The Origin and Development of the unique Political Phenomenon named 'Other Backward Classes' and its role in reshaping the Post-Independence National Politics in India: a perspective from an Anthropologist

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Abstract

Caste in India has played a detrimental role in deciding the fate of the political and social life of numerous individuals across the socio-political spectrum. After independence a new socio-political horizon based on complex social relations emerged, replacing the notion of rigid stratification through overlapping potentialities and horizontal mobility among the lower stratum of social stratification. This translated into the formation of certain cohesive associations of various social groups, who ushered themselves into the arena of wider political representation and projected their group identities while truncating the notion of purity and pollution. Politicians, in order to attract these associations towards themselves and gain their allegiances, used strategies and coercion perhaps, to consolidate their position inside the domain of electoral and social politics. Seizing this opportunity, those associations and their stakeholders negotiated certain terms and demands of their own with those in the political realm, in return for a certain conditions viz., socio-political mobilization when needed. This article intends to understand the historical and ideological backgrounds and

factors involved in the origin and formation of such associations who modulated the overall ideologies of the member groups, while cementing the path for a wider scale of identity politics. The article also envisages the notion that the factors behind certain contemporary political mobilizations on a broader scale can also be traced back to the times of the formation of those cohesive associations of larger social groups.

Key Words: Social Stratification, Caste, Politics, Identity, Social Groups, Associations

Introduction

Since inception, the Hindu caste system has been a pivotal factor behind the social stratification of the Hindu society and shaped the socio-cultural trajectories of every citizen of India, irrespective of their religious affinities. Caste, being a unit inside the social organization in India, was previously considered to be limited to the Hindu social stratification. Later, studies have found the existence of various castes among the other religious sects of India also. But, it can be observed that the continuation of caste hierarchy, its replication throughout the succeeding generations and its essential practices can only be witnessed among the Hindu's of India only, or among the Hindu's of Indian origin in the abroad.

After independence, the newly formed Indian nation went through radical structural, socio-political and cultural changes. The ritualistic positions of the erstwhile caste traditions forced to open its concourse to a new era of complex social relations. Social groups, coming from the layers of social stratification of the Hindu caste system, broke the restraints of the older norms and achieved a horizontal mobilization inside of their respective social structures. These social groups were the occupational prosperous peasant classes. These 'lower caste-rich peasant' social groups achieved

their respective horizontal mobilization and ventured into forming mutual associations among themselves, for their perceived benefits, which later turned into various numerically cohesive socio-political entity. This emerging upward mobility among the caste groups had resulted in "the phenomenon of multiple memberships and overlapping potentialities" (Kothari 1970:4). Politicians across the spectrum exploited this phenomenon while trying to identify and manipulate the existing and emerging patterns of allegiances in order to mobilize more support and consolidate their own position (Siriskar 1965: 27).

This paper intends to venture into the various socio-political contexts and backgrounds which, based on past research, can be considered to be responsible for the emergence and gradual dominance of these cohesive socio-political entities into the pan-Indian public sphere. The existing literature describes multiple accounts of the 'Depressed Castes' of pre-Independence times, a section of the socially backward stratum of the Hindu society, asserted their identities and conveyed their representation in front of the government agencies and claimed for a fair share of representation in governmental deliberations. Many caste groups, whom were considered influential in their respective regions also asserted their identities for the same purpose, despite of not belonging to a socio-economic disadvantageous position. For example: *Vaniyar* of Tamil Nadu, *Lingayat* of Karnataka, *Reddi* of Andhra Pradesh, *Mahar* from Maharastra, *Jat* from Uttar Pradesh etc. (Kothari 1970: 4).

Now the question arises, why those 'lower' caste groups asserted their identities in front of the government while claiming to be socially backward and deprived, despite of being influencial in their own surrounding in terms of property and wealth?

Literature suggests that across the country groups with similar proclivities had demonstrated this tendency, differing only in terms of the timescale.

Various castes from the adjoining areas or from different geographical localities associated under this common narrative. What kind of socio-political factors were involved behind the need for such associations to be formed, whereas they are diverse in terms of group(s) participation and identities but successfully modulated the overall ideologies of its members?

During the period of 1960'-70's of post-independence era, the politics of dominant backward castes emerged and ushered a new tendency in the broader political discourse, purely driven by the notion of identity politics. What are the factors that led to such development in the broader scale of the post-independence national politics? What can be assumed and interpreted about the future of this phenomenon, which is very much in practice even to this day?

