

Caste politics

Caste in Indian society refers to a social group where membership is decided by birth.^[1] Members of such local group are endogamous, i.e. they tend to enter into marital relationships among themselves. They often have related political preferences.

For political/government purposes, the castes^[2] are broadly divided into^{[3][4]}

- Forward Castes (about 15% of population)
- Other Backward Classes (OBC) (about 41% of population)
- Scheduled Castes (about 20% of population)
- Scheduled Tribes (about 9% of population)

The Indian Muslims (13.4%), and Christians (2.3%) often function as castes since they too marry among themselves.

Official lists are compiled by states recognizing the OBC, Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. The dividing lines can be ambiguous, several castes have demanded a lower rank so that they can avail the privileges offered. The term Upper caste also refers to Forward castes when news reports refer to the Scheduled castes in relation to the two upper groups.

The removal of the boundaries between "civil society" and "political society" meant that caste now played a huge role in the political arena and also influenced other government-run institutions such as police and the judicial system. Though caste seemed to dictate one's access to such institutions, the location of that caste also played a pivotal role. If a lower caste were concentrated enough in one area, it could then translate that pocket of concentration of its caste members into political power and then challenge the hegemony of locally dominant upper caste. Gender also plays a significant role in the power dynamic of caste in politics. Women's representation within the political system seems to also be tied to their caste. Lower, more conservative castes have less female participation in politics than upper, more socially liberal, castes. This has caused a disproportionately large number of upper-caste women to occupy political office when compared to their lower caste counterparts. The hierarchy of caste and its role in politics and access to power and resources has created a society of patron-client relationships along caste lines. This staunchly rigid structure was most prevalent during the Congress-dominating period. This eventually led to the practice of vote banking, where voters back only candidates that are in their caste^[5], or officials from which they expect to receive ~~some~~ kind of benefits.

Historically^[5] it has been very hard to change the structure of **caste politics in India**. More recently however, there has been a flux in caste politics, mainly caused by economic liberalisation in India. This upsurge in lower-caste empowerment was accompanied in some regions by a spike in the level of corruption.^[6] This was partly due to lower caste perceiving development programs and rule of law as tools used by the upper caste to subjugate lower castes.^[7]

Contemporary India, however, has seen the influence of caste start to decline. This is partly due to the spread of education to all castes which has had a democratising effect on the political system. However, this "equalising" of the playing field has not been without controversy. The Mandal Commission and its quotas system has been a particularly sensitive issue.

It has been argued by Professor Dipankar Gupta ~~hat~~ the role of castes in Indian elections have been overplayed.^[8]

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Colonial history

The British institutionalised caste into the workings of the major government institutions within India. The main benefactors of this indirect rule were the upper castes or forward castes, which maintained their hegemony and monopoly of control and influence over government institutes long after independence from the British. The state of post-colonial India promised development, rule of law, and nation building, but in reality, was a complex network of patronage systems, which solidified the upper-caste position of dominance over civil service institutions. This network undermined the very promises of ‘nation building’ that post-colonial India had made and ushered in an area of uppercaste dominance that lasted for the next four decades.

In August 1932, the then Prime Minister of Britain, Ramsay MacDonald, made what became known as the Communal Award. According to it, separate representation was to be provided for communities such as the Dalit, Muslims, Sikhs, Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians and Europeans. These depressed classes were assigned a number of seats to be filled by election from special constituencies in which only voters belonging to these classes could vote.

Caste and political power

The caste system has traditionally had significant influence over people’s access to power. The privileged upper caste groups benefit more by gaining substantially more economic and political power, while the lower caste groups have limited access to those powers. The caste system distributes to different castes different economic strengths. The upper caste groups can then manipulate the economic and political system to transfer economic strength into political power^[9]

Access to power

In rural North India, upper and middle-ranking castes dominate the ownership of land. They were able to transfer this control over wealth into political dominance over the Panchayat decision. The Panchayat is a local government unit that is in-charge of resources disbursement. The dominant caste groups monopolised leadership positions in the Panchayat, thus gaining more opportunities to government contracts, employment and funding.

