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## CASTE POLITICS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF AN AUTONOMOUS DALIT MOVEMENT IN BIHAR

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### ABSTRACT

Particularly regional politics are nothing but a bandwagon of caste and communal politics only. Even our national politics has not turned an issue-based politics. The Hindu social system that is based on the rigid caste hierarchy is highly divisive, discriminatory and the source of injustice to Dalit community. The lack of alternative social imaginary under low literacy rate, mismatched grass-roots Dalit aspiration and the political elites, absence of Dalit dissenting culture, economic dependence on upper castes and occupational boundary and cultural stigma under the rigid patron-client system do not allow them constructing an alternative institutions and agencies to carry forward the Dalit and Ambedkarite tradition of socio-economic equality. This does not allow Dalits of Bihar to organized around their 'social marginalization' and the various forms of exclusion that they face in day-to-day life. Every Dalit related social and political initiative devoted to address the problem of Dalit mobilization has reduced to a part of an organized movement and touched only to a certain class of Dalit community. So, to launch a collective fight for justice the only option left in the state is to unite left and Ambedkrite politics together.

**KEY WORDS-** Autonomous Dalit Politics, Mahagathbandhan, Ambedkarite Politics and Saffronization of Dalit Knowledge.

### INTRODUCTION

National movement was fought by people irrespective of all castes, classes, regions, religions, birth, colour and races of India. Peoples from all sections gave up their lives to liberate India from the exploitative, discriminatory, undemocratic structure and regime and to establish a just and democratic society based on socio-economic equality. Even after 70 years of independence neither the national politics nor regional politics seem approaching in this direction. Particularly regional politics are nothing but a bandwagon of caste and communal politics only. Even our national politics has not turned an issue-based politics. It is always blamed for the politics of appeasement, politics of communal polarization and so on. Still, caste in India is strong phenomenon of Indian politics and it is responsible for the emergence of identity politics. Particularly in Bihar where I spent more than one and half month to cover all five phases of last Vidhan Sabha election. This time in Bihar election, I observed an unprecedented caste polarization. More than 90 percent upper caste casted their votes in favor of NDA on the other side more than OBCs casted their votes in favor of Mahagathbandhan. Again in the emerged situation, the two most important communities as always i.e. Dalits and Muslims left with no choice except tilting in the favor of

Mahagathbandhan. More than 90 percent Muslims casted their votes in the favor of Mahagathbandhan and also Dalits had no choice except to support mahagathbandhan.

The huge victory of *Mahagathbandhan* and humiliating defeat of NDA has another dimension to understand and it is nothing but a complete failure of Dalit and Minority politics in the state. Both Mahagathbandhan and NDA put their all efforts to attract Dalits in their coalition and it is Mahagathbandhan whom Dalits choose to believe once again rather than believing in so called Dalit leaders Manjhi and RamvilasPaswan. No doubt Manjhi emerged as a new hope for Dalits of Bihar but joining NDA was the crucial decision which destroyed the hope of Dalits once again and they have chosen to go with Mahagathbandhan and to believe in Nitishkumar and not even in RamvilasPaswan who has already tried, tested and failed Dalit leader.

Here point to ponder on is that if the sole motives of our freedom fighters were to establish a just, democratic and socio-economic equality where caste, communalism, region and religion have no role to play in the politics of India and issues like individual freedoms, rights, education, inclusive development and minimizing corruption would have role to play with but question remain to think is that who is responsible to maintain the same exploitative and discriminatory structure where caste is still remained a strong feature of Bihar politics? Who gave the birth of caste politics in Bihar? Who made this worst way of politics to follow on? Why this caste factor is still so relevant in the politics of Bihar? Do Lalu Prasad Yadav, Kapoori Thakur and JitanRamManjhiare responsible for doing and maintaining caste politics? Certainly, it is not. Do the raising voices against inhuman treatments by upper caste to Dalits, their struggle for individual rights against the humiliation in daily lives even after long period of the independence, the casteist politics? Even today this question is very relevant to ask in the present era of the concentration of all social, cultural, political and economic rights and opportunities in the hands of few people belonging to certain caste by taking benefits of their caste and dominant social positions.

