

The Role of Caste in Indian Politics

Dr. Sunita Choudhary^{1*} & Garima Gupta²

¹Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Vivek P.G. Mahavidhyalaya, Kalwar, Jaipur.

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Vivek P.G. Mahavidhyalaya, Kalwar, Jaipur.

*Corresponding Author: sunitac.091981@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Caste has been an extremely significant and influential element in Indian politics. From the pre-independence period to the current democratic setup, caste has impacted political behavior, electoral processes, policy-making, and leadership structures. This research paper analyzes the role of caste in the historical context of caste structure, Dalit movements, the Mandal Commission, caste-based political parties, and the contemporary political scenario. The study examines how caste has become a medium for political participation, empowerment, and representation, while also analyzing how casteism challenges democracy.

Keywords: Caste, Indian Politics, Elections, Representation, Mandal Commission, Dalit Movement, Casteism, Empowerment, Social Justice, Democracy.

Introduction

India is a land of diversity, where social elements such as religion, language, region, and caste significantly influence the social structure. Among these, caste is a dominant factor that not only affects the social system but is deeply embedded in the political process as well. The role of caste in Indian politics has changed over time, but its influence has never diminished.

On one hand, caste has provided the marginalized and backward classes with a medium for political representation and empowerment. On the other hand, caste-based politics has also led to divisions and conflicts within society. The purpose of this study is to understand the complexity of this duality by exploring the deep interrelation between caste and politics.

Need for the Study

Understanding the role of caste in the development of Indian democracy is crucial because it not only influences election outcomes but also directs policy-making, resource distribution, social justice, and the direction of representation. In contemporary politics, alliances based on caste, voting behavior, and the strategies of political parties are clear indicators that caste continues to play a decisive role.

Objectives

The main objectives of this research are:

- To analyze the historical development of caste in Indian politics.
- To understand the political role of caste in different time periods.
- To assess the extent to which caste-based politics has contributed to empowerment.

- To analyze the contradictions between casteism and democracy.
- To propose potential solutions to make politics more inclusive and just.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the role of caste within the socio-political context of India. It includes pre-independence caste structure, constitution-making, reservation policies, the Mandal Commission, contemporary electoral strategies, and social movements. Although the study is limited to India, a brief comparative analysis of some foreign democracies will also be included.

Research Methodology

This research is based on historical, descriptive, and analytical methods. It relies on secondary sources such as books, government documents, commission reports, Election Commission data, research papers, and contemporary news sources.

Historical Background of Caste and Social Structure

Origin of the Caste System

The foundation of India's caste system lies in the Varna system, which traces back to the Vedic era. The Rigveda divided society into four varnas—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. This division was initially based on one's work and qualities, but over time, it became a rigid, birth-based structure. This social stability eventually turned into strict casteism.

This caste system not only regulated social but also economic and cultural activities. Each caste was assigned a specific occupation, which eliminated social mobility.

- **Caste and Social Identity**

Caste has influenced an individual's social identity, marriage alliances, food habits, occupations, and residential choices. It not only upheld social hierarchy but also created social distance based on the principles of purity and pollution.

The status one acquired by birth within a caste led to social inequality—where upper castes enjoyed privileges, and lower castes were pushed to the margins.

- **Caste Conditions in Medieval India**

During the medieval period, the caste system became even more complex. The Bhakti movement partially challenged caste discrimination, but feudal structures and religious orthodoxies reinforced caste boundaries.

Even in this period, social responsibilities and rights were defined based on caste. Brahmins and Kshatriyas retained control over power and knowledge.

- **Colonial Period: Caste and Census**

During British rule, the caste system was institutionalized. The colonial censuses, starting in 1871, formalized the classification of castes. This allowed British rulers to deepen social divisions under their "Divide and Rule" policy.

British governance used legal and administrative policies to maintain caste distinctions. Simultaneously, caste-based organizations and consciousness also developed during this period, laying the foundation for caste-based politics.

- **Caste, Religion, and Regional Diversity**

India, being a multi-religious and multicultural nation, shows regional variations in caste structures. The caste hierarchy differs between South and North India. Moreover, caste-like structures are also present among Sikh, Muslim, and Christian communities.

Despite these variations, the influence of caste is deeply embedded across the country, affecting political representation, economic opportunities, and social status.

