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Dalit Politics in India

Recognition without Redistribution

RADHA SARKAR, AMAR SARKAR

Dalit political parties in North and Central India have overwhelmingly pursued an agenda of recognition, calling for equal respect, rather than one of redistribution. While this has improved the social and economic standing of Dalits better situated in terms of class, it has failed to substantively improve the lives of the majority of Dalits. Ultimately, Dalits' quest for equal treatment will be limited so long as it lacks a redistributive politics that addresses exploitative economic relations.

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How should we understand the rise of caste-based politics among India's Dalits since the 1990s? Should we celebrate it as the empowerment of a historically oppressed community and a major success of Indian democracy, as some scholars have (Jaffrelot 2003; Kohli 2001; Varshney 2000)? Or should we be more sceptical in examining the gains and limitations?

We argue that caste-based politics cannot achieve social justice for Dalits unless it takes class into account, which it has largely failed to. The politics of recognition employed by Dalit parties has brought only limited gains for Dalits on the whole as the benefits associated with it have been reaped by Dalits better situated in terms of class. Ultimately, Dalits' quest for equal treatment will be limited so long as it lacks a redistributive politics to address exploitative economic relations. We use the case of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh (UP)—one of the largest and most electorally successful of caste-based parties—and its project for Dalit equality to illustrate our arguments.

Social Justice

Nancy Fraser (1998) distinguishes two conceptions of social justice: one that

centres on redistributive claims, comprising calls for a more equitable distribution of goods and resources; and a second conception built on claims for recognition with the goal of a "difference-friendly world" that accords equal respect to a plurality of social groups (Fraser 1998: 1). While redistribution has had a central place in calls for justice, Fraser highlights the equal importance of recognition in achieving justice for those groups for whom "institutionalized patterns of interpretation and valuation [have] impede[d] the parity of participation in social life" (Fraser 1998: 4).

Fraser argues that to adequately address injustice, the politics of redistribution and recognition must be employed together: either one on its own is incapable of dealing with the complex cultural and economic realities of injustice. Her argument primarily concerns women but is also well suited to explain the nature of caste oppression in India. Caste, like gender in Fraser's account, is a two-sided category, composed of economic and cultural dimensions. And as with gender, redressing caste-based injustice calls for attention to both redistribution and recognition (Fraser 1998: 2).

Recognition vs Redistribution

Dalit political parties in Northern and Central India have emphasised a politics of recognition, even as they have marginalised a politics of redistribution, thereby precluding a fuller achievement of justice. Such organisations and parties are based on, and articulate, demands for respect from others (Basu 2012; Weiner 2001).

They are concerned primarily with changes to the cultural order as means of securing equal treatment in social relations, or, in Fraser's words, they pursue "parity of participation in social life" (1998: 4).

But changes to the cultural order can at best address misrecognition, or the unfairly low social status accorded to a group; they are unable to address what Fraser terms maldistribution, or the unjust distribution of resources and goods. If caste constituted the sole principle of distribution, then it would correspond perfectly with class. If all members of a caste engaged in their traditional occupations, then we could expect few differences between property ownership, education, wealth or income between the members of any one caste or sub-caste (Weiner 2001). Misrecognition of a group's status in society would directly entail maldistribution, and a politics of recognition would serve to address injustices of distribution as well as recognition.

However, the reality of caste is more complex, for caste and class do not map seamlessly onto one another. With changes in economy and policy, caste Hindus as well as Dalits have become increasingly differentiated internally. With deregulation, liberalisation of the economy and higher economic growth rates, individuals from various rungs of the caste hierarchy have gained diverse economic benefits (Weiner 2001; Kohli 2001). As some members of lower castes acquire higher levels of education and have benefited from caste-based reservations in government employment, class divisions among them have increased.

Weiner (2001) predicts an increasing trend of social mobility for educated, urban Dalits; the prospects for the more numerous rural sections of the Dalit population, with less education, are less optimistic. Thus, all the members of any one caste do not belong to the same class: caste and class are not interchangeable, and we cannot infer one directly from the other. Consequently, a politics of recognition does not, in and of itself, entail a politics of redistribution.

In the remainder of this article, we demonstrate the ways in which the caste-based politics of Dalit parties are unable to address the economic dimensions of

oppression, in addition the cultural ones, for the overwhelming majority of Dalits.

The Case of Uttar Pradesh

Consider, for instance, the pro-Dalit BSP in UP. The BSP emerged as a competitor for state-level power in 1991, winning 9.4% of the vote that year. In 2007, it won a landslide victory with 30.6% of the vote (Jeffrey et al 2008). The BSP's attempts to better the social, economic, and political position of Dalits in UP comprised two interlinked strategies.