Little deeper exploration indicates that in the politics of Bihar however freedom movement was fought by all castes but just after a few years of independence the Bihar politics was captured by a certain caste called *Bhumihar*. Even Rajpoots, Brahmins and Kayasth were also thrown out to show their ways, then what to talk about Dalits. Even the first Chief Minister of Bihar started his politics as a man of above caste but died with the identity of a casteist *Bhumihar* (HetukarJha 1959: 75- 105). But interesting fact is that Dalits and Backwards are blamed for starting caste politics in Bihar. Even one of the great political crusaders Jayprakash Narayan also blamed Shrikrishn Singh a *Casteist* leader for giving all key positions to the leaders belonged to his caste only and preparing the stage to capture all political space by his caste leaders only (The Searchlight 1959). The truth is that till date none of the leaders of Bihar tried his level best to end the caste politics because of their helplessness to deeply entrenched caste sense among the people. Neither a strong movement was drawn aiming to establish a casteless society, nor a collective forum was established to think and debate how to bring caste and community out of politics and political activities of the state.

Another important fact is that till date none of Dalit leaders holds key position of state politics of Bihar then what forces and who are the persons belonging to which caste are responsible to promote the caste politics in Bihar? Certainly, the upper caste leaders are responsible to promote the caste politics, caste coalitions and caste polarization. These upper caste leaders are responsible to make caste the only feature of Bihar politics. If upper castes ruled most of the government then they must have taken care of equal participation of all sections of society. Only they are responsible to not constructing a way to establish a true democratic society where everyone has their freedom to enjoy their democratic individual right and live with dignity irrespective of their caste and communal identity. Till nineties, backwards were also marginalized from all the political and economic rights and Dalits are still completely marginalized from all social, cultural, political and economic rights. Now, when these marginalize sections started asserting themselves to fight for equal share of all constitutional rights then they are blamed for promoting *Casteism* and caste politics.

In the present situation the society of Bihar has been polarized in two broad categories. One is commanded by so-called socialist OBCs and Backwards politics where Dalit and Ambedkarite politics has been subsumed under it in the absence of *Ambedkarite movements* and Dalit politics in Bihar and other is commanded by elite upper caste dominated politics who are trying to captured the power by playing religious, communal and caste politics drawing a broader category of (so-called) *Hindutv* than OBCs category. What is different in the

politics of Bihar today after this convincing victory of *Mahagathbandhan*, (the so-called socialist coalition) and complete failure of Dalit leaders is that now Bihar has emerged as the playing ground for three broad categories i.e. right wing politics, so-called socialist and OBCs politics and Ambedkarite politics. Congress has lost their political ground in Bihar however left has tried to recover their political ground but has failed to make good impact in the last state assembly election 2015. Dalits and EBCs remained the base votes for both the Congress and Left for the long period of time in Bihar but now Dalits of Bihar has started asserting themselves to constitute Dalit as a category like OBCs and to play their politics themselves. Here opens the possibility of an autonomous vibrant Dalit politics in Bihar.

Coming to the historical background of Dalit politics in Bihar. Literally saying, there is no history of Dalit politics as such in Bihar because of complete absence of Ambedkrite and Dalit movement in Bihar, however, history of strong leaders belong to Dalit caste has been found who remained the 'face of Dalits' but served the interest of different mainstream parties rather than serving interests of their communities. Even the leaders like Jagjivan Ram, a towering figure of congress, BholaPaswanShastriearliar and RamvilasPaswan who very frequently claim himself a leader of Dalit community never dared to constitute a collective social or political forum or a party through which Dalits of Bihar could have bargain their interests and fight for their justice. No doubt they are by caste Dalits but throughout their political life they remained agents of their parties and worked for pursuing the interests of their parties to bargain the interests of party with Dalits, not to bargain the interests of Dalits with their parties and governments. However, JitanramManjhi shown some daring by taking some decisions in favor of Dalits in his very short tenure but when time has come to represent Dalits and their aspirations he sided with NDA to dig his own graveyard.

