

Research Article

BSP and Empowerment of Scheduled Castes

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ABSTRACT

Bahujan Samaj Party was formed mainly to represent the schedule Castes, schedule tribes and Other backward Castes. The Schedule Castes were the most oppressed and exploited people. The Party worked for these downtrodden masses to remove their backwardness, to fight against their oppressed and exploitation, to improve their status in society and to improve their living condition in day to day life. This paper is an attempt to examine empowerment of SCs through BSP. The paper also emphasised the various steps taken by Kanshi Ram for the empowerment of SCs, STs and OBC.

Keywords: empowerment, Bahujan Samaj Party, untouchability, Schedule Caste, Dalit.

Diverse forms of undemocratic elements: such as corruption and criminalisation of politics can be seen in the present political scenario of India. Indian people had setup the democratic structure in the country after getting freedom from colonial power. In democracy people play the master's role by electing their representatives whereas the elected people to serve the masters. Such an idealised system is required to make democratic setup flourishing. But the reality differs from it.

In spite of the existence of various undemocratic elements, posing threats to national unity, integrity and efficiency of the political system; several positive moves have been observed in 66 years of the Indian democratic setup. The major one is the change in social, economic and political setup due to the awakening of the weaker sections of the society, especially the Scheduled Castes (SCs), who were earlier the humiliated ones.

The SCs over centuries have faced oppression and exploitation because of social and economic inequalities. After obtaining freedom, our country had to face internal problems like social and economic backwardness of some sections of the society. Among them the most backwards were the SCs. The main reasons behind their backwardness were the inhumane activities in the society like 'untouchability' and their 'impure' occupation for their livelihood. This untouchability and impurity is the birth of the Hindu religion. One of the principles of the Hindu caste system is that it ascribes a status to human beings on the basis of their birth. That is why the Brahmins are at the top of the pyramid and the rests are beneath the Brahmins. An individual's place on this pyramid, ascertained on the basis of his or her birth, determines the nature of his or her occupation. Owing to this hierarchical structure, the SCs were treated as outcastes (Babu and Khare, 2011). Being at the top of the caste hierarchical order upper castes the Brahmins and the Rajputs enjoyed dominant positions in political, economic and social life (Pai, 1993). In this context Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's view was that, "The root cause of untouchability lies in a pronounced cultural or social difference of contempt and hatred coupled with a close economic dependence of the inferior society on the superior one."

Caste is the root cause of discrimination and social injustice. To tackle this discrimination and social injustice, the concept of 'affirmative action' originated in independent India. The importance of this concept lies in the fact that it is in the favour of SCs and scheduled tribes (STs) as they were being discriminated for a long time on the grounds of their castes. It also provides them proportional representation i.e. reservation according to their population. These reservations are in the fields of education, employment and industry etc. Only by such attempt, a middle class of the SCs could emerge who at the time of independence, had the lowest literacy rates of all ethnic categories, and a majority of them were in labour and service occupations. Despite these equities measures the condition of the Dalits did not improve on a satisfactory level and they remained marginalised and discriminated on account of their caste.

This oppressed section of the society needed a support and a platform from where they could raise their voice against those inhumane activities and atrocities to which they were being subjected. People having top social positions play bigger roles in politics whereas SCs being lowest in the hierarchical order had no significant and respectful position. Such a hierarchy represents inequality. They are excluded from the society because of its hierarchical order (Samel, 2006). Being out of the castes, they are termed 'Outcastes' and also known as 'Harijans' by Gandhi, 'Avarrias', 'Depressed Class' and 'Scheduled Castes', a constitutional term. Now, they call themselves 'Dalit', a term which has a positive meaning. They constitute 20 per cent of the Indian population. This section of the society is

considered untouchable because of the Hindu concept of 'ritual pollution and purity'. According to this idea Dalits are not in the category of pure ones and are considered the most polluted (Bhatt, 2005). However, by the self-implied term *Dalit*, they want to express their hope and identity which they had been denied for centuries. Lack of identity has made them the subject of inhumane treatment and others' humiliating attitude towards them. It is their pain for identity for which they mobilised, and great leaders sacrificed their lives. One of them was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the first untouchable leader who fought against untouchability and Hinduism. He was much concerned with the reform of the caste system in the society and for the creation of such a society based on three fundamental principles: liberty, equality and fraternity. He was the architect of *Dalit* politics in India. He founded the 'Scheduled Castes Federation' (SCF) in 1942 to focus on *Dalit*'s status, and finally 'Republican Party of India' (RPI) in 1956 to all the depressed categories of the lower castes (Michael, 2007). With the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram realised that the political empowerment of the Dalits is the only way by which they could get their due place in the society. He represented himself as the leader of the *Dalits* and made efforts to create a homogeneous identity for the diverse Dalit castes that represent the lower level of hierarchy in Hindu religion. He believed that their representation in democratic power is the only means by which they could enjoy a respectful and dignified life in the society.