Assertion of identity and the portrayal of numerical superiority: the heyday of caste based political mobilization

Village India by Mckim Marriot (1955) changed the earlier notion through which researchers used to analyse the caste groups interpersonal interactions in the Hindu society. The said publication, for the first time recognised that the caste groups and its attributes are not confined locally within the village itself, but they act and interact in a nexus beyond the village boundary. Marriot further expressed his conceptuality in terms of the little and the great tradition and argued that there is a path through which cultural changes occur in all major civilisations (Marriot 1955). M.N. Srinivas pointed out that the numerical castes are shedding their traditional areas of expertise and the gradually entering into a competitive world of democratic politics (Srinivas 1972). He afurther argued that the hierarchy of purity is subverted on the ground by the presence of 'dominant caste' (Srnivas 1987). From these arguments, it can be inferred that the ritualistic

dominance do not influence the nature of caste interactions in contemporary India.

According to Rudolph (1967), there are seven factors that affect the role of a caste in an interpersonal interaction sphere. These are:

i)   The number and size of the other caste actors.
ii)   Regional differences and their effect on the profile of the individual caste groups.
iii) Differences in the land holding capacity and the characteristics of the existing political system.
iv)   The relative significance of the dominant castes of the immediate areas and the propensies of those castes towards horizontal mobility in the caste fold.
v)   Changes over time in the social and political environment in which particular castes operate.
vi)   The degree of self-consciousness and cohesion that characterize a particular caste.
vii) The countervailing power of other castes, interest groups and integrative forces; particularly the political entities.

The factors explained by Rudolph (1967) which induce the caste group influenced political mobilisation and interpersonal transactions between the caste groups, can be justified in a social scientific lens by going through the historical and socio-political accounts of the such movements across India. The caste groups, originally ascribed and attributed to the *Shudra Varna* of the *Varnashrama* tradition, claimed their superiority interms of the idea of ritualistic or numerical superiority; in contrast to their position against the *Brahmin Varna* or the *Ksatriya Varna.* Agrarian castes like the *Jat, Ahir, Gujar,*and *Kurmi,* transcended their respective village societies boundary and become champion of their socio-political aspirations. The untouchable caste

groups, previously considered docile in terms of their mobility inside of the hierarchy, becomes more radical interms their ideology while accepting the scope for power and the enjoying the fruits of democracy in a civil society. Caste identity became the body politics responsible for the struggle for achieving socio-political powers and hegemony outside the purview of the ritualistic dominance and hegemony. This phenomenon occurred after the foundation of the *Kurmi sabha* of undivided Bihar and through the draft constitution of 1909, they expressed their claims; which asks for the unity and solidarity among the different sections of the *Kurmi* society, promotion of the general welfare of the *Kurmi* community, educational facility and outreach for the *Kurmi* children, and finally seeking greater funds for the fulfilling of these objectives (Verma 1981: 48-49).

According to Dipankar Gupta (2004: vi), there was a tranquillity among the inter-caste relations ordered by their respective status among the social hierarchy but now we have a plethora of assertive caste identities privileged by their respective angular hierarchy. Gupta further argued that an assertive caste identity, when articulate itself into an alternative hierarchy there exists hardly any unanimity on ranking between *jatis.* After the introduction of democratic mobilisation and the gradual increase in urbanisation, caste groups from various regions asserted their identities, among which many could not be manifested on the grounds of reality. Gupta refers to this phenomenon as the 'spiral of caste antagonism symbolised by contradictory hierarchical formulations in the political market place' (ibid.). Gupta further argued that the castes groups are proud bearer of their identities based on the accounts of their 'glorious historical past', regardless of where the textual tradition place them on the social hierarchy based on purity-pollution (Gupta 2004).

After the introduction of the universal adult franchise in the democratic electoral political sphere, caste and democratic politics got intertwined

differently and the shift of its space of practice took place. The village become no longer viable for such practices and the old fashioned *Brahmin-Ksatriya* dominance was broken effectively with the gradual rise of the peasant caste groups like the *Jat, Ahir, Gujar, Kamma* etc. Calling these caste groups through a monolithic term like the 'dominant caste' may not always be accurate. These castes may act significantly in terms of the role they play inside of the village, but in broader context they do not constitute more than 20% in any parliamentary constituency across India. In contemporary political scenario, the factors behind the caste based political mobilisation is not easy to comprehend solely based on a small arena like a village. To expand our understanding, we need to widen our field of enquiry.