Jagjivan Ram, a towering figure of Congress party, contemporary of B. R. Ambedkar, he served as a deputy Prime Minister of India and holds the record for being the longest serving cabinet minister in India (more than 30 years, from 1946 to 1977) (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2005). In one hand, he enjoyed the better position and power than even B. R. Ambedkar and any other Dalit leaders of India, on the other hand, in the same period Dalits of Bihar were continuously being marginalized from politics and the political participation in Bihar by upper caste and particularly Bhumihars. He did nothing for Dalits except forming some organizations to fight with untouchability under Gandhian and Congress leadership and throughout his political life he remained all time loyal to congress, which used him as a Dalit face of the party and most importantly to counter B. R. Ambedkar (Devendra P. Sharma 1974). BholaPaswanShastri was Chief Minister of Bihar on three occasions during the very short period of time 1968 to 1971. However, on the political ground he was not in the position to do much for Dalits of Bihar but the worse thing he did was along with Jagjivan Ram he pelted stones on Ambedkar and his supporters out of the Patna Railway Junction when B. R. Ambedkar and his supporters were on their way to Gandhi Maidan, Patna to join a public meeting scheduled to start Ambedkrite movement in Bihar. Both along with some Congress supporters gave slogan 'Go Back Ambedkar' and forced him to return Maharashtra without attending that meeting scheduled in Gandhi Maidan, Patna<sup>i</sup>. That cost entire Dalit community of Bihar who remained aloof from a strong Dalit movement till date. However, Kanshi Ram has tried hard to start strong Ambedkrite movement here but the decision of BSP having opportunistic coalition with BJP, demise of Kanshi Ram and BSP decision to shifting of Bahujan politics to Sarvajan politics destroyed the strong effort of Kanshi Ram in Bihar. However, this coalition was not against the Ambedkarite politics of total transformation of society but *Dalit-Bahujan* communities are not well enough to take it well.<sup>ii</sup>

The history of Dalit discourse in Bihar can be traced with the beginning of twentieth century with the formation of Bihar, however, the process of debating highly humiliating and demeaned social status of Dalit was already started at the time of united Bengal province when the conservative Brahminical thoughts encountered with modern values of democracy and ideals of western education. The Brahminical system that is based on the rigid caste hierarchy is highly divisive and the notion of purity and impurity, superiority and inferiority and high and low status are the source of injustice to Dalit community. The lack of alternative social imaginary under low literacy rate, mismatched grass-roots Dalit aspiration and the political elites, absence of Dalit dissenting culture, economic dependence on upper castes and occupational boundary and cultural stigma under the rigid patron-client system do not allow them constructing an alternative institutions and agencies to carry forward the Dalit

and Ambedkarite tradition.

Even Dalit academia does nothing to stop or criticize the attempts of *Saffronising* Dalit culture and defacing of Ambedkar and his political ideas. Dalit academics indulge in the brahminical *project of silence*. It is a *tactical Brahminical* trick to keep Dalit intellectual silence by offering them some notional post or position in party. They do *Saffronising* Dalit identity and culture by deconstructing and reinterpreting Dalit myths, history, stories etc. to give alternative meaning, other than the appropriate version to the language that found popular voice among Dalits and lower castes. It is the deliberate attempt of Brahminical society to mutilate all space and time created by Dalit and Ambedkarite movement to assert an independent Dalit identity and culture. Some Dalit intellectuals have become the source of raw material for Brahminical society to furnish a product as they want and give them a level of authenticity so that Dalit readers do not suspect on intentions behind those writings.

Brahminical politics of keeping their hegemony over production and reproduction of knowledge and the knowledge production systems intact is very obvious. When they feel this brahminical hegemony is being challenged now by developing alternative knowledge production system then they came with the *production* agents who belong to the Dalit, oppressed and backward communities. These production agents help Brahminical society to provide authenticity to the alternative meanings of 'Dalit identity' through the process of *saffronising* Dalit stories, myths, histories and culture. Sankyamuni call these production agents who belong to Dalit and oppressed castes *vectors of Brahminism*.

These vectors of Brahminism produce certain kind of knowledge mediated by certain worldview different from Dalit understanding to not mediate but manipulate *Dalit-Bahujan knowledge*. The specialty of this kind of knowledge production is that it upheld the idea of some section of people and counters the idea and knowledge of certain section of people. The irony of Bihar in respect of Dalit mobilization according to the Buddha Saran Hans, a retired IAS, editor of Ambedkar Mission magazine, Patna and popularly known as *DalitBabu*, is that;

concern Dalits intellectual has no established mechanism and agencies through which they can pass Ambedkar's ideas and knowledge. However, a few Dalit intellectuals are interested to write and spread Baba saheb's ideas and knowledge but still a bunch of written materials we have and what we are not able to do is circulating these written materials to whole Dalit communities of Bihar and India. Even all educated Dalits are not aware of the great ideas and mission of Baba Saheb Ambedkar then what to talk about an autonomous Dalit political mobilization in Bihar (Buddh Saran Hans).

