

'IDENTITY POLITICS'

## **The Crisis of Identity**

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India is a vast country with a population of about 1100 millions. If a person is selected at random, from this sea of people, he/she would be found to have a number of identities. One identity is based on his specific mother-tongue, which may be Hindi, Bengali, Santali, Telegu, Assamese or any other language. Again, the religious community to which he/she belongs may mark him/her out as a Hindu, or a Muslim, or a Christian, or a Buddhist, or a worshipper of nature like the adivasis. Besides, he/she has his/her caste identity. Caste divisions are recognized only in Hinduism, but a glance at the Indian society would reveal that even the followers of Christianity or Islam have become stratified into castes. Over and above these considerations, every person is either a male or a female( barring a very small group of bisexuals), and that too constitutes an aspect of his/her identity. Finally, whatever the linguistic, religious, caste or gender identity of the person, he/she participates in the social process of social production and gets a share of social product in a specific manner. He /she may be an agricultural labourer, a brick-kiln worker, a sharecropper, a small owner cultivator or a factory or plantation worker. Alternatively, he/she may be a rural rich farmer or non-cultivating landowner, the owner of a factory or tea garden. Again, he/she may be a government employee, teacher of a school or college, employee of a bank or insurance company or something else. In the Census records of India, these diverse identities of every person are put on record. This enables people to know the number of males and females, and the number of persons engaged in each broad occupational category.

But after independence, the practice of recording the caste and ethnic identities of the people was stopped, except for scheduled castes and adivasis. On the eve of the census of 2001, a strong demand was raised for recording the caste identities of persons, but the then ruling NDA government refused to accept it. This year, the same demand has been raised and the Government of India has accepted it. It is noticeable that the political parties that took the lead in this regard were from the NDA as well as the UPA, while the leftists, although not as vocal as them, did not offer any opposition. The Census operations undertaken before 1951, the last being that of 1931, noted the caste-identities of persons. At the time of the first Census of Independent India, the Central Government led by Nehru decided to stop the practice of recording caste identities. Now his descendants belonging to his third next generation of successors are compelled to reintroduce this practice.

An analogy can be found from the story of the changing attitude of the Central Government towards the Other Backward Classes. When in 1953, the Kaka Kalelkar Commission, appointed by the Government of India, recommended reservation for these Classes according to population in respect of education and jobs, this was turned-down by the Government. In 1978, the Government of India appointed the Second Backward Class Commission and after a long period of haggling, implementation of its recommendations began in as late as 1990. In today's India, neither the Congress nor any other political party is in a position to oppose reservation for the OBCs. But the most significant change has taken place in West Bengal. When in 1978, the Mondol Commission came to West Bengal and sought the opinion of the State Government, the

latter formed a one-man committee, the lone member being Mr Binay Chaudhuri. The committee, within one month, produced its report denying the existence of Other Backward Classes in West Bengal. This opinion of the Government of West Bengal is recorded in writing in the report of the Mondol Commission. When, after a great deal of turmoil in national politics, 27% of reservation for the OBCs in education and jobs was introduced nationally, the Government of West Bengal refused to implement it. After much haggling, 7% reservation was introduced in West Bengal, but that too in jobs, not in education. In the 1980s, any talk of reservation for Muslims in government jobs in West Bengal evoked only furious opposition from the leftists. Now, after the defeat in the Lok Sabha polls of 2009 and the civic polls of 2010, the Left Front Government has reckoned Muslims as OBCs and has accordingly announced 10% reservation for them. Besides, it has amended the Panchayet Act in order to provide reservation for the OBCs in the *panchayets*, something that no other Indian state has done. The position of the present Left Front Government is thus entirely different from that of the 1980s. But the fact remains that the structure of the Bengali society has remained more or less the same as it was in 1977, and hence if there was no other backward classes in West Bengal in 1977, there is no reason why such classes should come to exist later.

