UNIT 6: CHANGING NATURE OF CASTE

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Casteism: Meaning and causes

- 6.3.1 Relationship between caste and politics
- 6.3.2 Voting behaviour
- 6.3.3 Political Elite
- 6.3.4 Caste mobilisation

6.4 Let Us Sum Up

6.5 Further Reading

6.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

6.7 Model Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- understand the concept of casteism
- understand the relationship between caste and politics
- explain the elite theory and caste mobilisation.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

'Casteism' is a social problem associated with the caste system. Just as the caste system is exercising its influence in all the fields of social life, casteism too has become all pervasive.It is considered as a social problem as it disturbs the sound governmental politics and democracy and paves the way for mutual group conflicts. It is manifested in the form of clashes between various castes for higher share in the socio-economic privileges and power. Casteism leads the members of one caste to exploit the members of other caste for their own vested interest in the name of superiority. In the previous unit we have learned in details about the Caste

System in India. In this unit we shall try to understand its changing nature in contemporary Indian Society where we shall focus especially on Casteism.

6.3 CASTEISM: MEANING AND CAUSES

Casteism is understood as a partial or one-sided loyalty in favour of any particular caste. It makes members of the caste become conscious of their membership of the caste and look at everything from the standpoint of the caste. It is an attempt made by the members of one caste to gain personal advantage to the detriment of interests of the members of other Castes.

According to R. N. Sharma, 'casteism is a blind group loyalty towards one's own caste or sub-caste, which does not care for the interests of other castes, and seeks to realize the social, eco-nomic, political and other interests of its own group'.

According to D. N. Prasad, "casteism is loyalty to caste translated into politics. It is an overriding blind and supreme group loyalty that ignores the healthy social standards of justice, fair play, equality and universal brotherhood'.

- **Causes of Casteism**

Casteism which exercises a negative influence on the network of social relations is caused by several factors of which the following may be noted.

- **Endogamous nature of the caste:**Casteism is often the result of restrictions imposed on marriages that takes place in the Hindu society. Each caste is endogamous in nature where members have to marry within his or her caste. Because of this rule marital relations are confined to a small circle/section of the people. This practice of endogamy makes the people narrow-minded.
- **Strong desire to enhance caste prestige:** People belonging to a particular caste have the tendency of developing loyalty to their caste and to become more conscious of its relative prestige in society. Every member thus tries their best to see that their caste prestige is safeguarded and enhanced. This type of loyalty towards the caste leads the members of the caste to favour the members of their own caste wherever they get the opportunity. Excessive caste loyalty tends to keep other caste people at a distance.

- **Improvement in the means of transport and communication leading to a better organisation of caste:** Advancement that has taken place in the field of transport and communication has helped the members of the caste to be in touch with one another regularly. It has also helped them to strengthen their caste organisation and conduct activities on caste lines.
- **Urbanisation indirectly favouring casteism:** Industrialisation and urbanization have been attracting people towards the cities in large numbers. When the rural people go to the cities they naturally search for their near and dear ones on the basis of the caste. They consider their own caste people as their potential friends and well-wishers. Thus, the city atmosphere also contributes in strengthening caste feelings and caste-mindedness.
- **Powerful hold of the caste over the members:** Caste is a strong cohesive group. It has powerful hold over its members. Members of the caste also look to the caste to obtain the needed help and assistance in times of crisis, difficulties and emergencies. Dependence of the members on the caste in this way has further added to the problem of casteism.

6.3.1 Relationship between caste and politics

The relationship between caste and politics in Indian society has been the subject of intensive study for many years. Many sociologists including Andre Beteille, Rajni Kothari, and Anil Bhatt have highlighted various aspects. According to M.N Srinivas the role played by caste in politics is in close approximation to that of the pressure group.The modernizing forces will however reduce the influence of caste over politics.

However Andre Beteille holds that while westernization is taking individual away from caste identity, the role of caste in politics is taking the people towards caste identity and thereby strengthening it. He maintains that loyalties of castes are exploited in voting.

The analysis of Dominant Caste and political process by Anil Bhatt reveals the crucial role played by castes in politics and awareness of the lower castes of their political gains. He found that the higher caste groups had lower political interest and low castes higher political interests. Political awareness was high among the higher castes and was low among the lower castes. Lower castes by organizing themselves in pursuit of collective interest were able to emerge successfully. The involvement of these castes organization in politics has changed their position in hierarchical pattern of Hindu society. Caste solidarity and political power helped them to achieve higher social, economic and political success.