Access to police and judicial assistance also depends on which caste one belongs to. By bribing, influencing and intimidating the police and judicial officials, the rural north Indian middle and upper castes tend to manipulate the local police and judicial power more successfully. These types of political-rent-seekings have also helped secure the supply of rents to dominant castes through other channels such as ‘rigging Panchayat elections, capturing electoral booths, and using pre-election intimidatory tactics in elections for the state assembly.’^[9] Whether an individual or a group can raise enough money for constant bribes depends on the caste-based

socioeconomic status. Hence, the advantage in accessing economic resources not only transfers into but also reinforces the political might of the dominant caste groups. Certain scientists and activists, such as MIT systems scientist Dr. VA Shiva Ayyadurai, blame caste for holding back innovation and scientific research in India, making it difficult to sustain progress while regressive social organisation prevails!^{[10][11]}

Caste, ascribed at birth, is also influenced by where one is born. Political lines in India have often been drawn along caste lines; however, this is only part of the story. Caste is often specific to a particular area. These caste pockets create a locally dominant castes. Because of the political structure in India, local dominance can translate into regional dominance. This concentration of caste population has meant that smaller, less influential castes have the opportunity stake there claims in the political power arena. However, if a non-dominant caste is not concentrated in a particular area, then they are not likely to get any representation without teaming up with another caste to increase their influence. This means, "localised concentration facilitates a space for contesting the domination of State-level dominant caste".^[12] For instance, the Maratha-Kunbi caste has concentrations of populations all over the Indian states. They thus managed to receive maximum representation at the state legislature.(ibid)

Though the caste system factors greatly in determining who makes up the local elites, it also plays a huge role in determining women's influence and representation in the political system. In India's bicameral parliamentary system, women represent a minuscule amount of each house. Of the people's assembly, made up of 545 members, women represent a mere 5.2 percent; and in the State assembly, with 259 members, women make up only 8.8 percent. Both houses have seen an alarming decline in female representatives in the most recent decades. Of the 39 women representatives in the Indian Parliament most were members of higher castes. Caste, which eventually effects class, is one of the most important factors in determining a woman's successful inclusion into the political system. This may be due to the fact that higher castes challenge the role of the traditional Indian woman and so their caste position gives them a greater range of options that are not available to lower more traditional castes. This inflated representation of elite caste in public offices has meant that the impact they have on public policy is disproportionately large in comparison to their actual numbers.^[13]

Clientelism

Politics in India highly depended on patron-client ties along the caste lines during the Congress-dominating period. The caste that one belongs to serves as a strong determinant of his or her voting pattern.^[14] In India, different political parties represent the interests of different caste groups. The upper and merchant castes such as Brahmin, Rajput and Kayasth and the rich Muslim groups tend to express their interests through the Congress Party. The agrarian middle class such as the Jats tend to vote for the competing parties. Numerically minor parties, represented by the Jan Shaghi, receive votes almost exclusively from the upper and trading castes (ibid). However, caste does not solely determine voting behaviours. Discrepancies occur especially for the upper caste groups. (ibid) This means that not everyone from the same caste would vote for only one particular party. The upper caste people have more freedom to vote by political beliefs. The Mandal Commission covered more than 3000 Other Backward Castes. It is thus not clear which parties are associated with each caste.

Loyal groups of voters usually back a certain candidate or party during elections with the expectation of receiving benefits once their candidate is in office. This practice, called "votebank", is prolific throughout most regions of the country. Many political parties in India have openly indulged in caste-based votebank politics. The Congress party used votebank to maintain power; the competing parties constructed votebanks to challenge the Congress dominance of politics.

Caste politics in flux

By the early 1990s there began a shift in caste politics. The continuation of a one party system, which was the Congress party, composed mostly of upper-caste leadership, came to an end. This was partly due to economic liberalisation in India which reduced the control the state had on the economy and thus the lower castes, and partly due to an upsurge in caste based parties that made the politics of lower caste empowerment a central part of their political agenda. It should be pointed out that these new political parties emerged not on a national level but on a village and regional level, and were most dominant in North India.

