

Caste and Political Mobilization: A Study of the Patnis in Cachar District of Assam

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Abstract

There is a very close connection between social stratification and the political system. The system of social stratification provides a broad frame of reference for the functioning of the political system both in terms of selection of ends and adoption of means. David Easton defines politics as authoritative allocation of values. In this way politics mobilizes various existing allegiances in order to attain certain goals. The crucial connecting link between caste and political system is political party, association or movement. A political party consists of those whose entrepreneurial activities are essentially devoted to the recruitment of followers who attempt to modify the system either by participating in government or by directing their action against it.

The main focus of the study is to identify whether the elite of the community who are recognized as the party members of both Indian National Congress (INC) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) think on predictable lines apprehending the community interest and weakness of the community. It is also interesting to find out whether as members a community, they are coincided or factionalized in their perception on the basis of party affiliations.

Key words: Political Mobilization, Political Elite, Community Interest Party Politics.

1. Introduction

The present study proposes to explore the relationship that exists between caste and politics in bringing changes in thinking, belief and attitude of a scheduled caste community Patnis in their community politics. The study is based on the perception of political elite of the community on the various aspects and issues concerning their community assertion and political mobilization. This study aims at contributing in the political sociology of caste by focusing on the changes that took place in the age-old hierarchical caste system due to adaptation of the modern democratic politics after Indian independence. Indian democracy has provided the platform for both the caste system and the modern politics to interact, influence and adapt each other with the changing and emerging allegiances as result of the continues interaction between the two. As politics is largely depended on the social stratification system for its infrastructure, caste groups on the other side has started asserting their identity, bargaining for power and position. Though caste still remains dominant factor in Indian politics but gradual erosion in some aspects of its traditional rigid nature cannot be denied. One of the most influential agencies which played a significant role in bringing the crucial changes in the content of caste system in India after adopting democratic politics is actually the party politics. Political parties for electoral competition and vote bank politics induced new tactics for political mobilization of various caste groups. They attracted members basing on caste composition of an electoral constituency through party ideology, power and

position, easily co-opting the members of backward and extending party influences. In this way, democracy brought changes in a long-established, unchanging social institution caste responded to political influence and change. This flexibility generated in the caste system in the post-independence era is acting as a tool for identifying marginal groups and including them into the mainstream politics through political mobilization.

The relationship between caste and politics can better be grasped in terms of three types of political mobilization showing different phases of political development: vertical, horizontal, and differential. Vertical mobilization¹ is a workable strategy for dominant castes to mobilize poor and backward castes by ideological appeals to community interests and sentiments seeking political support from societies that are organized and integrated by status, mutual dependence and the legitimacy of traditional authority through their interests and deference. Horizontal mobilization is a strategy to extract political support by community leaders and their specialized organizations making direct ideological appeals to communities creating a new pattern of cleavage by challenging the vertical solidarities and structures of traditional societies. Differential mobilization is a strategy of political parties seeking direct and indirect political support from internally differentiated communities through parallel appeals to ideology, sentiment, and interest.²

In Assam, there are 16 scheduled caste communities and Patni community is one among them. The people of Patni community are predominantly the inhabitants of three Bengali dominated districts of Cachar, Karimgan and Hailakandi of Assam. According to the census of 2001, the Patni population in Cachar is 78,699.³ According to the same authority, Patnis constitute the highest member of scheduled caste population in Cachar. "The Patnis are mainly a land owning community and the landholdings are individually owned. Traditionally, their primary occupation is cultivation; fishing is only a subsidiary occupation."⁴ They profess Hindu religion. Guswami Brahmins provide priesthood to the Patins strictly according to the injunctions of Hindu Shastras.⁵ The Patnis however, claim to be the offsprings of Madhava who ferried Rama across river Yumana on his way from Ayodhya to Mithila.⁶ Traditionally Patni community has produced significant number of political leaders to different political parties. Individuals from this community represented both Lok Sabha and Legislative Assembly from both Congress and BJP. It shows that it is an important community but there is no significant political mobilization within the community. As other scheduled castes communities are mobilized in different parts of the country. It is an interesting question to explore why there is no significant mobilization of the Patni Community.

