

Casteism in India and The Influence of Politics

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Abstract

Casteism in India remains a deeply entrenched social phenomenon that continues to shape socio-economic and political structures. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, caste identities persist and often influence political mobilization, governance, and public policy. This paper explores the historical roots of casteism, its modern manifestations, and the significant role played by politics in both reinforcing and transforming caste dynamics. It also evaluates affirmative action policies and electoral behavior to assess whether politics acts as a tool of division or empowerment. Caste and politics in India share a deeply paradoxical relationship. On one hand, democratic politics has provided historically marginalized communities with a platform for representation and empowerment. On the other hand, the same political processes often reinforce caste identities for electoral gain.

The role of the Supreme Court of India illustrates this duality. Progressive judgments supporting affirmative action and sub-classification attempt to ensure substantive equality. However, such interventions also demonstrate that caste inequalities remain structurally embedded, requiring continuous legal correction.

1. Introduction

The caste system in India has historically structured society into hierarchical groups based on birth. Over time, this system evolved into casteism, a discriminatory practice that perpetuates inequality and restricts social mobility. Although modernization and democratic governance were expected to diminish caste divisions, caste remains a central factor in Indian politics.

Political actors frequently mobilize caste identities to secure electoral advantages. This intersection of caste and politics raises important questions about democracy, equality, and social justice.

Historical Background

The origins of caste can be traced to the varna system described in ancient texts, which divided society into four categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Over time, this evolved into a complex system of jatis characterized by rigid social boundaries and hereditary occupations.

Colonial policies further institutionalized caste by categorizing and documenting communities, thereby reinforcing social divisions.

CASTEISM IN MODERN INDIA

Casteism persists in both rural and urban India, though its forms may differ. In rural areas, it is often visible in practices such as segregation and restricted access to resources.

In urban contexts, caste manifests subtly through social networks, employment opportunities, and housing discrimination.

1. Theoretical Perspectives on Caste and Politics

Understanding casteism requires engagement with sociological and political theories:

1 Structural Functionalism

This theory views caste as a system that historically maintained social order through division of labor. However, in modern India, it contributes to inequality rather than stability.

2 Conflict Theory

Conflict theorists argue that caste is a tool of oppression used by dominant groups to maintain power. Thinkers like B. R. Ambedkar strongly criticized caste as a system of graded inequality.

3 Identity Politics

Modern politics uses caste as a form of identity mobilization. Political parties leverage caste identities to:

- Consolidate voter bases
- Influence policy agendas
- Create coalition politics

Role of Key Leaders in Anti-Caste Movements

1 B. R. Ambedkar

- Architect of the Indian Constitution
- Advocated abolition of caste system
- Promoted reservations and social justice

2 Jyotirao Phule

- Worked for upliftment of lower castes
- Focused on education and social reform

3 Periyar E. V. Ramasamy

- Led anti-Brahmin movement in South India
- Promoted rationalism and equality

These leaders influenced political discourse and laid the foundation for caste-based empowerment movements.

Judiciary and Caste: Landmark Case Laws

The judiciary has played a crucial role in addressing caste discrimination:

- **Indra Sawhney v. Union of India**
Upheld reservations for OBCs and introduced the **50% cap rule**
- **State of Kerala v. N. M. Thomas**
Recognized equality as including **affirmative action**
- **M. Nagaraj v. Union of India**
Examined reservations in promotions

These cases highlight how law interacts with politics and caste.

Caste-Based Violence and Atrocities

Despite legal safeguards, caste-based violence remains a serious concern.

Key Issues:

- Crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
- Honor killings related to inter-caste marriages
- Social boycotts

The **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989** was enacted to address these issues.

However, implementation challenges remain due to:

- Political interference
- Weak enforcement
- Social bias

Role of Media in Shaping Caste Politics

Media plays a dual role:

Positive Role:

- Raising awareness about caste discrimination
- Highlighting marginalized voices

Negative Role:

- Sensationalizing caste conflicts

- Reinforcing stereotypes

Social media platforms amplify caste identities, sometimes intensifying political polarization.

