

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Democracy and Caste Politics in India: A Sociological View

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Abstract

Democracy and caste politics in India are deeply interconnected dimensions of the country's political and social transformation. Although the Indian Constitution establishes equality, prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste, and provides institutional safeguards for historically disadvantaged communities, caste continues to shape political mobilization, electoral competition, representation, public policy, and access to state resources. Rather than disappearing with modernization and democratic development, caste has been reorganized and politicized within democratic institutions. Electoral competition has enabled subordinated caste groups, particularly Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), to transform caste identity into a resource for political mobilization and collective bargaining. At the same time, caste-based politics has generated concerns regarding identity polarization, patronage, political fragmentation, and the reproduction of social divisions. This paper examines the historical evolution, institutional foundations, and contemporary manifestations of caste politics in Indian democracy. It focuses particularly on the politicization of caste, electoral mobilization, affirmative action, Dalit and OBC political assertion, caste-based political parties, representation, and the changing relationship between caste, class, and democratic citizenship. The paper argues that caste politics should not be understood simply as a distortion of democracy. It is simultaneously a consequence of India's unequal social structure and an instrument through which historically marginalized groups seek representation, recognition, redistribution, and political power. The democratic challenge, therefore, is not merely to eliminate caste from politics but to transform caste-based political mobilization into broader forms of substantive equality, social justice, and inclusive citizenship.

Keywords: Democracy, Caste Politics, Electoral Politics, Social Justice

Introduction

Indian democracy developed within a society characterized by profound social inequalities, including caste hierarchy, economic deprivation, and unequal access to education, land, employment, and political power. The adoption of universal adult suffrage after independence introduced a significant institutional transformation by formally recognizing individuals across caste groups as equal political citizens. However, Jaffrelot (2000a, 2000b) argues that the expansion of democratic politics did not simply dissolve caste identities; rather, it provided new opportunities for their political reconstruction. Caste consequently became embedded within electoral competition, political organization, and claims for representation. As Chandra (2004) demonstrates, democratic competition in India has frequently encouraged political actors to mobilize voters through socially recognizable ethnic and caste identities[1].

The persistence of caste in democratic politics therefore challenges the assumption that modernization, education, urbanization, and political development necessarily weaken traditional identities. Instead, caste has acquired new political meanings within democratic institutions. Rudolph and Rudolph (1967) described this transformation as the political adaptation of caste to modern institutions; where traditional social identities could be converted into organizational and political resources[2]. More specifically, Jaffrelot (2000a, 2000b) identifies a movement from Sanskritization toward ethnicization, through which lower and intermediate caste groups increasingly asserted collective political identities and sought greater access to political power[3, 4]. This transformation illustrates that caste should not be understood simply as a survival of tradition but as an identity continually reconstructed through contemporary political processes.



The democratic incorporation of marginalized caste groups has nevertheless produced contradictory consequences. On one hand, Witsoe (2009) shows that electoral politics can undermine established relations of caste dominance by enabling lower-caste groups to acquire political influence and challenge entrenched local hierarchies[5]. On the other hand, caste-based competition may reinforce social boundaries when political parties rely heavily on identity-based mobilization and patronage. Chandra (2004) explains that the organization of electoral support around ethnic and caste constituencies can make social identity an important determinant of political strategy[1]. Caste politics thus possesses a dual character: it can expand democratic inclusion by providing marginalized communities with political voice, while simultaneously reproducing boundaries of identity, competition, and political exclusion.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach and relies solely on secondary sources. It explores the relationship between democracy and caste politics in India by reviewing existing scholarly literature, books, research articles, government reports, constitutional provisions, electoral data, policy documents, and reports from relevant institutions. To build the study's conceptual and historical background, it examines academic work on caste, democratic politics, electoral mobilization, Dalit and Other Backward Classes (OBC) politics, affirmative action, political representation, and social justice. Where appropriate, secondary data from the Census of India, Election Commission of India, government reports, and parliamentary and policy documents are used to identify patterns in political representation and caste-based political mobilization. The study uses thematic analysis to examine key aspects of caste politics, including the politicization of caste, electoral competition, affirmative action, the assertiveness of Dalits and OBCs, caste-based political parties, and the evolving relationship between caste, class, and democratic citizenship. This analysis is interpretive in nature and does not rely on primary fieldwork or statistical hypothesis testing. The study should be read as a narrative thematic review rather than a systematic review, because the manuscript does not specify a reproducible database-search strategy or formal inclusion and exclusion criteria. This limitation should be acknowledged when interpreting the breadth of the literature covered. By combining historical evidence, empirical studies, and institutional documents, the paper aims to understand how democratic institutions have influenced caste dynamics and provided opportunities for historically marginalized communities to seek representation, recognition, redistribution, and social justice.

