ROLE OF CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS

The role of caste in the Indian political system can be specifically discussed as under:

(1) Caste Factor in Political Socialisation and Leadership Recruitment:

Different caste groups have their loyalties behind different political parties and their ideologies. Right from his birth, an Indian citizen inherits a caste and grows up as a member of a particular caste group. He belongs either to one of the High Castes or to Scheduled Castes. In the process of picking up his political orientations, attitude and beliefs, he naturally comes under the influence of caste groups and casteism. ‘Caste values’ and caste interests influence his socialisation and consequently his political thinking, awareness and participation. He banks upon caste solidarity for occupying and performing a leadership role. Caste influences the process of leadership recruitment. This is particularly true of highly ‘caste conscious’ people of some states like Haryana, Bihar, UP, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. In Haryana, the leadership comes either from the Jats or from the Bishnois or Brahmins. In Andhra Pradesh, the Reddys, Kammas and Valamas provide state leaders.

(2) Caste and Party Politics:

Caste factor is a constituent of the Indian party system. Some political parties have a direct caste basis while others indirectly bank upon particular caste groups. In particular, the regional political parties stand predominantly influenced by the caste factor. The DMK and AIADMK are non-Brahmin rather anti-Brahmin political parties of Tamil Nadu. In Punjab, Akali Dal has a community panthic identity but stands influenced by the issue of Jats vs. non-Jats. All political parties in India use caste as a means for securing votes in elections. While the BSP banks upon the support of the Scheduled Castes, the BJP largely banks upon its popularity among the high caste Hindus and the trading community. In fact, while
formulating its policies and decisions each political party of India in India almost always keeps in vision the ‘Caste Angle’.

(3) Caste and Elections:
The caste factor is an important factor of electoral politics in India. All political parties give great weightage to the caste factor in selecting their candidates, in allocating constituencies to their candidates and in canvassing support for their nominees in the election. In constituencies predominated by Muslims, Muslim candidates are fielded and in areas predominated by Jats, Jat candidates are fielded. Even avowedly secularist parties like the Congress, the Janata Dal, the CPI and the CPM take into consideration the caste factor in selecting their candidates.

In the election campaigns, votes are demanded in the name of caste. Caste groups are tapped for committed support. No one can disagree with N.D. Palmer when he observes that “Caste considerations are given great weight in the selection of candidates and in the appeals to voters during election campaigns.” In elections, caste acts as the most important political party.

(4) Caste as a Divisive and Cohesive Factor of Indian Politics:
Caste acts both as a divisive and cohesive force in Indian politics. It provides a basis for the emergence of several interest groups in the Indian system each of which competes with every other group in the struggle for power. At times it leads to unhealthy struggle for power and acts as a divisive force.

However, it is a source of unity among the members of various groups and acts as a cohesive force. In rural India, where the social universe of the rural power is limited to an area of 15 to 20 km, caste acts as a unifying force.

It is the only social group they understand. However, the existence of two or three big caste groups also leads to factionalism. Caste as such is a strong factor in Indian politics and it acts as a cohesive as well as a divisive factor.