

Identity Politics in India - It's Various Dimensions

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Abstract: *The term 'Identity' connotes the characteristics determining or the fact of being whom or what the person or thing is. And the term 'politics' in relation to the identity refers to the activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power.*

In Common usage, the term identity politics refers to a tendency of people sharing a particular racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity to form exclusive political alliances, instead of engaging in traditional broad-based party politics, or promote their particular interests without regard for interests of a larger political group. Identity politics aim to reclaim greater self-determination and political freedom for marginalized groups through understanding their distinctive nature and challenging externally imposed characterizations, instead of organizing solely around belief systems or party affiliations. It starts from analyses of oppression to recommend, variously, the reclaiming, re-description, or transformation of previously stigmatized accounts of group membership. Rather than accepting the negative scripts offered by a dominant culture about one's own inferiority, one transforms one's own sense of self and community, often through consciousness-raising.

The second half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of large-scale political movements—second wave feminism, Black Civil Rights in the U.S., gay and lesbian liberation, and the American Indian movements, for example—based in claims about the injustices done to particular social groups.

India after independence is characterized as Liberal democratic polity but the communities and collective identities have remained powerful and continue to play a major role. The identity politics is driven by the appeals of caste, religion, ethnicity, language and gender. To uphold the identity of several sections of society, the Constitution of India provides for reservation and also guarantees certain fundamental rights and makes the violation of these rights a legally punishable offence.

This paper aims to bring about a general understanding of identity politics and the key identities which is playing a crucial role in India. And to explain in detail the constitutional and legal protection to these identities and also analyses its impact on polity the positive and negative effects on society.

Keywords: *Identity, Politics, Freedom, Constitutional Provisions, Reservations*

I. INTRODUCTION

Identity politics refers to political positions based on the interests and perspectives of social groups with which people identify. It is politics in which groups of people having a particular racial, religious, ethnic, social, or cultural identity tend to promote their own specific interests or concerns without regard to the interests or concerns of any larger political group.

Identity politics includes the ways in which people's politics may be shaped by aspects of their identity through loosely correlated social organizations.

Identity is used as a tool to articulate political claims, promote political ideologies, and guide political action with the aim of asserting group distinctiveness and gaining power and recognition in the context of perceived inequality or injustice.

Identity was not central to politics till late 1950's and it emerged as a new concept as it was demonstrated as a consequence of political and economic shifts in 1960's. It does not mean there was no presence of the concept of the identity or crisis of identity, but nowhere in the popular books and magazines, corporate and business literature and political statements and manifestos published before the middle of the twentieth century reveals reference to identity as we now know it – there was quite simply no discussion of sexual identity, ethnic identity, political identity, national identity, consumer identity, corporate identity, brand identity, identity crisis, or 'losing' or 'finding' one's identity – indeed, no discussion at all of 'identity' in any of the ways that are so familiar to us today, and which, in our ordinary and political discussions, we would now find it hard to do without.

The oldest example can be found in the written form in the April 1977 statement of the black feminist group, Combahee River Collective, which was subsequently reprinted in a number of anthologies, and Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective have been credited with coining the term. And their statement stated as follows:

“As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated different—for example, when we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being 'ladylike' and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. In the process of consciousness-raising, actually life-sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from the sharing and growing consciousness, to build

a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression....We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work. This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression."

This statement clearly speaks about identity crisis faced by women, where they are not only differentiated and looked down because of 'gender' but also of the 'color'.

Identity Politics as a field of study can be said to have gained intellectual legitimacy since the second half of the twentieth century, i.e., between 1950s and 1960s in the United States when large scale political movements of the second wave-feminists, Black Civil Rights, Gay and Lesbian Liberation movements and movements of various Indigenous groups in the U.S. and other parts of the world were being justified and legitimated on the basis of claims about injustices done to their respective social groups. However, as scholars like Heyes point out that although "Identity Politics" can draw on intellectual precursors from Mary Wollstonecraft to Frantz Fanon, writing that actually uses this specific phrase—Identity Politics—is limited almost exclusively to the last 15 years.