To answer this question, it is useful to study political elite of the community. Political elite do operate with certain visions, goals and values which transform nature of caste. The relationship between political elite and caste can be of many kinds. It varies from a patron client relationship to community as autonomous actors having independent interests. It is politics, which determines the path of the

¹ Rodolph, Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoeber Rodolph (1961), "The Modernity of Tradition Political Development in India", Orient Longman Limited, Hyderabad.

² Rodolph, Lloyd I. and Rodolph, Susanne Hoeber (1961), "The Modernity of Tradition Political Development in India", Orient Longman Limited, Hyderabad.

³ Census of India 2001, Basic Data Sheet, District, Cachar (21), Assam, (18).

⁴ Singh K.S., The Scheduled Castes, Vol-1, Anthropological Survey of India, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998, p-1086.

⁵ Harprashad Das, Halik Patni ba Mahishyagonar Itibrittya, Mukherjee Press, Calcutta, 1940, p-101.

⁶ K.S. Singh, The Scheduled Castes, vol-1, Anthropological Survey of India, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998, p-2823

community. So this study focuses upon the perceptions of the political elite regarding various aspects concerning the community, which may be called the community's interests.

2. Review of related literature

The nature of interaction between caste and politics has taken variety of forms in different parts of India. This phenomenon is also studied widely moving away from doctrinaire positions like, is caste disappearing? Instead, these studies have focused on transformation in caste structure due to the impact of democracy and changes in politics due to its interaction with caste. As a result, changes in caste and politics occur vary often in place to place.

Rajni Kothari studied the nature of interaction between caste and politics. He found that the rate of political interest in higher caste groups is lower and political interest in the lower caste group is higher. Political awareness is high among the higher castes and is low among the lower castes. Lower castes by organizing themselves in pursuit of collective interest were able to emerge successfully. The involvement of these castes organization in politics has changed their position in hierarchical pattern of Hindu society. Caste solidarity and political power helped them to achieve higher social, economic and political success.

The same was highlighted by Andre Beteille's study of Tanjore district in Tamil Nadu. Caste has become one of the most dreadful elements of group formation within political parties in India. The patronage and financial resources available to the political leaders enable them to create a coalition of factions on caste basis, whose leaders are bound to higher leadership in power in a complex network of personal obligation. Each of these leaders had a group of followers tied to him in accordance with the same set of caste principles. The personnel of these castes factions may vary but whatever may be their social composition they demand and receive from their member's full support. It is used by the political parties to mobilize caste support in various ways.

Robert Hardgrave argues that nature of change in caste system depends on the elaboration of caste ranking and the internal differentiation within the caste itself. While passing through tradition to modernity it has to pass through three stages, the parochial, the integrated and the differential political cultures. The cause of development from one stage to another stage is economic.⁷

Eleanor Zelliot, in an article Learning the use of political means, the Mahars of Maharashtra discusses a movement for social upliftment of Mahars of Maharashtra. They were under the conditions of social degradation and how they perceived the potency of politics as a means to ameliorate their social condition.⁸ The recruitment of Mahars in the military service and encouragement to them through economic opportunities in the field of education and employment, the advent of Dr. Ambedkar as a leader who concerted them into a political force also encouraged them to use political means for achieving social equality and also their efforts to secure governmental benefits and representation in the state legislature, political bodies. The efforts made by the Republican Party of India to secure their special interests worth mentioning. These are the factors that contributed to their struggle against social inequality.

⁷ Robert L. Hardgrave, Political Participation and Primordial Solidarity: The Nadars of Tamilnad in Rajni Kothari (ed.) Caste in Indian Politics, Orient Longman Limited, Hyderabad, 1995, p-98

⁸Eleanor Zelliot, Learning The Use of Political Means: The Mahars of Maharashtra, in Rajni Kothari, (ed.) Caste in Indian Politics, Orient Longman Limited, Hyderabad, 1970, p- 27.

3. Objective of the Study

The study is addressed to understand the state of community assertion of Patnis as a scheduled caste community.

4. Hypothesis of the study

The relationship between the political elite and the community is of patron-client in nature and hence there is no autonomous mobilization of Patnis.

5. Methodology

Cachar district covers 15 development blocks. Of them 6 has been selected purposively where Patnis are influential politically and numerically large in number. These development blocks are: Katigorah, Narshingpur, Palonghat, Salchapra, Silchar and Sonai. The district presidents of both Congress and BJP were approached to identify political elite requesting them to provide a list of Patni leaders in chosen blocks. In each Block nine leaders were interviewed out of them five are from Congress and four are from BJP.