It is easily comprehensible that these changes of declaration and practice are motivated by considerations of votes. The Congress Government ruling in Delhi too is modifying its policies for the same purpose. In a democratic polity, this is not an offence. But these changes contain an implicit recognition that the electorate, while exercising their franchise, are mindful about their respective identities, which means that they are taking into account the possible gains and losses of their respective identities. They are asking questions on various issues; for example, on the entry of Muslims into government jobs, the opening of the doors of higher education and jobs for OBCs, the right of the *adivasis* of the Jharkhand cultural region (*jangal mahal*) and the Kamtapuris to be instructed in their mother tongue, and so on and so forth. Yet it is not that these issues were raised always during election campaigns. During the Lok Sabha polls of 1977, the main question was whether the Emergency should continue or the democratic rights of the people should be restored. The assembly polls of that year in West Bengal brought to the fore not only the issue of ending the misrule and authoritarianism of the Congress, but that of meeting demand of the rural toiling masses on the issues of wages, *barga-recording*, declaration and distribution of surplus land etc. In the subsequent elections of West Bengal too the common demands of agricultural labourers and poor peasants played a significant role. Considering the country as a whole, it can be observed that just as the Congress held official power at the centre till 1977, it generally reigned in the states as well. During those years, the question of identity did not play any important role in the states except Tamilnadu. For example, when the Nehru Government refused to accept the recommendations of the Kaka Kalelkar Commission, there was no nationwide movement and the monopoly of the Congress in ministry making remained unimpaired. In order to understand the significance of these experiences, one shall try to find out the connections among the multifaceted identity of a person of the Indian society, his/her social standing and his/her economic gain.

### **IDENTITY AND ACHIEVEMENT**

After the use of iron in productive activities was introduced, vast tracts of the Doab region lying between the Ganga and the Yamuna were brought under settled cultivation and agriculture began to yield surplus on a sizeable scale. The concentration and reinvestment of this surplus, i.e. bringing new areas under settled cultivation and concomitant growth of industry and commerce, required a strong state, which the

Mauryas created. The state owned land, mines and other instruments of production. The kings, priests, ministers, army commanders and departmental royal officials used to supervise the various departments of administration and production, and used to receive salaries from the state. Agricultural labourers working on state farms and craftsmen producing under state supervision were also salaried workers. The difference between the salaries of direct producers and those of royal officials was enormous. The ration between the salary of a minister or an army commander and that of an agricultural labourer was 500:1 or 1000:1. Thus a state class appropriated and consumed the surplus. The process of social stratification on the basis of caste had already begun and the state class was composed of the *dwija* castes. On the other hand, workers and peasants belonged to the lower castes, having no right to education and official employment. Alongside state ownership of land, the system of private ownership had also come into existence, but these owners were upper caste people. Later a complex caste system came to be the basis of social stratification, and in this pyramid like structure, the extent of the share of social product to be received by a caste was determined basically by its relative position in this ladder. Even before the growth of capitalist relations, class divisions began to appear among castes, sometimes giving rise to the break-up of one specific caste into several castes. After the rise and growth of capitalist forms and relations, such class divisions were- accentuated, and particularly from among the intermediate castes grew (*e.g. the sadgops, telis and mahisyas* in Bengal, the *khandayets* in Orissa, the *yadavs and kurmis* in Bihar, the *yadavs and Jaths* in North India) a class of landowners and rich farmers , and one section of them began to invest surplus in trade and commerce. After the abolition of the system of *zamindari*, one segment of these intermediate castes, which had been used to pay rents to landlords, became *ryots*. But they were very much backward in respect of education, jobs and share of political power. The ruling structure that began to function after independence made it incumbent for individuals and groups to use the political ladder for upward mobility.

