



Research Paper

The Politics of Mandalization and the Indian Middle Class

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ABSTRACT: *The paper aims to study changes in the nature of the Indian middleclass post-Mandalization. It argues that with Mandal I and Mandal II, the social composition of the Indian State stands to change in favour of a larger middle class. However, the trajectory of this change remains to some extent, unpredictable because the process of Mandalization suffers from a defective imagination in terms of its implementation. The aim of the following is to comprehend what this political imagination lacked and why it lacked what it did. The paper investigates the defects inherent in the initiation and implementation of the process of Mandalization. It is divided into three major sections: Evolution of the Indian Middle Class, the Process of Mandalization and the Politics of Mandalization.*

KEYWORDS: *Class, Middle Class, Caste, OBCs, Mandalization, Liberalization.*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the underlying factors of Indian politics is the dynamics of caste and class cleavages. Caste has been the engine of Indian politics since colonial times, be it from the reformist perspective or later through the assertiveness of deprived castes. However, class as a category to understand Indian politics was historically overshadowed by the caste debate in Indian society. In medieval Europe, class as a social category defined population, whereas, in South Asia, it was predominantly caste. In Europe, class fragmentation and the emergence of the 'Middle Class' are associated with the industrial revolution. The changes in the mode of production and the rise of the capitalist economy dislocated nobility and peasantry and created the urban trading and professional classes. However, in colonial India, the middle class rose to prominence through colonial administration as a predominantly urban, educated, English-speaking section of the population with jobs in the colonial administration. In post-colonial India, the public discourse led by the middle class was defined by colonial modernity, which shaped India's public policy and political democracy after independence.

Class as a defining feature of social composition assumed great importance in discussions about inclusive politics in India. In the early decades after independence, the ruling elite was identified with the middle class (as educated, English-speaking and urban) because it drew its ranks from Indian National Congress (INC), which Nehru (1936) described in his autobiography as a 'bourgeois' party. The politics of inclusion opened up significant debates on the political questions regarding minorities trying to make a place for themselves in the class structure of society and assert their identity in the political domain. The 'past few years have witnessed a noticeable shift in the political thinking regarding minorities' (Hasan, 2009, p. 227). Here, the domain of 'minorities' is beyond the category of religious minorities. It is mainly about social groups who identify themselves as a cohesive group within the social and economic structure of the society and find themselves eligible for consideration under the redistributive policies of the State. This shift, brought about by the resurgence of the Mandal debate in the 1990s, can potentially restructure the social composition, especially of the Indian middle class.

II. EVOLUTION OF THE INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS

The Indian middle class presents an exciting exception to the mechanism of class formation in a developing democracy. The emergence of the middle class in India is not the result of any social revolution, as was the case in the European countries where the middle class arose out of opposition to feudalism. "The middle class in India came into being with the felt need by the colonial masters to create a native elite in its own image for the colonial administration of the country" (Mahapatra, 2009, p. 125). Thus, to enter into this 'middle class,' western education was a key element. It promised not only a job but also a visa to the middle class. Partha Chatterjee (1989) argues that there is a 'paradoxical' context of the Indian middle class in the colonial context. "The middle class was culturally invented through colonial English education, yet structurally limited as it lacked a basis for economic expansion in the context of colonial economic control" (Mahapatra, 2009, p. 126). Class as a unit became a very politically loaded term in the 1980s and has assumed unprecedented

importance as an analytical tool to study Indian democratic politics. The Indian experience in the social formation of classes is quite unique. In India, historically, it was the uppercastes who constituted the middle class (defined by values like education, employability and urban location). The expansion of these variables after Indian independence makes the Indian case unique compared to developed European countries. In India, unlike the European countries, the middle class is more affiliated with the elite and the bourgeois – the upper classes instead of the lower classes – mediated by corresponding caste categorization.