Identity politics, as a mode of categorizing, are closely connected to the ascription that some social groups are oppressed (such as women, ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities); that is, the claim that individuals belonging to those groups are, by virtue of their identity, more vulnerable to forms of oppression such as cultural imperialism, violence, exploitation of labor, marginalization, or powerlessness. Therefore, these lines of social difference can be seen as ways to gain empowerment or avenues through which to work towards a more equal society.

Identity Politics in India

India is the one of the most diverse countries in the world, with a mammoth 1.25 billion people and a huge densely populated geography.

Correspondingly, social and political dynamics in India are highly complex. India's social fault lines are multi-dimensional, i.e., based on caste, ethnicity, language, community, and even race. Gender-related issues are increasingly becoming part of the socio-political discourse.

India had to deal with key identities- religion, language, caste in its nation-building process immediately after its independence and added to it in recent years the gender identity also taking its momentum and force.

Language:

After Independence in India, the political movements for the creation of new states developed on linguistic lines of identity. The movement to create a Telugu-speaking state out of the northern portion of Madras State gathered strength in the years after independence, and in 1953, the sixteen northern Telugu-speaking districts of Madras State became the new State of Andhra, which became first state to be created on a linguistic basis.

In Indian politics the period from 1953 to 1956 was dominated by 'language'. However the claim of separate states for linguistic collectivities did not end in 1956 and even today continues to confront the concerns of the Indian leadership. As language becomes an important premise on which group identities are organized and establishes the conditions for defining the 'in-group' and 'out-group'

According to the 2011 Census report of India, there are more than 19,500 languages or dialects and 96.71 per cent population in the country have one of the 22 scheduled languages as their mother tongue. This diversity and large number of languages also forms the basis for the identity crisis and is in continuity.

Caste:

Caste has become an important determinant in Indian society and politics. Caste-identities have resulted not only in the empowerment of newly emerging groups but has increased the intensity of confrontational politics and possibly leading to a growing crisis of governability.

The origin of confrontational identity politics based on caste may be said to have its origin on the issue of providing the oppressed caste groups with state support in the form of protective discrimination. This group identity based on caste that has been reinforced by the emergence of political consciousness around caste identities is institutionalized by the caste-based political parties that profess to uphold and protect the interests of specific identities including the castes.

For example in India we have the upper caste dominated BJP, the lower caste dominated BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) or the SP (Samajwadi Party), etc have implicitly followed the caste pattern to extract mileage in electoral politics.

Religion:

India is a multi-religious country with a majority of Hindus (79.80%), followed by Muslims (14.23%), Christians (2.30%), Sikhs (1.72%), Buddhists (0.70%), Jains(0.37%), and others (0.9%). Indian history is replete with inter-religious conflicts, due to use of religion and its identity for partisan advantage.

Hindu loyalist groups like the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh) or the Siva Sena and political parties like the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) or the Hindu Mahasabha claim that India is a Hindu State based on

their numerical strength in the country. These generate homogenizing myths about India and its history. Such claims are countered by other religious groups (less in number compared to majority) who foresee the possibility of losing autonomy of practice of their religious and cultural life under such homogenizing claims. This initiates contestations that have often resulted in communal riots.

The generally accepted myths that process the identity divide on religious lines center upon the 'forcible religious conversions', general 'anti-Hindu' and thus 'anti-India' attitude of the minority religious groups, the 'hegemonic aspirations' of majority groups and 'denial of a socio-cultural space' to minority groups.

The divisions based on religion has become institutionalized in the form of a communal ideology has become a major challenge for India's secular social fabric and democratic polity. Though communalism for a major part of the last century signified Hindu-Muslim conflict, in recent years contestations between Hindus and Sikhs, Hindus and Christians have often crystallized into communal conflict and has become a threat and challenge for Indian Democracy and Secularism.

Gender

From time unknown, except the Vedic period the status of women has gone unrecognized. At present due to the awareness and also education, exposure etc, has paved way for the neglected genders of the society to speak up about their ignored-presentia. From 1950's & 60's we have LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender) movements also gaining momentum who are demanding for their rights and acceptance of their presence and respect in the society.

'Gender Identity' is what people think, believe and feel about themselves. But gender in relation to identity politics connotes the struggle of identification for their presence, and a demand for being respected and treated equally on par with other gender (especially in relation to male). The feminist movements and the gay liberation movements in and around the world are examples for this.