Contemporary studies have elaborated that the dominance of a certain caste groups do not dictate factors like the control over the land assets or the total number of individuals in a caste group involved in a village level. Supra-local aggregates play back into village politics and not the other way around (Beteille 1992: 86). The notion of dominance, in this context is fractured which cannot rest on a individual caste group for a extended duration. The factors which dictate dominance are negotiated regularly between the actors viz. the leaders of the caste groups, political parties and their agents and the voters who also member of that caste group. When the political trajectory transcends towards a higher pitch, identity plays a more important role because no single caste can ride to a considerable distance solely on its identity. Thus, to succeed on a broader level, identity plays a pivotal role (ibid.).

The caste identities are universal but in the context of the village society, the dominant caste groups can assert their identity based on their shared history, traditions and hierarchies. Castes groups who are in lower stratum in the hierarchy are usually suppressed under closed village economy (Gupta 2004). Interestingly, rapid urbanisation have influenced

the notion of caste identity and redefined the established concept of hierarchy. They provided the essential components and even grounds to a very extent that led the castes groups to express and assert their identities more predominantly into the domain of electoral and organisational politics and power structure.

Association between multiple caste groups belonging to the category of 'Backward Caste': the beginning of a new chapter in the democratic politics in India

Industrialisation, rapid urban growth and the sudden surge of market economy in the rural context affected the historical and traditional occupation of several caste groups. F.G. Bailey (1957) in his study based on rural sectors of Orissa, India; noted: "Not every person works at his traditional occupation.....Everywhere there is a scope for practising the hereditary occupation and not all members of a caste group engage in the work". Studies conducted both at village level and urban, semi-urban level during the 1950s and the 1960s also bear the evidence of this trend. Due to the green revolution, diversification of occupation in the farming and non-farming sectors increased in number, resulting in the beginning of a capitalist mode of farming.

Caste groups belonging to the fold of backward caste are by majority full of poor and marginal farmers, tenants and agriculture labourers who got affected due to the coming of radical changes in the field of agriculture. At that same point of time, a small vocal section among them, a budding middle class section emerged out from those caste groups riding on the increasing economic stratification that was into effect. These sections rendered themselves into the way of securing their individual interests while referring to their 'struggle' aimed at the collective upliftment of their entire caste groups (Shah 2002).

These dominant middle-class sections belonging to the numerous caste groups have emphasised over the need for reservation in government jobs, higher jobs, privileges in state and union government's position of power, more opportunities in other public institution; while bypassing issues like land reforms, higher wages for labour, proper distribution of land resources according to its ceiling among the recipients at the bottom end etc. which, if done at tandem could have achieved a great feat for their compatriots from the same social groups (Shah 2002).

The upper caste groups enjoy a higher social status in terms of their ritualistic positions, but it is not beyond doubt whether it's only a perceived ritualistic superiority or the economic positions. For example, in Gujarat the local Brahmins are not a dominant political factor in rural areas as they do not belong to the class of large landowners. Interestingly, the notion of power and hegemony lies at the hands of the middle peasant caste groups, i.e., the Patidars. Looking back, this phenomenon can be observed across the country since the middle of the nineteenth century. Thus it can be inferred that the possession of land is a crucial factor determining power and dominance (Shah 2002).

M.N. Srinivas argued that the development of the means of communication, the spread of modern education and the rising prosperity have been instrumental in cementing hitherto disparate fabrics of caste alignment (Srinivas 1962: 16), thus giving birth to caste associations or the *Sabha.* The impetus to form *Sabha* came out of the same motives that compelled people to strive for the rise of their respective castes (mandelbaum 1972: 519). The caste population expressed their desire for social mobility through the formation of such *Sabhas,* keeping in mind the desire to enhance their social and prestige as a whole. This can also be said for the lower and middle caste groups that had tended to incorporate and follow the norms, traditions and customs of the *Dwija* (Twice born) castes. These horizontal stretches

among the castes lead to the formation of such *Sabhas* (Srinivas 1966: 98). *Sabha* can be also be interpreted as a 'voluntary interest group' (Rudolph & Rudolph 1967: 29). Its membership is based on both, by birth and by individual choices. Functionaries or the members provides financial support to *Sabha's* various activities, for-which, a *Sabha* can claim the 'virtual representation of the community as a whole' (Verma 1979:3). The most prudent example of such 'virtual representation' can be seen among the *Jat* of Meerut, irrespective of their multiple *khap* during the revival of the 'defence league' during the later half of the nineteenth century.

