



CASTE POLITICS IN INDIA: A COMPLEX LANDSCAPE

Dr. Subhash Patil

Associate Professor and Head, Dept of Political Science,
Rani Parvati Devi College of Arts and Commerce , Belagavi, Karnataka.

ABSTRACT:

For millennia, caste politics has been a distinctive aspect of Indian politics. This paper investigates the complex aspects of caste politics in India, following its historical origins, analysing its modern expressions, and evaluating its influence on the political climate of the nation. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the study provides a thorough analysis of this intricate phenomenon by referencing political assessments, social research, and historical records.



KEYWORDS: affirmative action, reservation, social justice, identity politics, caste politics, political representation, and governance.

INTRODUCTION

The pervasive and significant influence of caste politics has shaped India's social structure and governmental framework for centuries. In addition to determining a person's social identity, India's deeply embedded caste system has a major impact on their access to opportunities, resources, and political representation. The goal of this research paper is to present a thorough analysis of the complex link that exists between caste and politics in India, from its historical roots to its current expressions, as well as the significant implications it has for Indian democracy.

Thousands of castes and sub-castes, each with a unique identity and historical significance, make up India's intricate and varied social structure. This system's hierarchical structure has fostered social inequality, marginalisation, and discrimination, all of which have contributed to the rise of caste-based politics. In the past, caste has influenced the choice of leaders, the allocation of resources, and the upkeep of social order. For administrative reasons, the British further formalised and maintained caste differences during the colonial era, thereby laying the groundwork for later caste-based political mobilisation (Beteille, 1996). Political parties with a clear caste identity have emerged in the post-independence era. Examples of these parties are the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and several regional parties in states like Tamil Nadu and Bihar. These parties have adeptly used caste affinities to garner support from voters, fight against the power of established political elites, and promote the rights and well-being of particular caste groups (Jaffrelot, 2003).

The reservation system in India, which attempts to give historically underprivileged communities affirmative action, is one of the most divisive parts of caste politics. Widespread demonstrations and political mobilisation among different caste groups were sparked by the Mandal Commission report in 1990, which brought to light the complex and long-standing difficulties regarding

caste-based affirmative action (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). In electoral politics, caste is also very important because voters tend to support candidates from their own caste, and candidates are frequently selected based on their caste ties. This phenomenon, referred to as "caste-based voting," can significantly impact election results as well as government priorities and programmes (Vaishnav, 2017).

Caste politics affects social justice, public policy, and governance in areas other than elections. Policymakers are subject to pressure from caste-based interest groups and lobbying, which causes some concerns and policies to be prioritised over others. This might lead to focused development programmes for disadvantaged populations, but it can also maintain disparities and divisions between various castes (Jenkins, 2010).

Caste Politics' Historical Origins:

The caste system has ancient roots that have gradually merged with the political landscape of the Indian subcontinent during millennia of evolution. These are the historical roots of caste politics in India. Gaining an understanding of these historical foundations is crucial to appreciating caste's ongoing influence on Indian politics.

"Varna" or "Jati," another name for the caste system, originated in ancient Indian scriptures, especially the Rigveda, one of the earliest sacred books. The Rigveda makes reference to "varnas," or classes, which eventually gave rise to the fourfold varna system that includes kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), vaishyas (merchants and artisans), shudras (labourers and servants), and brahmins (priests and scholars). With the emergence of multiple sub-castes (jatis) and the resulting complicated social order, this system grew increasingly sophisticated throughout time.

Caste Integration in Political Systems:

In ancient India, caste was not just a social institution but also intricately entwined with political systems. In order to obtain the support of the priestly class, monarchs and other leaders frequently performed rituals or allied themselves with specific castes in an attempt to appear legitimate. Due to some castes' privileges and dominance over others, the hereditary nature of castes also had an impact on political power.