Caste in the Freedom Struggle

Colonial Rule and Caste Consciousness

During British rule, caste became a formal administrative and statistical category. Caste-based censuses, job distribution, and access to education were all influenced by caste. This institutional

discrimination gave rise to social movements and political awareness, making caste an underlying element of the Indian independence struggle.

Gandhi and the Caste System

Mahatma Gandhi acknowledged the caste system as a social evil but supported the *Varna* system as a tool for social harmony. Through the **Harijan Movement**, he campaigned for compassion and reforms for the untouchables. Although he did not advocate for the complete eradication of caste, Gandhi aimed to eliminate caste-based discrimination and foster peaceful coexistence.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Perspective

Dr. Ambedkar strongly opposed the caste system. In his work *Annihilation of Caste*, he asserted that **equality and liberty are mere illusions as long as caste exists**.

He advocated for:

- Education and representation of Dalits
- Separate electorates for depressed classes
- Political and social reform as more important than mere political freedom

He believed political power alone couldn't ensure social equality in a caste-based society.

Poona Pact (1932)

In 1932, a significant compromise was reached between Gandhi and Ambedkar — the Poona Pact. It replaced separate electorates for Scheduled Castes with reserved seats within joint electorates.

While Ambedkar was not fully satisfied, the pact became a historic step toward political representation and social unity for Dalits.

Caste-Based Social Reform Movements

Several reform movements challenged caste discrimination parallel to the freedom struggle:

- **Phule Movement (Maharashtra):** Jyotiba Phule demanded education and rights for Shudras and Ati-Shudras.
- **Nadar Movement (South India):** Lower castes formed organizations to elevate their social status.
- **Periyar's Self-Respect Movement (Tamil Nadu):** Strong opposition to Brahminism and caste.
- **Dalit and Sikh Movements:** Attempted to dismantle caste from within religion.

Political Participation of Dalits and Backward Classes

During British rule, Dalits and backward communities also organized independently of the Indian National Congress:

- All India Depressed Classes Federation
- Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha (1924)

These groups demanded social and political rights, laying the foundation for inclusive citizenship in free India.

Caste and Politics In Independent India

Constitution and Caste Justice

The **Indian Constitution** incorporated the ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity to abolish caste discrimination.

- Article 15 & 17: Abolished untouchability and outlawed caste-based discrimination
- Article 46: Directed the State to promote the interests of socially and educationally backward classes

This was a historic step toward ensuring social justice.

Development of Reservation Policy

Reservation was introduced as a **constitutional remedy** to ensure representation for disadvantaged groups.

- Initially, SCs and STs were the only beneficiaries.
- In the 1980s, following the Mandal Commission report, OBCs were also granted 27% reservation.
- This broadened the idea of **social justice** and institutionalized affirmative action in India.

Mandal Commission and Social Revolution

- Formed in 1979 under PM Morarji Desai, chaired by B.P. Mandal
- Recommended 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs and education
- In 1990, PM V.P. Singh implemented the recommendations, sparking massive protests and nationwide debate

Despite resistance, it led to the political rise of OBCs and redefined India's social justice framework.

Rise of Caste-Based Political Parties

In independent India, numerous regional and national political parties emerged based on caste identity:

- Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP): A symbol of Dalit political empowerment.
- Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD): Representing Yadavs and other backward classes.
- Samajwadi Party (SP): Advocating for OBC and Muslim coalitions.
- AIADMK and DMK (Tamil Nadu): Born from the anti-Brahmin movement.

These parties built strong vote banks on the foundation of caste identity and succeeded in attaining power both at the state and national levels.

Caste Polarization and Coalition Politics

Caste-based vote banks became the primary tool of electoral politics. Political parties began prioritizing caste equations in candidate selection, campaign strategies, and manifestos.

- Alliances were formed through "caste cocktails," such as the Muslim-Yadav combination.
- Caste arithmetic influenced everything from policy formulation to resource allocation.

Beyond Reservation – The Question of Representation

Although reservations provided representation to marginalized groups, the debate continued: Can reservation alone ensure social justice?

- Political decentralization through Panchayati Raj institutions.
- Women's reservation, including its caste-wise distribution.
- Focus on not just representation but also participation in decision-making roles.

