

Mandalisation of Indian politics: surge of the Other Backward Classes in North India and its consequences

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Abstract: Rise of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) into both economic and political prominence has been one of the most defining and important events of the post colonial India. It has been able to challenge the established power and caste structure, ensured greater involvement of the neglected and subaltern communities in the decision making process and hence has led to greater outreach of democracy among the masses. Ram Manohar Lohia provided the intellectual background for the birth of this surge and it was duly popularized by his followers. At a broader level it can be associated with the larger process of mobilization of the marginalized groups which apart from OBCs also consist of such groups as the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes etc., against the upper caste domination. It has provided an umbrella for the erstwhile distributed peasant and intermediary communities to voice their grievances and get them addressed. But at the same time it has been criticized by many for various reasons ranging from ‘vote-bank politics’, promoting the feeling of groupism and acting against the nation etc.

Index terms: OBCs, Kalelkar Commission, Mandal Commission, Mandalisation, Ram Manohar Lohia.

Introduction

Historically what has come to be identified as the OBCs later were never a united mass. They were generally peasant communities or artisans who lied somewhere in between the three upper castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas) and the untouchables in the Indian caste structure. Much like the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), they have been historically wronged upon, but till very recent times had lacked a voice of dissent. They were not enumerated in the census reports as a distinct community. They lacked a centralized leadership to agitate for their grievances, till as late as the 1960s, even though the condition of many communities had been as deplorable as other socially backward classes (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). The upper castes were over-represented in political sphere, even though they constituted a minor portion of the total Indian population (especially in North India), while members from the intermediary castes were very thinly represented. Congress- the hegemonic political party of those times was dominated at the centre by progressive leaders (generally belonging to the upper castes) who did not regard caste as a relevant category for state-sponsored social change and relied

on conservative notables at local level. The Communists believed in class differences and rejected that of caste which they believed would be later submerged by the former.¹

The term 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) was firstly used by Jawaharlal Nehru in his Objectives resolution speech before the Constituent assembly, on 13 December, 1946. Provisions were made in the Constitution itself to work for the upliftment and betterment of these people (especially articles 15, 16 and 340) and thus can rightfully claim legitimacy from there.² But still neither Nehru nor any other veteran leaders were able to elaborate any further regarding who the OBCs were? Only a vague promise of appointing a commission to identify them was made. Although middle and lowest castes provided a critical support base for the Congress and a few leaders did wield important position within the party at national and state levels, they largely remained outside from the inner circles of power during both Nehru and post- Nehru period.

Underpinnings behind the surge

Though provision for reservations had been made in the Constitution itself, but it lost currency in the subsequent decades owing to the belief that the Caste system present in India at the time of independence was more of a colonial construct. The colonial power 'essentialized' caste i.e. thought of it as an essence that defined Indians and Indian culture and set out to measure and document this essence, through census reports and other such measures. Such an attempt was claimed to have turned a fluid, context-dependent variable into a fixed, immutable essence.³ It was understood that in order to reform Indian life, such Colonial legacies would have to be shed off and that caste distinctions would slowly wither away with time. However as is evident, caste inequalities have proved to be much more resilient than they were initially believed to be. It is a reality even in present times.⁴ We understood caste as other-than-modern. What we essentially lacked to understand was that caste was being reinvented as a modern institution, specially its new modes of reproduction and the fresh meanings and functions it was acquiring in urban India. Having justified the fact that caste is a reality in modern India, it becomes easy to understand the reason behind various caste mobilizations.

The intermediary castes (what came to be identified as OBCs later) had acquired increased voting power through universal adult suffrage and increased economic power through zamindari abolition and with the coming of Green Revolution. With the new found economic resources, the OBCs aspired not only to get hold of political power but also educational benefits and better opportunities for their children. This could have been possible only by challenging the established centres of power, which were generally dominated by members of upper castes. Thus as they acquired such opportunities, they were bound to come in conflict with members of upper castes, who were disproportionately far greater represented in these institutions.⁵

Ram Manohar Lohia: the ideologue behind the mobilization

Socialist leaders were the first to talk about focussing on the peasants' condition. The Congress Socialist Party (a faction within Congress itself), found in 1934, advocated the organization of peasants through 'Kisan Sanghs'. It talked about eliminating landlordism and redistribution of lands to the peasants. Socialists like Narendra Deva proposed a policy framework which was in deference to Gandhian model of 'trusteeship'. It talked about struggle between peasant and landlords at the village level. They referred to caste only occasionally and believed that only the evil of untouchability needed to be abolished in order to reform it. This was something very similar to what Nehru and Congress would try to implement twenty years later.⁶

In the post-independence India, Christophe Jaffrelot identifies two kinds of approaches pursued by those who wanted to dislodge upper-caste, urban establishments from power. The first one concentrated on their mobilization as peasants (kisans), led especially by Charan Singh, a 'Jat' leader (and his party BKD/Lok Dal), who believed in fighting against the high landlordism of a select few at the centre of power. They were prominent in western U.P., Punjab and Haryana- the Jat heartland. The second one relied more on caste identities and quota politics primarily espoused by socialist leaders led by Ram Manohar Lohia, who regarded caste to be the main obstacle in the way of creation of an egalitarian society. He believed that only by following affirmative action techniques i.e. by providing caste based reservation to the OBCs could the wrongs done against them could be annulled.⁷ In the longer run the second approach has gained more popularity and currency.

