

Political Mobilization of other Backward Class and the Decline of the Congress in Bihar

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INTRODUCTION

The decade of 1990s is the decade of transformation in socio-economic and political sphere in Indian politics which witnessed governmental instability, rise of coalition politics, rise of BJP and decline of Congress, rise of regional parties and emergence of OBC politics, and subterranean politics of economic liberalization. India became perhaps “the only large democracy in the world today where the turnout of lower order of society is well above that of most privileged groups”. In 1984, participation in the rural areas overtook urban turnout for the first time. During 1980s and 1990s, Tribal and Dalits closed the gap between vote levels in reserved and general constituencies, while the odd ratio for voting of Hindu upper castes showed a relative decline. All of this changed the social composition of voters and those who took part in the political activities. The expanded participatory base of India’s politics reached downward to involve nearly all groups suffering from some or the other form of social deprivations and backwardness, that is, OBCs, Scheduled Castes, Tribal and minorities¹.

Political Recruitment and Mobilization of OBCs:

The virtual monopoly of the upper caste over political resources has ended, and the operation of democratic

politics has endowed the underprivileged lower castes with two attributes, of political influence, number and organization². The political movement and mobilization have started with the formation of Triveni Sangh, an organization of (now dominant) Yadav, Koiri and Kurmi in the early thirties. This organization was formed to demand the share of lower caste in the political power structure, which the British government was slowly handing over to Indians. The Sangh also voiced its resentment against the discriminatory and unequal practices of the Hindu social system³. The upper caste also utilized the medium of caste organization to maintain status quo in the socio-economic and political structure. For example, Brahmin Sabha, Bhumihaar-Brahmin Sabha, All India Kayastha Conference, the Rajput Sabha were the organizations which played an important role in maintaining the status quo in the society as well as in the state.

The real challenge to upper caste dominance came after independence in India, when parliamentary democracy offered universal adult franchise. The clientelistic politics of the Congress co-opted vote bank ‘owners’, who were often upper caste landlords, and untouchable leaders, whose rallying around the ruling party derived their group of some important spokesmen.

1. Frankel R. Francine. *India's Political Economy, 1947-2004*, OUP: New Delhi, 2005, P- 626
2. RamshrayRoy. ‘Caste and Political Recruitment in Bihar’ in Rajni Kothari (eds.) *Caste in Indian Politics*, Orient BlackSwan: New Delhi, 1970, P-227
3. Roma Mitra. *Caste Polarization of Politics*. Syndicate Publication: Patna, 1992, P- 120.

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There were fewer lower-caste leaders within the Congress, the lower caste being closer to the opposition parties, especially the Socialist, or the “independents”⁴. The Socialist leader Rammanohar Lohia, who regarded caste as a main obstacle towards egalitarian society, attempted to form an alliance of the non-elite groups mainly on the basis of affirmative action technique: they asked for caste-based quotas, especially in the administration⁵.

The first significant change occurred in 1960s when they entered the Bihar Legislative Assembly in massive numbers under the auspices of the Socialist parties. In 1967 assembly elections as many as 71 MLAs were from backward castes in the 324 member Bihar Assembly. The trend indicated the beginning of phase where monopoly of the upper castes was challenged by those traditional structures which were denied access to power in spite of their larger numerical strength. They had been subjected to a continuous socio-political exploitation.⁶ In the Jan Sangh, SSP and CPI, the backwards have secured a greater percentage of seats than upper castes. The aspirations of OBCs soared by different political parties adopting the caste mobilization and recruitment favored to backward castes. For example, when D.P. Rai of Congress became C.M of the state, he appointed a Backward Classes Commission (Mungerilal Commission) to make recommendations for reservation in the educational institutions and government services for OBCs.

