

# Between Belonging and Division: Identity Politics not Against the Social Harmony, but the Oppression

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## Abstract

This study examines the construction and mobilization of identity politics in India's democratic space, as well as its implications for social cohesion and the quality of democracy. Using a qualitative approach with a case study method, this study found that identity politics in India is consciously employed by various political actors through the use of symbols, religious and cultural narratives, and social media. Identity politics has been proven to form affectation-based political loyalty, but it has an impact on the exclusion, polarization, and delegitimization of democratic institutions. The work highlights the need to balance the recognition of group identities with strategies that foster dialogue, mutual respect, tolerance, and inclusive governance, thereby promoting societal cohesion without suppressing diversity. This research contributes to contemporary debates on identity politics, participatory democracy, justice, development, and pluralism, emphasizing that the challenge lies in navigating the tension between affirming difference and maintaining social harmony and collective unity.

**Keywords:** identity politics, social cohesion, social disharmony, oppression, and justice.

## Introduction

Identity politics gives rise to ferocious debates in the press, on television, on social media, and in academia. Consider, for example, debates on trigger warnings, no platforming, cultural appropriation, and transgender rights. It is hailed by some as a long-overdue response to racial injustice, marginalization, and more generally harmful and oppressive attitudes and practices targeting vulnerable minorities, whereas others consider it an expression of the inflated sensitivities of snowflake Millennials, misguided political correctness, and a threat to the liberal order, tradition, solidarity, social harmony, unity, community, including to ideals of equal treatment, universality, and reason itself.

Debates over identity politics are not only plentiful in the media, on college campuses, and research institutions, but are also attracting attention from the highest levels in contemporary politics. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron has warned about the threat from 'certain social science theories entirely imported from the United States' (Onishi 2021). Thus, in parts of French political life, there is a concern that identity politics, focusing on categories such as race, religion, gender, and sexuality, is incompatible with the secularist and colour-blind ideals of the French Republic. Such as incidentally, concerns about US influence in the French academy are somewhat ironic in light of the significance that French theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have had for gender studies, queer studies,

post-colonial studies, and other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences in the US that Macron and others consider a threat to the French Republic. Senator in Florida and former US presidential candidate Ron DeSantis has enacted a Stop WOKE Act and declared that 'Florida is where woke goes to die!' (Mudde 2023; Smith 2023). In his 2024 US presidential campaign, Donald Trump spent millions of dollars running TV ads stating that 'Kamala is for they/them; President Trump is for you' (Allen et al. 2024). In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán speaks of a 'woke virus' (Losonczi 2023). India's Home Minister Amit Shah said that the country should come together to promote Hindi (The Hindu, 2021). Similar concerns have been raised by politicians in a number of other countries.

### **Objective of this study**

However, all the examples portray identity politics in a negative light. Identity politics is not anti-harmony; it is anti-oppression, anti-exclusion. Still, rather it's against the misrecognition, social, economic, and political, and universalist liberalism that it follows blindly and considers all problems from a single principle. Now, in the work to be clarified, identity politics is a favored approach to empowerment, justice, harmony, and recognition, rather than disturbance of social harmony and unity.

Social harmony refers to a state in which diverse communities coexist peacefully, with mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation. In India, this ideal is reflected in constitutional principles such as equality, fraternity, and secularism. Guided by the vision of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Indian Constitution sought to accommodate the country's multiple identities within a cohesive democratic framework. Ensuring harmony in a society with thousands of castes, 22 official languages, and numerous religious groups is inherently challenging. Historically, India's pluralism has been sustained through cultural tolerance, social interdependence, and the philosophy of Sarva Dharma Sambhava, which promotes respect for all religions. Nonetheless, economic disparities, communal politics, and cultural anxieties have periodically strained social cohesion. Within this context, identity politics has a dual impact: it can foster inclusion and justice for marginalized groups, but it can also exacerbate divisions and contribute to social fragmentation.