Mediaeval and Feudal Eras:

India saw the establishment of numerous dynasties and kingdoms during the Middle Ages, many of which included the caste system into their governmental and administrative frameworks. Caste remained closely linked to political power since it was often a determining factor in land ownership, taxes, and resource availability. Brahmins served as counsellors and administrators for dynasties like the Maurya's and the Guptas, demonstrating the caste system's significance in politics.

Impact of Colonialism on Caste:

The caste system in India was further institutionalised and maintained by the British colonial authorities. For administrative purposes, they divided various societies into caste-based groups by conducting surveys and censuses that assigned people to particular castes and tribes. This procedure not only made colonial administration easier, but it also made Indians more aware of and invested in their caste identities.

Social Reform Initiatives:

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, social reform movements headed by individuals such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and B.R. Ambedkar contested the caste system's repressive elements. These campaigns promoted equality and social justice, as well as the outlawing of untouchability. Eventually, the post-independence era saw the political expression of these efforts.

Political parties based on castes:

Political parties based on castes emerging India's political landscape has seen a dramatic shift with the rise of caste-based political groups. By organising support along caste lines, standing out for the interests of particular caste groups, and opposing the dominance of established political elites, these parties have been instrumental in changing the dynamics of Indian politics. This section examines the historical background and the elements that led to the emergence of these parties.

Historical Background:

Caste-based political parties have their roots in the independence movement, with figures such as B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy fighting for the rights of oppressed caste groups and attempting to improve their social and political standing. But caste-based politics rose to prominence in the years following independence.

Acts opposing the Brahmins:

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) originated in South India, especially Tamil Nadu, in the 1940s in reaction to what was thought to be Brahmin dominance in society and politics. N.C. With Annadurai and M., the DMK's Karunanidhi leaders supported Tamil identity while fighting for the rights of Dravidian castes. This was the first instance of caste-based politics being used in elections.

Social Justice Initiatives:

In the middle of the 20th century, the call for social justice for historically oppressed castes grew in strength. Bosses such as B.R. A major contributor to the creation of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar promoted the use of reservations for affirmative action. Under Kanshi Ram's leadership, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) became a powerful voice for the Dalits (formerly called "Untouchables") in Uttar Pradesh.

Activation of Regressive Castes:

Political leaders in a number of states realised that organising backward castes might help them win elections. Through their advocacy for their rights and representation, the aspirations of OBCs (other backward classes) have been successfully exploited by parties such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar and the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh.

Political Caste in Regionalized Interests:

Regional politics also frequently incorporate caste-based politics; they are not just found in national parties. Regional parties have arisen in many jurisdictions to represent caste or community concerns. For instance, there are strong caste-based ties between the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) in Tamil Nadu and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh.

Politics of Identity:

Caste-based political parties frequently centre their agendas on identity politics, highlighting past injustices experienced by certain caste groups and advocating for their reparation. Many voters find resonance in this story because they view these parties as defenders of their goals and sense of self. Caste-based political parties have garnered significant electoral support by uniting their respective caste bases. They frequently have a major impact on the formation of alliances and coalitions with other parties, which affects the makeup of state and federal administrations.

Caste politics and Reservation Policies:

In India, reservation policies have played a significant role in caste politics since they have been an attempt to rectify past injustices, support neglected populations, and allow them more access to jobs and education. The political environment has been significantly impacted by these policies, which have

sparked discussions over the effectiveness and boundaries of reservations as well as helped mobilise a number of caste groups.

Historical Background:

The fight for social justice and equality is the source of India's reservation policies. As a prominent member of the Dalit community and a major contributor to the Indian Constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was instrumental in promoting reservations as a way to improve the status of historically marginalised castes. Adopted in 1950, the Indian Constitution contains provisions allowing Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) to be given preference in government jobs and education.

Inclusionary Practises:

Affirmative action in the form of reservations aims to overcome caste-based social inequality and historical prejudice. Their aim is to give those who have been historically disenfranchised and oppressed the chance to pursue education and employment.

