

# Caste and Political Parties in Indian politics

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## **Abstract:**

This paper focus on Caste in Indian society rises to social movements is largely decided by birth. In the early 1990s there began a shift in caste politics. Indian voters are often perceived as being biased in favour of parties that claim to represent their caste. We incorporate this caste bias into voter preferences and examine its influence on the distributive policies and corruption practices of the two major political parties in the North Indian state. It should be pointed out that these new political parties emerged not on a national level but on a village and regional level, and were most dominant in North India. It is easier for the youth to maintain their status by rallying rather than remain loyal to a specific party. In present paper reviewed that, the current situation of politics while concerned with the caste in India.

**Keywords:** Caste, politics, leadership

## **Introduction**

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds, political parties play a key role in the Indian political system and Indian democracy is very much alive. Competitive elections, a free media and a vibrant civil society are all an integral part of the Indian political landscape. Although further progress is yet to be made, the results so far are impressive. Just over 60 years ago, when India obtained independence from British rule in 1947, conditions were not particularly favourable to the emergence and sustenance of democracy. The country itself had just been united through the merger of British India with numerous kingdoms and divided with two regions in the east and west forming the Muslim majority state of Pakistan. More than half the population lived in abject poverty, illiteracy was rampant, and discrimination and distrust on the basis of caste and religion was widespread.

Nonetheless, the new nation's Constituent Assembly essentially a broad based group of elites established a secular, federal, democratic framework. It proceeded to endow all adults with fundamental rights and the vote. It established a bicameral national parliament and sometimes bicameral state legislatures, with power over budgets granted to the directly elected houses. In the 1990s, the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian constitution took democratic empowerment to the grassroots by establishing a third tier of elected local governments in both villages and cities (termed the Panchayati Raj institutions), and by devolving funds for development directly to them. Today Indians regard democracy as integral to their way of life.

The democratic experiment succeeded, in no small measure, due to the active participation of political parties and their embrace of democratic procedures. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, led the way by establishing democratic norms in the ruling Indian National Congress party (hereinafter, the Congress) and the larger polity. In spite of having an overwhelming majority in parliament, he ensured that opposition parties' views were heard and respected. India's political parties also have a strong tradition of leading open, public protests, continuing with practices established during the independence struggle; such protests sometimes led to policy changes.

### **History of political parties in India**

Historically, the Congress has dominated the party landscape, building on its legacy as the all-encompassing movement that led India's struggle for independence from the British. After independence in 1947, the Congress won seven of the first eight general elections from 1952 to 1984, except 1977, and it has governed India for 49 of 61 years. It had an unbroken domination for the first thirty years of free India, and won pluralities of the vote of 40% and above against a fragmented and regionalized opposition. Even since 1989 it has remained the single largest party by vote share, though not seats, in each of the six elections from 1989 to 2004. The Congress is a secular party that believes in a linguistically and culturally diverse notion of Indian nationhood and remains broadly acceptable to all segments of the population.

There are four other major categories of parties (though these groups of parties do not necessarily constitute a coalition, by any means). We classify them as (i) Hindu nationalist parties (the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, and the Shiv Sena), (ii) the Communist parties, also termed the Left Front (including the Communist Party of India Marxist or CPI(M) and the Communist Party of India or CPI), and the various Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) splinters), (iii) the agrarian/lower-caste populist parties (the Janata Party, the Janata Dal and its offshoots like the Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Rashtriya Lok Dal, Biju Janata Dal, Janata Dal (Secular), Janata Dal (United), etc.) and (iv) ethno-regional or ethnic parties based on particular regional linguistic groups or lower-caste blocs or tribes (in the Northeastern states, in particular). Examples of such ethno-regional parties are the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) of Tamil Nadu, the Shiromani Akali Dal of the Sikhs in Punjab, the National Conference and People's Democratic Party of Jammu and Kashmir, Asom Gana Parishad of Assam, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) of Andhra Pradesh, the tribal Jharkhand Mukti Morcha of Jharkhand, and various small ethnic parties of the Northeastern rim states, and the Scheduled Castes-based Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

In some states, there are regional parties that have been founded by influential leaders. The Nationalist Congress Party of Maharashtra and the Trinamool Congress of Bengal are examples. Most of these, and a large number of even smaller parties, are single-state parties, and are officially termed regional parties. In the last general election (2004), there were 6 national parties, 36 state parties, and 173 registered parties.