Ram Manohar Lohia emerged as a champion of the cause of positive discrimination not only for Scheduled castes, tribes but also for OBC communities. He expounded the thesis that Indian society must develop on its own. According to him, the new creed cannot be developed on the basis of a borrowed western creed. He talked about a unique socialist ideology for India, which was free from the weaknesses of socialism as popular in Europe. He believed that over-centralization which was present in Indian polity, pulled it backwards. He emphasized that a truly non-violent society can be build only by promoting decentralization and by involving the masses into the power structure and decision making of the country, what he used to call the 'Chaukhamba Model'.⁸ He and his Samyukt Socialist Party (S.S.P., formed in 1964) objected against the class based classification of the Indian society and believed that caste is the most overwhelming factor in Indian life. He had a firm belief that social justice can be ensured only if the socially and educationally backward communities would be provided a level playing field. He asserted:

"when everybody has an equal opportunity, castes with the five thousand years old traditions of liberal education would be on top. Only the exceptionally gifted from the lower-castes would be able to break through this tradition... to make this battle a somewhat equal encounter, unequal opportunities would have to be extended, to those who have so far been suppressed".⁹

For him providing reservations in administration to the depressed sections would serve this cause. It was Lohia's vision which became a source of inspiration for other OBC parties of North India in the coming years. They challenged the power and patronage held by elite Brahmans, Kshatriya, Rajputs and Bhumiars castes. Bihar especially became a lab of

socialist politics. It produced such backward leaders as Karpuri Thakur, B.P. Mandal etc., who in one or the other way were influenced by Lohiaite thought.

Kalelkar and Mandal Commissions and the turnout of events

To identify these unidentified communities and to remove the discriminations faced by them, the first Backward Classes Commission was appointed on 29 January, 1953 under Kaka Kalelkar. Its terms of reference were to determine the criteria to be adopted in considering the admission of communities (apart from SCs and STs) as being socially and educationally backward, prepare a list of such communities, setting out also their approximate numbers and their territorial distribution and to investigate their condition and recommend steps to be taken to alleviate their problems. The commission submitted its report on 30th March 1955. It tried to derive a concept of defining the Other Backward Classes. It identified 2,399 backward castes or communities which formed about 32 percent of the Indian population, as forming the bulk of 'socially and educationally backward classes' that needed affirmative action to bring about a change in their condition. It recommended undertaking caste-wise census, taking special economic measures, reserving of seats in all technical and professional institutions for qualified students of backward classes and in all government services and local bodies in range between 25 to 40 percent in different categories.¹⁰ The report was rejected by the Central government on the grounds that by reorganizing the society on socialistic pattern, all such distinctions between different classes would get eradicated by itself. It also questioned the use of caste as the dominant criteria to identify such communities. No real progress took place in the following years.

It was only with the coming of the Janta government (1977), following a crushing defeat of the Congress that the issue again came into prominence. The new government had many leaders with socialist leanings within its ranks. It had promised in its electoral manifesto to revisit and relook the issue of OBC reservations and form a new commission. As per its promise, the Morarji Desai led government appointed the second Backward Classes Commission led by Bin-dhyeshwari Prasad Mandal (B.P Mandal, a prominent Yadav leader from Bihar, who had also served as its Chief Minister for sometime in 1968) on 20th December 1978. A point notable is that unlike the Kalelkar commission, the newly formed commission had no upper caste members.¹¹ Its terms of reference was to recommend such measures as reservations to ensure social emancipation of the backward castes within the mainstream society. It identified as many as 3,743 castes who accounted for about 52 percent of the country's population as being socially and educationally backward and very poorly represented in administrative services of the State. In order to undo the wrongs against these communities, it recommended a reservation of 27 percent, to add to the 22.5 percent reservation already offered to Scheduled castes and tribes. In its report, it explicitly stated:

“we must recognize that an essential part of the battle against social backwardness is to be fought in the minds of the backward people. In India Government service has always been looked upon as a symbol of prestige and power. By increasing the representation of OBCs in government services, we give them an immediate feeling of participation in the governance of this country.”¹²

The Janta government which had commissioned the report fell by the time the commission submitted its report and the Congress governments which followed tended to ignore it.