Similarly, the traditional caste *panchayats* had also been revived by the *Telis* of Odissa (Patnaik and ray 1960). The *Yadavs* on the other hand tried to bolster an event by bringing together all of those factions among themselves who were traditionally pastoral and exhibited similar traditions (Rao 1964, 1968). The *Rajput* antagonism against the land owning *Patidar* were a unifying force behind the formation of *Ksatriya Sabha* in Gujarat (Kothari & maru 1965; Weiner 1967). Rao (1964) and Verma (1973) emphasised that a significant number of local and diversified in nature caste groups have similar occupational style and status but they live around the different part of India. Despite of such factors they showed the tendency to become congregated in a pursuance of the variety of interests. Rudolph and Rudolph (1960) study shows how *Vanniyarkula ksatriya sangha,* an association of the *Pallis* of Tamilnadu became a organised political party in 1951, though they split into two in the following days. The two party merged their political existence with Indian National Congress after a extensive bargaining and negotiations while availing a key position in the state cabinet. The *Vanniyars* who claimed to be *Ksatriya* in 1871, demanded to be treated as a member of the 'backward castes' after Indian independence and demanded certain perks such as reservation in government jobs and educational

institutions along with reservation in legislative assembly representation (ibid.).

The *Jatavs* of Agra can be another instance of how *Sabhas* are entering into the arena of organised political domain. *Jatavs,* a caste group originally considered to be untouchable ones according to the ritualistic hierarchy of the Hindu caste system, asserted their identity and placed their claims to be included in the provincial assembly around the 1920s. Later they came under the influence of Ambedkarite movement and rejected the ritualistic dominance of the Hindu caste system hierarchy and claimed to have ushered the social stratification of the Hindu society, which lead to the formation of the Republican Party of India (Lynch 1968).

To this date, several castes across the country have associated themselves over various agendas from multiple aims and objectives. They have bolstered movements demanding equal rights, social justice and empowerment as well as demanding political power and representation. Various political parties as well as factions from various political interest groups have associated themselves with these caste associations. For example, the *Bharatiya Kranti Dal* under the leadership of Choudhry Charan Singh formed an alliance with the four major caste groups of Uttar Pradesh in the 1969 general elections, also known as AJGAR: *Ahir, jat, Gujar, Rajput* (Jafferlot 2000). Following the same trajectory, in 1977 general elections the Indian National Congress formed alliance with KHAM: *Ksatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim.* The electoral manifesto of the Congress party promised a 'twenty point poverty alleviation programme', which included reservations for the backward castes in government services and educational institutions (Palshikar 2004). Political parties like Lok Dal, Samta Party, Samajwadi party, Rastriya Lok Dal, Janata Dal (S) also identified themselves in association with castes group like the

Jat, Ahir, Yadav, Vokkaliga etc. In Karnataka the *Vokkaligas* and *Ligayats* became the principle vote banks of the Congress party (ibid.).

Ghanshyam Shah (2002) has pointed out three major consequences that emerge after the interaction between the associations lead by the caste groups and the mainstream political parties. First, the members of the castes who had hitherto remained untouched of political interventions begin to participate in the electoral politics catering to their expectations that are driven by their self interests. Second, the member of the caste groups gets split among various political factions weakening the foundations of the caste group. Third, numerically larger caste groups achieves their targeted representation among the various organs of the decision making bodies, thus weakening the strength of the other caste groups considered ritualistically superior in terms of traditions; while caste groups considered to be middle or the backward castes in terms of ritualistic traditions, filled the gap. This phenomenon can be observed in most of the state assemblies across the country. In Uttar Pradesh state assembly the proportion of the ritualistic superior caste groups went down from 42% to 17% in between 1967 to 1995; whereas the members of the backward caste groups increased from 24% to 45% during the same period of time. The similar pattern can be observed among the other state assemblies as well (Shah 2002).

The popular notion of democratic politics 'legitimised' and 'resuscitated' (Kothari 1970) the traditional institutions like caste groups to a extent that social scientists now fear that it will take an ugly turn in near future. To rephrase Rajni Kothari, this could lead to 'disintegrative tendencies' and could potentially 'disrupt the democratic and secular framework of the Indian polity' (ibid.). But in the broader aspects, associations between several caste groups did promote a sense of competitive politics and a notion of wider participation in the democratic domain enshrined in our constitutional framework, while exacerbating parochialism (Shah

1975). It is a fact that various political parties across the spectrum from various states generated the 'caste idiom' (Shah 2002) to mobilise these caste groups and their association according to their (parties) prerogatives. This phenomenon occurred despite of the fact that every caste group in economically and socially heterogeneous. This 'consciousness of kind' is shared by the members of the caste groups across the spectrum and it is futile to dismiss this notion as 'false consciousness' (ibid.).

