

Caste in Indian Politics

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Abstract

Caste is an important factor in Indian Politics and this paper explores how it influences politics and how politics influences it along with the current position of different caste groups with regard to crime, their socio-economic position and what can be done to solve the paradox of caste issues.

Keywords: Caste politics, Mosaic, Electoral Politics, Entrenched caste, Ascendant caste.

1. Introduction

The word caste is derived from Portuguese word 'casta' which means race, lineage, breed or kind. Despite the word being of Portuguese origin the practice of caste system in India is of century's old via the name of Varna and Jati for purity and pollution and functional specialization. It is widely agreed that Indian's don't cast their vote but vote their caste and as stated by Christophe Jaffrelot caste is a mosaic of Indian politics [1]. According to Dr. Ambedkar the origin of polluted caste system came during later vedic period where the four fold vertical classification became rigid and didn't allow other caste for upward mobilization and this was done against those who were rebels against Brahmanism [2]. From Independence to recent Lok Sabha elections caste has become a major factor in Indian electoral politics where there is presence of upper caste hegemony and due to India's silent revolution and role of Mandal Commission their also presence of lower caste hegemony in Indian politics.

2. Objective

- Does caste influences politics
- Does politics influence caste
- What needs to be done in future to improve Indian caste politics paradox

3. Data Source and Methodology

The study is based on data from Election Commission of India, India Votes, Spinper Project, NITI Aayog and NCRB. An empirical and descriptive comparative approach has been adopted in this study.

4. Caste role in Indian politics :

Caste has played a major role in Indian electoral politics where there has been influence of caste groups in their representation in Lok Sabha, Hindi belt, and party ticket representation. Different caste groups have been given preference according to the needs of winning elections which has also created segmentation between them in the form of entrenched caste and ascendant caste [3] i.e. dominant and non dominant caste.

Table 2 : Caste Group and Community Representation in the Hindi Belt (2009–2024)

	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)	2024 (%)
Upper Castes	29.70	28.70	28.50	25.80
Intermediary Castes	13.60	14.70	14.40	14.20
OBCs	21.90	23.20	23.00	25.40
SC	16.40	16.60	15.80	16.20
ST	9.60	8.80	9.00	9.40
Sikhs	1.30	1.30	1.70	1.70
Muslims	5.30	4.20	5.00	4.40
Non-ST Christians	2.20	2.20	2.00	2.20
Other Religious Minorities	0.00	0.20	0.60	0.60
Unidentified	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.20

Table 1 SPINPER PROJECT [3]

In the table 1 it is observed that that upper caste have a smaller reducing trend in representation in lok sabha but despite that they still hold strong presence , where as Intermediate caste, SC, ST have shown constant presence in lok sabha and OBC's presence is gradually rising.

Table 2 : Caste Group and Community Representation in the Hindi Belt (2009–2024)

	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)	2024 (%)
Upper Castes	41.6	42.0	38.9	32.7
Other Backward Classes	20.4	23.5	25.7	31.0
Intermediary Castes	6.2	6.6	6.2	6.6
SC	17.3	17.7	17.3	17.7
ST	9.3	8.0	8.0	8.4
Muslims	4.4	1.8	3.5	3.1
Sikhs	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Non-ST Christians	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.0
Unidentified	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4

Table 2 SPINPER PROJECT

In the table 2 it is observed that presence of OBC's is gradually rising in Hindi Belt and this can be seen with rise of Yadav's and Kurmi in this region. Additionally Upper Caste still hold major power base despite gradual decline in their representation and the major groups here are Brahmins, Rajputs, Baniyas, Kayasthas, Bhumihars.

Table 3: Caste and Religious Communities' Representation among Major Parties' MPs in Uttar Pradesh, General Elections, 2024

	BJP	BJP Partners*	SP	INC
Upper Castes	17		5	2
Brahmins	7		1	2
Rajputs	9		2	
Other U/Cs	1		2	1
Intermediary Castes	1	1	1	
Jats	1	1	1	
Other backward Classes	7	2	19	1
Yadavs			5	
Kurmis	3	1	6	
Gujjars	1	1		
Non-Dominant OBCs	3	0	8	1
Scheduled Castes	8		8	2
Jatav	1			1
Paasis	3		5	
Other SCs	4		3	1
Muslims			4	1
Total	33	3	37	6

Table 3 SPINPER PROJECT

In the table 3 it is observed by taking example of Uttar Pradesh because of being most populous state that 2024 lok sabha election results were decided by the OBC, SC and ST since they were given more tickets by opposition political parties in contrast to NDA and this led to NDA winning 36 out of 80 seats and the Opposition India Bloc winning 43 seats and similar pattern was observed in Maharashtra too and all this led to reduction of seats of NDA IN 2024 with 240 seats as compared with last lok sabha elections of 2019 [4]. Additionally the voter turnout rate was in the range of 66.4%, 66%, 69.5% for 2014, 2019, 2024 Loksabha elections [5].

5. Political Influence in Caste

During Pre-Independence there was demand of separate electorate by Dr. Ambedkar and this was later compromised due to Poona Pact into reservations. In Post Independence India we have witnessed patron-client ties like Jajmani System, caste association like Vanniyar Sangam, caste federalism like political parties of caste groups for example: Bahujan Samaj Party and economic subsystem of caste due to politics. There is also the practice of Sanskritization and this is seen in the Nadars of Tamil Nadu. The biggest turn was seen during Mandal Commission which transformed the power status-quo of dominant caste groups to the Other Backward Classes [OBC].

In recent times the upcoming of Bhartiya Tribal Party in 2017 which takes inspiration from Mangarh Massacre also called as Adivasi Jallianwala, which aims to form Bhil Pradesh is yet another chapter of caste politics in India and this time it will be for ST's.

The Maharashtra Maratha Protest is also a sign that the early dominant groups are now becoming economically subjugated due to Mandal Commission consequences and hence even they need protection in this regard and that's why they are demanding to get reservations.

6. What needs to be done in future to improve Indian Caste Politics Paradox :

Despite the history of reservations for lower caste to improve their socio-economic status in the form of U-Turn in equality there are still problems which need to be addressed like caste discrimination, caste based violence, caste based inequality etc. According to NCRB caste violence against SC increased by 0.4% from 57,582[2022] to 57,789[2023] and by 28.8% against ST from 10,064[2022] to 12,960[2023] [6]. Additionally according to NITI Aayog's Multidimensional Poverty Index [7] ST's are 32.6% multidimensionally poor, SC's are 27.4% multidimensionally poor, OBC's are 18.3% multidimensionally poor where as upper caste are 8.5% multidimensionally poor. And all this will not be solved with just reservations, we will need reservation + policy like changing the voting method in Indian elections like having double voting system which will empower caste candidates to work for their caste and have accountability for not working, more judges and expert to solve crime against SC and ST, teaching critical caste theory in schools like critical race theory taught in American Schools, empowering NCSC, NCST, NCBC, rewarding corporates who show merit + pluralism.

References

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