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Political and Social Awareness of *Kumhar* (Potter) Women: A Case Study of Banasthali Village in Rajasthan

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Abstract

Hindu society is divided into four *varnas* which are again divided in many castes and sub castes. The occupation and status of a person in Hindu society and religion was traditionally determined by a person's caste. Traditionally in Hindu society political power rested with the *ksatriya* or warrior class who were to be the kings or rulers or administrators or soldiers and *brahmin* priests who were to act as guide and ministers of the king. *Vaisha* or rich business people also had some share in governance but the lowest *varna* were denied participation. Even in the three *varnas* only elites were to enjoy political power. Common men and women were far away from any type of political participation. It was during national movement that common men and women started participating in political activities under the leadership of Gandhi and Congress or Ambedkar. After independence the constitution of India ensured adult franchise to all its citizens and affirmative action in form of reservation of seats in central and state legislatures to those belonging to traditionally lower castes i.e. schedule castes and scheduled tribes. This was to ensure that they are represented in the legislatures. As a result many men and women from these categories rose to the highest positions in the political system but the common masses remained far behind especially women because Indian society is patriarchal and women suffer additional disability of being lower in hierarchy than men. Present study is an attempt to understand the political and social awareness of *kumhar* (potter) women of a simple village in the state of Rajasthan in India.

Keywords: India; Rajasthan; Political Participation; Women; *Kumhar*; Potter.

Introduction

Rajasthan's society is traditional, caste ridden and patriarchal society where castes are organized in hierarchy and the castes lower in hierarchy suffered many disadvantages traditionally. Although the constitution of independent India provides for affirmative action by which the castes lower in hierarchy get reservation in government educational institutions and jobs and this has improved lives of many men and women. The Constitution of free India also gave all citizens of India equal rights to participate in politics such as right to vote, right to form political parties and right to get elected etc and

it gave citizens belonging to scheduled caste and scheduled tribes reservation in central and state legislatures.

Many men and women belonging to these categories have risen to the position of President of India, ministers in central and state cabinet, chief ministers, bureaucrats, academicians, doctors, engineers etc. However many still lead a disadvantageous life in various villages in India. They are even more marginalized if they happen to be women. The modern age is the age of democracy and successful functioning of democracy presupposes active participation of both men and women in the political process.

Political Participation

Political participation is normally associated with the modern form of democracy. In this political system, participation by the individual in political activity gives an opportunity to express one's own point of view and secure the greatest good for the greatest number. It alerts both the rulers and the ruled to their duties and responsibilities and facilitates broader political understanding. By involving people in the affairs of the state, participation promotes stability and order in the system. It not only stimulates political learning but also makes citizens responsible. It deepens the political awareness and increases the sense of political effectiveness. Taking part in the political processes which lead to the selection of political leaders or determine or influence public policy is generally known as political participation. Despite the fact that elections are the major event in the political process, political participation cannot be limited to only electoral process, i.e., voting and campaigning. It is a term applied to various types of activities ranging from political orientations, attitude, knowledge, interest in politics, identification with a political unit (political party or its any wing) to taking active part in political action such as rally, demonstration, strike or campaigning for voting in elections. The most important political activities may be those carried out by parties or citizens between elections to influence government decisions about specific problems that concern them. In brief, political participation refers to all those activities which influence the decision-making process. These activities may include voting, seeking information, discussing, attending public meetings, making financial contribution, communicating with representatives to become member in a political party, canvassing, speech writing, delivering speech, working in campaigns, competing for public and party offices, etc. (Mondal, 2016)

Political Participation in India

Myron Weiner terms India politics as a paradox because it is a stable democracy which has been torn by violent social conflicts. (Weiner, 1989, 22) He argues that Indian politics is about group identity and resource allocation. Indian intellectuals see the politics of group identity as politics of past and also as destructive and are less concerned about resolving the conflicts that arise out of struggles among linguistic, caste, religious and tribal groups than persuading them to turn to more secular politics of class and debates over economic policies and resource allocation. (Weiner, 1989, 10-11) However

group loyalties are a reality of Indian politics. People and political leadership often decide their political participation and policies on the basis of their group identity such as religion, caste etc. Hence it becomes important to study political and social awareness of caste groups and that is what this paper tries to do by studying *kumhars* of Banasthali village in the state of Rajasthan in India.

Caste in Indian Politics

Hindu society is divided into four *varnas* which are again divided in many castes and sub castes. The occupation and status of a person in Hindu society and religion was traditionally determined by a person's caste. Traditionally in Hindu society political power rested with the *kshatriya* or warrior class who were to be the kings or rulers or administrators or soldiers and *brahmin* priests who were to act as guide and ministers of the king. *Vaisha* or rich business people also had some share in governance but the lowest *varna* were denied participation. Even in the three *varnas* only elites were to enjoy political power. Common men and women were far away from any type of political participation. It was during national movement that common men and women started participating in political activities under the leadership of Gandhi and Congress or Ambedkar. After independence the constitution of India ensured adult franchise to all its citizens and affirmative action in form of reservation of seats in central and state legislatures to those belonging to traditionally lower castes i.e. schedule castes and scheduled tribes. This was to ensure that they are represented in the legislatures. As a result many men and women from these categories rose to the highest positions in the political system but the common masses remained far behind especially women because Indian society is patriarchal and women suffer additional disability of being lower in hierarchy than men.

Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership is decided by birth. Members of such local group are endogamous, i.e. they tend to enter into marital relationships among themselves. They prefer not to share food outside the caste groups. They have specific hereditary occupations and they are arranged in hierarchy which determines their social and religious status. They also tend to vote and form political opinions as a group. For political/government purposes, the castes are broadly divided into four groups: Forward Castes (about 15% of population); Other Backward Classes (OBC) (about 41% of population); Scheduled Castes (about 20% of population) and Scheduled Tribes (about 9% of

population). The caste system has traditionally had significant influence over people's access to power. The privileged upper caste groups benefited more by gaining substantially more economic and political power, while the lower caste groups had limited access to those powers. The caste system distributes to different castes different economic strengths. The upper caste groups could manipulate the economic and political system to transfer economic strength into political power. However in recent decades the lower castes and the middle castes have risen to political power in many states. They have formed political parties based on caste, candidate for elections are selected on the basis of caste and voting takes place on the basis of caste. Thus political parties like *Bahujan Samaj Party* and *Samajwadi Party* with leader like Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav have captured power. But the question remain how far common citizens political thinking is determined by caste.

Political Participation Women in India

India being patriarchal society women have a decidedly inferior position than men. Traditionally politics was regarded as a male bastion and very few instances of politically powerful women can be seen in Indian history and those women were mostly from the family of the rulers. Common women entered the political process in the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1905 when the British partitioned the province of Bengal, common women joined common men in protesting this decision by boycotting foreign goods and buying *swadeshi* (indigenous) goods. (Kuppuswamy, 1987: 8) The *swadeshi* movement, the non-cooperation movement and the civil-disobedience movement drew common men and women into the vortex of the freedom struggle under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The participation of men and women in these movements was not limited to the urban-educated-elite but it included thousands of ordinary-poor-rural men and women. The Constitution of free India gave men and women equal rights to participate in politics however women remain marginalized in Indian polity especially if they belong to lower caste group. This paper examines the political awareness and participation of *Kumhar* women of a normal village in Rajasthan to find out the reality.

Kumhar

Kumhar is a caste or community in India. *Kumhar* literally means potter in Indian languages. The *Kumhar* community is found throughout India and

is found in both Hindu and Muslim religions. Depending upon the subgroup or region they are classified as both Other Backward Class and the Scheduled Caste. Among Hindus, inclusion of Artisan castes in *Shudra Varna* is indisputable. The potters belong to the *Shudra* group of artisans of Hindu society. They are further divided into two groups-clean caste and unclean caste. In Rajasthan, *Kumhars* (also known as *Prajapat*) have six Hindu and one Muslim sub-groups. In the social hierarchy of Rajasthan, they are placed in the middle of the higher castes and the *Harijans*. They follow endogamy with clan exogamy. (Kumhar, 2015) They make pottery which is an art of making different objects by carefully molding clay. The sheer hard work they put and the skills through which they design those very pots are magnificent. Once their clay pots were to be found in every household mostly to keep water cool but new inventions like refrigerators have made these pots useless for most middle class and upper class Indians. Similarly earlier during festivals like *Deepawali* small *diyas* made by potters were in great demand which today have been replaced by electric bulbs. These changes in society have rendered the potters unemployed or paid too little.

Banasthali Village

Banasthali village is located in the Newai *tehsil* of Tonk district of the state of Rajasthan. It is located at a distance of 75 km from the capital of Rajasthan-Jaipur. The village is 500 years old and people are from middle and lower classes who are engaged in farming, service and small business like shops. Village has 1903 Hindu, 104 Jain and 30 Muslims but communal violence has never taken place. Among Hindus the main caste groups are *brahamin*, *kumhar*, *tehi*, *raigar*, *gurjar*, *harijan*, *rajput*, *nayak*, *lakhera*, *balai*, *rathore*, *dhobi*, *yadav*, *bairova*. People are traditional and customs like *purdah* (veil), child marriage, untouchability and dowry are prevalent. Women are treated as subordinate to men due to patriarchy. Marriages are regarded as essential ritual for getting sons to continue the family line. There are government schools in the village and a university for women called Banasthali Vidyapith adjacent to the village. Two political parties Congress and BJP are active in the village.

Case Study

There are 228 *kumhar* (potter) people in the Banasthali village of which 123 are men and 105 are women in 31 families. *Kumhars* belong to both Hindu

and Muslim religion. In both communities it's a backward caste. They make mud utensils for use in kitchen. *Kumhars* of Rajasthan trace their origin from grandchild of lord *Brahma* – Jalandharnath. Main Hindu *kumhar* sub castes are: *khater*, *bonda*, *maru*, *jatiya*, *purabia* and *mavara* and main Muslim *kumhar* people are *hoyla*. The study was done in 2007 and 65 *kumhar* women were studied using interview, observation and schedule techniques.

