

Backward Caste Empowerment : Historical Evolution and Concept

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Bihar is well known as a socially and economically backward region of India, and the inter-play of caste and politics is also well known. In the present thesis, an attempt has been made to analyse the backward class empowerment and to map the actual influence of caste on the state politics, i.e. the vernacularisation of democratic politics in Bihar. This phenomenon has been examined both in terms of historical development as well as the different level of political process in Bihar. The impact of backward caste empowerment on politics has progressively been increasing and if the present is any indication, it is very unlikely that the impact will be reduced in the near future.

The term OBCs evolved in a historical context. At the time of Independence, the term had a less fixed and definite reference. The question of who were the scheduled castes was debated and roughly settled before independence within the executive and without the participation of the courts. But who are the Backward classes is a post-independence question which the constitutional recognition of the category made one of all-India scope.

In 1917 the Maharaja of Kolhapur recounted to Montagu that he had "been taking very keen interest..... in uplifting the backward classes and especially the untouchables". Soon after the term appears in the terms of reference of the Southborough Committee, which was to advise on measures to secure representation of "minorities, of special interests, or a backward classes. But the committee did not mention any such groups in its report, other than depressed classes. The joint select committee of the British parliament which reviewed the Southborough report mentioned in passing the importance they attached to "the educational advancement of the depressed and backward classes." There is no indication that the term was meant to include anyone beside the depressed classes.

"Backward Classes" first acquired a technical meaning in the princely state of Mysore. In 1918, the Mysore government appointed a committee to enquire into the question of encouraging member of the 'backward communities' in Public service. In 1921, preferential recruitment of "Backward communities" was instituted and they were defined as "all communities other than Brahmins, who are not now adequately represented in the public service."¹

Although "Non-Brahmin" and "Maratha" were much more frequently used in the setting of the Bombay "Non-Brahmin" movement of the 1920s the backward classes rubric was employed both popularly and officially in a broad meaning, somewhat a kin to that in Mysore. In 1925, a Government Resolution defined Backward classes as all except Brahmins, Prabhus, Marwaris, Parsis, Baniyas and Christians. Reservations in government service

were provided for this group. The Hastoy Committee (1928) defined Backward Classes in their glossary : Castes or Classes which are educationally backward. This include the depressed classes, aboriginals, hill tribes, and criminal tribes.

In 1929 the Indian Central Committee distinguished the problem of the "Backward Classes", among whom may be counted aboriginals, criminal tribes and others among the less advanced of the inhabitants of British India. Apparently the committee not only excludes the Depressed classes but include in addition to tribals, some strata of the caste population, for they mention an estimate of sixteen million backward classes in U.P.² But the category is not used as expansively as, the Mysore or earlier Bombay usage, for it did not include the Madras non-Brahmins or Marhattas in Bombay who were discussed separately. The term could not have been a familiar one for the report finds it necessary to distinguish backward classes from untouchables several times. In a separate note, M.C. Rajah, an untouchable spokesman, mentions backward classes only as a confusing synonyms for Depressed classes.

In 1930 the state committee in Bombay devoted careful consideration to the question of nomenclature. It noted that in 1924, the term depressed classes had been accorded, a wider meaning to include : 'aboriginal tribes and the criminal tribes and some other wandering, and backward castes..... (which had) resulted in confusion of thought in this presidency, as in ordinary usage the phrase depressed classes is taken as meaning the untouchables..... where as they do not form half of this new and enlarged grouping of depressed classes.

The committee recommended that "Depressed Classes" should be used in the sense of untouchables, a usage which "will coincide with existing common practice". It proposed that wider group should be called "Backward classes", which should be subdivided into depressed classes (i.e. untouchables); aboriginal and hill tribes; other backward classes (including wandering tribes).

It noted that the groups then currently called Backward Classes should be renamed "intermediate classes. In addition to 16 depressed classes (approximate 1921 population 1.475 million) and 24 aboriginal and hill tribes (approximately 1921 population 1.323 million), it listed 94 other backward classes (approximate 1921 population 1.041 million). The total backward classes population was 3.840 million or 14.4 percent of 1921 population of the presidency.