Contemporary Caste Politics

In the 21st century, caste politics has taken new forms:

- The rise of "soft casteism", where caste is not overtly mentioned but subtly drives strategies.
- Caste identity and symbols are increasingly visible on social media platforms.
- Caste has a latent influence in issues like citizenship laws (NRC-CAA).
- EWS reservation granted to upper castes—though not caste-based, it sparked caste-related discourse.

Elections and Caste

Caste and Democracy: A Contradiction

Democracy is founded on the principle of **equal rights for all citizens**, but in India, electoral politics has made caste a dominant determinant.

Caste-based polarization of voters, candidate selection, and election promises distort the democratic process.

This creates a paradox—while democracy aims to be inclusive, caste continues to fragment it.

Voting Behavior and Caste

In India, voting behavior is often influenced by caste identity, group interests, and collective decisions.

- Voters frequently act under the influence of their caste groups.
- This tendency is stronger in villages and small towns.
- Caste leaders are often seen as messiahs who protect the rights and resources of their community.

Examples

- In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, castes like Yadavs, Kurmis, Jatavs, Brahmins, and Rajputs have significant political influence.
- In Maharashtra, Marathas dominate, while in Tamil Nadu, Vanniyars and Dalits hold decisive vote banks.

Candidate Selection and Caste Equations

Political parties give priority to caste equations while selecting candidates:

- Tickets are distributed based on caste composition of the constituency.
- Winning potential depends on caste demographics and social dynamics.
- Sometimes, grand alliances like the "Mahagathbandhan" (Grand Alliance) or "Social Justice Front" are formed based on caste coalitions.

Caste-Based Election Promises

Political parties tailor their manifestos to appeal to specific castes:

- Promise of expanding reservations
- Demand for caste-based census
- Launching special welfare schemes
- Politicization of **caste symbols** (e.g., statues and anniversaries of Raja Suheldev, Sant Ravidas)

Caste Analysis of Political Parties

- **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP):** Traditionally considered an upper-caste party, it has increasingly given representation to OBCs and Dalits.
- **Indian National Congress:** Tries to maintain caste balance, but its traditional vote base has weakened.
- **Samajwadi Party (SP), RJD, JD(U):** Operate largely through OBC-Muslim alliances.
- **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP):** The primary face of Dalit-centric politics.
- **AIADMK, DMK:** Regional caste-based support in Tamil Nadu.

Panchayat Elections and Caste Dynamics

Caste plays an even more prominent role in local body elections:

- Candidate selection, support, and opposition are all caste-driven.
- Gram Panchayat and Block elections frequently witness caste-based rivalries.
- The intersection of women's reservation and caste representation creates further complexities.

Role of the Election Commission and Caste

The Election Commission of India prohibits asking for votes on the basis of caste, but in practice, caste continues to influence elections.

- The Commission identifies sensitive areas where caste violence is a concern.
- Caste-based booth capturing, fraud, and voter intimidation are common issues.

Caste and the Politics of Social Justice

The Concept of Social Justice

Social justice means ensuring equal rights and opportunities to all sections of society, especially those historically oppressed, exploited, and excluded. In India, this concept is closely tied to caste.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar described social justice as the soul of Indian democracy, advocating education, organization, and struggle as the means to achieve it.

Caste-Based Policies and Schemes

To achieve social justice, the government has implemented various caste-based policies:

- Reservation system (for SC, ST, OBC)
- Educational scholarships
- Special coaching and housing schemes
- Backward Classes and Dalit Commissions
- EWS reservation for economically weaker sections in upper castes

Movements for Social Justice

Several mass movements emerged in support of caste-based social justice:

- Mandal Commission movement (1990): Sparked nationwide protests and support for OBC reservations.
- Dalit Panthers (1972): A militant Dalit rights movement in Maharashtra.
- OBC awareness movements in Bihar, UP, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu.
- Savarna movements: Upper-caste mobilization in favor of EWS reservations (2019).

Social Justice vs. Merit Debate

A recurring debate in India questions whether reservation policies compromise merit:

- One side argues that reservations dilute merit and quality.
- The other contends that true merit cannot exist without equal opportunity, which caste prevents.
- The judiciary has tried to strike a balance, such as capping reservation at 50%.