Theorizing Democracy and Caste Politics

Democracy and caste politics in India should be conceptualized as mutually transformative processes rather than as opposing forces. Modernization theory initially anticipated that industrialization, education, urbanization, and democratic citizenship would progressively weaken caste as a traditional institution. However, the persistence of caste in electoral politics challenges the assumption that modernization necessarily produces the disappearance of primordial identities. From an instrumentalist perspective, caste can instead function as a political resource through which individuals and groups organize collective interests, negotiate representation, and compete for state resources. Mitra (1993) demonstrates that caste possesses both traditional and modern dimensions and can be strategically mobilized for identity formation and political purposes[6].

A constructivist perspective further suggests that caste identities are not politically fixed but are continually redefined through political competition. Electoral institutions provide incentives for political entrepreneurs to consolidate caste categories into broader electoral constituencies. Chandra (2004) conceptualizes India as a "patronage-democracy," arguing that political actors and voters

frequently assess the numerical strength and representation of ethnic categories when making electoral choices[1]. His theory of ethnic head counts explains why caste-based parties can become electorally successful when their social constituencies are sufficiently large to secure victory or political leverage.

The social-cleavage approach highlights another dimension: the transformation of caste into organized political interests can restructure party competition. Chhibber (1999) shows how the decline of catch-all politics and the emergence of parties drawing support from particular caste and religious groups transformed India's party system[7]. Caste politics therefore represents not simply identity voting but the institutionalization of social cleavages within democratic competition.

From a democratization perspective, caste politics also possesses an emancipatory dimension. Witsoe (2009) argues that electoral democracy has enabled lower-caste groups to challenge established relations of dominance and upper-caste political hegemony[5]. Similarly, Witsoe (2012) demonstrates that lower-caste mobilization exposes the limitations of conventional liberal-democratic models for understanding postcolonial political transformation. Thus, caste politics can simultaneously reproduce hierarchy through patronage and clientelism while democratizing political power through representation and collective mobilization. Palshikar (2024) similarly emphasizes that the relationship between caste and Indian democracy remains complex, particularly following the rise of OBC politics and changing patterns of party competition since the 1990s[8].

Historical Transformation of Caste in Indian Politics

The historical transformation of caste in Indian politics represents a movement from a primarily ritual and hierarchical social institution toward an important basis of political organization, representation, and democratic mobilization. During the colonial period, processes of administrative classification, census enumeration, electoral reform, and the growth of caste associations contributed to the politicization of caste identities. Caste associations increasingly functioned as organized pressure groups seeking education, employment, representation, and access to state resources (Rudolph, 1960)[9]. Political modernization did not therefore eliminate caste; rather, caste communities adapted themselves to new democratic and institutional opportunities (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1968)[10].

After independence, constitutional equality, abolition of untouchability, affirmative action, and universal adult franchise fundamentally altered the political position of historically disadvantaged castes. Democratic institutions provided subordinated communities with opportunities to transform caste identity into a resource for political representation and collective bargaining. Dalit politics consequently developed not simply as an extension of traditional caste hierarchy but as a challenge to that hierarchy through claims for equality, dignity, and social justice (Waldrop, 2004)[11].