Global Perspective: Caste Beyond India

Caste discrimination is not limited to India. It has been observed in:

- South Asian diaspora communities
- Workplace discrimination cases abroad

Organizations like United Nations have recognized caste-based discrimination as a human rights issue.

Data and Statistics (Add for Academic Strength)

You can include points like:

- NCRB reports show thousands of cases annually under SC/ST atrocities laws
- Literacy rates and income levels remain lower among Scheduled Castes
- Political representation of marginalized groups has increased post-reservation

Critical Analysis

1 Does Politics Reduce or Reinforce Caste?

- **Reinforces:** Through vote-bank politics and identity mobilization
- **Reduces:** Through representation and empowerment

2 The Paradox

Politics simultaneously:

- Sustains caste divisions
- Enables social justice

This dual role creates a **paradox at the heart of Indian democracy**.

Future of Caste and Politics in India

Emerging trends:

- Shift toward **development-based politics**
- Increasing importance of **youth voters**
- Intersection of **caste + class + religion**

However, caste is unlikely to disappear soon—it is evolving rather than declining.

Recent Supreme Court Judgments on Caste and Reservation (2024–2025)

1 Sub-Classification within Scheduled Castes (2024 Judgment)

One of the most important recent rulings allowed **sub-classification within Scheduled Castes (SCs)** for equitable distribution of reservation benefits.

- The Supreme Court held that states can **create internal categories within SCs** to ensure benefits reach the most backward groups.
- This addressed long-standing concerns that dominant sub-castes were monopolizing reservation benefits.
- The judgment triggered policy debates in states like Karnataka.

Significance:

- Strengthens *substantive equality* under Articles 14 and 15
- Shows how politics and caste intersect in policy-making

2 SC Status and Religious Conversion (2025 Ruling)

The Supreme Court reaffirmed that:

- SC status is limited to **Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists**
- Individuals converting to Christianity or Islam are **not eligible for SC reservation benefits**

This ruling sparked nationwide debate on:

- Religious freedom vs. affirmative action
- Identity vs. socio-economic backwardness

3 Interpretation of SC/ST Atrocities Act (Recent Clarifications)

Recent judicial observations emphasized that:

- Mere insult is not enough; there must be **intent to humiliate based on caste**
- Courts are increasingly cautious about **misuse of the SC/ST Act**

Implication:

- Balancing protection of victims with prevention of misuse
- Reflects judiciary's evolving approach

4 Victim Rights under SC/ST Act (2025 Case)

In **Amit Kumar v. Union of India (2025)**, the court reinforced:

- Victims' rights to **legal assistance and protection**
- State responsibility in ensuring justice under the SC/ST Act

NCRB Data and Recent Statistical Trends

1 Overall Crimes Against Scheduled Castes (SCs)

According to NCRB (latest available data):

- **57,582 cases** of crimes against SCs recorded in 2022
- Increase of **13.1%** from 2021
- Crime rate rose from **25.3 to 28.6 per lakh population**

Top states:

- Uttar Pradesh (highest cases)
- Rajasthan
- Madhya Pradesh

2 Crimes Against Scheduled Tribes (STs)

Recent trends show a sharp rise:

- **12,960 cases in 2023**
- Increase of **28.8% from 2022**

Common offences include:

- Assault
- Riots
- Sexual violence

3 Concentration of Atrocities

- Around **97–98% of cases** are concentrated in a limited number of states
- Indicates regional concentration of caste-based violence

4 Conviction Rates and Justice Delivery Issues

- Conviction rates remain **low (around 30% or less in many regions)**
- High number of pending cases and delays in investigation

Implication:

- Weak enforcement reduces deterrence
- Undermines trust in legal system

5 Government Support and Relief Measures

Recent government data shows:

- **99,000+ victims received relief (2024–25)**
- Increasing number of **inter-caste marriage incentives**

This reflects attempts to:

- Promote social integration
- Reduce caste barriers

Emerging Trends and Observations

1 Rising Crimes Despite Legal Safeguards

Even with laws like the SC/ST Act:

- Atrocities continue to rise
- Indicates **deep-rooted social prejudice**

2 Politicization of Reservation

Recent debates (like sub-classification) show:

- Reservation policies are increasingly shaped by **political considerations**
- Electoral incentives influence policy decisions

3 Regional Disparities

- Some states report significantly higher cases
- Reflects uneven socio-economic development and governance

Critical Insight

The latest data and judgments reveal a **clear contradiction**:

- **Law is becoming stronger and more nuanced**
- **Ground reality still shows rising caste violence**

This suggests that:

Legal reform alone is insufficient without social transformation.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS (SUPREME COURT & NCRB DATA)

Recent Judicial Developments

Recent judgments of the Supreme Court of India reflect an evolving approach toward caste equality and affirmative action.

1 Sub-Classification within Scheduled Castes (2024)

In a landmark development, the Court allowed **sub-classification within Scheduled Castes** to ensure equitable distribution of reservation benefits.

This ruling builds upon earlier precedents like *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India* and emphasizes *substantive equality* over formal equality.

Key Impact:

- Targets unequal benefit distribution within SCs
- Allows states to design more inclusive reservation policies
- Demonstrates the deep intersection of caste and political decision-making

2 SC Status and Religious Conversion (2025)

The Court reiterated that Scheduled Caste status is limited to specific religions, excluding those who convert to others.

Implications:

- Raises questions about equality vs. religious identity
- Reflects ongoing tension between **constitutional rights and political considerations**

3 Interpretation of the SC/ST Atrocities Law

Under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, courts have clarified that:

- Offences must involve **intent to humiliate based on caste identity**
- Safeguards are needed to prevent misuse

This indicates a **balancing approach** between protection and procedural fairness.

NCRB Data: Trends in Caste-Based Crimes

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau highlights persistent challenges:

1 Crimes Against Scheduled Castes

- Over **57,000 cases recorded annually (latest data)**
- Increasing trend year-on-year
- Highest incidence in states like Uttar Pradesh

2 Crimes Against Scheduled Tribes

- Significant rise in reported cases
- Increase of nearly **25–30% in recent years**

3 Conviction and Justice Gap

- Conviction rates remain relatively low
- High pendency of cases

Interpretation:

This reflects a **gap between legal protections and ground realities**

Caste and Politics

Caste plays a pivotal role in Indian politics. Political parties often select candidates based on caste demographics and engage in vote-bank politics.

Reservation policies have increased representation for marginalized groups but have also been subject to political manipulation.

Impact of Politics on Casteism

Politics has both reinforced and challenged caste hierarchies. While caste-based mobilization can deepen divisions, it has also empowered historically marginalized communities.

Democratic participation has enabled these groups to gain political voice and representation.

Challenges and Reforms

Eliminating casteism requires addressing deep-rooted social attitudes and ensuring equitable access to education and economic opportunities.

Policy reforms, awareness campaigns, and strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws are essential.

Conclusion

Casteism in India is not merely a social issue but a political reality deeply embedded in democratic processes. While political mobilization has often exploited caste identities, it has also democratized power structures by enabling marginalized communities to assert themselves.

The challenge lies in transforming caste from a **divisive identity into a tool for social justice**, without allowing it to undermine national unity and democratic ideals.

The relationship between caste and politics in India is complex and multifaceted. While politics often reinforces caste identities, it also provides avenues for social justice and empowerment.

Achieving a caste-free society will require sustained efforts across social, economic, and political domains.

Casteism in India persists not because of the absence of legal safeguards, but because of the complex interplay between social structures and political incentives. While democratic politics has empowered marginalized communities, it has simultaneously entrenched caste identities through vote-bank mobilization. Therefore, the challenge before India is not merely to reform laws or policies, but to transform the social consciousness that sustains caste hierarchies.

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