

Caste and Identity Politics in India: Exploring the Role of Caste in Political Contestation

Subhra Pratim Roy^{1,*}

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between caste and identity politics in India, focusing on the role of caste in political contestation. Caste, deeply ingrained in Indian society, has historically shaped social, economic, and political dynamics. The paper delves into the intersection of caste and identity politics, highlighting how caste-based identities influence political mobilization and electoral outcomes. It examines the ways in which political parties in India have exploited caste affiliations to garner support and consolidate power. Additionally, the abstract analyses the impact of caste-based reservations and affirmative action policies on political contestation and social mobility. The study draws upon theoretical frameworks to provide insights into the complex interplay between caste and identity politics, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities it presents for Indian democracy. By exploring the multifaceted dimensions of caste in political contestation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate socio-political landscape in India.

Keywords: Caste, identity politics, political contestation

INTRODUCTION

For many centuries, caste in India has been the primary distinction between social classes. It is characterised by rigid structures and strict limits. Given the many successful political mobilisations based on caste identity, caste is also a crucial instrument for political analysis.

Over the past few decades, India has observed the emergence of culturally, geographically, and historically distinct regions within its states. The aforementioned areas, characterized by pronounced divisions along ethnic, communal, caste, and other social-political lines, hold considerable importance in the developing political milieu. They represent the domain where forthcoming political and economic determinations will be enacted and rescinded (Hegde, 2020).

The reconfiguration of Indian politics has resulted from the introduction of democratic processes. The most significant of these processes has been the assertion of identity politics. Identity Politics has gained significant prominence in Indian politics in recent years. The escalation of identity politics in India has been fuelled by the emergence of diverse religious identities, linguistic groups, ethnic conflicts, and the rise of low strata.

*Author for Correspondence

Subhra Pratim Roy
E-mail: subhrapratim94@gmail.com

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, India

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OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the influence of caste-based identities on political mobilization and electoral outcomes in India.
2. To analyse the strategies employed by political parties in India to exploit caste affiliations for garnering support and consolidating power.
3. To examine the impact of caste-based reservations and affirmative action policies on political contestation and social mobility in India.

These objectives aim to provide insights into the complex interplay between caste and identity politics, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities it presents for Indian democracy.

CASTE

The issue of caste-based discrimination and oppression has been a persistent and harmful feature of Indian society. In the period following India's independence, the intersection of caste with politics has enabled formerly oppressed caste-groups to attain political autonomy and acknowledgement. Additionally, this intersection has brought attention to the potential of caste as a political asset. The identification of a contradiction was achieved through the elucidation of disparities between the viewpoints on caste held by Ambedkar and the Mandal Commission. The former individual formulated the policy of reservations or protective discrimination with the aim of abolishing untouchability as a social and political institution in India, while the latter individual regarded caste as a crucial political and racial differentiation (Patnaik, 2017) [8].

The caste system is a social stratification system that is founded on the principles of purity and pollution, hierarchy, and differentiation. This system has been a source of oppression for the Shudras and outcastes, who have been subjected to the stigma of ritual impurity and have lived in conditions of extreme poverty, illiteracy, and political disenfranchisement, despite the possibility of social mobility. The genesis of confrontational identity politics based on caste can be traced back to the issue of providing subjugated caste groups with state support in the form of protective discrimination. The consolidation of group identity predicated on caste, which has been reinforced by the rise of political awareness surrounding caste-based identities, is formalized by political parties that espouse caste-based affiliations and purport to defend and protect the welfare of particular groups, including castes (Hegde, 2020) [5].

IDENTITY POLITICS

As per certain scholars, the accentuation of one's identity on the basis of a fundamental trait, such as race, language, religion, sexual orientation, gender, or caste, is chiefly a contemporary occurrence. This is believed to serve as a potent antidote to anonymity in the otherwise impersonal modern society. The phrase "pattern of belonging, search for comfort, approach to community" is used to describe it.

According to one definition, identity politics "signify a broad range of political activity and theorizing founded in the common experiences of injustice of members of particular social groups." The term refers to a set of political endeavors that seek to redress the historical marginalization of groups based on defining characteristics of their self-identity, such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, caste status, and the like, with the goal of reversing their exclusion and denigration. Identity politics seeks to attain empowerment, representation, and acknowledgement for social groups by asserting the unique traits that distinguish them from others, and utilizing those traits to establish selfhood and identity predicated on differentiation rather than parity (Narayanan et.al, 2023) [7].

There have been conflicts in India over the assertiveness and divergent claims made by various identity groups. These conflicts have frequently been fought along lines of geography, religion, language (including dialect), caste, and community. The new electoral representation model, which has given formerly politically inactive groups and areas a voice, has given voice to these struggles and brought the local and regional into foreground.

The contrast between or among identity groups and areas has grown increasingly distinct as a result of a more truly representative democracy.