In the Indian society, one index of the privilege or deprivation of a person is his/her caste status. But that is not the only index. Another index is language. In colonial India, all Indian languages had equal dignity or indignity. After independence, Hindi is the only Indian official language. The other official language is English. Among all the linguistic groups of India, there is a tiny section to which English is synonymous with mother tongue. These people have no problem with the existing system of official languages. But among the broad majority of Indians, the Hindi-speaking section enjoys a privileged position compared with others. Again, there are some linguistic groups whose languages have no official recognition even at the state level. For example, Santali, notwithstanding its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution, have as yet been recognized as an official language in no state of India. Kamtapuri of North Bengal has no kind of recognition whatsoever. The number of Santali-speaking people in India is about seven millions. This number may appear small in the Indian context, but there are many countries having a population that is even less. Similarly, the number of Kamtapuri-speaking people living in West Bengal, Assam and Bihar is not less than five millions. There is a standing demand for a separate Kamtapur state, and there is a political movement on this basis. The area of North Bengal where Kamtapuris live has among its population Bengalis, Gorkhas and Jharkhandis too. Hence to grant a territorial autonomy for Kamtapuris only is deeply problematic. But there should be no difficulty in granting official recognition to the Kamtapuri language.

On the all-India plane, it is observable that the southern states are always vocal against the status of Hindi as the sole official language. Mainly on their demand, English has been retained as the official language alongside Hindi. But this is not a real-solution. There are some complexities in the process of granting equal status (official status) to languages like Tamil, Telegu, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi and other Indian languages, but these complexities are not insurmountable. Rather equal status for the languages is the *sine qua non* for the preservation of the unity of a vast multilingual country like India.

Outside caste, nationality and language there is another identity in the Indian society, that of religion. As many as 80 percent of the people of India are Hindus. But there is something problematic in this estimate. In the Census operations there are many that are recorded, as Hindus but do not follow anything ordained by the Hindu customs. For example, all the non-Christian *adivasis* are reckoned as Hindus, although a large section of the *adivasis* do not rely on Brahmin priests for performing the prayers in ceremonies like worships, funerary rites, marriage etc. Again, there are some communities whose Hinduisation is only partial. The *kurmis* and *mahatos* of the Jharkhand cultural region are such communities, and there is a strong clamour among them for the scheduled caste status. Again, sizeable sections of the Jharkhandi adivasi population e.g. the *santals*, *mundas*, *onraos*, *mahalis*, *malpahariyas* etc, live in Assam. They have scheduled tribe status everywhere in the country except Assam. This problem exists elsewhere also. Hence it is a legitimate conjecture that although the Census figures show the adivasis to be 7.5 percent of the population, in reality this percentage is higher—it is more than 10 percent. Among these adivasis there are political movements for the recognition of language, various kinds of autonomy including a separate state, recognition as a separate linguistic community etc.

Again, the socio-economic conditions of all the scheduled castes are not the same. In almost every state, there are one or two scheduled castes that are far advanced in relation to others owing to various historical reasons, and it is they who appropriate the reservation facilities in education and jobs. The *namasudra* community of West Bengal is such an advanced caste-group. The *chamars* of Uttar Pradesh and the *malas* of Andhra Pradesh are such groups. For this reason, movements for separate quotas by relatively backward scheduled castes are seen.

### **CONDITIONS OF MUSLIMS**

Muslims constitute the second largest religious community in India. There is a small section among them whose forefathers came from Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran or Arab lands. But the vast majority of them were low-caste people who were converted to Islam. The caste system of India is so strong that even after apostasy, the caste identities of these people were not obliterated. Islam does not recognize caste distinctions, but Indian Muslims are divided into castes. Although this division is not as rigid as that of the Hindu society, Muslims take into account caste identity before entering into matrimonial alliances.

The Constitution of the Indian State is secular in the sense that it has not formally conferred any special privilege to any particular religious community or has deprived any community. But the reality is much different. For various historical reasons (e.g. self-imposed distance of Muslims from English education till 1857, the lower-caste origin of a large section of Muslims etc.) the participation of Muslims in higher education and jobs was low even at the time of partition. After partition a section of affluent middle-class Muslims migrated to Pakistan and the share of Muslims in higher education and jobs