Categories of reservations:

India has various categories under its reservation policy.

Scheduled Castes (SCs): Reserved mostly for communities of Dalits Reservations for indigenous tribal communities are known as Scheduled Tribes (STs). Reservations for socially and educationally disadvantaged populations among non-SC/ST categories are known as Other Backward Classes (OBCs).

Economically Weaker Sections (EWS): A more recent inclusion that offers reservations to those in the general category who are economically disadvantaged. Reservation policy implementation has generated a great deal of discussion and controversy. Reservations' supporters contend that they are required to right past wrongs, while their detractors contend that they can undermine meritocracy and sustain identity-based politics.

Mobilisation and Protests Against Reservations:

Different caste groups have protested and mobilised in favour of and opposition to reservation measures as a result of these practices. For instance, there were large-scale demonstrations in 1990 following the Mandal Commission report, which suggested reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Some factions demanded an increase in the quota, while others were against it. Reservation policies have a big impact on election politics. In order to maximise electoral advantages, political parties frequently compete for the support of caste groups that profit from reservations, and candidates are selected according to their caste affiliations.

Difficulties with Implementation:

A number of obstacles have to be overcome before reservation laws may be effectively implemented, such as the underrepresentation of some subcastes, the creamy layer exclusion (the exclusion of relatively well-off members of restricted categories), and guaranteeing that the benefits are received by the intended recipients. Over time, reservation policies have changed. Caste-based politics became more intricate in 2006 when the government implemented reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in higher education institutions.

India's Election Politics and Caste

One of the key characteristics of Indian electoral dynamics is caste-based politics, which influences voter behaviour, candidate selection, and the political environment as a whole. Indian democracy is significantly impacted by the intricate relationship between caste and politics, which has been thoroughly researched by academics. We examine the function of caste in electoral politics in this section, citing scholarly works where needed. In order to improve their chances of winning, political parties frequently deliberately choose candidates based on their caste identities (Kumar, 2008). This practice is more pronounced in states where caste is a significant factor in determining voter behaviour

(Jenkins, 2003). In India, caste-based voting has a long history (Kothari, 1970). Because they believe these politicians will better reflect their interests and concerns, voters often select candidates from their own caste or those closely linked to them (Yadav, 1996). During election campaigns, political parties aggressively employ caste as a tactic for mobilisation (Kothari, 1990). Caste-based appeals are used to win over some populations; they frequently highlight past wrongs and promise justice (Narayan, 2007).

Coalition Politics and Caste Alliances:

Caste coalitions have a well-established relevance in Indian politics (Brass, 2003). To increase their electoral reach and have an impact on the formation of governments, parties associate with like-minded caste-based parties (Jaffrelot, 1996). The candidate's caste identity can have a significant impact on their electoral success (Chhibber & Verma, 2019). Candidates from that caste typically have an edge in regions where they are the majority, although varied constituencies may yield different results. To reach particular constituencies, political parties frequently have wings or cells based on caste (Jaffrelot, 2011). These wings take part in focused campaigning and mobilisation to meet the demands of the castes to which they belong. Concerns regarding caste-based politics' effects on public policy and governance are raised (Kohli, 1990). Critics contend that it can discourage meritocracy and elevate identity over qualifications. Caste and electoral politics have a dynamic relationship (Vaishnav, 2017). Urbanisation, generational movements, and changing demography can influence voting trends and the importance of caste in politics.

Governance and Caste in India

In India, caste has a complicated and multidimensional impact on the government. Caste is a factor in many parts of government, including the appointment of political representatives, resource distribution, and public service delivery. Caste's influence on governance dynamics has been thoroughly studied by academics, who have emphasised both the advantages and disadvantages of this phenomenon. Here, we examine how caste and government connect in India using citations to pertinent scholarly works.