The transformation became particularly significant from the 1980s onward with the expansion of Dalit and OBC political mobilization. Electoral democracy enabled lower-caste groups to acquire greater political visibility and influence, especially in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Dalit mobilization increasingly combined electoral participation, political parties, legal strategies, and demands for social justice (Ahuja, 2019)[12]. The post-Mandal period further institutionalized caste-based claims for representation and affirmative action while simultaneously producing new forms of caste competition and fragmentation (Deshpande, 2024)[13].

In contemporary politics, caste remains significant but operates through increasingly complex jati, class, regional, and electoral identities. Even when broad caste blocs appear weaker, political parties continue to calculate caste configurations at the local level (Jaffrelot, 2019)[14]. Thus, democratic transformation has not removed caste from politics; it has reconstituted caste as a flexible political resource within electoral democracy.

Findings and Discussion

Caste and Electoral Democracy

Caste constitutes one of the most enduring social foundations of electoral politics in India, but its relationship with democracy is neither static nor reducible to caste-based voting. The introduction of universal adult franchise transformed members of historically subordinated castes from subjects of a hierarchical social order into equal political citizens. Electoral democracy consequently created institutional opportunities through which lower and backward castes could convert numerical strength into political representation and claims for social justice (Gupta, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2003)[15, 16]. The political incorporation of subordinated caste groups therefore contributed to a significant transformation of India's social and political order (Michelutti, 2004; Witsoe, 2009)[17, 5].

The expansion of electoral competition also transformed caste itself. Rather than disappearing under the influence of modernization, caste became increasingly politicized and reorganized around electoral interests, political representation, and collective identity. Gupta (2005) argues that modern politics has shifted caste from a relatively closed social system toward an arena of political identity and competition[15]. Similarly, Michelutti (2004) demonstrates how political participation contributed to the construction of caste communities as politically meaningful collectivities[17]. Caste thus operates not simply as a traditional social identity but as a resource through which groups negotiate power, recognition, and access to state institutions (Jaffrelot, 2003; Witsoe, 2009)[16, 5].

The rise of OBC and Dalit politics particularly illustrates the democratizing consequences of caste mobilization. The emergence of lower-caste political leaders and parties challenged the historical dominance of upper-caste elites and widened the social composition of elected institutions. Jaffrelot (2003) describes this transformation as a "silent revolution," whereby lower and intermediate castes increasingly entered political institutions[16]. Witsoe (2009), however, shows that this process can also generate conflicts between newly empowered political groups and established administrative structures[5]. Caste empowerment can therefore simultaneously deepen democratic participation and expose institutional tensions within the state (Ahuja, 2019; Witsoe, 2009)[5].

Importantly, Indian voters do not invariably vote according to caste identity alone. Electoral choices are shaped through the interaction of caste with class, party affiliation, welfare policies, leadership, region, religion, and local political interests. Carswell (2014)[18], for example, shows that voting motivations in rural Tamil Nadu combine citizenship, rights, policies, party loyalties, caste commitments, and charismatic leadership. Recent scholarship similarly emphasizes that caste influence varies across electoral contexts and cannot be understood through a simple "caste-vote" model (Jaffrelot, 2024; Palshikar & Mishra, 2023) [19, 20]. Consequently, caste and electoral democracy in India represent a contradictory but mutually transformative relationship. Democracy has not eliminated caste; instead, it has politicized and reorganized caste identities. Caste-based mobilization has enabled marginalized communities to achieve representation and political bargaining power, while si-

multaneously creating new forms of competition, fragmentation, and exclusion. Electoral democracy therefore functions both as a mechanism through which caste hierarchies are challenged and as a political arena in which caste identities continue to be reproduced and strategically mobilized (Gupta, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2003; Witsoe, 2009)[15, 16, 5]. This dual character is essential for understanding the persistence of caste in contemporary Indian democracy.