These parties view development programs and rule of law as institutions used by upper caste to control and subjugate lower castes. As a result, these new political parties sought to weaken these institutions and in turn weaken the upper caste domination in the political arena in India. Since 'rule of law' was seen as controlled by upper-castes, these new parties adopted a strategy that had to operate outside of this rule in order to gain political influence and lower caste empowerment.

Political Corruption

Corruption thus translated into power and a means to enter the political arena, once only open to upper caste members. Corruption in India became a way to level the playing field. This struggle for empowerment that was forced to operate outside of the rule of law produced caste-based mafia networks. These mafia-networks began to chip away at upper caste control over state institutions.^[15]

However, unlike their predecessor, these caste mafia groups were not concerned with 'development', but mainly viewed elections and democracy as a way of gaining control of the state, which would enable them to level social inequalities. This new state envisioned a government of "Social Justice" through caste empowerment. Within the context of "social justice" corruption pontificated by the caste mafias became tolerated, and in some cases, as in the province of Bihar even celebrated.

The very nature of caste politics inherently means that there are no boundaries between "civil society" and "political society", as demonstrated by the proliferation caste mafia. The mafia dons became mayors, ministers, and even members of Parliament. Therefore, there was no alternative to fight against these mafia figures and political brokers. Because rule of law was perceived to be a mechanism of upper caste control, corruption used by caste mafia became popularly accepted, as it was perceived to be a means to achieve lower caste empowerment. The corruption elevated to such a level that nearly all elected officials in some towns and regions were also criminals. The upper castes who had used their control over the state to discreetly plunder its institutions for their own gain were now replaced by the mafia dons who now openly pillaged the state institutions. Many of these elected ministers/mafia dons were jailed for the illegal practices they employed; however, this was widely touted as the upper castes trying to regain dominance by eliminating "social justice" supporters. Corruption and politics became so common that at a time it was not uncommon for election results to be contested from a prison cell.

Corruption therefore translated into power and a means to enter the political arena, once only open to upper caste members. In this way corruption was seen as a way to level the playing field, and as a result was tolerated and in some villages championed under the banner of "social justice".^[16]

In the 1951 election, three ethnic parties challenged the Congress party: the Ram Rajya Parishad, the Hindu Mahasabha, and the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. These three sought to gain support from the Hindu majority. The All India Scheduled Caste Federation bid for support from the ex-untouchable castes. Three of the four ethnic parties gradually disappeared because they were not able to obtain enough votes. In the late 1980s, the Congress began to decline. More non-congress parties started to challenge the Congress dominance. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) descended from the Bharatiya Jana Sangh. It attempted to pit Hindus against Muslims. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Janata Dal (JD) tried to seek support from the Scheduled Castes, and Muslims against the upper castes.^[17]

The intense party competitions that started in the late 1970s have also weakened the influence of caste in Indian politics. Traditionally, Indian political parties have been constructed from top-down. Party leaders relied on preexisted patron-client networks to collect votes. Hence, no parties established fixed organisations to keep constant contacts with the village-level. Since 1977, the number of youth participating in politics has significantly increased. Due to the lack of fixed organisations, political parties had to rely on the young village members for political mobilisation.^[18] Often, these young villagers exerted more political influence than the upper caste leaders and patrons. The status of these young people in the village depended on how much he could contribute to the economic development of the village. It is easier for the youth to maintain their status by rallying rather than remain loyal to a specific party. This also weakened the influence of caste and clientelism on Indian politics.

In the 1990s, many parties Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Samajwadi Party and the Janata Dal started claiming that they were representing the backward castes. Many such parties, relying primarily on Backward Classes' support, often in alliance with Dalits and Muslims, rose to power in Indian states.^[19] At the same time, many Dalit leaders and intellectuals started realising that the main Dalit oppressors were the so-called Other Backward Classes, and formed their own parties, such as the Indian Justice Party. The

Congress (I) in Maharashtra long relied on OBCs' backing for its political success.^[19] Bharatiya Janata Party has also showcased its Dalit and OBC leaders to prove that it is not an upper-caste party. Bangaru Laxman, the former BJP president (2001–2002) was a former Dalit. Sanyasin Uma Bharati, former CM of Madhya Pradesh who belongs to OBC caste, was a former BJP leader. In 2006 Arjun Singh cabinet minister for MHRD of the United Progressive Alliance(UPA) government was accused of playing caste politics when he introduced reservations for OBCs in educational institutions all around.