suffered a further decline. For example, Muslims had 17% of government jobs in West Bengal in 1947, which came down to 7% at the time of the end of Congress rule in 1977, and by 2007, at the time of the publication of the Sachar report, it fell to as low as to 2%. Yet Muslims constitute about 25% of the total population of West Bengal. It should be mentioned that a government job in India is not just one kind of employment, and with it are attached some social prestige and various economic powers. In case of bank loans and various social services too (schools, drinking water, health centres, ICDS scheme etc) Muslims are in a state of deprivation. Although the extent of this deprivation has inter-state variations, its existence is an all-India reality. To add to it, there is coercion by the state and non-state agencies. In the eyes of the state, every Muslim is an offender or potential offender. It is stated in the report of the Sachar Committee, "Our analysis shows that although there are inter-state variations in the conditions of Muslims, this community is lagging behind in all states in respect of all the yardsticks of development. The actual reality is that the conditions of Muslims are slightly better than scheduled castes/tribes, but much below those of the Hindu OBCs, other minorities or general Hindus, the majority of whom are upper castes). Among the states in which Muslims live in large numbers, the conditions of this community in West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Assam are indeed very poor. Besides this deficient development, the problem has been aggravated by the fact that there is a strong notion among Muslims that they are being deprived or kept outside the process of development."

If the notion that Muslims are in a state of deprivation is an all-pervasive one among them, it is only natural that they would like to use the polls in such a manner that would end this deprivation and suppression, or at least lessen its intensity.

### **IDENTITY-BASED MOVEMENTS**

Of the identity-based movements that have taken place in India, the oldest is the Dravid movement of Tamil Nadu. In terms of sustainability too, this movement was a long one, although it underwent many divisions and changes later. Periyar Ramaswami Naikar—he later renounced the title 'Naikar'—may be called the founder and architect of the movement. In Periyar's thoughts, there was an intermingling of Tamil nationalism and anti-Brahminism; the question of women's emancipation too was an important aspect of his movement. His 'self-respect movement' combined these elements. He toured Russia and was deeply influenced by the system of work for everybody, education and health for all, and particularly freedom for women. The Dravid movement came to exercise a powerful influence on the social life of Tamil Nadu. In respect of reduction of infant mortality, enrolment of children in schools, management of ICDS schemes, male-female ratio and many other indicators of social progress, Tamil Nadu have come to rank among the most advanced states of India. It is the only state in India that, in order to implement 67 % reservation for the OBCs, have compelled the Indian state to amend the constitution and has thus defied the obstacle posed by the judgment of Balaji Vs State of Mysore case. In the political sphere too, Tamil Nadu has repeatedly played a positive role in providing support to the Anandpur Sahib Resolution as well as various other proposals in favour of a federal structure. In this state, as much as 95 % of Muslims have been identified as OBCs and have come within the purview of reservation. The all-India political parties, namely the Congress and the BJP have been reduced to a marginal position in Tamil Nadu, and they cannot do anything there without entering into alliances with some or other Dravid party as subordinate partners.

The movement of the depressed classes, subsequently known as the *dalit* movement, led by Dr B R Ambedkar had less local success than that of the Dravid movement. Even

Dr Ambedkar himself could not be elected to the Constituent Assembly from Maharashtra, and had to go there as a representative from Bengal. But in respect of nationwide significance, his thoughts had much greater influence. His Republican Party of India is now divided into many groups, and in Maharashtra, these groups now survive as appendages of the Congress or the BJP. But this upshot has by no means ended the Ambedkarite movement in India; rather it has reemerged in new places in new forms. The demand for equal dignity for those communities who have over the ages been deprived of the right to property, the right to education and political rights, and on whose blood and sweat the edifice of Indian civilization has been built, is the demand of revolutionary democracy in the Indian context. Ambedkar came to be the symbol of this revolutionary change. Ambedkar's thoughts grew in contradistinction to those of Gandhi, and through conflicts with the latter.

Gandhi was against untouchability, but was in favour of the caste system. His opinion was that the untouchables should acquire education but should not use it as their means of livelihood. It was his belief that the principle of hereditary occupation was eternal, and if India gave it up, a serious disorder would follow. On the other hand, Ambedkar's slogan was annihilation of caste, the first step towards which was the abolition of the principle of hereditary profession. It is true that Ambedkar's approach had its limitations. In the Indian society, the caste system was at the same time the cause and effect of concentration of ownership of land in the hands of upper castes. It was not possible to annihilate the caste system without a revolutionary programme of radical land reform. The subject has come theoretically in some of the writings of Ambedkar, but his programme did not incorporate land movements. One reason was that Ambedkar laid excessive stress on legal constitutional means for bringing about social change. In a word, he sought emancipation of dalits within the framework of bourgeois democracy.

