

Impact of Casteism on Chhattisgarh Legislative Assembly Elections 2018: A Political Study

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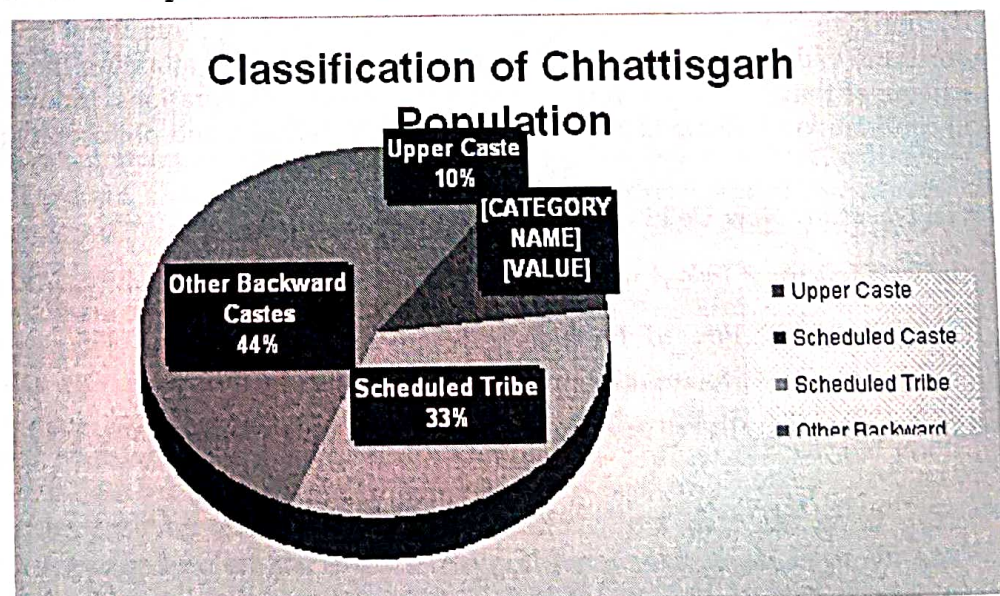
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Abstract: The present research paper titled "Impact of Casteism on Chhattisgarh Legislative Assembly Elections 2018: A Political Study" tends to study the role of casteism in the electoral politics of Chhattisgarh. Casteism is a very unique and important factor of Indian polity. No doubt the state politics is also affected by it. Casteism is deep rooted and its significance cannot be ignored by any political party while contesting elections or while taking any policy decisions when in power. This research paper focusses on the Chhattisgarh legislative assembly elections 2018. This was a historic election as the congress party came to power after 15 years. The strategy adopted by the party to win the electoral battle was to concentrate on the caste equations in the state. The Sahu and Kurmi castes form the bulk of the OBC population in the state. They have played pivotal role in electoral politics of the region and have produced stalwart leaders in the history and in present times too. The paper tries to understand the candidates fielded by parties based on caste and the promises they made during election campaign to woo the castes. The rise of Mr. Bhupesh Baghel, leader of Kurmi community and Mr. Tamradhwaj Sahu, leader of Sahu community in the Congress party before elections ensured the OBCs especially the dominant Sahus and Kurmis that Congress has started acknowledging their electoral importance. After the elections too, Mr. Bhupesh Baghel was made the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh and Tamradhwaj Sahu was made the Home Minister showing the electoral prowess of these two OBC communities.

Keywords: Casteism, Caste, Sahu, Kurmi, Chhattisgarh Legislative Assembly Elections 2018, OBCs' Population of Chhattisgarh, Chhattisgarh Swabhiman Manch, Bhupesh Baghel, Tarachand Sahu, Tamradhwaj Sahu.

Introduction

Recently in November-December 2018, elections to the legislative assembly of Chhattisgarh took place in which Congress acquired the power after 15 years. In politics of Chhattisgarh the factor of caste plays an important role which is evident in all four elections. The most recent election is analysed here to understand how casteism affects the politics of Chhattisgarh, a state where backward communities constitute over 90 percent of the population—Scheduled Tribes 32 percent, Scheduled Castes 13 percent and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) 40-50 percent.