The first consisted in a symbolic transformation of the landscape of UP—parks, statues, and libraries were dedicated to Dalit leaders; and hospitals, stadia, and educational institutions were renamed along similar lines (Jeffrey et al 2008). The BSP's second strategy was to alter the implementation of existing government policies rather than effect new legislation (Chandra 2004). For example, the BSP sought to change the nature of the state government by transferring Dalits into key positions in the bureaucracy and by expanding Dalit presence in the police force. In the six months that the BSP's Mayawati was chief minister in 1997, she transferred 1,350 civil and police officers (Jaffrelot 2003: 419), made a concerted effort to recruit Dalits to the police force, and made existing reserved seats in government training and professional training more accessible to Dalits (Chandra 2004; Hasan 2001).

In sum, the strategy of the BSP was to raise the profile of UP's Dalits writ large by increasing their presence and power in the bureaucratic and coercive apparatuses, as well as in the symbolic landscape.

Clearly, the BSP improved the political and economic standing of some Dalits. Varshney (2000) argues that, although the BSP has not substantially improved the economic position of ordinary Dalits, it has nonetheless benefited the Dalit community, politically and symbolically, across North India. He suggests that Dalits are better positioned to challenge the legitimacy of caste discrimination and to engage in politics. Jaffrelot (2003) goes further in suggesting that many ordinary Dalits are using their recently acquired state-level representation to significantly improve their access to political resources,

economic goods, and social contacts in rural UP. While the rise of low-caste politics has indeed altered local-level politics to a certain extent (Jeffrey et al 2008), hailing the BSP as the harbinger of a "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot 2003) is as yet premature, for a politics of recognition, divorced from that of redistribution, is limited from the very outset. Without a radical shift in the distribution of economic and social opportunities, a politics of recognition does little to reconfigure entrenched power relations.

Socio-economic Inequality

The limits of a politics of recognition are evinced by the BSP. Even as it has embraced a politics of recognition and advanced a largely symbolic agenda, the BSP has failed to intervene in disputes over land and labour and to implement policies that address inequality and poverty in UP (Jeffrey et al 2008).

The realities of socio-economic inequality, rooted in unequal land and asset ownership, also impact the ways in which Dalits are able (or unable) to take advantage of the policies of recognition offered to them. While reservations in state educational institutions and government offices have been implemented with the claim of advancing Dalits' economic, political, and social standing, in reality they have done little for the majority of the community.

For instance, rural Chamars, a Dalit group in UP, argue that reservations have little impact on their community's chances of securing government work because the competition for reserved government posts is fierce and corrupt (Jeffrey et al 2008). The Chamars' less prestigious education, obtained primarily from rural state schools with poor educational standards—the only schools most Chamar families can afford—combined with a lack of money for bribes marginalised their bid for government jobs relative to urban members of their caste (Jeffrey et al 2008). The politics of recognition have thus allowed those Dalit individuals better positioned in the class hierarchy to take advantage of the opportunities offered for recognition.

Furthermore, a politics of recognition without redistribution is limited even in its pursuit of respect in a largely rural

society where dignity and respect are bound up with landownership and use. Landownership has been a source of self-respect and a claim to respectful treatment from others across the Indian countryside (Bhatia 2005). For the majority of rural Dalits, their landlessness has left them completely dependent on landlords. The skewed labour relations engendered by this pattern of land ownership has been a source of enduring humiliation among Dalits and has exposed them to continued exploitation by their employers (Bhatia 2005). Respect for Dalits can only be meaningfully secured through a direct intervention in the labour relations between them and other castes—either through land redistribution, heightened minimum wage regulation, or other redistributive measures. The aim of a politics of recognition—parity in participation in social life—can only be achieved with redistribution.

All of this is not to deny the value of a politics of recognition. Dalits have been

denied dignity and respect, even their humanity has too often been denied. These harms are indeed injustices of recognition and demand remedies of recognition and demand remedies of recognition of equal worth. However, a Dalit politics of recognition that is unable to substantiate a redistributive agenda is doomed to be shallow, bringing tangible gains to those better off in class terms while permitting at best symbolic achievements for many.

Furthermore, such a politics ignores the interrelated nature of economic and social relations: without significant redistribution, Dalits are fated to continued dependence on higher castes to make ends meet. This economic dependence in turn fosters relations of exploitation that preclude the parity of participation in social life to which a politics of recognition aspires. Indian democracy can only be (at most) a partial success without the full social and economic incorporation of the country's most oppressed and marginalised groups.

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