Political Representation and Caste:

When choosing political representatives, caste frequently has a significant influence (Chhibber & Verma, 2019). As parties aim to win over particular caste constituencies, candidates are often selected on the basis of their caste affinities. A thorough analysis of the relationship between caste and political representation has been conducted, and research has shown how reservation regulations affect the representation of historically underprivileged castes in politics (Kumar, 2008). Caste groups frequently serve as powerful interest groups that put pressure on decision-makers to take into account their unique demands and concerns (Jenkins, 2010). These organisations influence how resources are allocated and what policies are pursued.

Allocating Resources and Developing Initiatives:

Caste considerations can have an impact on resource allocation, such as public funding and development initiatives (Kohli, 1990). Certain castes may receive preferential treatment in the distribution of resources due to their political clout. Increased resource distribution to their individual constituencies has been linked to the presence of caste-based politicians in positions of authority (Besley et al., 2017). Caste can have an impact on the provision of services and the operation of public administration. Interest groups based on caste may have an impact on how services are provided, such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure development (Jenkins, 2010). Concern has been raised about caste-based discrimination in administrative systems and how it affects the fair provision of services (Narayan, 2007). Affirmative action strategies include reservations as a means of addressing past injustices experienced by specific caste groups (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). The goals of these laws are equality and social justice. Scholars are currently investigating the effects of these policies on

governance and how well they work to improve the socioeconomic standing of marginalised castes (Chhibber & Verma, 2019).

Obstacles and Difficulties:

There are difficulties with caste's influence on governance. Conflicts between the aspirations of various caste groups can occasionally result in difficult policy decisions (Jenkins, 2010). Critics contend that the emphasis on politics and governance based on caste may impede efforts to achieve meritocracy and more general development objectives (Kohli, 1990). In India, the dynamics of caste and government are always changing. The influence of caste on the dynamics of governance can change as a result of urbanisation, changing demographics, and changes in political power (Vaishnav, 2017).

Social justice and caste in India

India's caste system and social justice are intricately intertwined, with caste-based injustice and discrimination at the centre of social justice issues. The issues and activities around social justice and caste in India have been thoroughly studied by academics and decision-makers. Here, we examine the connection between social justice and caste, providing citations to pertinent scholarly works. Social justice issues in India have centred on historical injustices and discrimination based on caste (Ambedkar, 1946). In the past, the Dalits—previously referred to as "untouchables"—have faced institutionalised prejudice and disadvantage. Academic work by B.R. The Indian Constitution was drafted by the well-known politician Ambedkar, who argues that social justice cannot be achieved unless these inequities are addressed (Ambedkar, 1936).

Reservation Guidelines and Equality in Employment:

One of the most important tools for resolving caste-based societal inequities is affirmative action legislation, which includes reservations in employment and education (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008). The goal of these measures is to improve underprivileged caste groups and offer opportunities for them. Studies have looked into how reservation laws affect historically underprivileged castes' socioeconomic standing and how successful they are at doing so (Chandra, 2016). In an effort to advance social justice, the Indian government has launched a number of social welfare initiatives aimed at marginalised caste groups (Dreze & Sen, 2013). These programmes cover things like livelihoods, healthcare, and education. Researchers have assessed the results and difficulties of these initiatives to lessen inequality based on caste (Thorat & Kumar, 2013).

Social Movements and Activism:

To achieve equality, caste-based prejudice must end, and Ambedkar and B.R. Jyotirao Phule have both been involved in social justice movements (Guru & Kumar, 2008). Social inequalities have been brought to light in large part thanks to these movements. Studies have looked at how social movements affect caste-based social justice programmes (Omvedt, 2008). Targeting, corruption, and the continuation of deeply ingrained social inequalities have all presented obstacles to the successful implementation of social justice programmes (Dreze & Sen, 2013). In the context of caste, academics have investigated the challenges and nuances associated with attaining social justice (Chakravarty, 2008).