Mayawati is the most successful leader of dalit movements in India so far. She has come to power in a state as large as Uttar Pradesh in a specific historical situation. The emergence of this historical situation can be traced back to 1977, before which the Congress had a monopoly of power in the Centre as well as in most of the states. It was not that there was no deprivation practised on dalits, adivasis, OBCs, Muslims or various marginal communities, nor that they had no grievances. But the Congress had emerged as the leader of the national movement, and the vocal, advanced sections of all identities had been accommodated within what was known as the Congress system. At the time of the split in the Congress in 1969, Mrs Indira Gandhi gave extra importance to the leaders of the lower castes, OBCs, adivasis and Muslims, and although without a majority in the Congress Working Committee, she could establish the section led by her as the real Congress. But the economic policy followed since 1947 had been in crisis, the disaster it had brought to the lives of the people gave birth to countrywide mass protest movements in 1966-67. Within 1974, the crisis deepened, and it became necessary to suppress the people by unleashing a phase of repression (*anushasan parva*). Along with it, the contradiction between different imperialist powers became enmeshed with the contradictions among the ruling classes, and in this complicated situation, the internal emergency was imposed. The emergency brought on attacks on all sections of people of the country, but the attack was most severe on those identities that were lowly placed in social and economic positions. Dalits, adivasis, OBCs and Muslims were attacked. The consequence was that although the leadership of these identities was with the Congress, the connections of that leadership with the masses were weakened, and in some cases altogether snapped. This was the breakdown of the Congress system. In the Lok Sabha polls of 1977, the main issue was the restoration of

democracy, and there was no identity-based demand. But it was that very election that witnessed the rise of identities. From Bihar and the entire North India including Uttar Pradesh, many candidates belonging to the lower castes and OBCs were elected with the ticket of the Janata Party. It was through the Jayprakash-led movement and the Lok Sabha polls of 1977 that politicians like Lau Prasad Yadv, Nitish Kumar, Rambilas Paswan, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Sharad Yadav etc came to the fore.

Uttarpradesh is the largest province of India. Here, after the breakdown of the Congress system, there was no longer any force that was capable of bringing dalits, OBCs, Muslims and upper castes under a single roof. Again, none of these groups was able to acquire a majority in the polls on its own. Muslims of Uttar Pradesh did not form a party of their own, and they usually exercise their franchise in favour of the non-BJP party that is stronger at the centre. It is more worthwhile to call it a defensive attitude rather than an effort to assert their identity. These circumstances led to a fluid situation in that province, and the BJP, although it won once (on that occasion, the BJP, by raising communal slogans, could acquire many OBC votes), failed to retain the victory. It was followed by various types of coalition governments, such as the BJP-Mayawati coalition and the Mulayam-Mayawati coalition. This period was used by Mayawati to raise the slogan of *dalit* rule and thus to consolidate *dalit* votes. In the dalit dominated areas, some Muslim votes too came over to her side. Thereafter, she replaced the slogan of '*bahujan*' (many communities) with '*sarbajan*' (all communities) and was able to win a section of upper-caste votes. In the last election, however, she has got only 32 % of total votes polled, but the existence of various alliances and divisions has enabled her to form a stable government. Her government has not taken any measure of basic importance (such as land reform) to improve the lot of *dalits*, although it has done some work like allotting homestead lands to the homeless or building residential quarters for *dalits* under the Indira Awas Yojana. But the scale of such activities are not of such a order that are significantly different from the work done in other states. On the other hand, although the common people are aggrieved at her outrageous exhibition of money, wealth, ornaments and power, *dalits* are as yet prone to view it as an 'exhibition of *dalit* power.' Until there is a broad-based mass movement in Uttar Pradesh on the basis of radical land reform and other democratic demands, Mayawati will continue to represent a political force.