The Rise of Dalit Political Assertion

The rise of Dalit political assertion represents one of the most significant transformations in the relationship between caste and Indian democracy. Dalit politics did not emerge simply as an electoral response but developed from a longer history of struggles against caste-based exclusion, untouchability, and social domination. Early movements such as the Ad Dharm movement demonstrated that marginalized communities could construct independent political and cultural identities rather than merely seek incorporation into dominant social institutions (Ram, 2004)[21]. Dalit political discourse subsequently moved toward claims for representation, political power, dignity, equality, and social justice, thereby challenging the assumption that caste would gradually disappear through modernization and democratic development (Rawat, 2003; Waldrop, 2004)[22, 11].

From the 1980s onward, Dalit assertion acquired a powerful electoral dimension, particularly through the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the wider organizational networks associated with Dalit mobilization. The significance of this development lies in the transformation of Dalits from primarily marginalized recipients of state policies into organized political actors seeking access to state power. Pai (2013) identifies grassroots mobilization, Dalit-based political parties, and middle-class activism as important dimensions of contemporary Dalit assertion, demonstrating that the movement has operated simultaneously through electoral politics, social mobilization, and civil-society activism[23]. Dalit politics therefore contributed to the democratization of political representation by bringing historically excluded groups more centrally into electoral competition and governmental institutions (Pai, 2013; Husain, 2022) [24].

Importantly, Dalit assertion has also changed the meaning of caste itself within Indian democracy. Rather than caste becoming politically irrelevant with modernization, caste identities have been reorganized as instruments of political mobilization, collective representation, and claims-making (Waldrop, 2004)[11]. Dalit movements have increasingly used constitutional rights, electoral institutions, legal mechanisms, and democratic citizenship to challenge dominant-caste authority. Research on Tamil Nadu, for example, demonstrates how Dalit activists combined legal advocacy with street-level mobilization to demand protection, justice, and recognition as equal citizens (Collins, 2017)[25]. Similarly, litigation under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act has provided marginalized communities with an institutional mechanism for challenging caste violence and dominant-caste power (Carswell & De Neve, 2015)[26].

Thus, the rise of Dalit political assertion has simultaneously deepened Indian democracy and exposed its continuing caste contradictions. It has expanded political representation, strengthened marginalized groups' claims to citizenship, and challenged historically entrenched political hierarchies. However, Dalit politics has also encountered fragmentation, sub-caste divisions, uneven socioeconomic transformation, and the changing strategies of political parties (Mandal, 2022)[27]. The democratic significance of Dalit assertion therefore lies not merely in the number of Dalit representatives elected but in its broader challenge to the social distribution of power. Dalit political assertion demonstrates that Indian democracy is not simply a system operating within a caste society; it is also

a contested arena through which historically subordinated groups seek to redefine citizenship, representation, equality, and political power (Husain, 2022; Mandal, 2022)[27].

OBC Politics and the Mandal Transformation

The emergence of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) as a major political constituency fundamentally transformed the relationship between caste and democracy in India. Although caste had remained important in electoral politics since independence, the politics of backward classes acquired a new institutional character through affirmative action and demands for political representation. The Mandal Commission, established in 1979 under the chairmanship of B. P. Mandal, identified backwardness through a combination of social, educational, and economic criteria and recommended reservations for OBCs in public employment. The implementation of its recommendations in the 1990s transformed caste-based inequalities into an explicit question of democratic representation, social justice, and access to state institutions (Hasan, 2011; Jaffrelot, 2000; Jaffrelot, 2006; Bajpai, 2011)[28, 29, 30, 31]. The Mandal debate consequently shifted the meaning of equality from formal individual equality toward substantive equality and recognition of historically disadvantaged social groups (Bajpai, 2011; Sitapati, 2017)[28, 32].