From Local to National: OBC as a key player and the rise of the *Dalit*

The parliamentary election of 1967 was a turning point in the post independence Indian politics where the ruling dispensation, the Indian National Congress lost in eight states by the simple arithmetic of caste based political dynamics. Ten years later, the victory of the Janata Party in the 1977 general elections brought the OBCs into the spotlight of national politics and Morarji Desai, the then prime minister of India appointed a commission in 1979 under the chairmanship of B.P. Mandal, the former chief minister of Bihar along with five other members. The B.P. Mandal commission listed 3743 caste groups from the overall Hindu society and termed them as 'backward classes' in terms of social and educational factors nad recommended a 27% additional reservation for these groups into the Union Government, PSUs and in the State Government sectors. Later, Janata Dal ruled government under the leadership of Prime Minister V.P. Singh implemented the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report thus initiating the ploy to realign its former support base from the days of the 'National Front Party, along with the caste lines. M.N. Srinivas in his work 'Caste in the 20th Century Avatar' (1996) described this particular event as the 'resurgence of castes in a new avatar'. But it was not, as S. Jodhka

argues, merely a consequence of the act of a politician who decided to implement the recommendations in an attempt to consolidate his voting base, but rather, it was a case of "tradition reasserting itself due to oft-quoted weaknesses of Indian modernity" (Jodhka 2010: 161).

During the decades of 1980s and 1990s the Indian polity witnessed some dramatic shifts which turned the tides regarding the relationship between caste groups and the organised political domain in the grassroots. Various scholars described this phenomenon as a shift from the 'politics of ideology' to the 'politics of representation' (Yadav 1999; Palshikar 2004). These emerging 'New Social Movements' questioned and challenged the earlier notion of development and welfare agendas of the Indian state (Jodhka 2001). The caste groups from the upper stratum of the stratification became socio-politically marginalised after the introduction of universal adult franchise, but it did not lead to a democratisation of the rural polity where the authority remained with the dominant localised caste groups in a nexus with the moneylenders and landowners across the caste lines. Studies show that across the country the Gram Panchayats or the GPs became an arena for the dominant groups to brandishing their power and influence (Frankel and Rao 1989, 1990).

Oliver Mendelsohn in his study based on Rajasthan have argued that, while M.N. Srinivas was right while talking about the 'dominant caste' in the 1950s such formulation of terminologies are making less sense in the context of contemporary rural India. The "lower castes and even untouchable sections of the lower castes are now less beholden to their economic and ritualistic superiors than was suggested in older accounts" (Mendelsohn 1993: 808). Similarly, "land and authority has been de-linked in village India and this amounted to an historic, if non-evolutionary transformation" (ibid.: 807). This emerging transformative scenario, a new socio-political identity emerged from the backdrop of the

wider 'backward classes' driven polity, the *Dalit* identity. The *dalits,* consisting of multiple assemblage of diverse acaste groups originating from the bottom half of the Hindu caste hierarchy including the untouchables, asserted their claims for equal rights and equal representation at tandem with the locally dominant caste groups who seldom controls the available resources. Jodhka, in his study of rural Punjab found the evidence which includes the gradual abolition and disintegration of *Jajmani/Balutedari* ties (Jodhka 2002). He suggested that theb *Dal;its* in Punjab have started to distance themselves from the villages economic organisations and raised their objections against their local employers and refused to work under them, whom are predominantly landed *Jats.* We can assume that such attitude and tendency coming from the *Dalits* have lead to many cases of violent altercations and atrocities between the middle caste groups and lower caste groups. Reports from rural Bihar also indicate such possibilities and till now there have been multiple occurrences of such violent confrontations (Sahay 2004).

The participation and involvement in the electoral politics have also transformed "the structural properties of castes in one fundamental respect: it created a democracy of castes in place of a hierarchy" (Kaviraj 2000: 103). In competitive electoral politics what matters most to a political party or faction is the extent of the spatial concentration, number of voters and the range of the social capital one particular community have. 'Democratic equality'- the experience gathered during the participation in electoral politics "has mainly been translated as equality between caste groups, not among caste-less individuals" (ibid.: 109).