Personal Profile

74 percent women were below 40 years of age, 21 percent were between 41 and 65 years of age and five percent were above 65 years of age. 65 percent women were illiterate, 31 percent had primary education and four percent had higher education. Family income of 74 percent women was less than Rs 5000 per month, family income of 21 percent women was between Rs 5000 and Rs 10000 and for five percent it was more than Rs 10000 per month. 77 percent women had no personal income remaining earned less than Rs 5000 per month. Those who worked were agricultural labourers, potters, cook, shop keepers, teachers and tailors.

Views on Women Issues

98 percent women said women should be educated. 75 percent women said women should work. 91 percent said women should vote and 83 percent women said women should fight elections. 75 percent women said women should have reservation in jobs and 79 percent women said women should have reservation in politics. 46 percent women said women should get reservation in parliament and state legislatures. 86 percent women said men of family view women political participation positively. 61 percent women said men of their caste view women political participation positively. 74 percent women said women are unable to play major role in politics due to work while 17 percent said women are unable to play a major role in politics due to family responsibility. Women said more work needs to be done for women in education, employment, poverty alleviation, reservation, widow pension, ration card, housing etc.

Political participation and awareness: 62 percent women said they are not interested in politics. 71 percent women said they never got a newspaper at home. 57 percent women said they had never read a news paper. 46 percent women said they never discuss political issues with family and friends. Only 19 percent women knew which political party was in power in centre. 32 percent women knew which

political party was in power in Jaipur. 20 percent women knew that Vasundura Raje was the chief minister of Rajasthan. Only 25 percent women knew that Indira Gandhi has been prime minister of India. None of the women knew the position of Sonia Gandhi. Only 19 percent women knew that Manmohan Singh was the prime minister of India. 48 percent women had no idea about main political parties of Rajasthan. 75 percent women knew that Shiv Singh Gaur was the *sarpanch* of the village. 95 percent women knew the correct duration of *gram panchayat* (village council). 54 percent women were aware of corruption in politics. 69 percent women said they vote regularly while 28 percent said they vote occasionally. 66 percent said they vote because they wanted to while others said they voted due to inspiration of elders or husband. Most women said personal relations influence their voting behavior while others said its ability of the candidate, work done, caste, family and religion in that order. Only 31 percent women knew that *kumhars* have been granted reservation. Only five percent women said their family members are in politics. 49 percent women said they would like to contest election. 15 percent women had participated in campaigning for some candidate. 48 percent women said they have given donation to political candidates or political parties. Nine percent women said they have contacted political leaders however none of the women had participated in any strike or sit in. 15 percent had heard speech of some leader. Three percent women said they were in active politics.

Problems

1. Illiteracy: 65 percent women were illiterate and 31 percent had primary education.
2. Poverty: Family income of 74 percent women was less than Rs 5000 per month.
3. Lack of personal income: 77 percent women had no personal income remaining earned less than Rs 5000 per month.
4. Dual role of women: 74 percent women said women are unable to play major role in politics due to work while 17 percent said women are unable to play a major role in politics due to family responsibility.
5. Little interest in politics: 62 percent women said they are not interested in politics. 71 percent women said they never got a newspaper at home. Only 19 percent women knew which political party was in power in centre. 32 percent women knew which political party was in power in Jaipur. 20 percent women knew that Vasundura

Raje was the chief minister of Rajasthan.

6. Lack of information: 57 percent women said they had never read a news paper. 46 percent women said they never discuss political issues with family and friends. Only 19 percent women knew that Manmohan Singh was the prime minister of India. 48 percent women had no idea about main political parties of Rajasthan.

Bright Side

1. Enlightened view on women empowerment: 98 percent women said women should be educated. 75 percent women said women should work. 91 percent said women should vote and 83 percent women said women should fight elections. 75 percent women said women should have reservation in jobs and 79 percent women said women should have reservation in politics. 46 percent women said women should get reservation in parliament and state legislatures. 86 percent women said men of family view women political participation positively. 61 percent women said men of their caste view women political participation positively. Women said more work needs to be done for women in education, employment, poverty alleviation, reservation, widow pension, ration card, housing etc.
2. Awareness of local politics and issues: 75 percent women knew that Shiv Singh Gaur was the *sarpanch* of the village. 95 percent women knew the correct duration of *gram panchayat* (village council). 54 percent women were aware of corruption in politics.
3. Regular voters: 69 percent women said they vote regularly while 28 percent said they vote occasionally. 66 percent said they vote because they wanted to while others said they voted due

to inspiration of elders or husband. Most women said personal relations influence their voting behavior while others said its ability of the candidate, work done, caste, family and religion in that order.

Suggestion

1. Education.
2. Employment or business opportunities.
3. Development of infrastructure.
4. Gender equality.
5. End of violence.
6. End of criminalization.
7. Good law and order.
8. Equality in society.
9. Poverty alleviation.
10. Awareness campaigns.
11. Child care facilities.

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