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Aim

The purpose of the research paper is to study the impact of casteism on the politics of Chhattisgarh with special reference to the 2018 state legislative elections.

Methods and Materials

The present work includes data collected from the secondary sources. Under this subject related magazines, books, articles, research work, newspapers, text books, websites, internet and books or reports published by government from time to time related to castes are studied. Also, passed acts, amendments and laws related to the subject are studied. The data and information provided by the state government is studied. Information available on the internet is thoroughly included. Analysis of the data collected is done and conclusions are thus drawn on the basis of it.

Discussions

The word 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese word 'costa' signifying breed, race or kind. In Portuguese, it's a saying: humen de boa costa which means "a man of good family". The use of word 'caste' can be traced to the year 1563. In the work of Gracia do Orta one can find the use of the word caste in the following sentence: "no one changes from his father's trade and all those from the same caste of shoe-makers are the same." In India, caste includes 'jati' as well 'varna' and it is generally related with a particular occupation which is generally endogamous.

In India, caste and politics are interwound with each other. In other words, politics in India cannot be imagined without caste. The relation between the two can be studied at two stages:

1. The effect of caste on politics.
2. The effect of politics on caste.

In order to study this, it is essential to evaluate the cognizance of different castes in politics which can be analysed in terms of four factors, viz:

1. Interest of castes in politics.
2. Political knowledge and political awareness of castes.
3. Identification of castes with political parties and
4. Influence of castes in political affairs.

While studying the relationship between caste and politics, Rajni Kothari found three factors-education, government backing and slowly increasing the voting population.

Castes affect politics and political behaviour. It is a well-known fact that people belonging to same caste, vote for the same person who belongs to their caste or the person whom their caste organization supports. While allotting tickets for election that candidate is preferred who garners the support of a particular caste or group of castes. Also those in the party high command involved in distributing tickets prefer candidates who belong to their castes. Election coalitions are also based on caste equations. The office holders of any political party are appointed such that all castes are well represented in the political party organization. After winning election cabinet ministers and other office bearers are carefully selected so that castes are satisfied with the fact that they are represented in the government. It is conclusively concluded by many political scientists that castes play a major role in politics, especially at state level and local level.

In India, where history and culture have introduced a novel factor affecting politics not to be found anywhere else in the world, democracy has been strengthened as caste politics give representation to those who otherwise were depressed and backward historically. Political democracy is successful as there is political communication, representation and leadership. The large population has found ways to participate efficiently and effectively in politics overcoming hurdles of poverty, social discrimination and illiteracy. The distribution of fruits of development, viz., employment, per capita income, education, political offices, honours and awards and privileges has been effective as caste politics has led to policy of inclusion instead of exclusion.

But caste politics has some drawbacks too. It is a divisive factor and weakens the social bond. It has given rise to narrow mindedness of supporting only narrow caste interests over national and state level general interest issues. It hampers the ideals of constitution also as it violates the principle of secularism enshrined in the preamble of the constitution. Moreover, the functioning of the government is also hampered as caste interests, pressure groups and caste lobby among ministers and All India Services encourage political blackmailing, horse trading and political bargaining affecting due process of legislative as well as executive.

It is essential to understand casteism and how it affects the electoral politics in India. So, recent history can be analysed in this respect. During the freedom movement one can take into account the role played by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar for fighting for the rights of depressed people and he later on established "Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha" for the all-round development of the outcastes (depressed class or untouchables). He published the book "Annihilation of caste" where he categorically rejected the caste system. He played a decisive role in drafting the constitution of India where he included a number freedom and rights of the unprivileged.