The Simon Commission, though it refers to "intermediate castes", and takes note of the non-Brahmin movement, makes no mention of Backward Classes. But shortly after 1930s we find a flowering of the term. The United Provinces Hindu Backward Classes League (founded in 1929) submitted a memorandum which suggested that the term "Depressed" carried a connotation "of untouchability as in the sense of causing pollution by touch as in the case of Madras and Bombay" and that many communities were reluctant to identify themselves as depressed. Thus league suggested the term "Hindu Backward." as a more suitable nomenclature which includes all of the communities belong to non-Dwijias or degenerate or sudra classes of the Hindus". They were described as low socially, educationally and economically and said to number over 60 percent of the population.³

This inclusive usage was adopted elsewhere. Travancore in 1937 abandoned the Depressed classes nomenclature and substituted the term "Backward communities" to include all educationally and economically backward communities. However, in Madras and elsewhere the term "Backward classes" was used to refer to the strata above the untouchables. In November 1947, separate reservations in the Madras services were provided for these "Backward Hindus".

In the meantime, the objectives Resolution of the Constituent Assembly, moved by Jawaharlal Nehru on December 13, 1946, had resolve to provide adequate safeguards for "minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes."⁴

Thus, the term had never acquired a definite meaning at the all-India level. There had been no attempt to define it or employ it on the national level and there were no nationwide backward classes organisations or spokesman. It had definite meanings in local contexts, although they differed somewhat. After the listing of scheduled castes, the usage as a synonym for untouchables drops away. The two major species of usage emerge : (1) as the more inclusive group of all those who need special treatment; (2) as a stratum higher than the untouchables but nonetheless depressed. This double usage continues today : the former in the usage of Backward classes in the wide sense (including scheduled castes and scheduled tribes); the latter in the usage as equivalent to "other backward classes."

By the time of the constituent assembly the usage of the term "Backward Classes" to refer to some larger or smaller portion of the population deserving of special treatment was familiar in many parts of the country. In the assembly, delegates from the north expressed puzzlement of the provisions for "Backward Classes" (in what come to be Article 16(4)). It struck them as vague and some thought it was meant merely as a synonym for the scheduled castes, while others were concerned that it might mean more. But representative from Madras, Mysore and Bombay assured their colleagues that Backward Classes was a distinct term with a technical meaning. Examples were given of Mysore where Backward Classes included all but Brahmins, of Madras where it referred to a stratum of non-untouchable Hindu Castes, and to Bombay where it included not only scheduled castes and tribes but other who are economically, educationally and socially backward. A representative from Bihar (which had the most active member of Backward Classes Movement in the North) explained that Backward Classes were a section of society between the highest castes and the scheduled castes "the third occupying the middle position..... and consisting of a large portion of our people in what may be termed the Backward Classes.... No doubt they are not treated as untouchables."⁵

After long discussion, the constituent assembly agreed to provide space in constitution to assign backward classes at national level with regional variance. And it culminated in the form of Article 340 in which the president is instructed to appoint Backward Classes Commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes and the difficulties under which they lived and to make recommendations as to the steps that should be taken by the union or any state to remove such difficulties and to improve their conditions.

In brief, the society in Bihar reflects a great deal of diversity. The society is divided along several axes. Seen through the lens of social and economic development, Bihar depicts a dismal picture. There exist huge socio-economic disparities among different segments of the population, especially among different social groups. These differences and cleavages often form the basis of social and political mobilisation and demobilisation.

Hence it seems pertinent to take a glimpse of the distinctive phases of the political processes in Bihar in the post-independence period. Political identity had changed in the elections of 1952. Bihari politics had evolved in bipole on one side there was Sri Krishna Singh (popularly known as Shri Babu) and other hand Anugrah Narayan Singh and congress was the circle of these two axis. Rajendra Babu was a great leader but he was elected as the President and Jai Prakash Narayan was in the Socialist Party. Kayastha strength declined and it was not whatever it was in the decade of twenties. It was now marginalized. Casteist representation of Krishnavallabh Sahay in the State Congress Working committee was on decline and it was only 5.26%. Besides, Sri Krishna Singh lobby brought Sri Sahay in their own lobby and elected as their representative. He prepared

the list of the candidates of Santhal Pargana. On the other hand Jaiprakash Narayan was also active in such type of efforts the Anugrah Narayan Singh. Later on a fierce allegations were also made on each other between Srikrishna Singh and Jaiprakash Narayan and in those days Jaiprakash Narayan used the "Bhumihar Raj" of the reign of Srikrishna Singh as a Chief Minister.⁶