6. Categorization of political elite

In this study, it is assumed that political elite belongs to poor category if he or she possesses monthly income below five thousand, possession of land up to twenty kathas and lives in a kacha house (hut). Elite belongs to lower middle class if he or she possesses monthly income starting from five thousand and one up to ten thousand, possession of land twenty and one kathas up to ten Bighas and lives in a Assam pattern house. And, political elite belongs to middle class if he or she has monthly income of ten thousand and above, possession of land above ten and one Bighas and also lives in a RCC house in table-1. The economic status of the elite of the community and their party preferences are shown in table-2. Similarly, the parity preferences of the elite of the community have shown in table-3.

7. Community interests

The term community interests include issues like, collective sense of injury due to humiliation, exclusion from public, discrimination by the state in the provision of education and employment, neglect by mainstream political parties a collective strife for cultural improvement, cooperation and unity etc. It would be interesting to capture their feeling of what they think as community interests and state of community assertion.⁹

The perceptions of the elite of the community have revealed positive opinion indicating their feeling of community interests. 70% of them have revealed positive opinion while 30% have expressed negative opinion. Here, it seems that majority of the political elite have feeling of community interests and are assertive towards their community. (Table no.04) However, the responses of the elite are shown in terms of different economic classes.

⁹Questions are; Do Patni people met frequently, members of the community are good leaders, they faced no discrimination from other communities in politics, the members of the community are poor, they lack education hence lack community interests, some educated members are selfish, they lack unity, one do not accept the leadership of other within the community, they prefer to support leaders from other communities, Congress and BJP cannot help Patnis alone because they must have to lead other communities also. Ten questions are asked and any seven positive responses have been recognized as positive community interests.

The perceptions across economic classes show that irrespective of the differences in their economic status, they have positive opinion towards community interests. However, the responses of the elite belonging to poor section 78% have positive attitude towards community interests while 22% denied the feeling of community interests. 68% of lower middle class seem to think for community interests while 33% do not think so. Among the middle class, 60% have community interests while 40% have expressed negative attitude towards their community. (Table no.05)

The responses of the party affiliated elite shows some variations on party lines. The Congress members though possess the feeling of community interests but a sizable number of members have no feeling of community interests. Whereas, in the perceptions of BJP elite it seems that very few of them have no feeling of community interests as compared to Congress members. Among the members of INC, 60% of them have expressed positive perceptions about community interests while 40% of them have negative perceptions. Among the elite of the BJP, 79% have positive community interests but only 21% have negative opinion about community interests. (Table no.06) Thus, it seems that the members of BJP have the sense of community interests while it is limited among the congress members as compared to BJP members of the community. The reason might be that the elite of the congress possess opinion supporting the traditional hierarchical social system while the members of BJP challenge traditional notions in their own way.

8. Weakness of the community

Though significant number of Patni people has got lands, jobs, yet majority of them have remained uneducated and poor. This community has contributed a number of political leaders to different political parties but there is no significant political mobilization in the community either to fight against the discrimination or to demand share in political power. Thus, it would be interesting to explore what the elite think as the problems of the community.¹⁰

The perceptions of the political elite have positively recognized the weak aspects of their community. Among them, 78% have expressed positive responses whereas 22% have expressed negative responses. (Table no. 07) Here, the reason behind this perhaps, the elite of the community are concerned with the weakness, the community possesses therefore, revealed mostly positive opinion recognizing their community's weakness.

The elite of the community belonging to different economic classes are more concerned with the different weak aspects of their community and therefore, expressed positive responses about the weaknesses of their community. Among the poor elite, 91% have expressed positive responses and 9% have expressed negative responses. The lower middle class have revealed 67% positive opinion while 33% have expressed negative opinion. Keeping uniformity with the poor and lower middle class, the elite belonging to middle class have shown 70% positive responses and 30% negative responses. (Table no. 08) Thus, it may be said that the members of the community irrespective of their economic differences, they have shown concern about their weak aspects recognizing the backdrops of the community.

¹⁰The questions are: The members of the community are poor, they lack education hence, ignorant of community interests, some educated members of the community are selfish, the community lack unity, one does not accept the leadership of the other, and prefer to support leaders from other communities. Six questions are asked. Any four positive responses are treated as accepting the weaknesses of the community.

