weaken; and new formation takes place. Thus, not only caste influences politics but the political system also influences caste and induces changes in it. There is no one way traffic. Both influence each other. It is to be seen: to what extent and in which way politics attain its objective of social transformation and to what extent it is influenced by prevailing social forces, particularly caste?

India became a Republic in 1950. For the first time in history all adult citizens of the country have gained the right to vote and elect their representatives for decision making bodies from village Panchayat to Lok Sabha. They also have the right to contest elections so as to become rulers. As a result, large number of social groups who were hitherto deprived of political power began to realise that they could compete with traditionally dominant power elite and also wield power so as to express their grievances, needs, priorities and aspirations. Thus they decide their destiny. Politics has become competitive and open. Moreover, the state has undertaken a number of social and economic programs, which have developed monetary and contractual relationship affecting traditional social ties and monopoly of privileges. And, judicial authority of caste panchayat has been replaced by state judiciary system.

22.2 WHAT IS CASTE?

Caste is an English translation of Indian word Jati. As Indians we all know what is Jati because we all have a tag of Jati by birth. This applies to non-Hindus also. But meaning of Jati is not the same among the Hindus and non-Hindus. Caste does not have religious sanction among the non-Hindus. It is a social stratum. Among the Hindus, it is believed that one's Jati is due to one's Karma (deeds) in previous birth. This is not so among the non-Hindus.

Meaning of Jati for oneself and for others is not always uniform and consistent among all. It varies from purpose to purpose for which the tag is used. Jati has a specific social meaning identifying one's place in social order in village society where one interacts everyday with other members of the local community. For instance in a village in central Gujarat its inhabitant, say Mr. X identifies himself as Khant when he interacts with another villager of neighbouring locality who calls himself a Bareeya

for inter-dining purpose. Mr. X would introduce himself as Kshatriya when he attends political party meeting at taluka or district place. He would call his caste as OBC (Other Backward Caste) when he visits government office to get loan or subsidy for government sponsored program or to get scholarship for his son. There is one meaning of Jati for matrimonial and kinship relationship, a different meaning for economic interaction and a third meaning for political purpose. One does not necessarily have the same meaning when one exercises vote for village panchayat than Lok sabha elections.

Thus it is difficult to give precise meaning of caste applicable in all situations. It is partly a subjective category. Social construct of caste by actors and observers varies from context to context.

22.3 MAIN FEATURES OF CASTE

Notwithstanding difficulties in arriving at precise definition of caste as a unit, there is a consensus among the scholars regarding general characteristics of caste system as a social order. Most sociological writings on caste conclude that homo hierarchicus is the central and substantive element of the caste system. The phrase is used by a French sociologist Louis Dumont to differentiate Hindu social system from other social systems - particularly that of the western society. Hierarchy is the central core of the caste social order. It includes hierarchy of status, values, customs and behaviour on the basis of purity and impurity, interpersonal relationship among individuals in terms of blood, food and occupation; and rituals divided into two orders: pure and impure. Certain occupations or type of food are considered as pure for certain castes and the same are impure therefore forbidden for other castes. It is obligatory for each Hindu to confine relationship and interaction within the restricted circle called Jati, as to maintain purity in marriage relationship; exchange of food and pursuing caste based occupation. There are four essential features of the caste system. They are: (1) hierarchy; (2) commensurality; (3) restrictions on marriage; and (4) hereditary occupation.

22.4 DYNAMIC RELATIONSHIP

No social system remains static. Social system changes from time to time with the changing social, economic and political circumstances. This is also true for the caste system. At the empirical level the caste hierarchy has never been static throughout history. Theoretically, all Jatis are hierarchically placed within a prescribed social status. Some Jatis enjoy high status and some occupy low status. Place of the Jati in the social order in the hierarchy is determined by its ritual status based on the observance of customs for interpersonal relationship. Some scholars believe this value system - acceptance of one's station in the life is the result of previous birth - has consensus among all Hindus including the Untouchables. But it is not true. Though the upper castes try to maintain their higher status, the middle and lower castes have successfully tried to change their status. Having improved their economic condition, a dominant section of some of the low castes, including the groups, which were at one time treated as untouchables, imitated customs and norms of the upper castes residing in their vicinity. Sociologists call this process as sanskritisation. One also comes across instances of some castes or even individuals who have succeeded in improving their status even without adhering to the norms and rituals of the upper castes. Acquiring political authority facilitates not only power holder - ruler - but also his kin and relatives to enjoy higher social status in caste hierarchy. One can cite instances in history, which show that Shudras and ati-shudras having occupying position of power have acquired status of Kshatriyas even without following the path of sanskritisation.