### **Coalition Politics in India**

Coalition governments have become an abiding feature of Indian politics over the last few decades. Following an outline of the evolution of coalitions we will analyze what this means for the party-democracy relationship. The evolution of coalitions in India can be summarized as follows. The first phase of broad-front anti-Congressism in the 1960s and 1970s was characterised by intra-state coalitions. The component parties of these coalitions, e.g., the Jana Sangh, Bharatiya Kranti Dal/Bharatiya Lok Dal, Socialists, Swatantra, Congress (O) had their state units, strongholds and interests and the coalitions had no programmatic glue. The second phase, again of broad-front anti-Congressism, was that of the Janata Party. In the aftermath of the Emergency, the Janata Party platform unified ideologically disparate non-Congress parties in intra-state and inter-state coalitions to ensure one-on-one contests aggregating votes at the constituency level. This reflected the imperative of aggregation to defeat the Congress and did not pay attention to the ideological differences between the parties that merged to form the Janata Party.

The National Front coalition, 1989-90, was led by the Janata Dal and included four regional parties. It was supported from the outside by the BJP and the Left Front and was a new departure in three senses. First, learning from the Janata experience, it did not try to unify very different parties but put together a coalition of distinct parties based on a common manifesto.

Second, it brought in the explicitly regional parties like the DMK, TDP and AGP, and the Left parties, unlike the late 1960s/1970s coalition experiments. Third, it also marked the beginning of inter-state alliances of parties which were territorially compatible, where parties did not compete on each other's turf. In 1996, a nine-party United Front (UF) minority coalition government was formed, led by Prime Minister Deve Gowda. Crucial outside support was provided by the Congress and most Left parties. The UF was a territorial coalition but had ideological coherence in terms of secularism, as its component parties and outside supporters were ideologically opposed to the Hindu nationalist BJP.

The Congress withdrew support in April 1997, forcing a change of prime minister, and then again withdrew support in November 1997, precipitating early elections in February 1998. In March 1998, a eleven-party BJP-led minority coalition government based on a coalition

consisting of thirteen pre-electoral (including three Independents) and one post-electoral members of the government, and ten post-electoral supporters and three pre-electoral allies who opted out of the government, assumed power for a year.

In October 1999, the twelve-party BJP-led NDA won a decisive victory and formed a minority coalition along with post-electoral allies, despite some NDA constituents opting to support from the outside. In May 2004, the nine-party Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) formed a minority coalition government with the external support of the four Left parties and two others, plus external support of two pre-electoral allies who opted to stay out.

All non-single party majority governments in India have been minority governments, either single-party minority governments or minority coalition governments, dependent on external support. All the coalition since 1996 has been inter-state territorial coalitions. The clear emphasis of coalitions since the nineties has been on territorial compatibility at the expense of ideological compatibility, particularly in the BJP-led coalitions of 1998 and 1999. The important point to be noted in this history of coalitions is that, with the exception of the Left Front (which is limited to three states), coalitions have been driven by the imperative to aggregate votes to win and not by ideological or programmatic cleavages, except for differences between the Congress/Left and the BJP on secularism.

Coalitions have reduced the sharpness of ideological differences as parties make compromises to win elections and form governments. Indeed, parties have, over time, learned “coalition dharma,” or the norms and practices that enable diverse parties with disparate ideologies to function as a cohesive government, which has enabled a greater variety of regional, ethnic and ideological interests to gain a share of power, thus broad-basing democracy, but at the same time making governance more complex and incoherent. Coalition politics has also rewarded and ensured a share in power for smaller parties, and hence, access to power for the social groups that form the basis of many parties in a regionalized and ethnicized party system. Because they play a key role in the formation and survival of coalitions, small parties have been able to extract important ministerial positions for their members on increased federal allocation of resources to their states. Thus coalition politics has further consolidated the “ethnification” of parties and the party system. It has, by extension, also reinforced the clientelistic relationship between such parties and voters in which parties channel patronage towards their (increasingly) ethnically defined social bases in what has been called India’s “patronage democracy.”