By 1953 the bifactional structure of the Congress Party in Bihar ended, when almost all the important non-Bhumihar supporters of the chief minister S.K. Sinha deserted his camp and formed a centrist group. This group blamed M.P. Sinha, for their grievances.⁷ However it is interesting to note that Bhumihar supporters of the chief minister by and large stuck to him even in cases when they failed to be rewarded by ministerial positions. Presumably the reason was the psychological satisfaction that they derived from belonging to the ruling caste.⁸ The revolt of the centrist group was directed against the ruling Bhumihar factions. This group, apart from impressing upon the Congress High Command the need for taking action against the Bhumihars leaders was busy in creating public opinion against them. The group further provided a forum for other disgruntled elements, both within and outside the party, for criticizing the Congress leadership. The rivalry between M.P. Sinha and K. B. Sahay affected the Congress Party's activities ranging from organizational elections to the 1967 general elections. But after 1957 election for the first time in the history of the Bihar Congress a contest for leadership of the Congress legislature party took place between the old rivals S.K.Sinha and A.N. Sinha, K.B. Sahay openly aligned with the Rajput group along with the remainants of the centrist group.⁹ However, A.N. Sinha lost as the supporters of Sahay deserted him, the 1957 elections did not alter the general caste-feeling. There were large number of applications for the 318 M.L.A. seats and 53 for Parliamentary seats. All caste groups wanted the Congress nominations. Sadiq Ali, the Semi-official Congress election historian noted that the matter of allotting tickets, was a difficult and ticklish task.¹⁰ Morarji Desai had to settle the dispute.

Congress was returned to power in Bihar. It won 210 out of 318 seats and was returned by a comfortable majority to the Vidhan Sabha. But for a good many individual Congressmen, the election was a disaster. Mahesh Prasad Sinha and Sri K.B. Sahaya both lost their seats, because it was widely believed that both of them supported non-Congress opponents in each other constituencies. An enquiry was held in which the evidence gathered served to confirm the suspicion. Again a struggle was witnessed for Chief Ministership between Sri A.N. Sinha and S.K. Singh, Sri S.K. Sinha again became the Chief Minister due to the majority of Bhumihars in Bihar Vidhan Sabha. Shortly afterwards Sri A.N. Sinha died and Sri S.K. Sinha also died in 1961. After the death of both the factional leaders, the caste based politics of Bihar was headed by their respective juniors Sri K.B. Sahaya, and Sri M.P. Sinha and Sri K.N. Sahaya, And Sri M.P. Sinha now began to manoeuvre openly for the Chief Ministership. As the contest approached, Sri B.N. Jha (a leader of non-united Brahmins). Jha became the second Chief Minister of Bihar. For some time Sri Jha had an alliance of Kayasthas, Rajputs and most of the backward castes, but this did not last long. The inclusion of Satyaendra Narain Sinha, son of late Sri A.N. Sinha, frustrated Sri K.B. Sahaya's aspiration and he joined M.P. Sinha before the elections of 1962.

Before the elections, however, conflict between the Chief Minister's group and Sri K.B. Sahaya – Sri Mahesh Prasad Sinha's group had accentuated to such acrimonious levels that the Pradesh Election Committee could agree on the names for only 103 seats. Even within the groups there was no unity, for in many cases, each group submitted the panel of names. The Pradesh Election Committee shifted bodily to New Delhi where under pressure from the Congress High Command it agreed on the names for 87 more seats. The remaining 128 seats were decided by Smt. Indira Gandhi. Thus the Congress that faced the electorate was a divided house.

However, this time the Congress won the election with a much reduced majority i.e. 185 out of the total seats of 318 in the Assembly. This election made some changes in Bihar politics, as it was the first time that non-

Congress party having some backward caste strength, got some majority in the State Assembly. Previously they had won a few seats here and there, but excepting the troublesome Jharkhand and to a lesser extent, the Raja of Ramgarh, there was no serious opposition to Congress hegemony.

Further, the death of A.N. Sinha in July 1957 left his group without a recognized leader capable of winning support from other communities. Consequently, the Rajput group under the stewardship of S.N. Sinha, son of A.N. Sinha was reduced simply to a caste faction. The other caste element of Rajput groups were organized under the leadership of B.N. Jha, a Brahmin and a camp follower of A.N. Sinha.¹¹ Thus bifactional structure of the State Congress was changed into a multifunctional structure.

To sum up, the second phase (1967-1989) was a period of political volatility compared to the preceding phase. It signaled the undercurrents of rising caste consciousness accompanied by change in socio-political mobilisation and contours of political power.

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