

A STUDY ON CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIAN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

In Indian culture, the term "caste" refers to a social class whose membership is mostly defined by birth. With the spread of Hinduism, this caste structure became entrenched and hereditary. The Laws of Manu (Manusmitri) proclaim the rule and complete impunity of upper castes while making reference to the impurity and servitude of outcasts. The lowest caste members are told that their standing in the caste system results from sins committed in a previous life. For offences like becoming literate or insulting a member of a dominating caste, harsh punishments including torture and death are intended. The most trustworthy text of Hinduism, Manusmitri, proposes extreme inequity as the governing principle of social affairs and justifies social exclusion. Caste still very much matters to Indian citizens even in the modern world, though one must point out that different groups of citizens have different reasons for maintaining the system of caste. Even in the present era, caste is still very important to Indian citizens, although it should be noted that different groups of citizens have varied motivations for upholding the caste system. In order to subjugate the lower castes and preserve their dominance, the upper castes aim to keep caste alive. The politics of ideology and the politics of action can be distinguished in every emerging political system. Some of the most crucial elements of the nature and course of political change in such a system can be revealed by analyzing the reciprocal activity between the two.

The caste system is one of the oldest social institutions in India, deeply influencing social, economic, and political life. Traditionally based on birth, caste determines social status, occupation, and access to resources. Even after independence and the adoption of the Constitution, caste continues to shape Indian politics in significant ways. In a democratic setup like India, political parties often rely on caste identities to mobilize voters. This has led to the emergence of caste-based politics, where communities vote collectively based on shared caste interests.

(I) OBJECT & SCOPE OF THE STUDY

• **Object:** To analyze the intricate relationship between caste and politics in India, identifying how caste identities influence voting behavior, candidate selection, policy-making, and political mobilization.

• **Scope:** The study covers the period post-independence, with a specific focus on the rise of lower-caste politics, the role of political parties in leveraging caste identities, and the dynamics of reservation politics (Mandal Commission). It spans both rural (traditional)

and urban (modern) political settings across India, including state-level regional dynamics.

(II) RESEARCH PROBLEM/ RESEARCH STATEMENT

The core research problem lies in the irony that while the Indian constitution envisions an egalitarian, democratic, and secular society, politics in India has become heavily "caste-ridden". The problem is defined by the paradox of "modern democracy" (adult franchise) using the "traditional institution" (caste) as a mechanism for political mobilization, which often enhances representation for lower castes but simultaneously fosters divisive, identity-based politics.

(III) RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How has the caste system transformed from a social system of stratification into a tool of political mobilization in India?
2. What is the influence of caste on voting behavior and candidate selection by political parties?
3. To what extent has the political empowerment of lower castes changed the power dynamics between dominant and marginalized castes?
4. Has the intersection of caste and politics contributed to social justice or fostered conflict?

(IV) HYPOTHESIS

- **H1:** Caste remains the primary determinant of voting behavior and political mobilization in India, regardless of urbanization or economic development.
- **H2:** The politicization of caste has resulted in both the empowerment of marginalized communities and the rise of sectarian conflicts.
- **H3:** Political parties in India leverage caste identities to create "vote banks" rather than focusing solely on developmental agendas.

(V) METHODOLOGY

- **Research Design:** Descriptive and analytical, incorporating a qualitative approach with elements of empirical observation.

- **Data Collection:** Primarily secondary data, including literature reviews of works by scholars like Rajni Kothari and M.N. Srinivas, analysis of electoral data from the Election Commission of India, academic journals, books, and reports on caste politics.

- **Analysis Methods:** Comparative study of voter behavior in different Indian states and analysis of the caste composition of legislative bodies (Lok Sabha/Vidhan Sabha).

(VI) LIMITATIONS

- **Data Scarcity:** A comprehensive, country-wide caste-based census is not available, requiring reliance on older data (e.g., 1931 census or 2011 SECC data) for demographic calculations.

- **Regional Variation:** The role of caste differs significantly between rural and urban areas, and across different Indian states.