**Caste and political power** Caste system in India The caste system has traditionally had significant influence over people’s access to power. The privileged upper caste groups benefit more by gaining substantially more economic and political power, while the lower caste

groups have limited access to those powers. The caste system distributes to different castes different economic strength. The upper caste groups can then manipulate the economic and political system to transfer economic strength into political power.

Access to power in rural North India, upper and middle ranking castes dominates the ownership of land. They were able to transfer this control over wealth into political dominance over the Panchayat decision. The Panchayat is a local government unit that is in charge of resources disbursement. The upper caste groups monopolized leadership positions in the Panchayat, thus gaining more opportunities to government contracts, employment and funding. Access to police and judicial assistance also depends on which caste one belongs to. By bribing, influencing and intimidating the police and judicial officials, the rural north Indian middle to upper castes tend to manipulate the local police and judicial power more successfully. These types of political rent seeking are having also helped secure the supply of rents to elites through other channels such as 'rigging Panchayat elections, capturing electoral booths, and using pre-election intimidator tactics in elections for the state assembly.'

Whether an individual or a group can raise enough money for constant bribes depends on the caste-based socioeconomic status. Hence, the advantage in accessing economic resources not only transfers into but also reinforces the political domination of the upper caste groups.

Caste, ascribed at birth, is also influenced by where one is born. Political lines in India have often been drawn along caste lines; however, this is only part of the story. Caste is often specific to a particular area. These caste pockets create a locally dominant caste. Because of the political structure in India, local dominance can translate into regional dominance. This concentration of caste population has meant that smaller, less influential castes have the opportunity stake their claims in the political power arena. However, if a non-dominant cast is not concentrated in a particular area, then they are not likely to get any representation without teaming up with another caste to increase their influence. This means, "localized concentration facilitates a space for contesting the domination of State level dominant caste" For instance, the Maratha Kunbi caste has concentrations of populations all over the Indian states. They thus managed to receive maximum representation at the state legislature. Though the caste system factors greatly in determining who makes up the local elites, it also plays a huge role in determining women's influence and representation in the political system. In India's bicameral parliamentary system, women represent a minuscule amount of each house. Of the people's assembly, made up of 545 members, women represent a mere 5.2 percent; and in the State assembly, with 259 members, women make up only 8.8 percent. Both houses have seen an alarming decline in female representatives in the most recent decades. Of the 39 women representatives in the Indian Parliament most were members of higher castes. Caste, which eventually effects class, is one of the most important factors in determining a woman's



successful inclusion into the political system. This may be due to the fact that higher castes challenge the role of the traditional Indian woman and so their caste position gives them a greater range of options that are not available to lower more traditional castes. Caste politics in flux by the early 1990s there began a shift in caste politics. This was partly due to economic liberalization in India which reduced the control the state had on the economy and thus the lower casts, and partly due to an upsurge in caste based parties that made the politics of lower caste empowerment a central part of their political agenda. It should be pointed out that these new political parties emerged not on a national level but on a village and regional level, and were most dominant in North India.

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

### **Conclusion**

All in all, the evolution of the party-voter relationship and the larger impact of political parties on democracy, moving in the direction of greater consolidation and improvement in the quality of democracy, particularly over the past two decades on minority and/or coalition governments. In our model, policies are targeted by class, but in recent years parties have started adopting policies that appear to be increasingly targeted by caste, despite the constitutional restrictions on such policies. However, despite the growth of small scale caste-targeted programs such as the Marriage Funding Program for OBC Girls and affirmative action policies ("reservations") in higher education, there is still the presumption that parties can really only affect the lives of the many millions of U.P. voters via their influence on large scale established programs like the Public Distribution System (PDS) and the Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (REGS), both of which are targeted to the class, not castes, that are in most need of these services.

We have to come to certain conclusions and offer viable solutions to the problems created by a wrong understanding and application of the standard of Caste in India. What has been there for centuries cannot be undone in a day or two. Therefore there is change all over the place in the thinking of people about caste, community, religious and philosophical values.

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