Mandal also produced a significant political transformation in North India. The expansion of OBC political consciousness contributed to the decline of the earlier dominance of upper-caste elites and facilitated the rise of parties and leaders representing intermediate and backward castes. Jaffrelot (2000a, 2000b) demonstrates that the rise of the OBCs in the Hindi belt represented a major restructuring of political power, while his later analysis characterizes this process as part of a broader “silent revolution” in which lower and intermediate castes increasingly entered institutions previously dominated by socially privileged groups (Jaffrelot, 2003)[3, 4, 16]. The political consequences extended beyond electoral representation: reservation policies altered the social composition of public institutions and contributed to the democratization of access to state employment and higher education (Hasan, 2011; Jaffrelot, 2006; Hasan, 2022)[29, 30, 33, 31]. Thus, Mandal converted caste identity into an important democratic resource through which marginalized groups could demand recognition, representation, and redistribution.

However, the Mandal transformation also revealed the complexity and internal differentiation of caste politics. The category “OBC” encompasses numerous jatis with substantial differences in socioeconomic status, political influence, and access to state resources. Consequently, the expansion of OBC politics generated competition between relatively dominant OBC groups and extremely backward or marginalized communities. The politics of reservation therefore became simultaneously a mechanism of inclusion and a site of contestation over who deserved the benefits of affirmative action (Hasan, 2011; Bajpai, 2011)[28, 29]. Jaffrelot (2006) argues that the political effects of affirmative action were particularly significant because they strengthened the representation and political confidence of lower castes even when socioeconomic transformation remained uneven[31]. In this sense, the Mandal moment did not eliminate caste from Indian democracy; rather, it recast caste as a democratic language of representation, social justice, political bargaining, and state recognition (Jaffrelot, 2000; Jaffrelot, 2006; Hasan, 2022)[30, 33, 31].

Caste-Based Political Parties

Caste-based political parties have become a significant feature of India's democratic politics, particularly since the political mobilization of Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) expanded from the 1980s onward. The emergence of parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP) and other regional

formations transformed caste identities into organized electoral constituencies. Rather than remaining merely instruments of social hierarchy, caste identities increasingly became resources for political representation, bargaining and claims to state power (Jaffrelot, 2003; Michelutti, 2004; Witsoe, 2009)[16, 17, 5].

The BSP represents one of the clearest examples of this transformation. Its political strategy sought to mobilize Dalits and other subordinated castes around the idea of Bahujan political empowerment. The party's use of caste-based candidate selection and representation enabled historically excluded communities to enter formal democratic institutions (Gundimeda, 2014)[34]. At the same time, this strategy revealed a contradiction: while caste mobilization could democratize political power, it could also marginalize smaller caste groups when electoral representation was distributed primarily according to numerical strength (Gundimeda, 2014)[34].

The rise of lower-caste parties also contributed to a broader transformation of India's party system. The decline of Congress dominance and the growth of regional and caste-oriented parties increased electoral competition and strengthened the bargaining power of socially disadvantaged communities (Palshikar, 2024)[6]. Lower-caste political mobilization challenged established patterns of upper-caste dominance and produced new political elites, particularly in states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Witsoe, 2009; Jaffrelot, 2003)[16, 5].

Importantly, empirical research suggests that caste-based political representation can have substantive consequences beyond symbolic representation. Legislators belonging to low-caste parties have been associated with improved access of disadvantaged households to government welfare programmes, indicating that political representation can influence the distribution of public resources (Khemani et al., 2022)[35]. Nevertheless, caste parties may also generate clientelism, factionalism and competitive identity politics. Research on Dalit parties in Tamil Nadu demonstrates that entering electoral politics can simultaneously expand institutional access and create tensions between political organizations and their original social movements (Gorringer, 2016)[36].

Thus, caste-based parties represent a paradox of Indian democracy, they institutionalize caste identities but simultaneously provide marginalized communities with mechanisms of representation, empowerment and political negotiation. Caste politics therefore cannot simply be viewed as anti-democratic; it has also been an important mechanism through which democracy has become more socially inclusive.