After independence, India was reorganized for administrative efficiency ignoring the social-cultural aspects. This led to demand for reorganization of states on linguistic basis starting from demand for Telugu speaking state out of Madras State, which finally led to formation of Andhra State in 1953. The State Reorganization Commission (1953) was formed by the first prime minister Jawahar Lal Nehru which led to reorganization of states on linguistic basis in 1956. This sowed the seeds of caste related politics and eventually caste and language became prime factors in states' politics.

The origin of Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984 founded by Kanshi Ram with ideology of affirmative action, social equality and social justice, mainly to represent scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward castes (OBC) that roughly consists of 85% of Indian population was a milestone in the caste politics of India. Similarly there was another political figure Mr. Devilal (former Chief Minister of Haryana) who used caste card in politics to great extent. The caste politics reached a new high under V.P. Singh who became prime minister with outside support of Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). Due to coalition politics, BJP could not be stopped from starting Rath Yatra which led to mass mobilization. Sensing his position weak, V.P. Singh implemented the Mandal Commission report (which was formed by Morarji Desai Government in 1979 to identify the socially or educationally backward classes of India).

With its implementation, 27% reservation was granted for backward castes whose population was estimated 52% of country's population by Mandal Commission. This phase of Indian politics is famously called-"Mandal-Kamandal Politics". The politics of reservation and undue advantage on caste basis began and this changed the face of Indian politics forever.

In India, almost all states have political parties which are based on caste and language like Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), TDP (Telugu Desham Party), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Assam Gana Parishad (AGP), Rashtriya Janta Dal, Saamajwadi Party, etc.

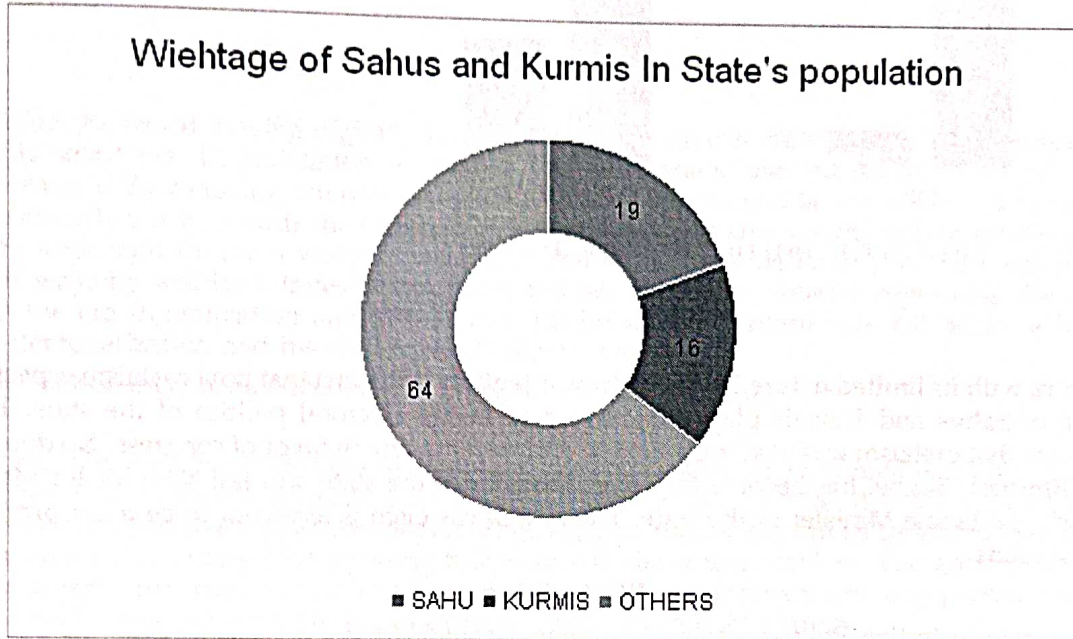
On 1st November 2000, Chhattisgarh state came into existence to fulfil the demand of development. The MLAs from the region in Madhya Pradesh legislative assembly formed the first legislative of Chhattisgarh State and Mr. Ajit Jogi was made the first Chief Minister of the state. In 2003, first legislative assembly elections of the state took place in which a slogan- "Sahu Kurmi Bhai-Bhai" became very popular. This slogan shows that casteism had a deep impact on Chhattisgarh polity and cannot be ignored at all in state electoral politics.