In Tamil Nadu, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party rose to power promising representation of all castes in all important sectors of society

Caste-based mobilisation

Recent evidence suggests that the influence of caste has been declining. Rather than a long-established, unchanging institution, caste is subject to political influence. Changes in political leadership throughout the history of India have led to changes in the structure of the caste system. India's colonial past has shaped caste into a flexible institution, generating a new system that has crucial influences on political mobilisation.^[20] In some regions of India, strategic reconstructions of the caste system have taken place. For instance, the Bahujan Samaj Party in the state of Punjab was first initiated by urban political entrepreneurs who belonged to the former lower caste groups.^[18] The pliable caste system in the post-independence era acts as a tool for identifying marginal groups and political mobilisation. Various political leaderships can alter and influence the caste system to give different groups of people unequal rights in accessing public services and political competition.

Education

Education spread to the lower castes after India gained independence. The younger generations of all castes have had access to educational resources since the 1980s. The number of the Scheduled and Backward Castes people receiving education increased at a faster rate than that of the upper caste groups. The spread of education to all castes generated democratising effects. Some representatives of the SC and ST groups obtained access to Congress in the 1950s~1960s (19). Due to their higher education levels, they are less likely to respond to the uppercaste patrons, but to the needs and interests of the lower castes.

Politically Important Castes

Andhra Pradesh, Telangana

- Kamma^[21]
- Reddy^[21]
- Velama
- Kapu
- Brahmin
- Goud
- Boya

Bihar

- Pandit, Yadav, Muslim^[22]
- Bhumihar
- Rajput

Uttar Pradesh

- Pandit, Rajputs, Jats in Western Uttar Pradesh
- Dalits, Muslims, Brahmins led by Mayawati^[23]

- Yadavs, who supported Samajwadi party recently^[24]

West Bengal

- Muslims^[25]

Karnataka

- Vokkaliga/Gowda
- Lingayat
- Ahinda (Kannada acronym for minorities, backward classes and dalits) or MOD (Muslims, OBCs and Dalits)^{[26][27]}

Tamil Nadu

- Vanniyars
- Naicker (*Naicker* or Naidu)
- Kongu Vellalar (*Kavundan* or Gounder)
- Thevar
- Vellalar
- Nadar
- Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes

Punjab

- Dalits (especially Ad-Dharmis and Mazhabis), who tend to support Bahujan Samaj Party^[28]
- Jat Sikhs,^[29] who tend to support Akali Dal(Badal)

Rajasthan

- Rajputs, Jats, Bishnoi, Meenas, Gujjars^[30]

Maharashtra

- Marathas
- Dhangars (NT in State, OBC in Center)

Controversial issues

Reservation system

The Mandal Commission was constituted in 1979 by the Janata Party government under Prime Minister Morarji Desai with a mandate to "identify the socially or educationally backward".^[31] The Commission was set up to consider the question of seat reservations and quotas for people to redress caste discrimination, and used eleven social, economic, and educational indicators to determine "backwardness." In 1980, the commission's report affirmed the affirmative action practice under Indian law whereby members of lower castes (known as Other Backward Classes and Scheduled Castes and Tribes) were given exclusive access to a certain portion of government jobs and slots in public universities, and recommended changes to these quotas, increasing them by 27% to 49.5%. L R Naik, the only Dalit member in the Mandal Commission refused to sign the Mandal recommendations,^[32] as he feared that well-to-do OBCs would corner all the benefits of reservation.

A decade after the commission gave its report, V. P. Singh, the Prime Minister at the time, tried to implement its recommendations in 1989. The criticism was sharp and colleges across the country held massive protests against it. Many alleged that the politicians were trying to cash on caste-based reservations for purely pragmatic electoral purposes. Rajiv Goswami, student of Delhi University, threatened self-immolation in protest of the government's actions. His act further sparked a series of self-immolations by other college students and led to a formidable movement against job reservations for Backward Castes in India.

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