

Chapter- 4

Gender Religion and Caste

STUDY NOTES

Gender and Politics

The gender division tends to be understood as natural and unchangeable. It is not based on biology but on social expectations and stereotypes.

Public/Private Division

The result of this division of labour is that though women constitute half of humanity, their role in public life, especially politics, is minimal in most societies. Earlier, only men were allowed to participate in public affairs, vote and contest for public offices. Gradually the gender issue was raised in politics. It demanded to enhance the political and legal status of women and improve their educational and career opportunities. The movements which were raised by women to get equality in personal and family life are called **Feminist movements**.

The political expression of gender division and political mobilisation helped to improve women's role in public life. As India is a male-dominated, PATRIARCHAL society, women face disadvantage, discrimination and oppression in various ways:

1. The literacy rate among women is only 54 per cent compared with 76 per cent among men.
2. On an average, an Indian woman works one hour more than an average man every day and yet much of her work is not paid. The Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 provides that equal wages should be paid to equal work.
3. In India, sex-selective abortion led to a decline in child sex ratio (number of girl children per thousand boys).
4. Urban areas have become particularly unsafe for women.

Women's Political Representation

Issues related to women are not given adequate attention. This has led many feminists and women's movements to the conclusion that unless women control power, their problems will not get adequate attention. In India, the percentage of

elected women members in Lok Sabha touched 12 percent of its total strength for the first time in 2014. Their share in the state assemblies is less than 5 per cent.

One way to solve women's problem is to have a fair proportion of women in the elected bodies. In Panchayats and Municipalities, one-third of seats in local government bodies are reserved for women. Now there are more than 10 lakh elected women representatives in rural and urban local bodies. Gender division is an example that some form of social division needs to be expressed in politics. This also shows that disadvantaged groups do benefit when social divisions become a political issue.

Religion, Communalism and Politics

Religion

The division based on religious differences are often expressed in the field of politics. In India, there are followers of different religions. People should be able to express in politics their needs, interests and demands as a member of a religious community.

Communalism

The use of religion in politics is called communal politics:

1. When beliefs of one religion are presented as superior to those of other religions
2. When the demands of one religious group are formed in opposition to another
3. When state power is used to establish the domination of one religious group over the rest.

Communalism can take various forms in politics as mentioned below:

1. The most common expression of communalism is in everyday beliefs involves religious prejudices, stereotypes of religious communities and belief in the superiority of one's religion over other religions.
2. A communal mind often leads to a quest for political dominance of one's own religious community.
3. Political mobilisation on religious lines involves the use of sacred symbols, religious leaders, emotional appeal and plain fear in order to bring the followers of one religion together in the political arena.

4. Sometimes communalism takes its most ugly form of communal violence, riots and massacre. India and Pakistan suffered some of the worst communal riots at the time of the Partition.

Secular State

India is a secular state. Some of the features of India Secular states are:

1. There is no official religion for the Indian state.
2. The Constitution provides to all individuals and communities freedom to profess, practice and propagate any religion, or not to follow any.
3. The Constitution prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion.
4. The Constitution allows the state to intervene in the matters of religion in order to ensure equality within religious communities. For example, it bans untouchability.

Caste and Politics

Caste and politics both have some positive and some negative aspects. Let's look at them:

Caste Inequalities

In most societies, occupations are passed on from one generation to another. Caste system is an extreme form of this. In this system, members of the same caste, the group were supposed to form a social community that practiced the same or similar occupation, married within the caste group and did not eat with members from other caste groups.

With economic development, large scale urbanisation, growth of literacy and education, occupational mobility and the weakening of the position of landlords in the villages, the old notions of Caste Hierarchy are breaking down. The Constitution of India prohibited any caste-based discrimination and laid the foundations of policies to reverse the injustices of the caste system.

Caste in Politics

Caste can take various forms in politics:

1. When parties choose their candidate or when governments are formed, political parties usually take care that representatives of different castes and tribes find a place in it.

2. Political parties and candidates in elections make appeals to caste sentiment to win the elections.
3. To gain support political parties raise caste-based issues during elections to get political support, as 'one man one vote' system or adult franchise has made the voter very powerful.
4. Political Parties have made people belonging to lower castes conscious about their rights to vote and their powers.

During elections caste matters, but it is not everything. There are many other factors that impact the elections. People's assessment of the performance of the government and the popularity rating of the leaders are considered during elections. Just have a look at the below points:

1. Candidates and parties need to win the confidence of more than one caste and community to win elections.
2. No party wins the votes of all the voters of a caste or community.
3. Some voters have more than one candidate from their caste while many voters have no candidate from their caste.
4. The ruling party and the sitting MP or MLA keep changing whenever fresh elections take place.

Politics in caste

Politics also influence the caste system and caste identities by bringing them into the political arena. Here are a few points that support this;

1. Each caste group tries to become bigger by incorporating within it neighbouring castes or sub-castes.
2. Various caste groups are formed with other castes or communities and then they enter into a dialogue and negotiation.
3. New kinds of caste groups have come up in the political arena like 'backward' and 'forward' caste groups.

Thus, caste plays different kinds of roles in politics. In some cases, caste division leads to tensions, conflict and even violence.