So, the absence of literary institutions and agencies are also the hurdle in penetrating. On contrary, the Brahminical organizations have well established mechanism and agencies as well as organizations institutionalized by their parent organizations like RSS, BHP and political party like BJP. So, their task of spreading that kind of counter arguments become easy to creep their manipulated materials into universities, libraries and all other academic and non-academic institutions across India. Further their agencies help to affect grassroots people on the ground. These agencies, institutions, organizations as well individuals are well aware of what they are doing. They are not colonizing Dalit knowledge what Naren Bedide (Kuffir) mean to say about 'the Colonisation of Ambedkar' (Kuffir 2015) or Colonisation of knowledge but they are manipulating it in terms of what Badri Narayan (2009) talks about *Saffronising Dalit knowledge*'. They have nothing to do with authenticity but getting recognition by manipulating it repeatedly at the grassroots level before the people on the ground. This can be seen in the term of the huge difference in 'ideological apparatuses' for creating and manipulating knowledge of Dalits and non-Dalit political and social communities. This has hugely cost Dalit communities of Bihar to organize against their marginalization and finally to come out of their victimhood identity to assert their independent respectful and dignified identity.

The above understanding says that Dalits of Bihar have never organized around their 'social marginalization' and the various forms of exclusion that they face in day-to-day life. Every Dalit related social and political initiative devoted to address the problem of Dalit mobilization has reduced to a part of an organized movement and touched only to a certain class of Dalit community because of the two reasons. First: the maximum populations of Dalits are wage labourers in rural unorganized sectors and they remain in clutch of upper castes. Second; the most of Dalit movements in Bihar moves around the one or two issues like

reservations and discriminations only. Dalit movements in Bihar till date have not been launched in a complete sense having all issues related to the different sections of Dalit communities. For example, the issues like reservation, discrimination and identity are only understandable to those who are educated and college going students but the reality is that most of Dalits of Bihar even today are not having access to colleges at all. However, in the last election for Bihar assembly the issue of reservation cost NDA hugely to benefit 'Mahagathbandhan' hugely. The issue of reservation played a very supportive role to mobilize all backward and pro-reservation section together but in the case of economically dependent Dalit communities this movement is limited to certain educated Dalit class only. The issue in Bihar is not related to the exclusion but they are not economically so well to access the schools and colleges at first then one can come to the point of exclusion from the educational institutions. Most of Dalits are wage labourer either under the state feudal lord or forced to be migrated to the other states of India in search of wage labour. Even in the other states of India they are in clutch of upper caste. So they can't raise the voice against their repression and their repressive caste system and the same with the case of rights. Precisely, I mean to say that a single issue cannot mobilize a whole community together to launch a strong independent social and political movement.

Some people are also of the opinion that in the urban area Dalit who are educated and those who can understand the meaning of an autonomous Dalit movement, compulsorily can't support the movement because their caste can be revealed and once their caste is revealed they may face the same problems what they had faced in their villages by the virtue of being Dalit. It does not mean that they don't have that level of social and political consciousness to assert their independent identity but the big question here related to the economic independence i.e. the economic justice. Until and unless Dalit communities do not acquire some sort of economic independence from the dominant feudal society the independent Dalit movement in Bihar has to take another route. Here the question of economic independence of Dalit communities and the vast economic disparity are not same but both are related to very different questions and issues.

As per as the issue concerned with the engagement of left movement with Dalit issues in Bihar then one thing is very clear that the left politics in Bihar is completely different from the left politics of the other parts of India. No doubt it has been very consistent, universal and cosmopolitan class approach in Bihar as other parts of India but along with the different kinds of oppression based on class, gender, and position etc, it has to also recognized the oppressions based of caste, religious and cultural positions. The left movement of Bihar has well recognized the oppression based on casteism and social exclusion more seriously and whatever the Dalit assertions are being witnessed in Bihar is nothing but the achievement of Naxalite and Maoist movement in the state. I don't know how I would describe left politics of Bihar? Whether I call it transformation or moving away from the universal traditional left ideology and principles that the left stands for or whatever else but I must say that the left movement of Bihar is more pragmatic, realistic and inclusive in her approach. It talks about both the broader issues related to the economic independence of Dalits and the caste oppression i.e. the issues related to the economic and social justice.