Political Representation and Affirmative Action

Political representation and affirmative action are central to understanding how Indian democracy has attempted to transform caste-based exclusion into democratic inclusion. The constitutional reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in legislatures was designed to provide historically marginalized communities with institutional access to political decision-making. Rather than treating political equality as sufficient in a society marked by profound social inequalities, affirmative action recognizes that formal equality may require compensatory institutional mechanisms to produce meaningful participation (Singer, 2012)[37].

The significance of political reservation lies in its capacity to alter the distribution of political resources. Pande (2003), using evidence from Indian states, demonstrates that mandated political representation can influence government policy and increase transfers toward groups benefiting from political reservation[38]. This suggests that descriptive representation can generate

substantive policy consequences rather than merely increasing the numerical presence of marginalized groups. At the same time, representation does not automatically translate into redistribution or broader socioeconomic transformation. Jensenius (2015) finds that long-term reservation of SC constituencies did not produce detectable effects on overall constituency development or redistribution toward SCs, highlighting the importance of political parties and electoral incentives in mediating the consequences of representation[39].

The relationship between representation and political empowerment is particularly complex because reserved representatives remain embedded within wider party and electoral structures. Hasan (2006) argues that the “politics of presence” cannot by itself resolve the deeper problem of representing constituents’ interests, particularly those of vulnerable groups[40]. Similarly, Imtiyaz and Fakhruz-Zaman (2019) demonstrate that the effectiveness of reserved seats must be assessed not simply through the presence of SC/ST legislators but through their substantive parliamentary activity and ability to raise issues affecting marginalized communities[41].

At the local level, affirmative action has further expanded caste-based political participation. Sivanna (2014) shows that reservations in Panchayati Raj institutions created opportunities for SC political participation, while simultaneously revealing resistance from dominant caste groups[42]. Witsoe (2009) similarly demonstrates that lower-caste political mobilization can challenge established structures of caste dominance and reshape electoral practices[5]. Thus, affirmative action has not eliminated caste from Indian politics; rather, it has transformed caste into an important basis of democratic mobilization, representation, and political bargaining.

Caste, Class, and the Changing Political Landscape

The relationship between caste and class has become increasingly important for understanding the changing character of Indian democracy. Caste continues to structure political identities, access to resources, social networks, and patterns of political mobilization, but its political meaning has been transformed by democratic competition, electoral representation, affirmative action, and the expansion of mass politics. Rather than disappearing under modernization, caste has acquired new political functions, becoming an important instrument through which historically marginalized communities articulate demands for representation, dignity, and redistribution (Pankaj, 2007; Witsoe, 2009)[43, 5]. The institutionalization of caste-based reservations and the rise of backward-caste and Dalit movements further transformed caste from a traditional status hierarchy into a significant democratic resource (Jaffrelot, 2003; Pai, 2002)[16].

The post-Mandal period particularly demonstrated how caste and class intersect in the restructuring of political power. The expansion of OBC politics challenged the earlier dominance of upper-caste groups and facilitated the emergence of new political elites. However, the category of OBCs itself contains substantial economic and social differentiation, meaning that caste solidarity cannot automatically be equated with common class interests (Jaffrelot, 2003; Pankaj, 2007)[16, 43]. Similarly, Dalit political mobilization has expanded democratic participation while remaining affected by internal differences of class, region, occupation, and sub-caste (Pai, 2002)[23]. Consequently, contemporary caste politics increasingly involves competition among relatively differentiated groups rather than a straightforward confrontation between upper and lower castes.

Economic mobility has further complicated this relationship. The emergence of a new middle class has produced new aspirations among sections of OBC and other caste groups, while economic

insecurity has encouraged some relatively privileged castes to demand access to affirmative-action benefits (Fernandes, 2006; Jaffrelot, 2016)[44]. The Patel mobilization in Gujarat illustrates how a historically dominant caste could reinterpret itself through economic vulnerability and employment concerns, demonstrating that caste identities can be politically reconstructed around changing class positions (Jaffrelot, 2016) [45].

