

Identity Politics: A Conundrum of Objectification?

Arguably, in the general sense, there are sound and not so sound grounds that are used to justify the cabinet reshuffle by the ruling parties. Inducting legislators particularly from the marginalised castes even by the current ruling party at the centre is applauded on the grounds that the party is sensitive to the cause of social justice. Thus, for the observers, the ground for such induction is always already sound. But such induction also offers us an opportunity to raise certain broad points for consideration.

First, the induction of the legislators from lower caste and some Adivasi groups, on the face of it, may look less objectionable, particularly on the grounds of inclusionary democracy and an attempt to respond to the question of social justice. And yet, such efforts on the part of the ruling parties do reveal that the members from lower castes and Adivasis deserve the benefit of political attention only at the second instance and not the first. That is to say, they remain invisible at the very first opportunity when the formation of the government takes place. Second, the acknowledgement of the “competence” of these beneficiaries of induction does form part of the delayed assessment on the part of the ruling bosses who may think that such legislators possess necessary competence only as the secondary priority; priority that seems to be influenced more by the strategic value of these members rather than their competence, which is potentially available right from the moment these legislators make it to the central as well as state legislatures.

On a more charitable consideration, one may argue that the government has discovered the competence of the members of marginalised castes and communities but, as mentioned above, only as a secondary priority and not as the first choice when the government was formed at the first instance. Or the concerns for social justice for the marginalised can wait till such time that such posturing becomes strategically important for the government. Thus, social justice is reduced to the level of strategy rather than the cardinal principle that needs to be embodied in the very practice of democracy.

Such delayed recognition of the “competence” of the lower caste legislators tends to point out at the ruling elites’ rather tactful intention to accommodate these legislators in the formal power structure. This tactfulness is defined less by the stronger force of invitation and more by tactful intention. The initiative to invite the “lowered” caste members by the ruling party that took the reins of power in the early years of independent India, arguably,

was based on the acknowledgement of the universal calibre and competence of such members. Bhimrao Ambedkar is one outstanding example of such acknowledgement.

Ambedkar was not only well-versed in the theory and practice of governance but had the required ethical stamina to stay in the government as long as his principled politics was respected by the party which invited him to join the government. Thus, the invitation is different from the intention that is behind the tactful accommodation of the members who have been inducted in the recent government reshuffle.

The question that one has to raise is this: Is there an extraneous factor that can explain the hidden script of the cabinet induction of the members from the marginalised? Ironically, it is a mutual assumption that seems to guide the “intention” behind the inclusion in the cabinet. The ruling party assumes that the induction of such members would ensure the electoral support of the caste groups to which these members sociologically belong. The members also assume that their sociological ties with the group would enable them to bargain for a berth in the ministry. The politics of such assumptions gives rise to the following maxim: What is social, by political mediation, becomes essentially individual and what is individual is approximated to the social. Put differently, lower-caste elites use collective experience of comprehensive marginalisation of the social group as a plank to seek opportunity in the system of patronage controlled by the dominant parties. While the common members of such social groups get tied up to these lower-caste leaders through the logic of identitarian politics. The framework of mutual assumption leads to a conundrum of objectification.

On the conundrum of objectification, the inducted members allow themselves to be objectified by the dominant party. In turn, the members of such groups seek to objectify the constituency to which they socially belong.

One can overcome the impasse of identity politics possibly by the enlightened critical insider, an insider who does not participate in their objectification and neither do they tolerate the objectification of lower-caste leaders who tend to exist on the conundrum of objectification. The critical political consciousness will not only stop the instrumentalisation of their voting force but, more importantly, will question the conundrum of objectification on which their “representatives” tend to survive.