Until the emergence of Karpoori Thakur after 1977 elections and implementation of reservation policy, the backwards were not under single leadership. He, though belonging to a minority caste of Nai, assumed the

leadership of the entire “backwards” of Bihar and turned other Koiri, Kurmoi and Yadav leaders who dominated backward politics⁷. He was dynamic leader who mobilized backward classes under his leadership. During Indira Gandhi’s regime, BPCC was dominated by Brahmins; while Indira Gandhi was herself a Brahmin and had close political relationship with Lalit Narayan Mishra (a Maithil Brahmin and elder brother of the youngest chief minister Jagannath Mishra). Emergency was a setback to Indian democracy as well as the organization of Congress. In 1977 election, Congress lost its traditional electoral base to Janata Party. All lower castes united under the leadership of Karpoori Thakur who implemented the Backward Classes Commission (Mungerilal Commission) recommendations culminated in strong polarization of castes in two parts. The entire rank and file of upper caste rallied behind Congress (I) on one hand and all lower castes supported the Janata Party led by Karpoori Thakur and his lieutenant on the other.

Meanwhile, one of the most important developments, started in the villages of Bihar, and this was caste conflict between upper castes and Dalits. Both castes, Dalit as well as upper caste with Muslims, were the traditional supporters of the Congress. From 1977 (Belchi, Patna) to 1988 (Malbaria, Palamu), there were eight caste massacres occurred during Congress rule. This ritualistic violence against the Dalit community was done by private militia formed by upper caste. This collective massacre known as Gohar⁸, Arvind N. Das calls “Harijan hunting”⁹, challenged the state administration to maintain law and order and protect the victim of caste conflict.

If the statistics of conflicts in rural areas is examined,

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4. Christofer Jafferlot, ‘Rise of Other Backward Classes in the Hindi Belt’. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2000, p-87-90.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Jawaharlal Pandey, “Politics of United front in Bihar” (An unpublished Ph.D. Thesis) quoted in S.K Jain. 1989. Caste and Politics in Bihar, Commonwealth Publisher: New Delhi, P- 107.
 7. Hiranmay Dhar, Shaibal Gupta, Nandadulal Roy and Nirmal Sengupta. “Caste and Polity in Bihar” in G. Omvedt (eds.) ‘*Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States*’. 1982. A Project of Teaching Politics. Department of Political Science, Delhi University, New Delhi, P- 109
 8. Gohar is a very famous term in Bhojpuri and Magadha area of Bihar Gohar, a term representing a phenomenon so indigenous that it is difficult to find in another culture and language of its equivalent term. It can be loosely translated as attack but that is only small aspect of the actual process. It includes summoning friends, relation, armed retainer and dependent clients to help avenge real or perceived assaults on the social, economic or cultural position of the counterattacking party.
 9. Arvind N .Das. *The Republic Of Bihar*, Penguin Books: New Delhi, 1992.

the incidence of rural violence shows some definite patterns. In the incidences of atrocities in Bajitpur, Khijuria, Bishrampur, Gopalpur, Baniapatti and Chandadano, the main issues were wage, sharecroppers' rights over their cultivated land, and possession of government distributed land. In Belchi, and to a certain extent, in Bishrampur, fight was against social oppression, including sexual exploitation. These factors were not obvious in other incidents though they were latently there in almost all cases. The caste component of attackers was varied. In Bajitpur, Parasbigha and Pipra; Bhumihars were particularly aggressive landowning upper castes. In Bishampur, Baniapatti, Papri, Belchi, Gopalpur, Chaudadon and Pipra; Kurmis were a counter pose to Bhumihars among the backward castes. Whether Bhumihar or Yadav or Kurmi, they were landlords, who were determined to preserve their land¹⁰. Sometimes Kurmi Zamindars were backed by upper caste landlords who fought jointly against the poor Dalits share-croppers and their victims were Mushhar, Chamars, Dusadh, Yadavs and even Brahmins (as in Belchi)¹¹.