Rajni Kothari studied the nature of relationship between caste and politics. He emphasised on three aspects while discussing about the interaction between caste and politics in India:

- The **first aspect** can be seen in the form of 'secularisation of caste through their political involvement. This will alter the traditionally maintained rigid features and lead to a breakup of the old (socio-political) order. This enables the process of alignment and realignment of various strata and the gradually embracing process of social mobility.
- The **second aspect** is related to the integration dimension. Caste system not only differentiates individuals on the basis of their caste/social identity but also distinguishes on the basis of occupational and economic roles. 'At the same time, it is an integral structure of a specific type, namely one that is more intense in its small group orientation and particularistic loyalties and where wider loyalties operate only when they are structured through the prevailing differentiations. This aspect is important in understanding the structural impact of democratic nation-building' (Kothari, 2010)
- The **third aspect** is related to consciousness; that is, caste enters politics through consciousness and then gets politicised. The practice of adult franchise in association with the provision of political

reservation for the Dalits has further strengthened consciousness among the concerned communities.

Political parties utilize the support of caste for their functioning and seek their support in winning elections. Grass-root political arenas as well as political parties have always remained and continue to remain dominated by elites of castes which compete with each other to form caste coalitions of supporters strong enough to maximize control over local resources and enhance opportunities to become players in political system.

6.3.2 Voting Behaviour

Elections and voting are an indispensable part of the democratic political system. One of the major tasks of the political parties is to contest elections. They select such candidates who have greater chances of winning. Candidates who have greater influence on voters and who have greater vote-catching capacity are an asset to any political party.

The term voting behaviour is not new. Voting behaviour is not confined to the examination of voting statistics, records and computation of electoral shifts and swings. It also involves an analysis of individual psychological processes (perception, emotion, and motivation) and their relation to political action as well as of institutional patterns, such as the communication process and their impact on election. In the words of Plano and Riggs, "Voting Behaviour is a field of study concerned with the ways in which people tend to vote in public election and the reasons why they vote as they do."

Caste continues to be a determing factor of voting behaviour in India. It has deep roots in the society and constitutes an important basis of social relations at all levels. Despite the adoption of several provisions which prohibit action and discrimination on its basis, caste continues to be a determinant of political behaviour. Politicisation of caste and casteism in politics has been a well-known reality of the

Indian political system. The political parties in India, without any exception, while formulating their policies, programmes and election strategies always keep in mind the caste factor. Caste is a factor in the selection of candidates for contesting an election from a constituency. Votes are demanded in the name of caste. The role of caste as a determinant of voting behaviour has been analysed by several scholars and they have come out with the conclusion, as Morris Jones writes, "Politics is more important to caste and caste is more important to politics than before." Caste is the main language of voters belonging to rural India. Despite the adoption of democratic values which conceive of a society free from casteism, caste continues to characterise politics in India. Indeed it has become one of the chief means by which the Indian masses have been attached to the process of democratic politics. The decision to implement Mandal Commission recommendation for reservation of jobs for other Backward Classes (castes) and the reaction it generated in politics testifies to the continued presence of caste as a determinant of politics in India. However, it must be stated that the role of caste as determinant of the voting behaviour has been undergoing a change, at least in the urban areas. (Hazarika, 2015)

6.3.3 Political Elite

The concept of elite refers to the concentration of societal power—especially political power—in the hands of a few. According to Mosca, "In all societies two classes of people appear—a class that rules and a class that is ruled." One can distinguish the conception of "functional elites" in a variety of institutional contexts from that of a "ruling" or "political" elite that in some sense wields societal-level power. Elite is the highest position within a society. This stratum is composed of those persons who are recognized outstanding and are considered the leaders in a given field of competence. This class of elite (highest stratum) is further sub-divided into: (i) a governing elite; and (ii) a non-governing elite. The

'governing elite' comprises of individuals who directly play some considerable part in government. They wear labels appro-priate to the particular political offices, namely, ministers, legislators, secretaries and so on. The 'non-governing elite' are those people not connected with the governmental activities.