Social Justice and Women Empowerment

Women from marginalized castes face a dual burden of caste and gender discrimination:

- 33% reservation for women in Panchayats
- Women's Reservation Bill in Parliament and State Assemblies
- Special schemes for SC/ST/OBC women

Judiciary and Social Justice

Indian judiciary has upheld social justice as part of the basic structure of the Constitution.

- Indira Sawhney case (1992): Validated Mandal Commission recommendations.
- MP and Maratha reservation cases: Reinforced that reservations should be based on social and educational backwardness, not political motives.
- EWS reservation was also upheld by the Supreme Court, introducing a new dimension to the concept of social justice.

Modern Challenges and the Way Forward

Key challenges to social justice include:

- Misuse of reservation for political gains
- Poor implementation of creamy layer concept
- Controversy over caste-based census
- Changing nature of caste in urban contexts
- Persistent inequality in education, health, and employment

Social justice politics should not be limited to reservations alone—it must be expanded to include inclusive development, quality education, equal economic opportunities, and awareness campaigns.

Caste, Media, and Civil Society

Media and the Discourse on Caste

Media is considered the fourth pillar of democracy in India, but its role regarding caste-related issues has been mixed:

- Selective reporting often delayed acknowledgment of caste atrocities.
- Mainstream media has frequently excluded the voices of Dalits and backward communities.
- Journalists from dominant castes often reflect their own class perspectives in coverage.

Dalit Journalism and Alternative Media

A new discourse called 'Dalit Journalism' has emerged as a response to caste-based media bias:

- Platforms like Round Table India, Dalit Camera, and The Mooknayak have provided a voice to the marginalized.
- These platforms promote open discussions on caste, social justice, and Dalit oppression.
- This new media discourse has become instrumental in challenging caste inequalities.

Social Media and Caste Identity

Social media has given caste-based communities a **digital space** to express their identity and fight for their rights:

- Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram host caste-based pages, groups, and movements.
- Hashtags like #DalitLivesMatter, #JaiBhim, and #CastelsNotDead have gained global recognition.
- This has led to digital empowerment beyond the limitations of traditional media.

Media Coverage of Caste Atrocities

Media plays a crucial role in highlighting caste atrocities, though it often displays bias:

- In the Hathras case (2020), media silence on the victim's caste and police actions raised serious questions.
- After Rohith Vemula's suicide (2016), demands grew for media to highlight the struggles of Dalit students.

The role of media remains dual: while it exposes caste-based oppression, it also sometimes displays prejudice towards specific castes.

Role of Civil Society

Civil society, including NGOs, intellectuals, activists, academicians, and students, plays a significant role in promoting caste equality:

- NGOs work on education, health, employment, and legal aid for Dalits and backward classes.
- Several organizations have filed Public Interest Litigations (PILs) to ensure legal support for social justice.

Intellectual Discourse on Caste

Prominent thinkers and writers in fields like literature, politics, and philosophy have enriched the caste discourse:

- Intellectuals like Ganesh Devy, Kancha Ilaiah, Omprakash Valmiki, Sharad Pawar, and R.S. Kasbe have provided diverse perspectives.
- The rise of Dalit literature has voiced the pain of oppression and triggered a literary revolution.

Conclusion

Caste has not only shaped India's social structure but has deeply influenced its politics. This research paper explored the role of caste in Indian politics through a wide lens of historical, social, electoral, and policy-based analysis.

Key Findings:

- Caste has evolved into a political resource beyond social identity.
- Caste has played a decisive role in elections—from candidate selection to manifesto promises and voter behavior.
- Media and civil society have brought new dimensions to caste discourse, though mainstream media still often excludes marginalized voices.
- Social justice through caste-based policies has improved opportunities and empowerment but has also led to misuse and growing inequality.
- For democracy to be inclusive and just, caste must be used as a means of empowerment and equality, not merely as a tool for political power.

To achieve this:

- We need to integrate education, economic development, legal empowerment, and social awareness as a holistic approach.

Future Directions

- Ensure transparency in caste census
- Periodic review of reservation policies
- Promote digital empowerment and new caste consciousness
- Strengthen civil society participation

Caste discourse must move beyond power politics and focus on building an inclusive and egalitarian society.

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Dr. Sunita Choudhary & Garima Gupta: The Role of Caste in Indian Politics

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