For his ideological mission, Kanshi Ram united a large section of the *Dalits* with other minorities and Other backward castes who were earlier excluded from the democratic process of the country and led the foundation of the 'Bahujan Samaj Party' (BSP) in April, 1984. It provided a means for these humiliated people to come together with a new identity crafted by Kanshi Ram, known as 'bahujan identity'. He formed this party with the belief that the exploited groups could obtain access to electoral power with a view of establishing a just society based on the principles of equality and justice. He termed his constituency the 'bahujan samaj' (majority community) constituting all those castes which were oppressed by the twice- born upper castes community.

The BSP has its roots in social movement as a struggle against Brahminism and aimed at to create awareness amongst these exploited sections to form a socio-political block as they are in the majority i.e. 85 per cent of the total population (Waghmore, 2002). The first step was to organise the educated and employed people of these sections so that they could be motivated to pay back to the society (Franco, 2004). In 1971, Kanshi Ram established the 'Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Minorities Employees Association' which turned into the BAMCEF 'All India Backward and Minorities Communities Employees Federation' in 1978. It was an organisation of educated employees, by

educated employees but not for the educated. It functioned as a 'brain bank', 'talentbank', and 'financial bank' of the oppressed and exploited section of the society (Mayawati, 2006). Its motto was to 'educate', 'organise' and 'agitate' (Meldenson and Vicziany, 2004). In 1981, Kanshi Ram organised 'Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti' a quasi-political organization (Jaffrelot, 2005) and finally, the BSP in 1984 to uplift the Dalits and the downtrodden sections of the society. It could be possible only when the strong hold of Brahmins and the Banias on the society would be completely finished and Dalits would be free from the clutches of the upper castes (Brahmins). The Dalits are in majority:- therefore, their rule can be the basis of true democracy in India (Raj, 2004). However, his political strategy was that the oppressing upper castes, the 'Savarna' are the minority and all other castes with Muslims constitute the 'Bahujan Samaj', with an overwhelming majority. Hence, the bahujan samaj should unite and take power to bring about the desired social change (Meldenson, 2004). SC leaders and Kanshi Ram believed that 'political power is the master key to all problems' (Dalit Voice, 2004). He was much concerned about the rights, dignity and interest of the Dalits. He realised that because of oppression, the Dalits had lost their self-respect and had suffered grievous physical damage. He wanted to break the psychological fetters of the Dalits by attaining power. The first move was uniting the Depressed Classes with backwards, minorities and STs as bahujan samaj. Kanshi Ram realised that caste is much more emotional issue than is religion in India. His slogan was to 'break the caste and unite the society'. Kanshi Ram has the concept of 'bahujan' rather than 'Dalit' in order to create the base for political empowerment. Converting caste into an ideology and capturing political power by the bahujan through parliamentary means is an important development. This new formula of caste ideology has challenged the Hindutva school which is trying to appeal to the sense of religious community whereas the Dalit- bahujan force is trying to appeal to the sense of caste community (Ilaiah, 1994). Kanshi Ram's strategy to achieve political power was that in a democracy, the number of votes from the government and it is bahujan samaj who constitute 85 per cent of the vote but the foreign Aryans (upper castes) with 15 per cent votes are ruling over the bahujan samaj (Michael, 2007).

Emergence of the BSP added a new feature in Uttar Pradesh electoral politics with its 'caste-based mobilisation' strategy against the Manuwadi (upper castes) people at the starting period. However, it soon changed its strategy to broaden its base to upper castes by giving tickets to them (Hasan, 2002). The only purpose behind all its electoral strategies has been the political empowerment of the Dalits that is nothing but self- help depends on self- effort and psychological mobilisation of people. It is a state of mind and it reflects self- confidence, self- reliance and the determination to fight for ones' rights and interests. This awakening among

SCs has not been only helpful in establishing their self - respect, self - determinism and honour, but has also led them to protest against the domination of upper castes and classes in India (Michael, 2007). Moreover, it was the empowerment of the Dalits that made it possible to establish a government of SCs with the support of other bahunjan castes in an upper caste-dominated political structure of U.P (Hasan, 2002). U.P. politics has become unstable because the political class has fragmented the social structure on the basis of caste versus caste, sub-caste versus sub-caste and community. It has been claimed that the upper society is witnessing a grand social churning because the oppressed and suppressed castes and social groups are asserting their democratic right to elect their caste, sub-caste or community leaders. The state is said to be experiencing the political empowerment of the hitherto excluded and marginal castes, and the process of including new and earlier neglected sections tend to be disruptive. On one hand, the Dalits use their votes to affirm identities and avenge past humiliations; and on the other hand to secure instrumental benefits.

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