However, responding to the issue of weakness of the community, the elite belonging to lower middle class revealed slight difference of opinion. The figure in the table shows that the members of lower middle class, 57% members of INC have recognized weaknesses of the community along with 43% of BJP members. (Table no.09) The lower middle class members of the INC, 43% have expressed opinion denying weakness of the community along with 57% BJP members. (Table no. 10) Thus lower middle class denying the weaknesses of the community.

The responses of the members of both INC and BJP shows that the elite of the community have a clearly accepted the weaknesses of their community like poverty, backward educational status, their selfishness, lack of unity among the members of the community, unhealthy competition within the community and the support for the leaders of other communities. The elite belonging to congress party, 80% have expressed positive opinion recognizing these facts while only 20% have expressed negative opinion denying these issues. The members of BJP, they have expressed 75% positive attitude accepting the drawbacks while 25% do not admit these facts. (Table no.11) It is true that the members of the community irrespective of their party affiliation accept weakness of the community interests. It is necessary to point out that Congress members of lower middle class background are not willing to publicly express the weaknesses of their community while BJP members are openly ready to speak out the weaknesses of the community.

9. Findings of the Study

A majority of Patni political elite defend community and its interests and they strongly identify with the community. More number of BJP members asserts their identity strongly when compared to Congress. While acknowledging the failure of the community in mobilizing and articulating the community interests, there is not significant variation on the basis of economic class. But BJP members are outspoken in speaking out the weaknesses of the community. Poor and a section of middle class strongly assert with community interests and happy with the strength of the community. Most of them belong to Congress party.

Majority of poor middle class Patni political elite express different social and political attitudes which indicate a different articulation of community, they are not happy with the progress of the community. This group identifies themselves strongly with community interests. They are not happy with the strength of the community. Most of them belong to BJP.

Appendix

Table no-1: Economic Status of the Political Elite

Poor	Lower middle	Middle	Total
23 (42.59%)	21 (38.88%)	10 (18.53%)	54 (100%)

Source: Field Study

Table no-2: Party Affiliation of the Political Elite on the basis of Economic Status

Elite	INC	BJP	Total
Poor	13 (56.53%)	10 (43.47%)	23 (100%)
Lower middle class	11 (52.38%)	10 (47.62%)	21 (100%)

Middle class	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	10 (100%)
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Source: Field Study

Table no-3: Party Affiliation of the Political Elite

INC	BJP	Total
30 (55.56%)	24 (44.44%)	54 (100%)

Source: Field Study

Table no-04 Patni political elite are aware of their community interests

	Positive	Negative	Total
Elite	38 (70.37)	16 (29.63)	54 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

Table no-05 Community interests and class wise analysis

Elite	Positive	Negative	Total
Poor	18 (78.26)	5 (21.74)	23 (100.00)
Lower middle class	14 (66.67)	7 (33.33)	21 (100.00)
Middle class	6 (60.00)	4 (40.00)	10 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

Table no-06 Community interests and party wise analysis

Elite	Positive	Negative	Total
INC	18 (60.00)	12 (40.00)	30 (100.00)
BJP	19 (79.17)	5 (20.83)	24 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

Table no-07 Patni community is suffering from many ills

	Positive	Negative	Total
Elite	42 (77.77)	12 (22.23)	54 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

Table no-08 Weakness of the community and Class wise analysis

Elite	Positive	Negative	Total
Poor	21 (91.31)	2 (8.69)	23 (100.00)
Lower middle class	14 (66.67)	7 (33.33)	21 (100.00)
Middle class	7 (70.00)	3 (30.00)	10 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

Table no-09 Lower Middle class recognizing the weaknesses of the community

Elite	INC	BJP	Total
Lower middle class	8 (57.15)	6 (42.85)	14 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

Table no-10 Lower Middle class denying the weaknesses of the community

Elite	INC	BJP	Total
Lower middle class	3 (42.85)	4 (57.15)	7 (100.00)

Table no-11 Weakness of the community and Party wise analysis

Elite	Positive	Negative	Total
INC	24 (80.00)	6 (20.00)	30 (100.00)
BJP	18 (75.00)	6 (25.00)	24 (100.00)

Source: Field Study

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