These are intended to fight against the atrocities and towards the removal of certain social evils like child marriage, polygamy, restriction on remarriage of widows, non-access to education, ill treatment etc., and also to gain equal remuneration of work, social, economic and political rights as well.

Measures: Constitutional and Governmental.

In order to address the issues raised by the crisis of identity faced by different sections of people based on religion, caste, religion, gender etc., the makers of the Constitution as well as the leaders of the nation has brought out several measures and laws. Some of these are as follows:

Constitutional Provisions:

- Fundamental rights (Part III of the Constitution) inscribed under Right to Equality (Article 14-18), Right to Freedom (Article 19-22) and Right to Freedom of religion (Articles 25-28).
- 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Act in 1993 - creation of local self-governments (more power to states), reservation for women. etc.,

Governmental Measures:

- States Reorganization Act, 1956- creation of states on linguistic lines.
- Mandal Commission Report- reservation in all India Services and educational institutions for Schedule Castes, Schedule Tribes and Other Backward Classes which correspond to 15%, 7.5% and 27% respectively
- Set up of National Commission of Backward Classes, Nation Commission for SCs and ST's, National Commission for Women – to protect the interests of the respective communities. Etc.,

Acts of Judiciary:

Section 377 Verdict: Decriminalization of homosexuality.

- Ban of practice of Triple Talaq.
- Caste based reservations to Dalits and Adivasis.
- Allowing Women to enter Sabarimala temple. Etc.,
- These are some of the positive actions taken by the legislature, executive and judiciary of the country to uphold the identity of various sections of the society.

Identity Politics and its impact on Polity

- Formation of coalition government based on identity and ideology (UPA, NDA)
- Rise of dominant political parties has origin in identity politics in many states. (BJP, Communist Parties etc.)
- Rise of regional and state parties is one of the consequence of identity politics in India. (AIADMK, BSP, Shiv sena etc.)
- Identity politics has made considerable impacts on international relations more on neighboring countries. (Impact of Tamil identity politics on India - Srilanka relations.)
- Identity politics led by caste groups is at peak in India today. (SP etc).
- Agitation of third gender community- A positive development which led to passage of protective legislation for third gender community.

- Identity politics has also led to vote bank politics where political parties focusing mainly on the needs of particular social groups.

Identity Politics and its impact on society

Identity politics has impacted society both in positive as well as in negative sense.

On the positive side: Due to the emergence of political parties based on the regional, linguistic or caste identities, they could focus on particular sections which are deprived of political power and economic opportunities in the society.

It also provides a scope for increase in political awareness among marginalized and weaker sections of society, as they would be part of mainstream of politics and also a part of recognition they gained through assertion of their identity.

Identity politics has also given better representation to socially discriminated classes and minorities through legal measures such as reservation.

Analyzing the Negative aspects: Identity politics has sowed the seeds of hatred and enmity among different sections of society based on castes, religion, ethnicity etc. and also have led to clashes, riots which in turn disturbed the set-up of communal harmony and the very secular nature of the nation.

It has also resulted in creating the limited or narrow minded views of the citizens and political parties which makes them intolerant towards other communities.

Identity politics is responsible for divisive tendencies and could lead to the separatist tendencies. (Naga insurgency after independence, Khalistan movement, Coorg demand for a separate state etc.) could divide the nation further and also poses a threat to the unity and integrity of the nation.

II. CONCLUSION

The phrase “identity politics” has come to signify a wide range of political activity and identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.

In India despite adoption of a liberal democratic polity after independence, communities and collective identities have remained powerful and continue to claim recognition, which are based on language, religion, caste, ethnicity or gender identity.

Diversity and democracy have become the institutionalized and deeply rooted common sense of Indian politics. Struggle for identities, identification of identities and politicizing those identities is an important phenomenon present in India and also part of process of governance too.

No doubts that Identity politics has played an important role in bringing marginalized and discriminated sections of society to mainstream politics. However at the same time it has brought some negative developments in Indian polity and society. So there requires a reasonable thought process to reap the benefits of the ‘Identity Politics’ and at the same time not giving scope to downsize the views and feelings towards others.

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