### **Historical Context of Identity Politics**

The historical context of identity politics reveals its evolution as a powerful and complex force in shaping modern political landscapes, with the collapse of social hierarchies, the emergence of dignity, the idea of uniqueness as the ideal of authenticity, as well as the politics of equal respect, within the democratic nation or with democratic principle, particularly from the late twentieth century onward (Gutmann, 1994). Rooted in the first stage is the struggle for recognition and equality; identity politics emerged in response to systemic marginalization and social exclusion faced by various groups. Its development is closely linked to the rise of major social movements such as feminism, civil rights, racial movement, casteism, and LGBTQ+ rights, which sought not only political representation but also cultural recognition and respect for distinct identities (Neofotistos, n.d.). These movements transformed the nature of political engagement by emphasizing the lived experiences and collective struggles of specific communities rather than universal class-based politics. Thus, identity politics became both a strategy of empowerment and a critique of traditional political systems that often silenced minority, marginalised voices.

The historical influences on identity politics also reveal its deep entanglement with socio-economic and cultural transformations in the modern world. The very notion of "identity" as a central category of political analysis is relatively recent in Western thought, gaining prominence in capitalist societies from the 1960s onwards (Moran, 2018). During this period, the shift toward post-industrial economies,

globalization, and individualism encouraged new forms of self-expression and group affiliation. As a result, political discourse is increasingly centered on questions of cultural difference, recognition, representation, and belonging.

In Europe, particularly in Germany, identity politics has developed through a series of historical and ideological debates, reflecting broader tensions between liberal universalism and particularistic group identities (Jünke, 2024). This evolution illustrates how identity politics is not a uniform phenomenon but one deeply shaped by specific national and historical trajectories.

Overall, the historical evolution of identity politics demonstrates its dual character: it has been a crucial tool for justice and recognition, yet it also carries the risk of deepening social fragmentation when identities become rigidly politicized. Understanding this duality requires situating identity politics within its historical, cultural, and ideological contexts, where struggles for equality coexist with the challenges of maintaining collective harmony and shared belonging.

Identity politics refers to forms of political activism and theorizing that are organized around social identities and social harmony theory, such as race, caste, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion. It often stands in contrast to class-based movements that prioritize economic divisions; caste-based movements emphasize the division of humans, social disharmony, restriction, and injustice, and religious-based movements highlight the role as the central axis of political struggle. At its core, identity politics serves as a mobilization tool for marginalized or historically oppressed groups seeking social recognition, legal rights, and political inclusion. It draws attention to systemic discrimination and power imbalances, emphasizing that individual experiences of oppression are rooted in broader social structures. However, critics argue that identity politics can become exclusionary or overly focused on individual and cultural differences, thereby diverting attention from universal or structural forms of inequality. This tension makes identity politics a deeply complex and contested concept within modern political discourse, with ongoing debates surrounding its impact on social cohesion, inclusivity, and democratic participation.

In contemporary discourse, identity politics has emerged as a pivotal framework for understanding the dynamics of social interaction and cohesion within diverse societies. Defined as the political approach wherein individuals align based on shared characteristics such as ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, identity politics seeks to address the unique concerns and aspirations of marginalized groups. In the context of India, a nation characterized by its rich tapestry of cultures, languages, and religions, the interplay between identity politics and social harmony presents a complex and multifaceted landscape. Historically, India has witnessed a profound evolution of identity politics, influencing both collective and individual identities. This evolution has significant implications for social harmony, as it simultaneously fosters a sense of belonging among various groups while also sowing the seeds of division.

India, with its vast diversity of religions, languages, castes, and cultures, stands as one of the most pluralistic societies in the world. This pluralism has been both its greatest strength and its deepest challenge. Within this complex social fabric, identity politics has emerged as a defining force shaping political behavior, public discourse, and social relationships. While identity politics has empowered marginalized groups to demand justice and representation, it has also, at times, fractured the very social harmony that sustains the Indian nation. The tension between belonging and division lies at the heart of India's political evolution: belonging signifies inclusion, recognition, and empowerment, while division signals exclusion, polarization, and conflict.

## Methodology

This research employs an analytical and interpretive qualitative approach to explore how identity politics operates within society. Rather than relying on quantitative data, it focuses on interpreting texts, speeches, media narratives, and policy documents to uncover how language and representation shape political and social realities. It views identity as a fluid and socially constructed concept, formed through discourse and interaction. Political communication and media framing are seen as key tools in defining inclusion, exclusion, and collective belonging, while policy documents institutionalize these narratives through official language and structures.

The work is based on the theoretical framework of recognition and identity politics. The concept of recognition begins with two models: the generative model and the response model. The recognition of identity aims to eradicate or minimize injustice and the exclusion of people. This conception originates from the debate between Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2003).