2.1 ECONOMIC UNDERSTANDING OF CLASS

Class is a quintessentially dynamic category; it is a relational concept rather than a frozen category, like those of caste and race. The middle class in India is an abstract and expanding class defined broadly. Hence it lacks accuracy in terms of its definition (there is a lower middle class, upper middle class, urban middle class, Dalit middle class, upper caste middle class and the like). How to define and enumerate the middle class in India? "The 'middle class' is an over-used expression and difficult to pin down, since it is defined not just in terms of income, but also as values, cultural affinities, lifestyles, educational attainments and service sector employment. Using income, one way of defining middle class is in terms of how much of income is left over for discretionary expenditure, after paying for food and shelter. If more than one-third is left, that qualifies one for inclusion in the 'middle class'. This is the way the Economist recently defined middle class" (Debroy, 2009).

If one goes for the definition of the middle class in terms of income, much of the Indian middle class is almost poor. Hence at best, they can only be described as the lower middle class if we include them within the middle class category. In that case, the middle class is not the quantitative median between the rich and the poor in India. However, over the years since independence, there has been an inevitable increase in the size of the middle class. "The size of the middle class has also changed our attitude towards the question of population, which is no longer seen as a liability but as an asset" (Mahapatra, 2009, p. 122). The old middle class following independence in the era of the Nehruvian consensus has been replaced by a new middle class post the social reforms of Mandalization and economic reforms of the 1990s. The middle class now enjoys disproportionate power to its size, as it dominates powerful institutions – like mass media, corporate world, judiciary, bureaucracy, academia, police and army.

2.2 CULTURAL DEFINITION OF CLASS

If one uses cultural affinities to define class, the Indian middle class has a large section representing dominant communities – upper caste, urban and invariably Hindu. Caste, in terms of its origins, was rooted in the Hindu religion. However, over time, it has also permeated to other religions, thereby making the *Chaturvarna* system inadequate to cover the varied castes across religions. Hence the simple reservation system covering the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) failed to address the question of social inclusion in India. In such a scenario, the middle class existed as a minority in its public appearance because it had grown out of the upper-caste fold under colonial patronage. However, after independence, a resurgence in Indian society to alter the social power relationships and claim rights through affirmative action became ideal for 'nation-building' and identity politics. Thus, the identity of the middle class was both to dissociate from tabooed lower castes and not to be seen as part of privileged upper castes. A new category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs henceforth) had to be recognized to cover the other underprivileged and underrepresented sections of society. The definition of this class presented an equally complicated case for becoming the basis of reservations. The controversy regarding the class-caste definition of OBCs was settled by the 1992 Supreme Court judgment in the *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* case. "The Court upheld Caste as a criterion for identifying OBCs, declaring: A caste can be and quite often is a social class in India" (Hasan, 2009, pp. 91-92). It is for this reason that historically, caste has been associated with occupation and work.

2.3 CLASS AND CASTE IN INDIA

In India, there is considerable overlap between caste and class; they overlap to the extent of becoming synonymous (Kumar, 2015). However, both are distinct in organization and operation. Caste is a hierarchical and immobile categorization of social groups based on ascriptive identity. In contrast, class is a meritocratic and mobile categorization. Reservations in India have been oriented towards overcoming the historical disadvantages and are based on caste. Since the 1990s, with the adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP), an increasingly subtle economic logic has been working behind the assertion of caste identity. This economic logic made its presence felt in the controversy regarding the process of Mandalization for the OBCs. As pointed out by K S Chalam: caste, in the Indian subcontinent, is considered a peculiar social category. It is, however, hardly at all analyzed by social scientists as an economic category (Chalam, 2011, p. 41). Earlier, the lower caste identity politics was moving around the axis of dignity, social recognition, and access to social capital as a power base; however, with the opening up of the Indian economy, this link between class and caste needs to be contextualized against the linkage between liberalization and Mandalization in the 1990s.

The decade of the 1990s was a watershed moment in Indian politics as it spontaneously witnessed two processes of liberalization and Mandalization. Leela Fernandes points out that: India's move toward economic liberalization in the 1990s did not simply bring about changes in specific economic policies – it set into motion a broader shift in national political culture (Fernandes, 2006, p. 29). Fernandes (2006) reveals how the middle class represented the political construction of a social group and how it operated as a proponent of economic democratization. "Today India's middle-class numbers around more than 250 million people and is overgrowing. A survey by the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) put the OBC population in the country at 40.94%" (The Times of India, September 1, 2007). As such, then "in fact the OBCs are a statistical majority as they constitute roughly 40-50 per cent of the population" (Hasan, 2009, p. 97).