Electoral politics therefore increasingly reflects the interaction of caste, class, and party strategy. The 2014 election revealed the growing significance of the emerging “neo-middle class,” while the 2019 election demonstrated that caste remained politically resilient even when class-based voting patterns changed (Jaffrelot, 2015, 2019)[46, 14]. In particular, political parties increasingly target specific jatis rather than relying exclusively on broad categories such as OBC or Dalit, thereby producing more complex electoral coalitions (Jaffrelot, 2019)[14]. At the local level, caste also remains embedded in relations of dominance, territorial power, and access to state institutions, as demonstrated by electoral politics in Bihar (Witsoe, 2009)[5]. Thus, caste politics in contemporary India should not be interpreted as a survival of a traditional social order alone. It represents a dynamic process through which caste identities are continuously reshaped by class mobility, democratic competition, reservation, political representation, and changing socioeconomic aspirations.

Democratic Benefits of Caste Politics

Caste politics in India has generated significant democratic benefits by transforming historically subordinated caste identities into instruments of political participation, representation, and collective bargaining. Rather than simply weakening national integration, caste-based mobilization has enabled marginalized communities to enter electoral politics and challenge historically entrenched forms of social and political domination. The democratization of caste identities has therefore contributed to a redistribution of political power, particularly among Dalits and OBCs. Witsoe (2009) demonstrates that lower-caste political empowerment in Bihar challenged established upper-caste dominance and altered the functioning of electoral democracy[47]. Similarly, Witsoe (2011b) argues that lower-caste mobilization transformed popular understandings of the state and the politics of lower-caste empowerment[48]. Shaikh (2010) further shows that democratic politics itself contributed to the restructuring and political recasting of caste identities[49].

One of the most important democratic benefits of caste politics is political representation. Caste-based mobilization has strengthened demands for proportional representation, reservations, and greater participation of historically disadvantaged groups in legislative and administrative institutions. Hasan (2006) observes that demands for political inclusion by Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and OBCs have become an important dimension of India’s representative democracy[40]. Institutionalized political reservation provides a particularly significant mechanism through which disadvantaged communities can influence public policy. Pande (2003), using evidence from Indian states, finds that political reservations increased transfers toward groups benefiting from reserved representation, demonstrating that representation can affect substantive policy outcomes[38]. Husain (2022) similarly emphasizes the relationship between Dalit political assertion, democratic representation, and development in Uttar Pradesh[30].

Caste politics has also contributed to political inclusion and social justice by making questions of discrimination, welfare, redistribution, dignity, and access to state resources central to electoral competition. Political mobilization allows marginalized groups to convert social grievances into collective political demands. Pellissery (2015) argues that political mobilization is particularly important in confronting durable caste inequalities because

conventional social policies alone may have limited transformative capacity[50]. In Tamil Nadu, caste-based social-justice politics has also been associated with affirmative action, administrative reform, and redistributive policies benefiting historically marginalized groups (Karthik & Vasanthakumar, 2022)[51].

Finally, caste politics can strengthen electoral accountability and democratic competition. Political parties are compelled to recognize the interests of caste groups that constitute important electoral constituencies. This process can encourage marginalized citizens to negotiate with political parties and demand concrete benefits rather than remain politically invisible. Thus, caste politics should not be viewed exclusively as divisive identity politics. Under competitive democratic conditions, it can function as a mechanism of political inclusion, representation, empowerment, redistribution, and social justice, even though its outcomes remain uneven and can also reproduce clientelism and intra-caste inequalities (Witsoe, 2012; Palshikar, 2024)[6].

Contemporary Transformation of Caste Politics

The contemporary transformation of caste politics in India demonstrates that caste has not disappeared with modernization, education, urbanization, or democratic development; rather, it has been recast within the institutions and practices of democracy. Electoral competition, universal adult franchise, affirmative action, and political representation have transformed caste from a predominantly hierarchical social institution into an important basis of political organization, collective identity, and claims to state resources (Shaikh, 2010)[49]. Democratic politics has therefore provided historically marginalized communities with new opportunities to convert social identities into political power and institutional representation (Jaffrelot, 2003)[16].