In 2008 Lok Sabha elections, senior BJP leader and four times Lok Sabha Member Late Tarachand Sahu formed the "Chhattisgarh Swabhiman Manch" mainly on the issue of son of the soil and emphasized that sahus are the real chhattisgarhis and they should take important position in state politics. He fought the election from Durg Lok Sabha constituency and secured third position. In 2013, factor of casteism was bigger than ever and in 2018 it was an accepted fact that caste factor cannot be ignored at any cost in Chhattisgarh polity. Now a brief analysis of Chhattisgarh legislative elections will be done and it will be tried to understand how caste factor played a decisive role in the formation of government.

In 2018 legislative assembly elections, both national political parties BJP, Congress and JCC (Janta Congress Chhattisgarh)-BSP (Bahujan Samaj Party) have given tickets to Sahu community which accounted for about 34 candidates in total (14 by BJP, 8 by Congress and 6 by JCC-BSP). It is clear that the parties had acknowledged the caste equations and voter inclination for caste and surrendered to it. It was observed that although election campaign was based on development issue but no political party would dare to ignore caste factor which is the ground reality of Chhattisgarh politics.

Prominent Kurmi leaders of Chhattisgarh are Dr. Khoobchand Baghel, Purushottam Kaushik, Chandulal Chandrakar, Vasudev Chandrakar, Bhupesh Baghel and Ramesh Bais and the like. The Sahun leaders include the likes of Tarachand Sahu, Chandrashekhar Sahu, Chandulal Sahu, Tamradhwaj Sahu, Dhanendra Sahu, etc. Kurmis and Sahun are two dominant communities among OBCs, and account for around 36% of the state's population. Bhupesh Bhagel (Kurmi) and Tamradhwaj Sahu were among the prominent faces for the congress party's electoral

battle. Tamradhwaj Sahu till recently has risen to great heights in the party. He was the only congress M.P. from the state in 2014 Lok Sabha elections. He had been made head of the party's national OBC cell and later a member of Congress Working Committee (CWC) which is the party's highest decision-making body. This deliberate rise of Tamradhwaj Sahu was aimed at winning the powerful sahu community of the state which account for approximately 19% of total state's population. Bhupesh Bhagel who belongs to kurmi community accounts for the state's 16% population was the president of state congress and led to the historic electoral victory. The strategy of congress party was to strike a balance between the two dominant OBC communities.

