UNIT 15: CASTEISM AND COMMUNALISM IN INDIAN POLITICS

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15.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- describe the meaning of caste and communalism
- explain the features of caste and communalism
- discuss the influence of caste in Indian politics
- explain the ways to deal with communalism

15.2 INTRODUCTION

No discussion of the Indian political system would be complete without discussing two very important issues in Indian politics *i.e.* caste and communalism. This is because, the Indian political system operates within a broad social environment where traditional forces such as caste and religion play a dominant role. Accordingly, elements form the social

environment like caste and religion do influence the functioning of the political process and political system in India.

15.3 CASTE

Caste has been a major and dominant factor of Indian politics. It has been a determinant of political participation, voting behavior and almost every aspects of Indian politics. Let us discuss the issue of caste in Indian politics.

15.3.1 Meaning and Definition of Caste

The literal translation of the word "caste" in most of Indian languages is *jati*. The term caste is derived from the Spanish and Portuguese word *casta* which means race breed or lineage. It was the Portuguese who first used the term caste in the context of Indian society, in 16th century.

Caste is a social system that stratifies the people living in a society into divisions and such divisions or ranks are generally on the basis of descent, marriage and occupation. Historically, the caste system in India consisted of four basic categories- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra.

15.3.2 Features of Caste

According to Indian sociologist Ketkar, a caste is a group having two characteristics:

(i) Membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born.

(ii) The members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group.

Let us now discuss some of the main traditional features of the caste system. These are discussed below:

- **Hierarchical Division of Society**

One of the main features of the caste system is that it divides the members into different grades. For instances, in the Hindu caste

system, the Brahmins enjoy the highest grade and hence they are placed at the top of caste hierarchy. Likewise, the so-called "untouchables" are placed on the lowest level of caste hierarchy.

- **Restrictions on Food Habits**

The caste system imposes certain restrictions on food habits of the members. Basically, the restrictions are on who should accept what kind of food and from whom. For instance, a Brahmin in North India, would accept on '*pacca'* food i.e. food cooked in ghee only from some castes lower than his own. However, he would accept *kachcha* food i.e. food prepared with the use of water from Brahmins only. Since, Brahmins are placed at the top of caste hierarchy; any kind of food made by them is accepted by all castes. Moreover, there are restrictions on use of vegetables like onion, garlic, cabbage, carrot etc. This restriction is even today followed by many Brahmin families.

- **Restrictions on Social Relations**

In the traditional caste-ridden society, there is the idea of "pollution." It means, the touch of a lower caste man (particularly an "untouchable") would "pollute" a man of a higher caste. Even, his shadow is considered to pollute a higher caste man. For instance, in Kerala, a *Nayar* could approach a *Nambudari* Brahmin but would not touch him. This practice continued for a long time. In Tamil Nadu, the *Shanar* toddy tapper had to keep a distance of 24 paces while approaching a Brahmin. All this resulted in the practice of "untouchability".

- **Restriction on Marriage**

The caste system imposes certain restrictions on marriage. Being an endogamous group, it imposes the rule of endogamy. According to this rule of marriage, an individual has to marry within his or her own group.

- **Restrictions on Occupational Choice**

A caste-ridden society is characterized by a gradation of occupations in the sense that each caste has its own specific occupation. While some occupations like learning, priesthood,

teaching, etc. were considered to be high-caste occupations which were mostly pursued by the Brahmins. Weaving, shoe-making, sweeping, barbering, etc. were considered to be inferior or "impure" occupations. There is no occupational mobility and there are restrictions on the taking up of "low-caste occupations" by the high caste and vice-versa.

15.3.3 Caste in Indian Politics

In the above section, you have learned about various characteristics of caste and its implication in day-to-day social life. Here, in this section, you will see the interrelation between caste and Indian politics.

The use of caste for gaining political benefits is not a new phenomenon. The British imperialists used religion as well as caste for political division of the nation. Unfortunately, even after independence, India could not stop caste as a factor from influencing politics.

Independent India saw the introduction of universal adult franchise. This brought in a new socio-political transformation. In this new environment, caste got a new dimension in the politics of India.