Axel Honneth emphasized that injustice exists in the world because of the misrecognition of identity. He argued that to establish justice within individuals, society, and communities, it is essential to recognize and correct this misrecognition. Honneth proposed three basic stages of recognition: love, rights, and solidarity. The first, love, develops psychological bonds within the family and close relationships. The second, rights, fosters self-respect and builds social solidarity, social harmony, and social capital. The final stage, solidarity, is based on ability, merit, and shared values that reinforce mutual recognition.

In response, Nancy Fraser argued that while rights and recognition are important, they alone do not eliminate or reduce injustice in society. She asserted that justice requires not only the recognition of identity but also the recognition of material needs through redistribution. Fraser believed that cultural acknowledgment alone cannot address deep-rooted economic inequalities. Overemphasizing symbolic recognition, she warned, may fragment social movements. However, integrating redistribution with recognition can achieve both cultural and material justice. Ultimately, the debate highlights that achieving justice requires balancing moral recognition with structural fairness, addressing both personal respect and broader social and economic conditions.

## Belonging and Disharmony:

### 1. Social identity theory:

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explains that individuals derive self-esteem, meaning, and belonging from their membership in social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These groups may be formed around caste, religion, language, ethnicity, or region and development in the context of Time, place, and socio-culture. In multicultural societies, SIT helps clarify why identity-based movements arise: they are often responses to perceived inequality and status differences rather than attempts to undermine unity. Identity politics, from this perspective, can function as a pathway to dignity, participation, and democratic inclusion.

When communities experience historical marginalization, shared identity becomes a psychological and political resource. Collective awareness of injustice fosters solidarity and motivates organized action for equal treatment. Iris Marion Young argues that justice requires political representation and active participation of marginalized groups; without inclusion in decision-making processes, genuine empowerment is impossible (Young, 1990). This insight aligns with SIT's emphasis on the importance of status recognition for group well-being.

The Indian Dalit movement under Dr. B.R. Ambedkar illustrates how identity-based mobilization can

promote empowerment within a constitutional framework. By affirming Dalit identity and demanding safeguards, representation, and social reform, the movement sought equality within Indian democracy rather than separation from it (Ambedkar, 1945). The inclusion of affirmative action and anti-discrimination provisions in the Indian Constitution strengthened the country's commitment to justice in a multicultural context. Also suggests that intergroup harmony improves when subgroup identities coexist within a broader, superordinate identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In India, diverse communities are united under the shared identity of citizenship, reflected in the principle of "unity in diversity." Thus, identity-based mobilization becomes constructive when it advances fairness, recognition, and inclusive participation. In multicultural societies, empowering marginalized identities can deepen democracy while reinforcing social cohesion.

## **2. Cultural Backlash Theory.**

Cultural Backlash Theory, developed by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, argues that the rise of authoritarian populism is closely linked to rapid cultural change in modern societies (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). As values have shifted toward gender equality, minority rights, secularism, and multicultural inclusion, many citizens have embraced these transformations. Others, however, perceive them as disruptions to traditional norms, religious authority, and established social hierarchies. This perceived loss of cultural status can generate resentment and mobilization in defense of familiar identities.

Seen through the lens of identity politics as empowerment rather than division, these dynamics reflect parallel struggles for recognition. Progressive movements mobilize around marginalized identities to secure dignity, representation, and institutional reform. In India, for example, the women's movement advocating for legal reforms after the 2012 Nirbhaya case mobilized gender identity to demand stronger protections and justice. Similarly, the Dalit movement led by B.R. Ambedkar asserted caste identity to challenge structural exclusion and secure constitutional safeguards (Ambedkar, 1945). These efforts sought inclusion within democracy rather than fragmentation of society. At the same time, other groups mobilize to defend cultural or religious identities they believe are being overshadowed. Such reactions often reflect concerns about status and visibility in a rapidly modernizing society. Education plays a crucial role here: higher education is frequently associated with liberal and cosmopolitan values, while limited access may reinforce attachment to traditional frameworks (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). When identity claims are framed as zero-sum, polarization intensifies; when institutions promote dialogue and equal citizenship, mobilization can strengthen democratic participation.