With the Other Backward Classes, or one can easily call them Other Backward Castes coming to the forefront, there has been an entire reworking of identity politics for the manipulation of political bargaining. Thus, the relationship between caste and class in Indian democracy goes far beyond just being simultaneous realities; instead, they are constitutive of each other. Perry Anderson (2012) predicted that Indian democracy would become a caste-iron democracy.

III. THE PROCESS OF MANDALIZATION

The process of Mandalization was initiated ceremoniously with the formation of the Mandal Commission on December 20 1978, during the Janata Party regime. This was the second Backward Classes Commission; the first Backward Classes Commission was the Kaka Kalelkar Commission set up in 1953. The second Commission, headed by Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal, former Chief Minister of Bihar, "estimated the population of OBCs to be around 52 per cent and recommended a reservation of 27 per cent" (Hasan, 2009, p. 87). However, the report submitted in 1980 saw the light of day only in 1990 when it was implemented.

"The Mandal era can be said to have begun with a government of India notification of August 1990, providing for 27 per cent reservation in central government jobs for the other backward classes, as per the nearly decade-old recommendations of the Mandal commission [...] if this decision changed the course of history, it was not by providing more jobs to the OBCs. The order applied only to a small number of central government jobs. Many state governments followed it up by preparing official lists of the OBCs and implementing reservations for the first time. But only the educated could take advantage of these policies. They were mainly from relatively well-off families or upper castes within the OBCs. Besides, this was an era of privatization, when government jobs were declining in number and prestige. A national sample survey conducted in 1999 found that the OBCs were closer to the dalits and adivasis than to the forward castes in their educational attainments and economic conditions" (Yadav, 2001).

As Chalam points out: The report of the Mandal Commission provided data on the numerical strength of the *brahmin*, *bania* and other upper castes in the Indian democracy (Chalam, 2011, p. 48). Mandal Commission crystallized the anxieties of the middle class population in a double-edged fashion. On one side, it had a small privileged minority of upper caste and merchant class (*Brahmin* and *Bania*) who enjoyed disproportionate political and economic clout in the society; on the other side, it had the most disadvantaged SCs and STs who had constitutionally guaranteed access to affirmative action. Thus, leaving this massive chunk of the OBC population (52%) to look after themselves. Thus "the socially disadvantaged groups who were about to occupy positions of power and command in the public sector got an impetus with the declaration of the reservations for OBCs under the Mandal Commission" (Chalam, 2011, p. 129). Deshpande brings out the ideological aspirations of Mandal I and Mandal II:

Mandal contained an idealized vision of caste-based politics that rested on three distinct ideological expectations. First, it encouraged the formation of caste blocs in order to ensure effective political representation of the marginalized social sections. Second, its politics was linked to a vision of an imagined ideological unity of the Dalits and OBCs that would contribute to a deepening of Indian democracy. Finally, the Mandal framework had ambitious suggestions about caste-based politics as a liberating vision of politics that would contribute in the long run to the anti-caste discourse (Deshpande, 2009).

However, the recommendations of the Backward Class Commission became a victim of political dispensations. Political leaders manipulated it for electoral gains and countered political dissidents by favouring factions on caste-based identity politics.

3.1 MANDAL I

This historic decision of finally implementing Mandal I reservations in public employment gave impetus to a violent outburst of disapproval. "The uproar was not about caste hierarchies or pollution or purity; rather, the high-pitched campaign was directed against the changing power equations and the undermining of the dominant status of upper castes" (Hasan, 2009, p. 87). It was worked out on the logic that accesses to employment guaranteed economic empowerment and could turn into social upliftment. Mandal I was believed

to help in the upward mobility of socially backward castes and challenge the status quo in society. Hence many protests were staged against its implementation.

However, Mandal I was only a structure without any true substance. The attempt to put substance was made through Mandal II reservations in higher education. "In April 2006, Human Resource Development Minister Arjun Singh made the announcement that the central government was planning to extend reservations to OBCs in Central educational institutions" (Hasan, 2009, p. 96). The distinction between structure and substance is associated with achieving social justice and empowering backward classes. If the Mandal reservations aimed to empower the OBCs, then this empowerment cannot be achieved only by reservation in government jobs. The first step should be to make the OBCs eligible for those jobs reserved for them. What followed as Mandal II made many members of the OBC community qualified for government jobs by giving access to education through reservation.

3.2 MANDAL II

The Supreme Court's judgment in the P A Inamdar and Others v. State of Maharashtra case in August 2005 necessitated the 93rd Amendment Act in 2006, which put private education within the purview of reservations. The Court had declared that the State could not impose its reservation policy on minority and non-minority unaided private colleges, including professional colleges. Human Resource Development Minister Arjun Singh described this Act as an enabling amendment ensuring that affirmative action was compatible with the Right to Equality as enshrined in the Indian constitution.

Further controversies regarding Mandal II were settled by the Ashoka Kumar Thakur v. Union of India case. "Ending uncertainty over the controversial law providing for 27 per cent reservation for Other Backward Classes in central educational institutions including IITs and IIMs, the Supreme Court, upheld its validity but ruled that the "creamy layer" among the backwards would not get reservation. A five-judge Constitution Bench headed by Chief Justice KG Balakrishnan upheld the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act, 2006, paving the way for its implementation in all central educational institutions. [...] The CJI emphasized: Reservation is one of the many tools that are used to preserve and promote the essence of equality so that disadvantaged groups can be brought to the forefront of civil life. [...] On the issue of determination of backward class, the CJI said it cannot be exclusively based on Caste. Poverty, social backwardness, economic backwardness, are all criteria for determination of backwardness" (Hindustan Times, April 11, 2008).

3.3 MANDAL AND ECONOMIZATION OF CASTE

With the active engagement of political groups both in favour and against the implementation of Mandal recommendations and through several Supreme Court judgements, OBC came to be defined as a deserving category for reservation based on social and educational backwardness. Hasan looks into the positive implications of the Supreme Court judgment and its impact on the understanding of the right to equality and caste-based reservations in India:

The Supreme Court upheld reservations for OBCs in institutions of higher education in April 2008. In line with the Court's earlier ruling, it reiterated that the fundamental right to equality is compatible with special benefits for the disadvantaged, even if they are defined in caste terms. The near unanimous court verdict and, more importantly, the unanimous passage of both the constitutional amendment and the reservations bill in Parliament vindicate [...] the primacy of caste identities in India's politics of inclusion (Hasan, 2009, p. 228).

However, how legislation and judicial pronouncements turned the debate on caste and class in India after the 1990s economic reforms need more analysis. As Deshpande shows, liberalization along with Mandalization has not only resulted in a middle-classization of castes; it has also led to an economization of the castes themselves, thereby establishing caste and class as synonyms in India:

At the macro level one can still see a reinforcement of Caste and class relations. This is especially true at the top and bottom of the caste hierarchy as the upper castes continue to monopolize higher level jobs and the Dalits get largely confined to the lower levels. [...] Besides, capitalist development and the changing nature of caste occupation linkages have contributed to internal economic stratification within each Caste and to the creation of a middle class. The new economy of the post-liberalization period intensified these economic divisions within castes and aggravated the material crisis faced by the small and marginal castes, forcing them to fall back on their caste identity for material and symbolic survival. (Deshpande, 2009). Hence it would not be wrong to say that caste in Post Mandal India is no longer a religious class identity. It has become an economic class identity. So, the process of Mandalization of classes resulted in the effect of the economization of castes.