- ***Positive Role of Caste in Indian Politics***

Prior to the introduction of the universal adult franchise in India, it was mostly the individuals from the higher caste who were politically active. However, the franchise system in India brought in the importance of numbers in India. Those who were placed in the lower ladder of social hierarchy got an opportunity to assert themselves by using their numerical strength. In many parts of India, caste associations have emerged with the aim of pursuing not only social status and economic interest but political power as well. As a result of this, most of the political parties have had to consider the welfare and development of lower castes.

➢ ***Negative Role of Caste in Indian Politics***

Like religion, some politicians use the issue of caste to divide voters. Many political parties take advantage of the caste sentiments and fracture the society in such a manner that they gain from such divisions. Caste leaders appeal to the sentiments of the voters of their respective caste groups and try to mobilise votes on that basis so as to capture and retain political power. Not only this, politicians have also managed to divert the attention of its voters from issues relating to development etc. by engaging them in caste related issues. It is therefore, clear that the relation between caste and politics has both positive as well as negative sides; however, over the years the negative role of caste has found prominence in Indian politics. And this is an unhealthy trend.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Restrictions on Food Habits is not a feature of the caste system.
(True/False).

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Q 2: What do you mean by caste?

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Q 3: Mention two main features of caste? (Within 50 words).

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Q 4: Write about the negative influences of caste in Indian Politics. (within 50 words).

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15.4 COMMUNALISM

Communalism constitutes the biggest strain on the unity and integrity of India as a nation. It has become one of the sad and hard reality of Indian

politics. It is a national menace, a mental disease and a big social evil. Let us now discuss the issue of communalism in Indian politics.

15.4.1 Meaning of Communalism

Simply speaking, communalism implies a strong sense of belonging to a particular religious community to the exclusion of others. The concept of communalism holds that religious distinction is the most fundamental and overriding distinction that separates a particular community from others. Communalism as evident from the rise of politics based on religious identity has been an important factor In the Indian political system.

15.4.2 Communalism and Indian Politics

The relationship between communalism and Indian politics was given a formal shape way back in 1909 by the Morley-Minto Reforms and subsequently through the Mont ford Reforms of 1919 which led to the creation of separate electorates for Muslims. Though the system was abolished in 1947, the germs of communalism remained in independent India as well.

The introduction of universal adult franchise in independent India was one of the historic events of the nation. This gave the people of this country an opportunity to elect their representatives, a right which was denied to them for long. However, political parties soon began to look for 'easy ways' of mobilizing votes. Besides using caste, they also used religion to woo voters. Interestingly, the law of the land does not debar the formation of political parties on the basis of caste or religion. Even the Supreme Court in a judgment delivered on 17th July, 1995, ruled that political parties which identify with a particular caste, community, religion or language can seek votes to promote their cause without harming or creating hatred for other caste, community, religion or language. Unfortunately, many political parties today cross their limits and this has created a number of communal violence in recent years.

Moreover, communal issues are often brought up during the time of elections; this is mostly done to divert attention from real issues of basic development. A section of politicians has been manipulating communal issues for their selfish ends. This section of individuals and groups is more prone to use divisive ideologies like communalism to ensure their political power. Communalization of politics has today become a threat to secular character of the nation.

15.4.3 Ways to Deal with Communalism

Though the problem of communalism is grave but the following suggestions can be helpful in dealing with it.

- Noted Indian historian, Bipan Chandra suggests that secular, democratic and non-communal forces should jointly start an ideological struggle to eradicate the evil influence of communalism from the social as well as political scenario of the nation.
- The economically and politically unequal communities tend to harbour a sense of alienation from the majority. This feeling is often used by politicians who do not hesitate to give communal colour to this inequality. Unless sustained efforts are made to bring various communities at par with the majority, vested interests will continue to use these loop holes for their political gains.
- A section of people feels that only with the abolition of religion that communalism can be ended. However, this suggestion lacks practicability.
- Besides economic and political backwardness, illiteracy among a large section of Indians has also helped communal forces to gain benefit. Therefore, it is necessary to take proper steps to educate the citizens about the secular spirit of the nation, so that they do not fall prey to communal campaigns of political parties.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Explain the meaning of communalism. (Within 50 words)

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Q 6: Morley-Minto reforms were introduced in 1919. (True/False)

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Q 7: Write a note on Communalism and Indian Politics.(Within 50 words)

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Q 8: Mention any two ways to deal with Communalism. (Within 50 words)

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15.5 LET US SUM UP

- Caste is a social system that stratifies the people living in a society into divisions and such divisions or ranks are generally on the basis of descent, marriage and occupation. Historically, the caste system in India consisted of four basic categories- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra.
- The main traditional features of the caste system are hierarchical division of society, restrictions on food habits, restrictions on social relations, restriction on marriage, restrictions on occupational choice.
- The use of caste for gaining political benefits is not a new phenomenon. The British imperialists used religion as well as caste for political division of the nation. Unfortunately, even after independence, India could not stop caste as a factor from influencing politics.