## **3. Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism acknowledges that contemporary societies consist of diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious communities. Instead of demanding assimilation into a single dominant culture, it encourages public institutions to recognize and accommodate diversity within a shared civic framework. And create or made the tolerance society, an inclusive environment. When approached as a model of empowerment, multiculturalism strengthens social harmony by ensuring that all groups experience equal respect and belonging (Kymlicka, 1995).

At its ethical core lies the principle of equal dignity. Cultural recognition in education, law, and public policy affirms that no community is inferior or invisible. Canada offers a significant example through its Multiculturalism Act of 1988, which formally recognized cultural diversity as a national asset and committed the state to supporting minority cultural expression within a unified citizenship structure (Government of Canada, 1988). Rather than fragmenting society, this policy fostered inclusion by

allowing immigrants and minority communities to preserve their heritage while participating fully in Canadian public life.

India provides another illustration within a different historical context. The Indian Constitution guarantees cultural and educational rights to minorities under Articles 29 and 30, protecting linguistic and religious diversity while maintaining a common national identity. Policies such as linguistic state reorganization and affirmative action for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes reflect efforts to combine recognition with equality. These measures were not designed to divide society but to integrate historically marginalized communities into democratic governance (Ambedkar, 1945).

Critics argue that multiculturalism can risk social fragmentation if group identities overshadow shared values. However, experience in both Canada and India demonstrates that when diversity is supported by constitutional safeguards, democratic participation, and dialogue, it enhances cohesion rather than undermines it. Social harmony does not require uniformity; it requires fairness and inclusion. By linking recognition with equal citizenship, multiculturalism empowers communities and strengthens democratic resilience.

### **Core Argument**

Identity politics challenges systemic oppression rather than fostering disharmony. Far from being divisive, it empowers marginalized groups to name and dismantle injustices rooted in race, gender, caste, or sexuality, fostering equity as a path to true social cohesion. At its origin, as articulated by the Combahee River Collective in 1977, identity politics centers on "focusing upon our own oppression" to spark radical change, arguing that liberating Black men-women would dismantle all oppressive systems like white men's dominance in the USA, and patriarchy, capitalism, and crony capitalism in the world. Critics claim it reinforces group divisions, but this misreads its aim: it builds solidarity by valorizing oppressed perspectives, boosting self-esteem and agency against hierarchies. Properly practiced, it forms intentional coalitions for anti-racist, anti-patriarchal goals, not rigid identities tied to injury.

### **Beyond Harmony Myth**

Harmony under oppression is illusory; it masks dominance. Identity politics disrupts this by politicizing lived experiences, as in subaltern studies, where lower castes contest elite narratives in Indian democracy. It promotes a sense of belonging and power, countering the psychological reinforcement of subjugation, and seeks to disrupt the centralization of power and resources to establish distributive justice. Ultimately, it strives for universal freedom by ending particular forms of oppression and aligning with liberatory projects

### **Case Studies of Social Movements, Solidarity and Identity Politics**

The term 'social movement' was used in the nineteenth century, in the context of emancipation of the marginalised, exploited group and for the change, empowerment, and creation of a new society (Shah, 2015). It must be a collective action by the masses that works toward injustice, unfair institutional representation, uneven development, and social exclusion. The development of the social movement is based on collective experience, problems that build the collective consequences, and solidarity among the members, because these interact with each other, and make the collective identity for the fighting against the injustice and pool the collective demand.

Identity politics in India continues to be a defining feature of its political and social landscape. Despite adopting a liberal democratic system after independence, communities and collective identities rooted in caste, religion, language, ethnicity, and gender have continued to influence public life. As Bikhu Parekh notes, India functions as both a community of communities and an association of individuals, where each group seeks acknowledgment and protection of its unique identity. The post-independence state, by recognizing diverse social identities through its constitutional and institutional framework, as well as liberal democracy, allows the platform for making and building its own interest, recognizes the identity, and inadvertently provides the foundation for the rise of identity-based claims and movements (Stepan, Linz & Yadav, 2011).

Identity politics in India is a multifaceted phenomenon that significantly influences political behavior and social dynamics. It encompasses various identities, including caste, religion, regional, and ethnicity, which shape political affiliations and mobilization strategies. The following sections explore key aspects of identity politics in India, highlighting its implications and manifestations.

### **Dalit Activism**

In pre- and post-independence India, the rise of Dalit assertion movements has been driven not merely by a desire for recognition of identity, but by a demand for the acknowledgment of historical injustices and the establishment of justice for the Dalit community. Caste has historically been one of the strongest bases of identity politics in India. Not only for identification, but also for many types of discrimination and divisions, such as purified vs non-purified human, division of village north vs south, development vs underdevelopment, and “is not merely a division of labour, but also a division of labourers” (Ambedkar, 1936). The caste system, built on notions of purity and hierarchy, marginalized lower castes and Dalits for centuries, depriving them of education, wealth, and power. So there was neither justice nor any solidarity. During the national movement, rises of different types of Dalits movements in different parts of India, such as Vancum movement led by Periyar in South, Mahad Satyagrah in North India, etc., all these movements identified the different demands like separate electorates, territory, and other things. Ambedkar also said that no justice is taken in Hinduism, and finally converted himself into Buddhism in 1956. Justice first demands that all benefits and privileges in society should be shared by all its members. If any group in society has suffered from structural discrimination inherent in the social system, special care should be taken to remove such structural discrimination. The obvious implication is that the state should take affirmative action to remove such injustices perpetrated in the same society by one section over another section (Tiwari, 2009).

After independence, they tried to establish solidarity among the community, state, and nation through the principle of the liberal constitution (Yadav, 1999). After some years of independence, the top-down model or universal principle has failed in its pursuit of empowerment. In the 1990s, the rise of different political and social movements for the identification, recognition and redistribution. In the movement under the democracy, caste became a tool for political mobilization. Lower-caste movements, such as those led by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Samajwadi Party (SP), sought empowerment through political participation and representation. At the same time, upper-caste-dominated parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have also used caste alliances to consolidate power. Thus, caste continues to shape party leadership, election strategies, and governance priorities, while also fostering new caste-class coalitions that challenge traditional hierarchies and build solidarity within the community. Because the representative democracy works on the principle of the majority system.

## Women's Liberation

Gender movement begins with the identification of problems and recognition of injustice that half of the population faces, because it is women. Historically, caste-based violence in rural India has been a shared and organized way for dominant castes to control and punish the Dalit community, especially when caste hierarchies are questioned. This violence is not only a reaction to conflict but a key method through which caste power is maintained. Cases such as the Nirbhaya case (2012), the Kolkata doctor's rape and murder case (2024), and the Hathras rape and murder (2020) show how sexual violence against women and specific Dalit women is used to send a message of fear to the entire community. These acts do not harm only individual women; they also protect and reinforce the authority of dominant castes (2022).

Indian feminist movements have played an important role in challenging patriarchal laws related to rape and domestic violence. However, their response to caste-based sexual violence has often been limited and inconsistent. This reflects a deeper problem within mainstream feminism, which has long focused on a general idea of “women’s issues” while ignoring caste as a central part of gender oppression. As a result, violence against Dalit women is often treated either as a caste problem alone or as an unusual incident, rather than as a core issue of the women’s movement.

There are two main reasons for this limitation. First, the fight for justice in cases involving violence against Dalit women has mostly been led by Dalit movements and Dalit women’s groups, such as the All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch, rather than by mainstream feminist organizations. The protests after the Hathras case clearly showed the gap between dominant-caste feminist spaces and Dalit-led struggles, exposing the weakness of feminist unity across caste lines. Second, no law specifically focuses on Dalit women. Although the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act addresses violence against Dalit communities, it does not fully recognize the gendered nature of caste violence. As a result, Dalit women are treated mainly as members of a community, not as individuals facing both caste and gender oppression.

This lack of legal recognition strengthens caste hierarchy by reflecting the values of Hindu patriarchy, where Dalit women’s bodies have historically been seen as available, vulnerable, and undeserving of protection. In reality, this means that Dalit women often have to prove their honesty, character, and worth in courts and social institutions—something rarely demanded of women from dominant castes. The failure to deliver justice in cases such as Bhanwari Devi (1992) shows how caste position affects access to legal and feminist support.

Caste and gender violence are not new problems but are deeply rooted in historical systems that normalized the sexual exploitation of Dalit women under feudal and Brahmanical social orders. The continued neglect of Dalit women’s sexual oppression highlights the limits of a feminist politics that does not fully engage with caste-based identity. For a truly meaningful gender movement, feminist solidarity must go beyond token inclusion and actively place Dalit women’s voices, experiences, and leadership at its center. Only then can solidarity become a powerful political force capable of challenging both patriarchy and caste together.

Gender identity is a cultural recognition that is based on the special capability, experience also gained political importance. Women’s movements and organizations have played crucial roles in civil society, advocating for equality and empowerment. Political parties like the Congress, BJP, and Communist Party have mobilized women differently around secularism, nationalism, or economic issues. Yet, women’s political participation still reflects broader social inequalities, demonstrating how gender intersects with caste and class in shaping identity-based politics. Finally, after a long decade, the Women’s Reservation

Bill (2023) represents a significant intersection of identity politics and democratic reform in India. Rooted in the logic of recognition, representation, and justice, the bill goes beyond being a procedural or electoral reform; it embodies the broader struggle of women to assert their collective political identity within a historically patriarchal political structure. From an identity politics perspective, the bill highlights how gender, as a social and political category, shapes access to power, voice, and agency in democratic spaces. In India, identity politics is closely tied to social justice. The state's efforts through constitutional guarantees (DPSP, FRs, federal structure), affirmative action, and welfare policies aim to address historical discrimination and ensure equality of opportunity. Social justice in India, therefore, encompasses both redistributive policies, focused on equitable access to resources, and recognition policies that affirm diverse identities. However, these measures sometimes generate social tension when misused for political gain. Despite such challenges, identity politics has enabled marginalized groups to achieve greater visibility and inclusion, transforming India's democracy into a more participatory and representative system.

### **Language and Regional**

The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu used linguistic and cultural identity to challenge Hindi dominance and upper-caste hegemony. Although initially separatist, it eventually strengthened federalism and cultural rights. In contrast, the Assam Movement (1979–85) against illegal immigration escalated into ethnic violence, Naga separation movements, and the Khalistan movement, illustrating the destructive potential of exclusive identity politics.

Language-based identity politics, the region emerged strongly after independence, with the creation of linguistic states such as Andhra Pradesh in 1953. While linguistic reorganization provided autonomy and recognition to different groups, it also strengthened regionalism and encouraged new identity claims. With over a thousand mother tongues and 22 official languages, linguistic identity remains a vital factor in Indian politics.

### **Media and Political Parties**

#### **Media**

Media and news channels significantly influence how identity politics evolves within democratic societies. Through selection, framing, and repetition of particular narratives, media institutions shape how audiences understand race, religion, ethnicity, and nationality. When certain identities are repeatedly highlighted in conflict-driven or sensational contexts, public perception can shift toward suspicion and polarization (Hopkins et al., 2024). In this way, the media does not merely report identity politics; it actively constructs its meaning.

The representation of marginalized communities is especially crucial. Research has shown that in some Western contexts, Muslims are disproportionately associated with extremism or security concerns, reinforcing narrow and negative stereotypes (Atqiya et al., 2025). Such portrayals can alienate communities and weaken their sense of belonging. In India, similar patterns have occasionally emerged. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, sections of television and digital media linked the Tablighi Jamaat congregation to the wider spread of the virus, using labels that many critics argued stigmatized the Muslim community. Scholars and civil society groups observed that this framing risked deepening communal divides rather than promoting public health awareness (Chadha & Kavoori, 2018).

Visual media also plays a powerful role. Images, graphics, and televised debates often simplify complex identities into symbolic representations, which can reinforce rigid boundaries between “us” and “them” (Roosvall, 2014). When visuals repeatedly associate certain communities with violence or disorder, stereotypes become normalized.

However, the media also has the capacity to strengthen social harmony. Inclusive reporting that highlights shared experiences, constitutional values, and stories of intercommunity cooperation can foster empathy and mutual respect. Balanced coverage during moments of tension—such as reporting that emphasizes peace-building efforts alongside conflict—can help sustain social cohesion (Atqiya et al., 2025).

In multicultural societies like India, responsible journalism is essential. Ethical standards, fact-checking, and diverse representation can ensure that identity politics becomes a platform for inclusion and democratic participation rather than division.

### **Political Party**

Political parties are central actors in shaping identity politics and its impact on social harmony. Through their strategies, messaging, and policy priorities, parties influence how cultural, religious, ethnic, and regional identities are recognized within democratic systems. Identity politics can serve as a tool for representation and inclusion, but it can also intensify polarization if mobilized in exclusionary ways.

Comparative research shows that political parties often use identity narratives to broaden their support base. For instance, Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (JDP) incorporated elements of Kurdish and Alevi recognition into its agenda while maintaining conservative cultural values (Bölükbaşı, 2016). In Indonesia, political actors have mobilized religious and cultural symbols during elections to strengthen voter loyalty, demonstrating how identity appeals can shape electoral outcomes and public cohesion (Tumanggor & Azhar, 2025). In the United States, partisan identity has become closely linked with social stereotypes, contributing to affective polarization and mutual distrust between party supporters (Ahler, 2018).

India provides a particularly instructive example of the dual nature of identity politics. Since independence, political parties have mobilized caste, religion, and regional identities to secure electoral support. The rise of parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) illustrates how caste-based mobilization can empower historically marginalized communities, such as the Musahar, through land distribution, increasing political participation and representation, and influencing policy agendas (Jaffrelot, 2014). At the same time, religious mobilization around issues such as temple politics or citizenship debates has sometimes intensified communal polarization (Varshney, 2002).

These examples show that identity politics is not inherently divisive. When political parties frame identity claims around constitutional values, equal citizenship, and inclusive participation, they can strengthen democratic engagement and social harmony. However, when identity is used to delegitimize opponents or exclude minorities, it risks eroding institutional trust and social cohesion. Effective democratic leadership therefore requires balancing recognition of diversity with commitment to shared civic principles.

### **The relation between the media and the political Party**

The relationship between political parties and media institutions has a profound impact on social harmony, particularly in diverse democracies. When this relationship becomes adversarial or strategically manipulative, it can deepen polarization and weaken trust in public institutions. Political actors increasingly rely on both traditional and digital media platforms to shape narratives, mobilize supporters,

and discredit opponents. Such “media wars” often simplify complex social issues into emotionally charged binaries, making it harder for citizens to make informed decisions (Elem et al., 2024).

Media outlets themselves can intensify polarization through selective framing, sensational headlines, and partisan commentary. The expansion of digital platforms and algorithm-driven content has further contributed to audience segmentation. Personalized feeds tend to expose users to information that confirms existing beliefs, creating echo chambers and reinforcing ideological divides (Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023). In such environments, misinformation and exaggerated claims circulate rapidly, often without sufficient verification.