Nearly a decade later, when the National Front government led by V.P. Singh came to power (1989), the report and the question of its implementation again came to limelight. The newly elected Prime Minister was quite aware of the till then clearly visible power of the OBCs and his weak position as the leader of a fragmented, minority government. To strengthen his own position as the head of the government and to win the confidence of the OBC 'vote-bank', he issued a four paragraph order on 13th August, implementing the basic recommendations of the Mandal Commission. Henceforth 27 percent of all vacancies in the government of India were reserved for the 'socially and educationally backward classes identified by the commission.'¹³ However implementation of the recommendations proved to be a tedious issue. Whole of the society got divided into two factions. One in support of the recommendations and the other who opposed it. The opposition of the order was more in North than South because the high caste communities were in greater numbers and proportion in North in comparison to South. Also affirmative action programmes had been in existence in South for quite some time by then. Owing to these reasons, it never became pregnant for any large scale opposition. But the opposition to report was fierce and strong in North. Bandhs, dharnas, agitations, marches and many times even self-immolations were quite frequent. Pitched battles were fought between the reservation supporters and its opposers. Government found it difficult to maintain law and order. Criticisms of the report ranged from the number of castes identified by it to be very large as well as also over the criteria used to identify them.

In 1990, a case was filed against the order in the Supreme Court, admonishing the divisive tendencies the order was perpetuating. A stay order was effected. Congress, which till then had remained tight-lipped, tried to come to terms with the reality. The new P.V. Narsimha Rao led government issued a fresh order on 26 September 1991, endorsing the Mandal report, when asked by the apex court to clear the government's stand on the issue. However it added the 'rider that in allocating 27 percent of jobs to the OBCs, preference shall be given to poorer sections among them. It also endorsed adding additional 10 percent reservations to be added for economically weaker sections of any caste.'¹⁴ In it's verdict of 16th November 1992, the Supreme Court dismissed the petition against the report. Majority judges of the bench upheld the constitutional validity of the report, but added two conditions in it's implementation: that total reservations should not exceed 50 percent of the jobs in government, and that the caste criteria would apply only in appointment and not in promotion. Later it brought in the concept of 'Creamy layer' to dither the economically well off sections among the OBCs from enjoying the benefits of reservation. It also rejected the idea of 10 percent additional reservations on the basis of economic criteria for people below the poverty line belonging to general category.

Consequences

The rise of the OBCs in the Indian politics has had large scale consequences. The general masses in India which till then had largely remained dis-interested in mundane reports presented by various commissions, took keen interest in discussing and debating upon the provisions of Mandal report. Although many of the leading political parties such as Congress, BJP, CPM and other left parties raised questions regarding lack of clarity in the criteria used for designing the report, none of them were able to totally rejected it and with the passage of time have accepted it. On the other side of the scale were parties in North India, which were formed around the support they garnered from the newly identified category of OBCs, especially Samajwadi party (SP) led by Mulayam Singh Yadav in U.P. and Rastriya Janta Dal (RJD) led by Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar. Both of them gained immense popularity riding on the 'Mandal issue' and were able to form governments in their respective state legislatures many times. Many other parties and leaders such as Ram Vilas Paswan, Nitish Kumar etc. were also able to carve out their niche in the coming years, either on the basis of OBC 'vote-bank' alone or by combing forces of other groups of the society as well.¹⁵ 'Mandalisation' of Indian politics, along with rising right wing nationalism under the aegis of Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and other such groups (what has been many times referred to as 'Kamandalisation') to counter the effect of Mandal politics, have come to define the Indian political scene since 1990s till present. It has also led to fragmentation of the single party rule in the country, which was popular till then and begun the era of coalition governments both at the centre and in the states.

Both positive and negative aspects of the Mandalisation of politics has been extensively discussed by different scholars of the subject. The upsurge has been criticized for promoting 'vote-bank politics' and fragmentation of polity, which has led to unnecessary delay in decision making and for promoting group rights in place of individual rights.¹⁶ It has been claimed that some castes among the OBCs, have been able to tap out all the benefits, while many others, what has been called as the Most Backward Classes (MBCs) still remain suppressed. Over insistence over reservations has been criticized for ruining merit and scholarship and for diverting attention of the people and policy makers from addressing the real issues such as increasing employment opportunities, improving growth potential etc., as everybody is interested in having a larger share of the fixed pie. However the criticisms have been countered by others. It has been hailed for leading to the democratization of the Indian political space and for increasing the confidence of the lower caste people who became much more confident and begun voting in masse for leaders belonging to their own milieu. This has led to changing of upper-caste oligarchy by people coming from more humble backgrounds, who had till now lacked voice in decision making. Reservations has had similar effects in educational and administrative fields. They pointed to the states of south India, where more than two-thirds of government jobs were allocated on the basis of caste, without (it was argued) affecting the efficiency of the administration.¹⁷

Conclusion

The paper tries to understand that how the implementation of Mandal Commission's recommendations and the fall out of events that followed it had a deep impact upon the polity of the post-colonial India and how it provided the till then distributed and under-represented peasant communities with a sense of identity. A thorough discussion of the historical development, Lohiaite influence over the rise of OBCs, reasons behind the upsurge and the various other developments and the consequences of 'Mandalisation' of politics has been presented. Arguments both in favour and opposition of rise of Mandal politics have been included.

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