The Dalit community, a traditional supporter of Congress, disillusioned with the rule of Congress government failed to protect their rights as well as their life, particularly in the North Bihar where caste conflict turned into class conflict. Both sides arranged their militia and became ready to fight for suppression on the one hand and assertion on the other. In order to do so, there were many private militias that had been organized especially based on caste such as Bhoomi Sena, KuerSena, LorikSena, Brahmarshi Sena, Diamond Sena, Sunlight Sena, Ranveer Sena, Ganga Sena, Kishan Sena and so on. The given table shows some details of the private militia groups and their confrontations in Bihar

politics. Majority of this private militia was to maintain status quo in the social, economic and political structure of the state. State government did nothing in the situation to maintain law and order and provide security to the poor who were at the mercy of the upper caste militia. The upper castes dominance in the Party as well as the state structure may be one of the several causes of the massacre of the Dalits and was described by Arvind N Das as 'Harijan hunting'¹² and he had given the term 'Gohar'¹³ for that genocide.

In the post-Janata periods, Janata Party fragmented into several parties and remained divided till (1989) ninth general elections. The Congress's win in the 1980s elections was due to the severe division in the Opposition.¹⁴ The Mandal Commission issue polarized the masses between upper castes and lower castes. Karpoori Thakur played an important part in the assertion of the OBCs and his activities explained the rise of SSP at the expense of the Congress.¹⁵ Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal, a former Chief Minister of Bihar and a Yadav who presided over the Second Backward Classes Commission in 1978, had been elected as MLA on a Congress ticket in 1957 and 1962. He defected from the Congress in 1965 and joined the SSP when it offered him better opportunities; indeed he obtained the ministerial portfolio of health in the SVD government in 1967 in spite of the fact that he had been elected in the Lok Sabha and not to the state assembly.¹⁶ During Bihar movement all Oppositions were protesting united against the Congress rule and also united against the emergency. When election was fought, all parties contested against the Congress and won the elections at centre as well as in Bihar.

When V.P. Singh government announced to

10. Hiranmay Dhar, Shaibal Gupta, Nandadulal Roy and Nirmal Sengupta. "Caste and Polity in Bihar" in G. Omvedt (eds.) '*Land, Caste and Politics in Indian States*'. A Project of Teaching Politics. Department of Political Science, Delhi University, New Delhi, 1982. P- 110

11. Ibid.

12. Arvind N. Das, *The Republic of Bihar*. Penguin Books: New Delhi, 1992.

13. Gohar has already been defined in footnotes. see above pages.

14. Sudha Pai, The Congress and Six National elections: 1964-1984 in Aditya Mukharji (eds.): *A Centenary History of the Indian National Congress*, Academic foundation: New Delhi, P- 88.

15. Christophe Jafferlot. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics*. Permanent Black: New Delhi, 2003, P- 266.

16. Ibid.

implement the policy of reservation recommended by second Backward Classes Commission, also known as Mandal Commission, a huge anti-reservation protest came in front of India politics by students of different universities. The order to nullify the Mandal Commission's recommendation of reservation of seats in jobs and in educational institution, the supporters of the anti-reservation argued to eliminate all kind of reservation which has been given to Scheduled castes by Indian constitution. This attitude of the upper castes and other, who were opposing the quota politics, brought the other backward classes and Scheduled castes closer. The quota politics issue was raised by socialists who had great belief that caste system is the root cause of all kinds of perpetual inequality. Among the great socialists in India, Rammanohar Lohia raised the issue of quota politics and political recruitment of castes to reduce the social, economic and political inequalities in the state. He proposed thesis of non-Congressism to bring the alternative politics in India and ousted the Congress from power. His thesis of non-Congressism had great impact on states politics, particularly in the north Hindi belt of India.

Congress: From Catch-All to Catch-None and Its Decline:

The Congress has passed through different phases in terms of support base, ideology, leadership, organizational structure, and programmes in its course of history since its birth. Once Congress was elite debating group organized by liberal modern educated intelligentsia, transformed into mass organization by popular freedom movement such as Champaran, non-cooperation and civil-disobedience movement led by Mr. M.K. Gandhi. The Congress was an organization of movement character which transformed completely into political party to capture power at centre as well as states in post-independent India. Still, party had catch-all character and grand-coalition to attract diverse social background to secure the majority of seats in the Parliament and the state assemblies. Till 1967, the Congress had position of dominance in Indian political system in which it had been called "party of consensus" and "party of pressure". The overwhelming support of all section of the societies and from all segments, the Congress was called an "umbrella party" in which

members from the left segment to the Right segment were present in the Party.

Significant changes occurred in the Congress when Mrs. Indira Gandhi took the charge of the Prime Minister of India. Nature of the Congress changed from the Party of consensus to the Party of personalization and centralization of power. Deinstitutionalization in the Indian politics was also started by Indira Gandhi that led to the JP movement and emergency. During her regime the Congress faced its split twice in 1969 and in 1978 respectively. The last Congress was popular due to personality of Indira Gandhi named as Congress (Indira) which means Congress remained with the synonyms of the rule of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In Bihar significant changes occurred in the Congress during this time due to factionalism and rampant defection. Once, the Party was known as the Party which was concerned with the people who are deprived, marginalized, and excluded from the mainstreams, it changed into the Party in which leaders were more concerned about their personal power and personal interest. The umbrella character of the Party drastically reduced and at the same time intelligentsia left the Party on its own due to arrogant behavior of the leaders.¹⁷

The 1980 to 1990, the Congress ruled Bihar but faced the crisis of governability due to few reasons such as, to stop the rise of crime in the state, to stop the rampant caste conflict in which thousands of Dalits and poor have been killed by the private militia of the upper castes, the Bihar Press Bill, which erupted a violent protest in anti- and pro- support of the Bill in which media was badly treated by the Bihar government, and to protect the security to the innocent Muslim people in the state who were traditional supporters of the Congress. The party was also not united at leadership level. In the last five-year rule of the Congress in Bihar, the leadership has been changed four times from Rajputs to Brahmins. Its traditional voters such as Dalits' and Muslims' concern were not focused by the Party and it was fragile from within. There was a need to strike once to disintegrate and it was done by the united Janata Dal in 1990 elections.

What happened to the Congress which once had catch-all character but could not succeed in catching even a single broad group such as upper castes, Dalits, OBCs or Muslims? Upper castes were dispersed in different parties such as Congress, BJP, and Janata Dal and the

17. Bhawani Sen Gupta. 'Crisis of the Indian state', EPW, vol.23, no-16, 1988, P- 764-765.

other castes were in support of the Janata Dal. The Hindutva ideology of the BJP attracted the upper castes and they fully supported them. The Congress had nothing to offer in the election campaign to attract the voters. The nature of the Party changed from catch-all character to catch-none in Bihar which later resulted in decline in the electoral base.

The paper dealt with how the rise of OBCs politics shaped the institutional decline of the Congress which had changed its character over the period of time. The other backward classes were consolidated around the reservation politics which was led under the guidance of strong leaders such as Rammanohar Lohia, Karpoori Thakur, Sharad Yadav, Nitish Kumar and Laloo Prasad Yadav. Lohia was opposing the move of the Congress since independence that is why he developed his thesis of non-Congressism and promoted the quota and socialist politics. He did not care about ideology to mobilize the parties to oust the Congress from power. He was very much associated with the backward class politics and joined hand with All India Backward Class Federation to mobilize the lower castes. The consolidation of the lower castes took place around reservation politics which pushed the OBCs with the Dalits closer than ever before due to anti-reservation mobilization of the upper castes. The decade also witnessed the rise of the Hindutva ideology that attracted the upper castes who already got tired with affiliation to the Congress. The rise of the BJP and OBCs politics was at the expense of the Congress which had nothing new to offer to the electors. OBCs politics emerged due to democratization of the politics as well as society while BJP emerged as a reactionary party which offered new choices to the people, especially to the upper castes. In the due course of time, Congress became a fragile and weak party which broke down internally first and externally thereafter. On the one hand the Party strength and the lack of leadership appeared at center with the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi on the other hand its leaders scattered in Bihar due to deinstitutionalization of the Congress. In contrast, the Opposition was united and ready to challenge the

Congress in the electoral field as the ground was already built to oust the Party from power. This time the Opposition took democratic engineering policy to attract the voters as they declared the candidacy from all section of the society whereas Congress was still dominated by upper castes and their candidacy was also dominated by the same. The democratization of the society as well as politics was not compatible with the Congress organization that is why they failed to attract the electors in 1990 elections.

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