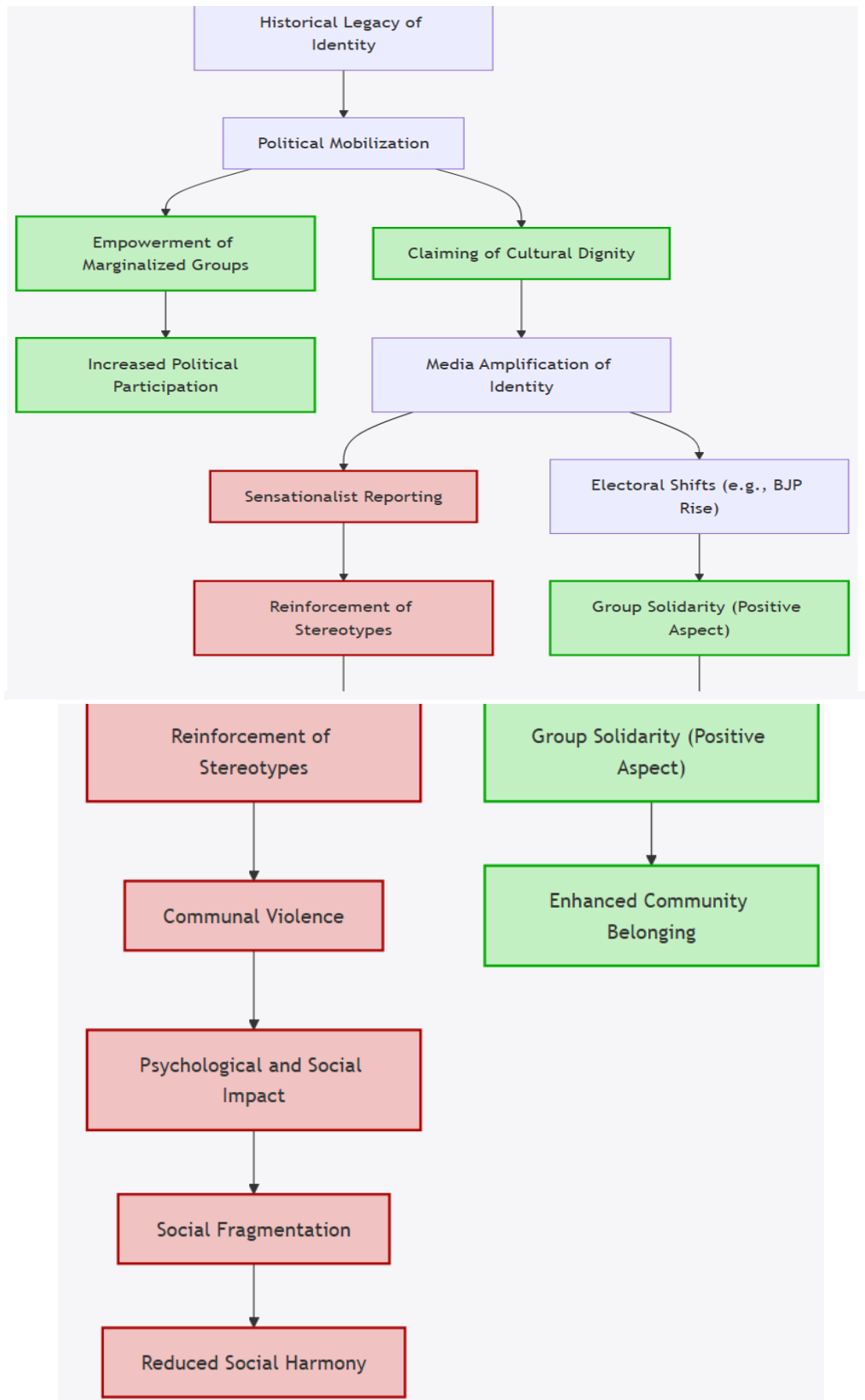
In India, this dynamic has become particularly visible in televised debates and online political campaigns. Certain news channels have been criticized for framing issues in highly polarized terms, especially around religion, nationalism, and security. During events such as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests in 2019–2020, media narratives varied sharply. Some outlets emphasized constitutional concerns and civil liberties, while others portrayed the protests primarily as threats to national stability. Scholars note that such divergent framing can significantly influence public perception and intergroup relations (Chadha & Kavoori, 2018; Varshney, 2002). Political parties have also used social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) to circulate targeted messages, sometimes spreading unverified or inflammatory content to mobilize supporters (Yang et al., 2024).

This strategic manipulation contributes to what some describe as an “outrage economy,” where emotionally provocative content gains visibility and engagement. The result can be erosion of democratic dialogue and increasing mistrust among communities (Trajkoska et al., 2024). However, the media and political parties are not inherently divisive forces. When guided by ethical standards, fact-checking, and inclusive communication, they can foster informed debate and cross-community understanding (Maseng, 2025).

In multicultural societies like India, responsible media practices and accountable political leadership are essential to ensure that identity-based discourse promotes representation and democratic participation rather than social fragmentation.

### **Case Study Summary Diagram**

Below is the flowchart that outlines the key stages and outcomes in the case studies discussing the possible and negative consequences of identity politics:



Sources: myself

The diagram shows how historical legacies, political discourse, and media narratives interact. These factors can influence society in different ways. They can encourage positive results, such as civic

engagement and community unity. However, they can also lead to negative outcomes, like social fragmentation and community conflict.

## Conclusion

Identity politics in India operates at the intersection of empowerment and division, belonging and exclusion. It has undeniably democratized the Indian polity by bringing marginalized voices into the mainstream and challenging entrenched hierarchies. Yet, when manipulated for electoral or ideological gains and enforced by political parties and the media, it becomes a destructive force that undermines social harmony, secularism, and fraternity. However, the challenge for India is to strike a balance, preserving the dignity of diverse identities while cultivating a shared civic identity rooted in constitutional values. The path forward lies not in erasing differences but in transforming them into sources of dialogue and solidarity. As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized, political democracy must rest on the foundation of social democracy—liberty, equality, and fraternity. Only when identity politics aligns with these ideals can India move from division toward belonging, from polarization toward peace, and from fragmented identities toward a harmonious national unity.

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