On the contrary, it is also true that in Bihar the left politics is not what we really call progressive and democratic but reality is that they are trying to acquire the rhetoric of nothing but populist politics. They just try to capture the popular imagination of Dalit and other backward caste and the rhetorical imagination of Dalit icons as well. Still, their manifesto does not recognize the oppressions and exploitation based on caste. They are also using Dalits and poor as a flag bearer only as same how other right wing organizations like RSS, BJP and other political parties have used so far. They talk about democracy but one cannot find any democracy within the party structure. Only upper caste's people capture all the official and authoritative positions. They talk about participation and representation along with other democratic values to insure in society and what they are fighting for but we cannot find setting any example in respect of fair participation and representation of Dalits and other backward society within their party organization. One can also observe a sheer dictatorship in the decision making process of party. Precisely, the authoritative structure and the character of governance are same in all the parties irrespective of their ideological stand and it is Dalits who are the ultimate victims under these politics.

No doubt the left politics have been engaged with Dalit problems, their caste oppression and

exploitation along with other injustices seriously but the problem with the left politics of the state is that it has never reflected within its internal functioning. An ex-communist activist revealed a truth that while our leaders (communist leaders) encourage inter-caste marriages, they talk against other social evils and lots of good philosophy to bring justice and equality in society, at the same time they practice many of the Hindu religious rituals and caste discrimination. Precisely, even the left movements in Bihar keep engaging Dalits for not the interest of Dalits and backward and poor rather they use them for their narrow interests of doing politics for the sake of politics only. They are not really concerned with the interests of Dalits rather they act as an agent of Brahminical politics to divide Dalit issues to dilute the possibility of independent Dalit movement in the state.

The class politics of left and the caste based Identity politics have been in conflict for long time in Bihar but the nature of identity politics in Bihar is something different from the other states of India in terms of assimilating themselves into the domain of social justice. The identity politics of Bihar is dominated by other backward castes (OBCs) and the movements for social justice that moves around the social, economic and political marginalization have been captured by these OBCs dominated identity politics. With the emergence of OBCs dominated identity politics all issues of social justice for which left and Dalits were fighting subsumed under it and it would not be injustice to say that not only the issues rather Dalit politics itself subsumed under the OBCs dominated identity politics. The issues also got divided to dilute the prospect of the emergence of an independent Dalit politics in Bihar.

## CONCLUSION

In the contemporary politics of Bihar issues related to the economic justice and the social justice got divided between left and Dalit politics. The emergence of an independent Dalit movement cannot be imagined independently until taking a clear position on the all kinds of injustices being done to that community. The approach must be inclusive and collective, the issue of identity, Dalit caste & class interests regarding different kinds of economic, social, cultural, political inequality and injustices must be taken together, so unless the movement will not address both the common and diversified problems of the vast sections of depressed society aspiring for the mass movement is impossible. Since, the issues of social justice have been captured by OBCs dominated identity politics and the long engagement of left politics with Dalits has succeeded to divide and dilute Dalit movement in the state. Despite this, In Bihar still today without Dalits left has no existence and without left Dalits have no respectful subsistence. Dalit movement and left movement cannot be seen separately. Both are complementary to each other. So, to launch a collective fight for justice the only option left in the state is to unite left and Ambedkrite politics. The left movements have to assimilate themselves in the Dalit movement and other such struggles and show that they are fundamentally committed to the interests of marginalised groups. Then only the mission to mobilize people under broader agenda of Ambedkrite and left politics would be possible and that would be certainly an autonomous Dalit politics in Bihar.

## NOTES & REFERENCES:

- i. This fact has been revealed with the conversation with various people from Bihar such as Dr. Rajeev Ranjan (MBBS), an office bearer of BAMCEF Bihar, Kishori Prasad, office holder of PUCL and Dalit social activist, Suresh Paswan Ambedkarite Activist and Buddh Saran Hans (Dalit Babu), former I.A.S. and chief editor, of Ambedkar Mission Magazine, and many other people of Bihar during my field work for PhD when I was trying to explore the reasons for the absence of an autonomous vibrant Dalit Politics in Bihar.
- ii. Interview with Prof. R. S. Arya, Patna University, ex-BAMCEF member worked with Kanshi Ram in Bihar.

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