The Jharkhand movement is very old. Once the Jharkhand party led by Jaipal Singh occupied the place of the principal opposition party in Bihar. But after his joining the Congress, the movement received a setback, to be revived again after Naxal-bari. In the 1970s, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha came into existence and grew through land and anti-usury struggles. Besides, the joint leadership of Binod Mahato and Sibhu Soren forged a unity between adivasis and semi-*adivasi* communities like the Kurmis and Mahatos. In the 1980s, the participation of the CPI (ML) and other revolutionary forces strengthened the Jharkhand movement, and a possibility emerged of the basic democratization, including the formation of a separate state, of the movement. The Indian ruling classes, scared of such a possibility, purchased one section of the leadership of the movement with the lure of power and pelf. The consequence was a breakdown of the Jharkhand Co-ordination Committee and a division in the movement, leading to a separation between Binod Mahato and Sibhu Soren. Besides, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha could not settle the question as to the rights of the semi-*adivasi* communities, reckoned as scheduled tribes till 1935, after the formation of the separate state. Sibhu Soren, by embarking on a race for personal and family power, turned himself into a laughing stock.

But the voice against the plunder of the riches of the Jharkhand region by imperialist and corporate capital, raised during the movement, has not been smothered. When Arjun Munda of the BJP was the Chief Minister, he signed MoUs for handing over about 2 lakh hectares of land to the Tatas, Jindals, Bhusans and other large companies. But nowhere have the companies been able to take possession of land in the face of the pressure of resistance movements.

### **NEO-LIBERALISM AND IDENTITY POLITICS**

The neo-liberal regime that has come into being in India after 1990 has freed foreign capital from the obligation to secure permission from the central government for investment in a state. A clearance from the central government is necessary for setting up a Special Economic Zone, and for any other industry, a clearance from the forest and environment departments is necessary. Past experience has shown that if the concerned state government agrees, the companies succeed in obtaining clearances by lobbying and bribery in Delhi. In this new situation, all the state governments without exception compete with each other to welcome domestic and foreign big capital. The larger the amount of capital pouring into a state, the greater is the opportunity for plunder. A Chief Minister of Jharkhand, having no party affiliation, took advantage of the volatile political situation of Jharkhand and amassed a few thousand crores of rupees within a span of two years only by selling out mines. In Chhattisgarh, minerals worth quite a few crores of rupees are 'sold' at a price of one lakh rupees. Now illegal mining and attendant corruption are rampant over a vast region including Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Orissa and Jharkhand, and these activities fetch thousands of crores to the companies and corrupt politicians.

Identity-based parties (the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Mukti Morcha in Jharkhand, Lalu Yadav and Nitish Kumar in Bihar, Mayawati and Mulayam in Uttar Pradesh) have adapted themselves to this plunder of the neo-liberal regime. In West Bengal, the Trinamul Congress, although not an identity-based party, is a regional outfit. The same is true of the Biju Janata Dal of Orissa. The Trinamul Congress garnered strength by capitalizing on the grievances of the people against neo-liberal plunder. But immediately after ascent to power at the Centre, they have declared the policy of banning workers' right to strike and activities of other political parties. They are trying to impress upon the bourgeoisie that they are much more reliable for executing the neo-liberal programme.

But under this neo-liberal regime, workers, peasants and other toiling people of the country are now faced with large-scale attacks. The problem of suppressed identities is most acute. As the leadership of identity politics has come to support the neo-liberal policies, a search for alternatives has begun. A vacuum similar to one that had been created after the breakdown of the Congress system is coming into existence. This is a favourable situation for a revolutionary transformation of the Indian society. This vacuum can be filled up only by a leftist force or a leftist coalition that will stand up against neo-liberal policies, will combine the identity-based demands with the basic demands for radical land reform and work, food, education and health for all, and will present a political programme for the broadening of democracy through local power (for example, power in the hands of *panchayets* or *gram samsads*) over land, forests, water and mineral resources. Various regions of the country are now witnessing the rise and growth of such leftist forces, although their realization of the question of broadening of democracy is still incomplete. It may be expected that they will learn through experience and play their necessary role in the revolutionary transformation of the Indian society.

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