

Power and Equality

Changing Grammar of Indian Politics

By V. P. Singh

Democracy is not just a ballot box and a government. The saga of democracy is the saga of human dignity. If one person's boot is on the other person's head wherein is democracy? If one is discriminated by birth wherein is equity? If we carry the hatred of a thousand years in our hearts wherein is fraternity?

The question arises as to how to tackle so deeply entrenched a cultural divide? Governmental action alone cannot do so. What is needed, is that reservations within our hearts must finally go. The need of governmental reservations will then vanish.

Gandhi did try to bring about change of hearts. He also succeeded to a measure. Dr. Ambedkar sought **the constitutional route and enshrined the principles of social justice in the Constitution, specifically providing for reservations**. The criterion for reservations was not caste but social and educational backwardness. But after independence the equity agenda was jettisoned by the ruling party.

Ugly Fact

The ugly fact is that the vast majority of the lower castes and the religious minorities **have hardly any share in power**. This is a major reason why development efforts did not reach those who ought to have benefited. Unjust social order gave rise to an unjust power structure and this structure then distributed the benefits of power unjustly.

In India, political power follows the contours of the social power structure. It is not that the ruling party did not do anything for the deprived sections. They bestowed many a governmental benefit on them, but the relationship was a transactional one, not transformational. That is, we **give you benefits, you give us power**.

However, with the working of the democratic process and gradual awakening among the lower sections, political parties espousing the cause of social justice have sprung up. Almost every political party, today, is swearing by the cause of **"social justice."**

A sea change in people's attitudes and political responses has taken place. The days of hounding of the votaries of **the Mandal message**, and self-immolation of its detractors have yielded place to the edification of Mandal philosophy. The Mandal plank, once condemned as divisive, casteist and anti-national, has become the plank on which every political party is clamouring to climb on.

For me it is a **matter of deep personal satisfaction**. In kicking the ball **I may have broken my leg but I do feel I have scored a goal**. Social justice today is solidly on the national agenda and it is going to decisively determine the political dynamics of my country for the coming decades. Now the bid by the deprived sections is not for mere jobs or any other benefits of power, but to operate the levers of power itself. Nothing less. This represents a change in the very grammar of Indian politics.

Till now the ruling elite deliberately avoided discussing the social reality because that would endanger its own position. Any voice which drew attention to the social reality was promptly muffled as casteist and divisive. Now that every party is wooing the deprived classes, with every round of elections more and more representatives of the deprived sections will be elected. This will ultimately be reflected in the social composition of the local bodies, state governments, and the central government. **A silent transfer of power is taking place in social terms**. Till now government may have changed but the real centre of power remained where it had always been — within the upper social strata. Today, an alternative ruling elite is in the making.

Historic Landmarks

The United States has a rich experience in affirmative action and the pronouncements of its Supreme Court are historic landmarks, from "**separate but equal**" in the judgment of Plessey, "**to freedom of choice**" developed by Brown I and Brown II, to "**just schools**" in Green, to elimination of segregation "**root and branch**" in Swann are indeed a long way in the march towards providing justice to discriminated social groups. The perception of the U.S. judiciary that affirmative action can be resorted to — to remove "**the persisting or present and continuing effects of past discrimination**," to lift the "limitation on access to equal opportunity for full participation in governance" of the society, "**to overcome substantial chronic under-representation of a social group**" — is a point of view that we can whole-heartedly endorse.

The goal of removal of "past discrimination" could not be more relevant than in the case of India, for past discriminations have not only been institutionalised but also sanctified. The overcoming of substantial **chronic under-representation of social groups has become the national programme** after our government implemented the Mandal Commission Report. The idea of "**full**

participation in the governance of the society" is now the impelling political dynamic which is shaping the power structure of India as never before.

Our own Supreme Court in the case of *M. R. Balaji vs State of Mysore* has pronounced "what qualifies for reservation is backwardness which is the result of identified past discrimination." It expresses the same concern regarding historical neglect and prejudice as your judiciary has shown. In the judgment on the Mandal Commission Report Justice Swant has observed: "The goals of the Constitution cannot be realised unless all sections of the society participate in the state power equally irrespective of their caste, community, race, religion and sex and all discriminations in the sharing of the state power made on those grounds are eliminated by positive measures." And Justice Pandian, in the same case, observes: "There is equality only among equals and to equate un-equals is to perpetuate inequality."

Vital Differences

While these pronouncements by the highest courts of both our countries show striking similarities, certainly there are vital differences in the ground realities.

In the U.S. affirmative action is directed primarily towards minorities, though when all are added up two-thirds of the population is covered. In India it is the majority that is disadvantaged; and 85 per cent at that. By majority I do not mean religious majority but those who are socially and educationally backward. This radically changes the political dynamics.

As for the argument that affirmative action is violative of the principles of equality before law, I would emphasise that national equality is just thin air. If equality has indeed to be realised then we have to ensure equality of results and take concrete measures. Mere provision in the Constitution that we are equal does not make every one equal. Till power is not shared equally inequality will remain.

As power in India is anyway coming to the deprived sections a balance has to be maintained. Hatred is not the answer to hatred. At least it is not the Indian answer, for hatred dehumanises the victim as well as its perpetrator. We do not want to create new victims in the process of removal of past victimisation.

Apart from the deprived sections holding the commanding heights of power a massive effort for universal education and the re-establishment of values of probity in public life and efficiency in governance will have to be made. Social justice is a joint effort to shed mutual prejudices and hate, and to work together for a glorious national reconstruction.

(Excerpted from a lecture by Mr. V. P. SINGH, former Prime Minister, at Harvard University, U.S.A.). (Times of India 14.2.96.)