

Identity Politics and the Empowerment of the Marginalised in the Post-independent Indian Context.

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to survey the scenario of the identity politics pertaining to the marginalized community in India. Initially, it delineates the rationale of the politics in terms of identity and points up the necessity given the forlorn condition of the marginalized. For, the politics as understood in this context attempts to assure a degree of empowerment in the midst of the scramble from all sides of the society making the caste hierarchy a means to reinforce the entrenched prejudicial notions. Finally, the paper makes the case for identity politics in the Indian context which has an aggrieving past. It draws insights from Charles Taylor in support of its stand.

Key words: marginalized; identity; politics; Dalit; empowerment

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Identity designates a person's understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics as a human being. Charles Taylor in his essay "Politics of Recognition" says,

Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or compatible picture of themselves. (Taylor 1)

He characterizes the role the notion of identity plays in a society as consequential in fashioning the psyche of an individual as:

Non-recognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being. Those who have been marginalized internalize a picture of their own inferiority so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their advance fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities. (Taylor 1)

This ends up causing them suffer the pain of low self-esteem because of the demeaning image being projected. Their own self depreciation becomes one of the most potent instruments of their own oppression. Their first task therefore ought to be to purge themselves of this imposed and destructive identity. Misrecognition is not just manifestation of lack of due respect. It inflicts a grievous wound saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe to people. It is a vital human need.

Identity politics signifies a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Identity politics aims to secure the freedom of a specific constituency marginalised within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination. In other words, it signifies a body of political projects that attempt a recovery from exclusion and denigration of groups hitherto marginalized on the basis of differences based on their selfhood determining characteristics like ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, caste positions, and so on. Identity politics attempts to attain empowerment, representation and recognition of social groups by asserting the very same markers that distinguished and differentiated them from others and utilizes those markers as an assertion of selfhood

and identity based difference rather than equality.

Identity politics essentialize certain markers that fix identities of social groups around a set of definitional absolutes. These markers may be those of language, culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, caste positions, religion, tribe, race, etc. institutionalized in jargons, metaphors, stereotypes and academic literature and reinforced through practices of positive discrimination or affirmative action. Setting up a parallel entity of institutional challenge formed the best part of it. (Identity Politics here implies a certain essential local and particular categorical identities rather than any universalizing ideals or agenda.) This struggle gained intellectual legitimacy in the second half of the 20th century. Thus, the main aim of identity politics has been to empower the oppressed to articulate their oppression in terms of their own experience - this is a process of consciousness raising. Identity politics has become a prominent subject lately. The rise in struggles launched in terms of religion, language, and ethnicity contributed to the significance of identity in India. Intensified efforts are being made nowadays at strengthening individual and categorical identities and reinforce self-sameness. This is seen as a modern phenomenon because identity is based on a central organizing principle of ethnicity, religion, language, gender sexual preferences, caste positions etc. This is a compelling remedy for anonymity in an otherwise impersonal modern world. Proponents of Identity politics claim that it is a pattern of belonging, a search for comfort, an approach to community. However, complex social changes and the overlapping of various layers of forces, factors and events have rendered such production and recognition of identities problematic. It is fraught with negotiating the overlapping, contested, heterodox or multiple selves. Assertion of identity then is a simultaneous seeking of the emphasizing of the difference and attempts to establish commonality with others.

Indian Polity has always shown an inclination to negotiate the allegiance to a liberal spirit and the consciousness of community. In its process, it has recognized a plethora of autonomous and largely self-governing bodies. It finds itself both as an association of individuals and a community of communities with rights. The material basis for the identity claim has been made feasible by the post independent state and its structures and institutions. The state is seen as an active contributor to identity politics through the creation and maintenance of state structures which define and then recognize people in terms of certain identities. Thus space for all with differing identities like language, religion, caste, ethnicity or tribal identity have been created. However these identity markers do not operate autonomously, independent of the overlapping of the other markers. So to speak, caste affiliations intervene linguistic identities and linguistic identities intervene religious associations, religious association intervene ethnic origins and so on. Yet the easily noticeable feature of the Indian society is that caste-based discrimination and oppression have been extremely injurious.

The post-independence period saw the affiliation of caste with politics and it has made the hitherto oppressed to be accorded with political freedom and recognition. Nevertheless it has opened up a new avenue to see the same as a political potential. Dr.Ambedkar designed the policy of reservations or protective/compensatory discrimination to remove untouchability as an institution from Indian social life and polity. Mandal saw in caste a political resource - a political capital. In fact the Mandal commission served as an intellectual inspiration to make it an asset to secure political and economic gains. The notion of caste had been built around the notions of purity and pollution, plus hierarchy and

difference. Besides the stigma of ritual impurity ascribed to the marginalized, they lived in sheer poverty, illiteracy and denial of political power. The active confrontation of identity politics between the suppressor and the suppressed starts with the State giving support to the Dalit a protective discrimination. The caste based political parties emerge and profess to uphold and protect the specific identities. Moreover constitution guarantees their grievances being addressed to in the State structure. Thus the Dalits have turned out to be a force in the political sphere as that cannot be set aside as unimportant. They determine and impact a trend in politics by their new consciousness and organized actions.

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