One of the most significant transformations has been the political rise of OBCs and Dalits. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations strengthened backward-caste political consciousness and contributed to the emergence of regional parties and leaders representing lower and intermediate castes (Jaffrelot, 2003)[16]. Caste consequently became increasingly associated with democratic participation, political bargaining, and demands for social justice rather than simply with traditional ritual hierarchy (Michelutti, 2008)[52]. Political mobilization also transformed caste identities into broader political communities, allowing caste groups to negotiate access to political institutions and public resources (Kothari, 1970)[53].

At the same time, contemporary caste politics has become increasingly fragmented and localized. The earlier distinction between “upper caste” and “lower caste” is insufficient for understanding present electoral behavior because individual jatis increasingly function as important political constituencies (Jaffrelot, 2019)[14]. Political parties strategically construct caste coalitions by selecting candidates, distributing party positions, and mobilizing particular caste groups at the state and constituency levels (Jaffrelot, 2019)[14]. Thus, caste operates simultaneously through identity, electoral calculation, class interests, and political representation.

Another important development is the emergence of caste-based demands among relatively prosperous communities. The Patidar movement in Gujarat demonstrated how sections of an economically and politically influential caste could mobilize around demands for reservation, reflecting anxieties concerning employment, education, social mobility, and changing economic opportunities (Jaffrelot, 2016)[45]. This indicates that reservation politics has expanded beyond conventional narratives of deprivation and has become part of broader struggles over status and opportunity.

Contemporary caste politics also involves the democratization of caste identities. Marginalized communities increasingly use political organizations, electoral participation, social movements, and symbolic assertion to challenge established hierarchies (Shaikh, 2010)[49]. Consequently, caste remains politically significant not because traditional caste structures have remained unchanged, but because democracy has provided new institutional mechanisms through which caste identities can be reconstructed, negotiated, and politicized (Michelutti, 2008)[52].

Conclusion

The relationship between democracy and caste politics in India is complex, contradictory, and historically evolving. Democracy did not eliminate caste; instead, it transformed the ways in which caste operates in public life. Caste has moved from being primarily a system of social hierarchy to becoming, among other things, a political identity, organizational resource, electoral constituency, and basis for demands for representation and social justice. The political mobilization of Dalits and OBCs has substantially democratized Indian politics by challenging historically dominant groups and enabling previously marginalized communities to acquire political power. The rise of caste-based parties, reserved representation, caste associations, and lower-caste political elites demonstrates that democratic institutions can redistribute political authority. Witsoe (2009, 2012) shows particularly clearly how lower-caste political assertion can disrupt established structures of domination[5, 54]. Jaffrelot (2000, 2010) similarly demonstrates that caste has adapted to modern democratic competition rather than disappearing under modernization[55].

At the same time, caste politics has serious limitations. It can produce political fragmentation, patronage, competitive identity mobilization, and internal inequalities. Representation may remain symbolic rather than substantive, while political parties may use caste identities instrumentally for electoral purposes. Chandra (2004) highlights the importance of patronage and representation in explaining ethnic and caste-based party competition, whereas Hasan (2006) emphasizes the distinction between political presence and effective representation[1, 40]. The future of Indian democracy therefore does not depend on removing caste from politics altogether. Such an objective would ignore the social realities within which democracy operates. Instead, the central task is to democratize caste politics itself—to transform demands for caste recognition into broader struggles for equality, dignity, redistribution, representation, and social justice. Caste-based mobilization can contribute positively to democracy when it challenges domination and expands citizenship; it becomes democratically problematic when it reproduces exclusion or converts public institutions into instruments of narrow group patronage.

Indian democracy has consequently demonstrated an important paradox: caste survives partly because democracy gives social groups political resources, but democracy also provides historically subordinated groups with mechanisms through which caste hierarchy can be challenged. The interaction between caste and democracy should therefore be understood not as a simple struggle between tradition and modernity, but as an ongoing process through which social identities, political institutions, and claims to equality continuously reshape one another.

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