Editorial

Caste and Politics: The Dynamics of Multiplicity

Political parties have begun mobilizing people for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections, and to do so, they have invoked caste sentiment alongside those related to gender, linguistic, and religious identities. While leaders publicly express unease about the caste-politics nexus, they are nonetheless inured to it in one way or another to gain support from the masses on caste lines.

The caste system is one of the pillars of Indian society's social structure which can influence every social phenomenon. Political parties, political leaders, and party followers are no exception to this influence. Caste comes to an individual by birth, and caste socialization in families undoubtedly includes caste-conscious political socialization that encourages individuals to support political parties whose agendas align with the demands of their own caste. Thus, by institutionalizing the idea of caste in contemporary politics, political parties have perpetuated caste in its modern form.

According to a recent publication by the Election Commission of India (2021), India has 2,858 political parties. Most of them cling to life due to caste affiliations and considerations. For political parties, caste is a magic wand to mobilize people's support and win elections. However, political co-optation has allowed spaces historically denied to lower castes to open, and representatives from SC/ST/OBC communities have been given the opportunity to contest elections. Yet, these opportunities have had covert political motives. Having a representative from a marginalized caste group would attract people to vote for the candidate from their own caste group. Thus, the opportunities provided were an opportunity for parties to garner the vote bank of these categories. From issuing tickets to candidates to allotting constituencies, the caste card is the ace. Caste-based politics has also led to the formation of new small and big parties. It is true that caste has become more of a political instrument than a mere system of hierarchy. Founding a party based

on caste and following any party on the same basis reinforces casteism and caste identity, making the process cyclical: parties for castes and castes for parties.

It is obvious that political parties use caste for vote banks. A much more worrying trend today is that they have evolved organized ways of collating caste-based data for their propagandist politics and populist policies, assisted by modern technology. In this regard, the question of having a caste-based census comes to the forefront. On the one hand, the ruling coalition in Bihar has initiated the process of a caste census in the state, claiming to use the data to formulate better welfare policies and enhance targeted development. On the other hand, the central government is not in favours of a caste census, perhaps because it would reveal the sorry state of underdevelopment among lower castes in the society and the lack of progress in their status during the past seven years of rule. As the nation prepares for the 2024 elections and the "Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav," celebrating 75 years of independence, the potential outcome of a caste census could project the lives of some categories of people in the country in a bad light, which may be why the government is hesitant to implement it.

During the colonial period, the British conducted caste censuses in India, which highlighted that most of the upper castes were educated and dominated the public sector. However, some intellectuals from the lower castes argued for equal representation, as seen in the demands put forth by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Justice Party of Madras. These demands were seen as a threat to the national independence movement by the upper castes, who labelled them as a caste-based weapon to divide the populace. Therefore, the upper caste nationalists protested administering a caste-based census, and it was halted in 1941 during the decennial census (Singh, 2022).

Today, history is repeating itself, as the upper caste hegemony is once again against conducting a caste-based census. India has always been a Brahmin colony, rather than a British one, and the reasons stated follow a similar pattern. Firstly, it would exacerbate the caste divide and lead to social fragmentation. Secondly, it is a complex activity to undertake, coupled with a lack of administrative feasibility. Thirdly, it is beyond the ambit of the judiciary to direct

the government to conduct a caste-based census as it is a policy decision. Fourthly, caste-based data would be misused by political parties to garner vote banks. Lastly, it might lead to targeted discrimination while formulating and implementing policies, ignoring a group of people who do not fit into the party affiliations. These reasons showcase the downside of conducting a caste census, but the other side of the coin also needs a focus.

A caste census has a significant role to play as it would bring to light the population of SC/ST/OBCs and other castes, facilitating targeted development. However, it may raise questions about the under-representation of specific castes in different areas of development. For instance, according to the data presented by the education minister in Parliament in 2019, only 2.1% of total admissions in Ph.D. were from ST, 9% from SC, and 8% from OBC categories (2016-202). The same data for 17 IITs show that only 1.7% were from ST, 9% from SC, and 27.4% from OBC categories. When it comes to faculty strength, out of 6043 faculty members at 23 IITs, only 149 were from SC and 21 from ST categories. Most of the IITs do not even have a single SC/ST faculty (Kumar, 2021). If we look at their representation in the Parliament, just eight out of 27 parliamentary committees meet or surpass the 25.4% representation of SC/ST Members of Parliament in the Lok Sabha. Among all the 16 standing committees, only one SC/ST MP was the Chairperson of one of the standing committees (Sharma, 2021). Such under-representation in multiple sectors would come to light with the caste census, which would certainly stir up new debates and movements of rightful representational politics, and the consequent threat hovers over the upcoming election results.