Among the caste groups listed to be OBCs, a residual category of backwardness in terms of social-educational factors is present which helps to define the elusiveness of this category. The ritualistic upper

caste groups, consisting of 15%-20% of the entire population of the Hindu society, are undoubtedly the most powerful minority and the OBCs emerging political factions joined hands with these upper caste echelons and went to seek a broader identity which paved way for the '*Hindutva*' to emerge, as an alter ego to *'Mandal'*. This crystallisation of the OBCs was achieved due to the revolution called Mandal report, can also be considered as the 'Mandal Moment', helped in importing a new and enabling legibility to Indian politics (Deshpande 2015). This 'moment' in qualitative sense created and formulated a single largest group identity in the pan-Indian socio-political context consisting of 42% of the population.

The introduction to this kind of body politics marks the starting point of the creation of new constituencies by sub-dividing the older ones, with a realignment of various existing and emerging electoral and socio-political combinations. Numerous caste groups have historically ignored the specific differences that make them distinctive out of hundreds of castes. Nevertheless, they formed dozens of caste identity based clusters and associated themselves with each other over perceived self-interests which eventually subsumed their respective caste identities. .

This body politics have become a site of continuous fission and fusion, thus subjected to constant manoeuvre. New form of alliances and allegiances are emerging; older ones like the monolithic OBC, Dalit and Muslim groupings are fading away gradually (Deshpande 2015). Groups like the 'Extremely Backward Classes' (EBC) and the 'Most Backward Classes' (MBC), *Mahadalits*, *Pashmanda Musalman* have yielded a more complex polity, making it challenging for further scholastic interventions and inquiries. It is also interesting to note that in the post 1990s Indian socio-political scenario, the OBCs emerged as one of the most active oppressor of the *Dalits* in village societies across the country. It can be inferred, what the OBCs chooses to do should impart a major impact on

when and how the republican goal of transcending the castes will be achieved (ibid.).

The Peasant Movements of the 21st Century Neo-Liberal India: a revival of the Mandal politics?

The peasant movement of the post-independence eras saw the rise of prominent political personalities like Charan Singh, Devi Lal, Chotu Ram, Swami Sahajanand, Mahendra Singh Tikait, Rammanohar Lohia etc., who mobilised the peasantry against the upper-caste 'city dwellers' on a socialistic class-based issues demanding greater structural changes in the rural economy and on the other hand mobilised the 'united' peasantry against the 'discrimination' levied upon them by the urban 'babus' and the 'business class', the very signature of the 'upper-castes'. At the initial stages the united peasantry movement, the caste disparities at the village level societies, land holdings and in agricultural fields were de-emphasised. The movement explicitly recognised the interests of the lower castes in the anti-upper caste struggle (Jaffrelot 2000; George & Kumar 2017).

The phenomenon of struggle between the agrarian lower castes having numerical superiority with the upper castes at the village level can be best understood in the words of B.R. Ambedkar; in his *Thoughts on Linguistic States* (1955): " Castes are so distributed that in any given area there is one caste which is major and there are others which are small and are subservient to the major caste owing to their comparative smallness and their economic dependence upon the major caste which owns most of the land in the village" (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 167).

Ambedkar recognised that in an agrarian society the main source of income and earnings is land, a resource that was not open to purchase by the *Dalits.* However, the obstacle to *Dalits* purchasing land was

beyond an economic matter (Kumar 2020). Ambedkar commented on the obstacles faced by an Untouchable: "In an agricultural country, agriculture can be the main source of living. But this source of earning a living is generally not open to the Untouchables. This is so for a variety of reasons. In the first place purchase of land is beyond their means. Secondly, even if an Untouchable has the money to purchase land he has no opportunity to do so. In most parts, the Hindus would resent an Untouchable, coming forward to purchase land and thereby trying to become the equal of the Touchable class of Hindus......In some parts, they are disabled by law from purchasing land. For instance, in the Province of Punjab there is a law called the Land Alienation Act. This law specifies the communities which can purchase land and the Untouchables are excluded from the list" (BAWS Vol. 5, p. 23).

Again, Ambedkar emphasised around a more general level, i.e., the amount of small land holdings and the social differentiation within the peasantry is at the root of the agrarian question in India. In his paper *Small Holdings in India and their Remedies* (1918) refers to the nature of the small holdings, not just in terms of size of the holdings but in terms of the availability of factors necessary for the optimal yield. He outlined that the agricultural sector has a significant level of "idle labour" with an absence of alternative form of employment; and these labourers exerts enormous pressure on land and created a premium on landholding. The productivity of agriculture cannot support any reasonable standard of life because of the scarcity of the capital. Only through injecting enough capital at the agriculture and a substantial industrial growth to absorb the surplus labour from the agricultural fields, the agrarian crisis could be averted. The complete transformation of the agrarian crisis and the re-hauling of the agricultural sector without reducing the surmounted pressure on lands cannot be achieved (BAWS, Vol. 1, p. 468).