DEMOCRATIZATION AND IMPEDIMENTS

Caste-based identity politics have played a dual role in Indian society and politics, which is one of the obstacles to democracy. On the one hand, it has helped Indian society become more democratic by giving formerly excluded groups a voice and representation in politics. On the other hand, the

development of caste-based groups has also been hampered by the politicization of caste. While caste-based political parties assert that they represent and defend the interests of certain caste identities, they have made it difficult to establish more expansive, inclusive groups that cut across caste lines. In recent years, there has been a tremendous improvement in the democratization of caste-based Indian society. For castes who have been historically marginalized, this has boosted their social mobility, access to education, and economic prospects. Caste identity assertion in politics has aided in dismantling obstacles and spreading awareness of the injustices and oppression experienced by particular caste groups. The development of caste-based organizations faces obstacles notwithstanding the good developments brought about by the liberalization of India's caste-based society. While caste-based political mobilization has been effective in securing representation and privileges for particular castes, it has frequently resulted in fragmentation and restricted collective action outside of caste lines. The development of larger social movements and alliances required for systemic social change might be hampered by the focus on individual caste interests. The full realization of a caste-free society is further complicated by the ingrained prejudices and stereotypes connected to caste (Chaddha, 2018) [1].

CASTE, IDENTITY POLITICS AND POLITICAL CONTESTATION

In India, electoral politics are still heavily influenced by caste. Caste-based coalitions and alliances are frequently formed by political parties in order to motivate people and win support. Voting patterns and preferences depending on a person's caste have an impact on elections, legislative body makeup, and governmental policy.

The development of caste-based coalitions and alliances reflects the general ambitions and needs of particular caste groups. These coalitions use their size as leverage in negotiations for political influence, representation, and the satisfaction of caste-specific goals. Alliances based on caste have the capacity to affect national and state policy priorities and agendas. Caste dynamics have a significant impact on the agendas and policies of the government. When drafting policies for social justice, welfare, and development, political parties and decision-makers must take caste-based societal realities and ambitions into account. For efficient governance and inclusive policy-making, it is crucial to comprehend the complexities of caste-based identities and how they intersect with other social elements (Deshpande, 2016) [2].

Politics of religious identity play a significant role in Indian political contestation. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, and other religious communities are among those found in the nation. In an effort to appeal to the interests and sentiments of certain religious groups, political parties frequently mobilize voters along religious lines. The political climate in various places has been formed by intercommunal strife and disputes based on religious identities.

Political contestation also heavily incorporates linguistic identity. India is a linguistically varied nation, with several different states speaking hundreds of different languages and dialects. Regional parties that stress language and culture have formed, calling for increased regional autonomy, language rights, and recognition. Regional parties that have supported linguistic and regional goals include the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu. (Guha, 2017) [2].

In India, gender-based identity politics have also become more popular. In order to promote gender equality, women's rights movements and organizations have contested patriarchal conventions and pushed for political representation. Women's safety, empowerment, and gender justice have elevated to the forefront of political debate.

TRANSGENDER ACTIVISM-EXTENDING HORIZON OF IDENTITY POLITICS

The political engagement of transgender collectives in India presents a novel facet to the political landscape. Conventional political debates often revolve around matters such as social hierarchy based on caste or economic status, which primarily revolve around the distribution and allocation of power.

However, transgender activism encourages a more comprehensive analysis of the fundamental components of political structures and processes. The act of exploring and reflecting upon the significance and extent of political traditions creates opportunities for the advancement of democratic dialogues. Transgender groups in India are challenging the current legal and political landscape by advocating for recognition and inclusion, resulting in a range of consequences. The political engagement of transgender collectives serves to facilitate a reinterpretation of democratic customs in India, by establishing a connection between the country's extensive historical legacy and its contemporary progressive outlook. This reinterpretation conceptualizes democratic societies as a "imagined community" that prospers and develops in a cohesive manner through the aspirations and comprehension of its citizenry (Gupta, 2022) [4].

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 was passed, marking a significant victory for India. As a result of this law, India is now one of the nations that recognizes transgender status legally and offers a framework for changing one's gender identity. An important step in ensuring the interests of transgender groups in India is the political legitimacy given to transgender people by the Indian state. With this proactive strategy, the Indian government takes a significant role in the social activity of transgender organizations (ILGA, 2020) [6].

CONCLUSION

Political contestation and the larger socio-political environment in India have been significantly impacted by the interaction between caste and identity politics. Indian society is heavily influenced by caste, which has historically influenced social, economic, and political dynamics. By providing previously silenced people a voice and recognition, the politicisation of caste has both democratised Indian society and slowed the growth of more expansive, inclusive social movements. The role of caste, along with other elements like religion, language, and gender, in influencing political mobilisation and electoral outcomes, has increased in recent years with the growth of identity politics. Voting patterns, parliamentary representation, and policy priorities have all been influenced by caste-based alliances and affiliations. Despite the fact that caste-based reservations and affirmative action laws have aided in social mobility and the acknowledgement of oppressed caste groups, difficulties still exist in promoting cohesive group action across caste boundaries. The political environment is given a new dimension by the activism of transgender groups, which questions accepted beliefs and calls for acceptance and inclusion. In general, understanding the complicated socio-political fabric of India and working towards a more inclusive and egalitarian society require a grasp of the complex dynamics of caste and identity politics.

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