According to the Oxfam Report (2020), the top 10% of the Indian population owns 74.3% of the total wealth, whereas the middle 40% and the bottom 50% own 22.9% and 2.8% of the wealth, respectively (Oxfam International, 2022). This report depicts class differences, but India also has caste as a form of stratification. Therefore, it becomes inevitable to look at caste-class intersectionality. According to data published by the World Inequality Database, "Wealth Inequality, Class and Caste in India" from 1961-2012 (2018), 50% of Brahmins, 31% of Rajputs, 44% of Bania, and 57% of Kayastha belong to the richest category in terms of wealth ownership. Conversely, only 5%

of ST, 10% of SC, and 16% of OBCs are part of the same category (Bharti, 2018). This data show that OBCs, SCs, and STs are at the bottom of the wealth ownership hierarchy. The upper caste elites benefit the most from economic and policy reforms.

To address this inequality, a caste census is necessary to ensure targeted welfare delivery. However, the upper caste hegemony is against it for several undisclosed reasons. Firstly, it could lead to a demand for rightful representation in politics. The threat of demand for equal representation that may arise post caste-based census has led the central government to avoid caste-based census, at least until the 2024 elections. Secondly, the upper castes, who have benefited the most from all the welfare reforms, view the disclosure of the inequality present in this hegemonic structure of wealth and welfare distribution as a threat. Thirdly, a caste census would be a challenge to the most cherished "Hindutva project" of the upper caste Hindu elites, as called by Sandeep Saurav (Saurav, 2021). Fourthly, it would reveal the disparity in the wealth, education, and welfare accumulated by the upper and lower castes. This would prompt lower castes to demand more reservations and rightful representation in education, jobs, etc., in proportion to their population. The upper caste hegemony views reservations as a poverty alleviation program and refuses to accept them as reparations for the historical atrocities and social injustices committed against lower castes. Because apologizing would be like acknowledging their own faulty and atrocious stand in history. All of these reasons have led the upper caste elites to disregard and dismiss the caste census.

The halt to the caste census in 1941 was a major obstacle for lower caste groups seeking legitimate power and representation. Today, not having a caste census is again a barrier to the same group of people in two ways. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, it is necessary to gain equal representation in politics. Secondly, it deprives them of certain policy benefits and welfare measures that are beyond their reach. Justice Chandrachud stated that "castelessness" is a privilege that upper castes can enjoy, but lower castes need caste identity to uplift themselves (Mandhani, 2021). Caste-based reservations in education and employment are necessary for lower castes to climb the social hierarchical ladders of society, for which a caste census is

essential. Thanks to states like Bihar, where caste census has gained momentum. Caste-based census is not only useful for certain underrepresented groups to acquire or at least demand for power, but also to implement or channel power in the right direction. It helps in better formulation and implementation of various welfare measures and policies, resulting in targeted development.

According to Rajni Kothari, caste can never disappear, but it changes its form under the influence of politics. Likewise, political processes transform under the impact of caste (Desai & Singh, 1970). The politicization of caste is pervasive in India and is a mutual two-way process. Giving up on the caste system is difficult in India because political parties use it to mobilize the populace on the one hand, and individuals use it to assert their identities and seek power through caste-based political parties on the other. Consequently, it can be said that caste and politics are mutually dependent. Some use caste to suppress lower castes and sustain themselves in power through the politicization of caste, while others use it to assert suppressed identities and uplift downtrodden sections of society. In both the cases, the politicization of caste is inevitable.

In this Issue

In this issue, Artha Journal of Social Sciences presents four articles. The first article, *A Short-spanned Career and a Blurry Future: Migrants from North-East India in Hospitality and Retail*, elaborates on the experiences of migrants from the North-East in the service sector, specifically hospitality and retail, in terms of their influence on workers' subjectivities and aspirations. According to the authors, short-lived outcomes of city-life, the urge to become "city-boys," influence by the existing migrants, and finding better opportunities for a career motivate them to migrate. Most of them are uncertain about career prospects, and they have limited aspirations, therefore facing the threat of a blurry future. The article sheds light on the experiences and aspirations of North-East people who migrate for work to big cities.

The second article titled *An Assessment of the Effects of Political Risk and Exchange Rate on the Tourist Inflows to South Africa Using Time Series Data and the ARDL Model* is an empirical research article that uses time series secondary data in which political risk, exchange rate,

and tourist arrivals are considered important variables. The Autoregressive Distribution Lag Model is used to analyse the data. It discusses both short and long-run implications and reflects on how tourist arrivals in South Africa have been impacted.

The third article titled *The effect of Apartheid on South Africa's Agricultural Sector: A Sustainable Livelihood Approach* discusses the effects and determining influence of apartheid on South Africa's agricultural sector. Using case study and thematic content analysis, the authors have systematically proven the connection between apartheid and policies segregating South African backs from land ownership. In the fourth article titled *Internationalism, Soft Power and India's Vaccine Maitri*, the authors speak of the concept of Internationalism, an ideology that advocates cooperation among nation-states across the world over various dimensions. The authors discuss in detail how during the COVID period through the "Vaccine Maitri" Initiative, India didn't just promote its internationalism idea of "Vasudeva Kutumbakam" but also boosted the soft power image in health diplomacy. In the times of vaccine distribution when the western countries were showcasing "vaccine nationalism," India stood in solidarity with poor and developing nations, showcasing itself as a responsible global power.

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L T Om Prakash (Editor)

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