The report of the Indian National Congress Reform Committee in 1948, the 'Kumarappa Committee' was not clear whether the agrarian reform simply meant the abolition of *Zamindari* system or the implementation of the promise i.e., "land to the tiller" (Jannuzi 1994). During the first amendment bill debate of May 10, 1951; Ambedkar defended the insertion of Article 31A, 31B and the Nineth Schedule of the Constitution vehemently. These amendment protected the rights of the state to implement land reforms and allowed the state agencies to make special provisions for the social and educational advancement of the backward classes. Ambedkar in his constituent assembly debate speech argued that the majority of the peasants do not have the necessary resources, thus it will be a poor idea to create 'peasant proprietors' in this country (BAWS, Vol. 15, p. 354-5). He further added that the present land reform proposal at the table only focuses on the abolition of intermediaries but did not address the crisis of the fifty million landless workers.

After the emergence of the caste peasant leaders in the forefront of the anti-upper caste politics in the North, the 'lower caste-rich peasant' sections of the peasantry mobilised against their perceived common enemy which in turn generated a new consciousness of 'middle-peasantry'. This consciousness eventually segregated them from their brethrens in arms, the landless labourers and the small land holders from other lower caste groups, *Dalits* and the untouchables. This in turn transformed into a new peasant-proprietor model where the landless labourers from lower caste hierarchy and the untouchables were to be paid merely subsistence wages and the village society was assumed to be a harmonious and moral unit (George & Kumar 2017).

After the advent of the Green revolution, with limited land reform benefits on their hand many of the peasant-proprietors used and exploited the green revolution technologies which gave rise to a new consciousness among the middle peasantry, a consciousness which

would turn them into identifying as 'middle castes', further segregating them from their previous identity (Jafferlot 2000). The post-green revolution saw the phenomenon of commercialised agriculture and in this regard Bhalla (1983) proposed that the objective basis for a unified peasantry against a common enemy has ceased to exist and the landless labourers has become a distinct class which has the potential to lead any agrarian struggle in a vanguard role along with other small peasant classes with marginal land holdings. Bentall and Corbridge (1996) identified this new trend in the light of the agrarian movements in parts of India with respect to the emergence of what they call 'new agrarianism'. These movements, according to their argument testify to the profound political-economic changes in the village society after the advent of the green revolution. The rich and dominant farmers riding on the success of green revolution were the driving force of this 'new agrarianism' (ibid.).

While the old farmers movement of 1970s were centred on the class-based consciousness and demands of greater structural changes in agricultural and rural economy, the new farmers movements of post-1990s focused more on the specific issues such as procurement prices for the crops yield, organic farming and farming subsidies etc. among the others. But the movement declined rapidly after the coming of neo-liberalisation. Dhamagare (2010) located the rise of this new farmer's movement after the two contradictions produced by the green revolution during the 1970s. These contradictions are between the high productivity and still-low profitability in agricultural produces; and two, the contradiction between high yield and large number of impoverished sections in rural India. It is against this backdrop, the current phase of farmer's outrage and agitations beginning at 2017 gains its profound significance. After a hiatus of few decades, the country has again witnessed and still witnessing a nationwide mobilisation of the farmers

where the movement has been consistent in upholding the interests of the middle caste farmer-proprietors (George & Kumar 2017).

Gail Omvedt (1994) characterises the contemporary peasant-farmer movements as non-class 'new' social movement with a bigger mandate and higher potential than the earlier socialistic style movements in history. She argued that these movements combined with emerging caste based political identities signify an advance stage of social movements in India. Lindberg (1995) further analyses the objective linkages between the emerging cultural nationalists' identity and the susceptibility of the community oriented ideologies behind these movements, in a pan-Indian context. Brass (1991, 94, 97) argued against the 'new' populist farmers' movement of the 1990s. He asserts that the 'peasant essentialism' and the 'cultural otherness' which is an essential basis of the movement, are discursively linked to the 'new' right.

The period of 2015-16 saw the revival of the series of popular agitations across India by dominant caste-rich farmers, primarily the *Patidars* of Gujarat, *Jats* of Haryana and the *Marathas* of Maharastra. The motivations and objectives behind such movements and agitations were in a similar line; against the dwindling fortunes in the context of severe agrarian crisis, societal challenges coming from the *Dalits* and the other members of the backward classes*,* crumbling hegemony in the rural socio-economic horizon etc. 2017 witnessed farmers' agitations across the nine provinces demanding mass loan waivers, minimum support prices for the yield structured reform in agriculture etc. (George & Kumar 2017). In this context, one should cater to the formulation made by Jafferlot (2000) which perfectly highlights the tensions within the domain of caste politics versus peasant politics. There are no concrete divisions between the two in the rural areas, and it's a analytical distinction nevertheless. With looming stagnation and lack of resolution,

despite of the older rigid social structure, the lines between the two movements have become more blurred (ibid.).