- Simply speaking, communalism implies a strong sense of belonging to a particular religious community to the exclusion of others. The concept of communalism holds that religious distinction is the most fundamental and overriding distinction that separates a particular community from others.
- The relationship between communalism and Indian politics was institutionalized way back in 1909 by the Morley-Minto Reforms and subsequently through the Mont ford Reforms of 1919 which led to separate electorates. Though the system was abolished in 1947, the germs of communalism remained in independent India as well.
- Though the problem of communalism is grave, democratic forces can eradicate the influence of communalism from the social as well as political life of the nation.



15.6 FURTHER READING

1. Kapur, Anup Chand and Misra, K.K. (2006). *Select Constitutions.* New Delhi: S. Chand and Company.
2. Ghai K. K. (2017). *Indian Government and Politics*. New Delhi, Kalyani Publishers.
3. Chander, Prakash. (2000). *Indian Government and Politics*. New Delhi: Cosmos Bookhive Pvt. Ltd.
4. Pylee, M, V. (2006). *Constitutional Government in India.* New Delhi: S. Chand and Company.



15.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: False

Ans to Q No 2: Caste is a social system that stratifies the people living in a society into divisions and such divisions or ranks are generally on the basis of descent, marriage and occupation. Historically, the caste system in India consisted of four basic categories- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra.

Ans to Q No 3: (i) Hierarchical Division of Society

(ii) Restriction on food habits

Ans to Q No 4: Caste leaders appeal to the sentiments of the voters of their respective caste groups and try to mobilise votes on that basis so as to capture and retain political power.

Ans to Q No 5: The concept of communalism holds that religious distinction is the most fundamental and overriding distinction that separates a particular community from others. Communalism as evident from the rise of politics based on religious identity has been an important factor in the Indian political system.

Ans to Q No No. 6: False

Ans to Q No 7: Communal issues are often brought up during the time of elections; this is mostly done to divert attention from real issues of basic development. A section of politicians has been manipulating communal issues for their selfish ends. This section of individuals and groups is more prone to use divisive ideologies like communalism to ensure their political power. Communalization of politics has today become a threat to secular character of the nation

Ans to Q No 8: (i) Noted Indian historian, Bipan Chandra suggests that secular, democratic and non-communal forces should jointly start an ideological struggle to eradicate the evil influence of communalism from the social as well as political scenario of the nation.

(ii) The economically and politically unequal communities tend to harbour a sense of alienation from the majority. This feeling is often used by politicians who do not hesitate to give communal colour to this inequality. Unless sustained efforts are made to bring various communities at par with the majority, vested interests will continue to use these loop holes for their political gains.



15.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions

Q 1: Who first used the term caste in the context of Indian society, in 16th century?

Q 2: Which Reforms of 1919 led to separate electorates ?

B) Short Questions (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q 1: Define communalism? Mention any four ways to deal with communalism.

Q 2: Mention the features of the caste system.

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

Q 1: Discuss the problem of communalism in India.

Q 2: Discuss both the positive and negative role of caste in Indian politics.

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4) Ghai, K.K.(2007). *Indian Government and Politics*. New Delhi: Kalyani Publishers.

5) Kapur, Anup Chand & Misra, K.K. (2006). *Select Constitutions*. New Delhi: S. Chand and Company.

6) Kothari, Rajni (2009). *Politics in India*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan Private Limited.

7) Palanithurai, G. (2000).*Grass-root democracy in Indian Society*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

8) Pylee, M.V. (2006). *Constitutional Government in India*. New Delhi: S.Chand and Company.

9) Singh Sisodia, Yatindra (2005). *Functioning of Panchayati Raj System*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication.