

Bahujan Samaj and the Politics of Counting Caste

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1. What is Bahujan Samaj? In a simple sense it is the majority of our society. But the connotation given by most who have employed the term seems to suggest that it is much more than a simple majority. One sense in which the term is used is to mean the lower castes including Dalits who constitute about seventy or more per cent of our society. But then there are other questions . So what? For, it is not clear what one is trying to convey by employing this term. Perhaps one may be saying that though the Bahujan Samaj constitutes the large majority of our society, it does not have power. Bahujan Samaj is also used to convey that Indian society is even today governed by the principles of varna-caste identity . Therefore, any serious politics has to be based on the idiom of caste identity. When Kanshiram used the expression in the context electoral politics he wanted to convey that Bahujan Samaj can decisively influence electoral outcomes. He is said to have famously remarked that Bahujan Samaj may not win elections but will determine who will win the electoral battle in our democracy.
2. There is a problem with the conception of Bahujan Samaj which is similar to the concept of class . While capitalism creates a class of workers by the nature of the production process, the working class thus created cannot automatically become a class for itself. That is, the working class does not become class conscious automatically and be able wrest power from the capitalist class. The Bahujan Samaj similarly does not become the force that can shape our society without being conscious of its power. Unlike the working class that can develop the consciousness by the very conditions created by capitalism, such a consciousness, in the case of Bahujan Samaj of Dalits and the lower castes has a catch. Caste identity by

its very nature is divisive. The unity achieved by Bahujan for electoral purpose will be so temporary that right from forming the cabinet to the distribution of portfolios each caste or sub caste would begin to quarrel about the loaves and fishes of office / power. Since caste identity is one that basically emphasises the separateness of a caste from other castes in terms of status or culture, a Bahujan consciousness is almost impossible to achieve.

3. There appears to be another connotation to Bahujan Samaj. Ever since a distinction was made between India and Bharat, many of us have been pushing the idea that rural / village India is fundamentally different from the modern, urban, westernised India. Social scientists have always maintained that rural-urban continuum is more realistic than a fundamental separation between rural and urban. There is also strong evidence to suggest that the population engaged in agriculture as a primary activity has declined very significantly and it is not going to be very long before Indian agriculture resembles farming in advanced countries of the West. Thus identifying Bahujan as farmers and cultivators is not quite valid. It is also a fact that what sustained caste based community life no longer exists. And hence also a vibrant Lokavidya that provided sustenance to sizeable 'industrial' population of about 20 or more per cent of rural India. With the transformation of Indian agriculture from subsistence to capitalist farming, there has been a virtual disappearance of a number of agriculture related crafts/ occupations. Of course, many of the traditional craftsmen and artisans have adapted themselves to the changes and have become 'mechanics' or 'electricians' or 'plumbers' etc. Hundreds of thousands of them have moved over to cities to join the urban informal sector/ unorganised labour force. While they may carry with them their

caste identities, it is quite possible that they will become lumpenised and become the urban mass of poor people.

4. When the British began counting castes from the first Census of 1871-2 they had set in motion a process of 'substantialization' of castes. Castes are meaningful only in the context of a village or a group of villages called Nadu or Khap. They have to be understood in relation to one another, each having a 'function' to perform in relation to a 'whole'. It is in this sense that it is a 'system'. Castes have thus a functional unity, to preserve and continue the system. This unity of castes within a locality is what has been called the vertical solidarity of the system (a village or Nadu or Khap). That this system of castes was based on the principle of hierarchy is quite obvious. That it did not 'exclude' castes or groups is also obvious because the system required 'function' of every caste / group for the maintenance of the 'whole'. What Marx described as a social revolution set in motion by the British rule of India was responsible for the transformation of castes as substantial, impenetrable, discrete units that have horizontal unity over a large territory and sometimes across country.

This can be termed a distortion of caste or a 'perversion' of caste. We thus hear of international conference of Brahmins being held in USA or All India Sammelan of Yadavas in Coimbatore! Buta Singh came to be valorised in Tamilnadu by Dalits once they 'discovered' that he was a Dalit!

5. What we are witnessing in India today is what Andre Beteille called competing caste inequalities. There is a scarcity of secure jobs that can ensure a good life. The counting of castes is aimed at ensuring that a given caste or a creamy layer among them are able to secure government jobs. Even if we have very accurate numbers for each caste, it is very unclear

how that would ensure any more justice to castes for there are no jobs reserved for various castes in the large privatized economy. With outsourcing as the norm, there are fewer and fewer 'secure' jobs available. It is thus a moot point if counting of castes in itself can usher in any major change.

6. It is quite interesting to note that while there is a large support for social justice understood as ensuring education, employment and perhaps health for all sections of our society, the distribution of land has taken a backseat over the years. What was an article of faith with all political actors in the fifties and sixties, namely land to the tiller and land reforms, has virtually disappeared from the election manifestoes of political parties, excepting perhaps the Naxalites. What does this signify? Perhaps it means land reforms or redistribution of land is no more politically viable. I am not aware of the farmers associations ever being concerned with it in last forty or more years. It means something more significant has happened than what we have been able recognise. India today is more like many of the advanced capitalist countries of the West than it is realised by most of us.