During 2018, about 200 farmer organisation formed a coalition and staged protests across the country demanding the increase in the Minimum Support Prices (MSP), unconditional loan waiver for a onetime adjustment for the all non-performing assets and a special session in the parliament in favour of the discussion on the agrarian distresses across the country (Agarwal 2018). This protest turned into a mass movement during the 2020-21 times combining the peasant communities from the Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra etc. with a million farmers camped at the outskirts of Delhi NCR, thus turning the movement into a nationwide phenomenon (BBC 27 September 2021). The farmers movement and the subsequent resistance against the state crackdown on them resulted in several brutal clashes resulting injuries and deaths. Several nationwide strikes in support of the protesting farmers took place across the country involving a vast number of people in solidarity. The farmer leaders subsequently demanded that the government repeal the controversial farm legislation pass at the floor of the parliament in the September 2020 (Hardikar 2021).

The movement was spearheaded by the influential peasant leaders who are also the flag bearers of the various caste based *panchayats* across the states. The rich middle peasant-dominant caste groups among the protesting farmers became the face of the movement by garnering and gathering mass scale mobilisation in favour of the farmers' movement. But what about the landless labourers from the marginalised lower caste groups? Data shows that a substantial section of *Dalits* in the states in discussion are landless labourers engaged in cultivation as tenants. History narrates that the landless tenants were evicted and barred from the land they cultivated based on various legislatures, for example the Bundelkhand Land Alienation Act of 1903 and the Punjab Land

Alienation Act of 1900. In the present discussion, we can infer that the situation have not resolved since and the 'farmers unity' and the demands placed in favour of the all the farmers does not resonate the plight of the landless labourers and the marginal farmers. The farmers' movement have papered over the differences between the rich middle-farmers belonging to the dominant caste groups with large landholdings and the small cultivators, let alone landless labourers from the marginalised social groups. In the words of Zoya Hasan (1994), "The idea of a basic unity of interests of all agriculturalists glosses over the differential impact of terms of trade. The surplus appropriating classes invariably succeed in passing on most, if not the entire burden of deteriorating terms of trade to the poorer classes". Borrowing the words of Hasan we can infer that the 'united peasant leaderships' and the associations of various political factions and the dominant caste groups, who have spearheaded the movement, wanted to articulate the grievances of the farmers-the peasants who participate actively in the market in an attempt to maximize their economic return (Hasan 1994).

Conclusions

The OBC politics have greatly influenced both the state and the national politics during the period of 1980s and the 1990s, as Christophe Jaffrelot (Jaffrelot 2000) points out, the emergence of regional politics under the influence of regional political entities driven by the overall OBC identity and representation. Between the period of 1980 and 2004, the parliament had more representation from the OBCs and the percentage of upper caste parliamentarians declined nearly half to 34% while the members from OBCs reached from 11% to 26%. One cannot ignore the active and rapidly evolving section of our polity with rapid mobility and

overlapping aspirations which transcended into the "conglomeration of disparate elements" (Deshpande 2015).

The post independent political manifestation in a pan-Indian context is happening on four broad phases: social, administrative, legal and political. Factionalism among the caste groups and its political repercussions along with its success in the wider democratic arena are conceived as a primo0rdial phenomenon (Michelutti 2004: 69). To understand how a "culture re-enters into the political stage" we have to re-explore the culture of dominance, identity and its' participation in democratic politics (Spencer 1997: 12).

The Other Backward Classes, albeit a administrative classification coined for a specific welfare based agenda, manifested a distinct identity and the democratisation of this identity have ushered in the rise of a distinctive identity politics and caste consciousness among the other marginal communities and social groups as well, culminated into a new form of electoral behaviour and political mobilisation. This phenomenon have forced the government and state to cater them into the existing policy framework and making the welfare framework of the existing policy deliberation more accommodating for the said social groups. The rise of the OBCs in the nationwide political landscapes as a distinct socio-political phenomenon have reached to a new impasse and caught in a vicious circle of political ball game and we can conclude by saying that the outcome from this game will inflict an new dynamism in Indian politics.

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