6.3.4 Caste Mobilisation

'Mobilisation' means the 'gearing up' of groups for collective action. Collective action can simply be defined as people acting together in pursuit of interests they share, for example, gathering to demonstrate in support of their cause. Mobilisation helps a group to acquire political support to make collective action possible. The new political leadership emerges with the structural and ideological base of the caste for mobilization to participate in the democratic politics, where political parties are the means. According to Rajni Kothari, politics is a competition and its purpose is the acquisition of power for the realization of certain goals, and its process is one of identifying and manipulating existing and emerging loyalties in order to mobilise and consolidate position. As caste forms a very strong base in the society, the political parties follow that where politics is mass-based the point is to gather support through the caste organizations. It follows that where majority of the population is found to live with the caste structure, which provides one of the principal organizational groupings, politics must strive to organize through such a structure. When the caste associations turn to the State for furthering their purposes, their initial claims are aimed at raising caste status in terms of the values and structure of the caste order. But as liberal and democratic ideas penetrated to wider sections of the population, the aims of the Caste association began to shift from sacred to secular goals. Instead of demanding entry into temples, prestigious caste names, and "honorable" occupations and histories in the census, the associations began to demand for places in the economy, new administrative and educational institutions and

political representation. Independence and the realization of political democracy intensified these new concerns. Caste associations attempted to have their members nominated for elected offices, working through existing parties or forming their own; to maximize caste representation and influence in State cabinets and other governing bodies; and use ministerial, legislative, and administrative channels to press for action relating to caste objectives in the welfare, educational, and economic realms. This is perhaps the most significant change of the caste association in the contemporary era, where it has organized and mobilized itself into a greater political mass occupying different positions of leadership.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1 : How is caste system different from casteism?

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Q2 : What is the relationship between caste and politics according to Andre Beteille?

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Q3 : How does caste influence the voting behaviour?

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Q4 : Who is a political elite?

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Q5 : What has led to caste mobilisation?

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6.4 LET US SUM UP

- 'Casteism' is a social problem that disturbs the sound governmental politics and democracy and paves the way for mutual group conflicts.
- Caste acts both as a divisive and cohesive force in Indian politics.
- It provides a basis for the emergence of several interest groups in the Indian system each of which competes with every other group in the struggle for power. At times it leads to unhealthy struggle for power and acts as a divisive force.
- However, it is a source of unity among the members of various groups and acts as a cohesive force.
- Caste plays an important role in Indian Politics. Elections are fought and won on the basis of caste India.
- Candidates contesting elections seek support from their castes. These leaders if elected, maintain casteism even after election by showing special treatment to the members of their Caste.
- Elections and voting are an indispensable part of the democratic political system.
- Politicisation of caste and casteism in politics has been a well-known reality of the Indian political system.
- The concept of elite refers to the concentration of societal power—especially political power—in the hands of a few.
- Mobilisation helps a group to acquire political support to make collective action possible. The new political leadership emerges with the structural and ideological base of the caste for mobilisation to participate in the democratic politics, where political parties are the means.



6.5 FURTHER READING

1) Srinivas.M.N., (1962), "Caste in modern India: And other essays", Asia Publishing House.

6.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Caste system is a form of social stratification that comprises the four-fold division of society whereas casteism brings caste into politics and uses it for political gains.

Ans to Q No 2: Andre Beteille holds that while westernization is taking individuals away from caste identity, the role of caste in politics is taking the people towards caste identity and thereby strengthening it. He maintains that loyalties of castes are exploited in voting.

Ans to Q No 3: Caste continues to be a determining factor of voting behaviour in India. It is used in the selection of candidates for contesting an election from a constituency. Votes are demanded in the name of caste.

Ans to Q No 4: Elite is the highest position within a society. This stratum is composed of those persons who are recognized as outstanding and are considered the leaders in a given field of competence.It refers to the concentration of societal power—especially political power—in the hands of a few.

Ans to Q No 5: Caste mobilisation favours the various political forces which are active in democratic electoral politics. After the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report, when the lower castes and the dalits became poltically active, they understood that power lies in their caste vote banks as well as in the mobilisation of a combined bahujan-dalit identity.

6.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Short questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q1: How do you think casteism is a social problem?

Q2: In your opinion, what do you think can be the consequences of casteism?

B) Long Questions (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q1: Discuss the relationship between caste and politics.

Q2: How caste influences the voting behaviour in a democracy?

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