Lawful Structure:

Legal safeguards against discrimination and violence based on caste include the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (Guru, 2018). The rights of marginalised communities and social justice are the goals of this legislation. Legal academics have investigated the difficulties and efficacy of legal frameworks for addressing injustices based on caste (Pandey, 2009). In India, the relationships between caste and social justice are still developing. Changes in politics, law, and public opinion have a significant impact on the quest for social justice (Narayan, 2007).

Caste politics have a long history in India, going all the way back to the system's prehistoric beginnings. Caste changed into a complicated social hierarchy over time, affecting power relationships and political systems. Inadvertently laying the groundwork for later caste-based political agitation, the British colonised and formalised caste divisions throughout their rule. One of the key characteristics of Indian politics after independence has been the rise of caste-based political parties. Parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), and local parties in states like Tamil Nadu and Bihar have expertly exploited caste affinities to strengthen voter support, promote particular caste groupings, and overthrow established political elites. Caste-based politics also have a big influence on voting behaviour since people tend to vote for politicians within their own caste, which creates voting patterns based on caste. The dynamics of coalition politics, government policy, and election results are all significantly influenced by this phenomenon. In addition, caste has a significant impact on social justice and governance in India. Reservation laws have been a key component of India's social justice agenda since they were first implemented to address historical injustices and give underprivileged groups affirmative action. While there have been difficulties in implementing these policies, which seek to level the playing field in both education and employment, there have also been discussions on their effectiveness. Additionally, caste affects how governmental administration is run, social welfare activities are funded, and resources are allocated. Caste-based interest organisations frequently influence public policy agendas and the provision of services to the public. On the other hand, this can raise questions about fair distribution and possible disregard for more important policy matters.

CONCLUSION

Caste is still a crucial and dynamic aspect of Indian politics and society. Although it has given previously excluded people a voice to demand their rights and representation, identity politics, effective governance, and social cohesion are among the issues it raises. The complex relationship between caste and different facets of Indian culture is still a source of debate among academics, policymakers, and the general public as the nation works to create a more just and inclusive society. Understanding the intricacies of Indian democracy and social justice necessitates continued research and contemplation in the field of caste politics in India.

REFERENCES

1. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936) *Annihilation of Caste*
2. Ambedkar, B. R. (1946) *The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and its Solution*
3. Chakravarty, A. (2008). *Equality, Capabilities, and Social Justice: A Framework for Public Policy Evaluation* Oxford University Press.
4. Chandra, K. (2016). *Reservations in India: A Positive Discrimination* Oxford University Press.
5. Dreze, J., & Sen, A. (2013). *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions* Princeton University Press.
6. Guru, G., & Kumar, S. (2008). *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Sociology*
7. Guru, G. (2018). *Understanding Social Justice: Insights from India* Taylor & Francis
8. Narayan, D. (2007). *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* The World Bank
9. Omvedt, G. (2008). *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* Penguin UK.
10. Pandey, R. (2009). *Dalit Rights Are Human Rights: Caste Discrimination, International Activism, and the Construction of a New Subject* Oxford University Press.
11. Thorat, S., & Kumar, N. (2013). *Reservation in the Private Sector: Lessons from Other Countries for India* Sage Publications.
12. Beteille, A. (1996) *Caste, class, and power: changing patterns of stratification in a Tanjore village* University of California Press
13. Desai, S., & Kulkarni, V. (2008). Changing educational inequalities in India in the context of affirmative action *Demography*, 45(2), 245-270
14. Jaffrelot, C. (2003). *India's silent revolution: the rise of the lower castes in North India* C. Hurst & Co. Publishers

15. Jenkins, R. (2010) Caste and participation: The political mobilisation of the Indian Dalits. *Pacific Affairs*, 83(1), 61–79.
16. Srinivas, M. N. (1996) *Caste in modern India and other essays* Asia Publishing House.
17. Vaishnav, M. (2017). *When crime pays: money and muscle in Indian politics*. Yale University Press.