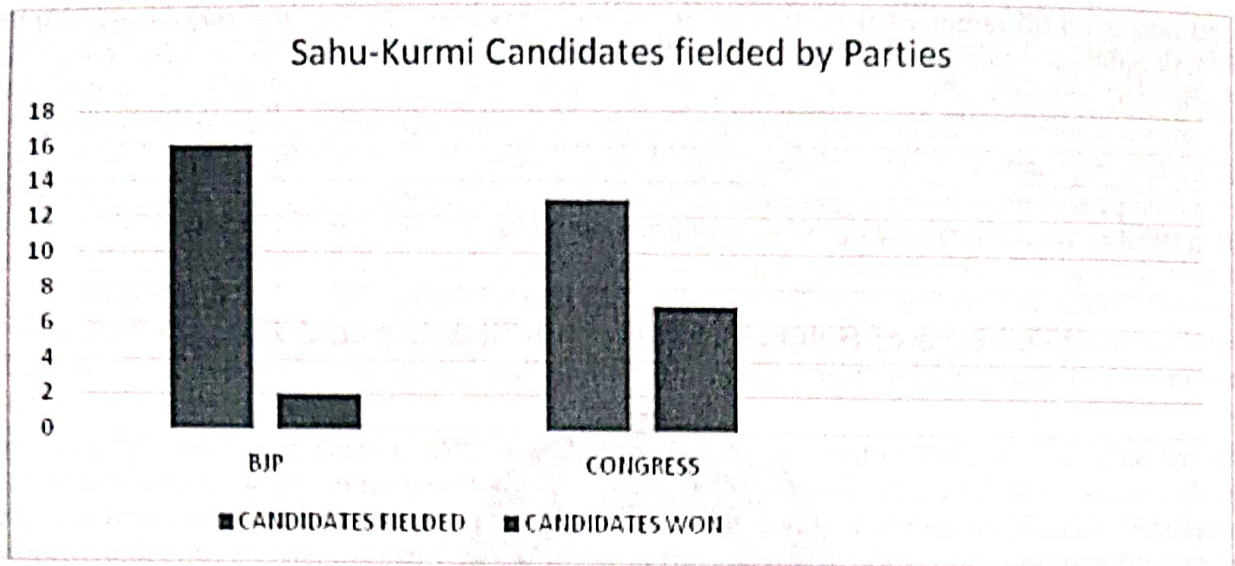


Previously the Congress used to depend on tribal and dalit votes in the state as a result prominent OBCs (Kurmis and Sahus) shifted their support to the Bharatiya Janata Party. They were ignored by the first chief minister of the state Ajit Jogi who was a tribal and was supported by the satnami community. He has now formed a new party Janata Congress Chhattisgarh aligned with the Bahujan Samaj Party in the elections and managed to win 7 seats.

Kurmis and Sahus follow professions of trade and farming and Sahus account for about 19% of the state's population. Sahus are rich farmers, landowners and influential in the rural setup. They also form the bulk in the government jobs. As many as 18 of the 90 seats have about 40% Sahu voters. So getting Sahu votes was crucial for the Congress. Sahus had been traditional vote bank of the BJP. But proper focus on them and giving them adequate representation in party leadership helped congress to recover the lost ground.

According to, political analyst Ashok Tomar, Tamradhwaj Sahu's promotion was a good move. He observed that there was a strong feeling in the community that Tamradhwaj could be the chief minister if the Congress comes to power. His analysis was that if the Congress manages to win 5% of the Sahu vote, it can be in power in the state, which actually proved to be true. The Sahus are present in large numbers in seven of the 27 districts in the state and form a sizeable number in other districts. Durg, Rajnandgaon, Dhamtari, Mahasamund, Gariyaband, Balodabazar and Kawardha are their areas of dominance. In some constituencies like Abhanpur and Rajim, they form more than 60% of the population. Abhanpur saw straight fight between Congress's Dhanendra Sahu and BJP's Chandrashekhar Sahu for a record 6th time. Other seats like Durg (Rural) and Khujji will also see a direct Sahu vs. Sahu contest. In high profile constituency Patan, Motilal Sahu, a senior BJP leader from the Mahasamund area, was brought to take on PCC president Baghel and to take the Sahu vote as Baghel was expected to take the Kurmi vote entirely. In Rajim, which also has a sizable sahu population saw triangular contest between two brahmins (Amitesh Shukla of Congress party and Santosh Upadhyay of BJP) and Rohit Sahu of JCC. It is clear that Ajit Jogi tried to polarize the OBC votes by putting up a Sahu candidate.

The congress manifesto promised a farm loan waiver of Rs. 2500 per quintal was like a life saving drug for the sahu and kurmi communities as they are directly related to farming. Hence this promise proved to be the game changer and won support of these dominating communities.



Conclusions

The present work with its limited nature is able to draw attention to the fact that how casteism especially the OBC mostly comprising of Sahu and Kurmis play a decisive role in the electoral politics of the state. The legislative elections of 2018 show that casteism was at all time high at it turned the tide in favor of congress. No doubt the stalwar kurmi leader Mr. Bhupesh Baghel has become the Chief Minister of the state and tall sahu leader Mr. Tamradhwa Sahu has been made the Home Minister of the state. The role of casteism is expected to be more pronounced in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections.

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