- **Complexity:** The distinction between caste, class, and economic interest is often blurred, making it difficult to isolate the "pure" impact of caste.

(VII) SCHEME OF THE STUDY

1. **Introduction:** Definitions, evolution of the caste system, and theoretical framework.

2. **Theoretical Framework of Caste in Politics:** Traditional vs. Modern roles, theories by MN Srinivas (Dominant Caste) and Rajni Kothari (Politicization of Caste).

3. **Caste in Electoral Politics:** Candidate selection, voting behaviour, and campaign strategies.

4. **Reservation and Political Empowerment:** Impact of Mandal Commission and SC/ST representation.

5. **Caste Conflicts and Social Justice:** Case studies of caste violence and empowerment movements.

6. **Conclusion:** Summary of findings and recommendations.

(VIII) LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Rajni Kothari (Caste in Indian Politics):** Argues that politics and caste are mutually dependent, where caste becomes a "vote bank" for politicians.
- **M.N. Srinivas:** Highlights the concept of the "dominant caste" and how they maintain power through numerical strength and landed property.
- **Rudolph and Rudolph (The Modernity of Tradition):** Argues that the Indian caste system has adapted to modern democracy, using traditional structures to achieve modern goals.
- **Modern Studies (2020–2026):** Highlight the increasing role of Dalit movements and the "commandal" (caste+hindutva) politics in contemporary India

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CASTE SYSTEM

The caste system in India originated from the ancient Varna system, which divided society into four categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Initially, this division was based on occupation and was flexible in nature. However, over time, it became rigid and hereditary, leading to the formation of thousands of sub-castes (jatis). During the medieval period, caste distinctions became more pronounced, with strict rules governing social interactions, marriage, and occupation. Lower castes and "untouchables" faced severe discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society.

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND RESERVATION POLICIES

The Indian Constitution provides a strong framework to ensure equality and social justice. Articles 14 to 18 guarantee the right to equality, prohibit discrimination, and abolish untouchability under Article 17. To address historical disadvantages, the Constitution provides for reservation policies. Articles 15(4) and 16(4) allow the State to make special

provisions for socially and educationally backward classes, including SCs, STs, and OBCs. Political reservations are provided under Articles 330 and 332 for SCs and STs in Parliament and State Legislatures. Reservation policies were significantly shaped by the Mandal Commission, which recommended 27% reservation for OBCs in government jobs.

ROLE OF CASTE IN ELECTIONS AND POLITICAL PARTIES

Caste plays a crucial role in Indian elections and the functioning of political parties. Voting behavior in India is often influenced by caste identity, with voters supporting candidates from their own caste group. Political parties frequently select candidates based on caste demographics of constituencies to maximize electoral success. This practice has led to the rise of caste-based parties and alliances, which focus on representing specific communities.

Caste-based mobilization has helped historically marginalized groups gain political power and representation. It has enabled leaders from backward and oppressed communities to emerge and influence policy decisions.

However, caste politics also has negative consequences. It can lead to vote bank politics, where development issues are sidelined in favor of caste loyalties. It may also deepen social divisions and hinder national unity.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Caste-based politics has both positive and negative impacts on Indian democracy. On the positive side, it has empowered marginalized communities by giving them political representation and a voice in governance. Reservation policies and caste mobilization have contributed to social justice and reduced historical inequalities. However, caste politics also has serious drawbacks. It often promotes identity-based voting rather than issue-based politics. Political parties may exploit caste divisions for electoral gains, leading to

fragmentation of society. Additionally, the overemphasis on caste can overshadow important issues such as development, education, and economic growth. It may also create tensions between different communities.

There is also criticism that reservation policies may not always reach the most deserving individuals and may benefit only certain sections within communities.

Thus, while caste politics has contributed to inclusion, it also poses challenges to the ideals of equality and national integration

KEY FINDS OF THE STUDY:

This requires a balanced approach that promotes social justice without reinforcing divisions. In conclusion, caste remains a complex and evolving factor in Indian politics. Its future role will depend on the effectiveness of legal reforms, political will, and societal change towards equality and unity.