IV. THE POLITICS OF MANDALIZATION

This paper argues that the order of Mandal I followed by Mandal II did mere lip service to the goal of social justice. Government should have instead implemented Mandal II followed by Mandal I in lexical order. First, it was to enable the OBC population and give substance to their upliftment through education as a means to employment and then employment as a means to economic and political empowerment. In the 1990s, the situation had changed a lot, and several political misjudgments marred the implementation of Mandal reservations. As Chalam argues: The Mandal-Kamandal drama was deliberately created to sidetrack the reservation agenda (Chalam, 2011, p. 47).

The defective imagination in implementing Mandal reservations suffered from political myopia, which overlooked the conjunctive link between employment and education in backwards classes' social and economic upliftment. I am referring to Mandal I-Mandal II order myopic for two reasons. First, there cannot be proper access to the reservation in jobs without having a reservation in education. Without reservation in education, only a certain group of people could avail reservation in jobs who were already educated before the implementation of the OBC reservation. The issue of who truly deserved to benefit from these reservations was resolved by introducing the 'creamy layer' clause to identify the economically backward section with OBCs. Second, with the implementation of liberalization and privatization, there was a steady decline in government jobs. As Chalam argues:

The magnitude of the public sector employment [...] has remained less than 0.02 billion. Further, the rate of growth of employment in this sector has declined particularly after the introduction of the NEP. There were 19.06 million employees in 1991 in the public sector that has come down to 18.20 million by 2004. (Chalam, 2011, pp. 47-48).

This decline further limited access to reservations to particular castes only. As Chalam goes on to show:

The NEP does not create new opportunities for the 'reservation groups' in the public sector and they have to be subservient to the private sector dominated by *Brahmin* and *bania* economic power. [...] The *bahujans* (consisting of dalits and lower sections of the OBCs) are mostly poor and hence unable to influence the market forces. The *Brahmin* and *bania* have already entrenched in private economy and in a commanding position both at the national and international level will be the largest gainer through the NEP. [...] Thus, these policies have facilitated the emergence of Caste as an economic power, if not capital, to manage and operationalize economic reforms (Chalam, 2011, pp. 47-48).

As Hasan points out: in the past fifteen years, the Mandal initiative has helped to change the face of the polity; the grammar of entitlement has become part of the new language of politics, and all parties now accept the logic of quotas (Hasan, 2009, p. 106). Deshpande further shows that there has been an irreversible casteization of politics, showing: "the dual reality of an inadequacy and inevitability of Caste in contemporary Indian politics" (Deshpande, 2009). Though the project of Mandalization has been a very novel step towards a more inclusive model of social inclusion, the results are still too unpredictable because of the inherent shortsightedness in its political imagination. However, the ideological aspirations set up by Mandalization are haunted by the eternal presence of caste as an ever-impending danger. As Deshpande concludes: The political project of Caste seems to be at a crossroads in its post-Mandal phase. (Deshpande, 2009).

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can say that despite the positive intention, Mandalization, in terms of the way it was implemented as Mandal I and Mandal II, suffered from the lacuna of political speculation. The model of Mandal I and Mandal II, in order to go beyond their procedural sanctity, should have been instead implemented as Mandal II followed by Mandal I. The defective imagination was the failure to realize that reservations in public employment without being preceded by reservations in education cannot move beyond a rhetorical reality. The reason for compromising with the rhetoric was to maintain the vertical balance of power between the upper and lower classes. Hence the political will got swayed by the necessity of saving its vote bank, considering it was a non-Congress government both at the time of Mandal I and Mandal II. So, it could not help but fall short of going beyond the status-quoist casteism and taking the bold step forward.

The wrong order of implementation proved doubly problematic because of the simultaneous processes of liberalization and privatization unfolding in the country at the same time. Once Mandal II was implemented and more OBC people became eligible for government jobs, the government jobs had already begun shrinking due to the enlargement of the private sector at the cost of the public sector. However, this is not to deny the future of its hope that with both Mandal I and Mandal II in place parallelly, things are likely to change in favour of a larger middle class. This emerging middle class will not only be larger than before but also more economically and socially inclusive than before. Thus, the Indian middle class will soon transform quantitatively and qualitatively, having a direct impact on the nature of Indian democracy.

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