

The Evolution of Caste Politics in Contemporary India: Varna to Vote Banks

AMIT BURDAK

4th year Student

Shaheed Bhagat Singh Evening College, University of Delhi, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

Caste has been a controversial issue in Indian Hindu society since ancient times. Despite various revolutionary efforts, the Indian caste system is still playing an important role in society at present. This research aims to analyse how caste politics has evolved in contemporary Indian politics. This study also examines how the varna system in ancient India has now turned into vote bank politics. This article analyses the practice of caste system which is very prevalent in India, especially in rural areas, in which the problem of untouchability still remains a serious issue which is taking the Indian society into an era of darkness. In ancient times, the concept of varna system was introduced through Manu Smriti written by Svayambhuva Manu. The caste system was started in which there were four varnas – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. On the basis of varna system, occupational division has been done in most of the societies of India since ancient times, which has been severely criticized by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in his book *Annihilation of Caste* which was published in 1936¹.

Keywords: Caste, Varna, Contemporary India, Vote Bank, Politics

INTRODUCTION

“If someone is subjected to discrimination, it is due to his class rather than his behavior.”²

The Indian caste system is one of the oldest social forms in the world and can be traced back to the Vedic period (around 1500 BCE) more than 3,000 years ago, which was mainly divided into four varnas: Brahmins-teacher, preacher and scholar, Kshatriya-monarch and warrior, Vaishyas- traders and agriculturists and Shudras-service providers and labourers, the lowest level in the varna system, the shudras, who were called untouchables, were excluded from society, this was a hereditary process³.

Some social reformers have referred to the “caste system” existence in India since classical times, as a curse and a barrier to the advancement of the nation and its society. Among them, Jyotiba Phule, Raja Rammohan Roy, and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar were particularly critical

of the “caste system.” Jyotirao Phule, a reformist leader of the 19th century, also expressed many views about the caste system in which he said that Brahminical tradition should not be given the highest place in society, instead all caste groups should be given respect and opportunities⁴. Under the caste system, the same religion is divided into many communities in which different religious practices are prevalent in the same religion. Under this, regional gods are also divided differently. Even in modern India, interfaith marriage is not recognized under the caste system and even today many types of defects exist in Indian society. There are some such traditions in which people of different regions, despite being of the same religion, develop hatred among themselves due to different castes and they also divide their respective gods, who later have to face problems in the name of caste.

Caste politics in India has undergone a long and intricate transformation from the ritualized hierarchy of

varna in ancient texts to the robust electoral blocs of modern-day *vote banks*. While Hindu philosophy initially conceived *varna* as an idealized division based on duty and purity, over time, this system morphed into hereditary, regionally varied *jati* networks, deeply embedded in social and political life⁵. In the post-colonial era, caste acquired an electoral dimension, becoming central to democratic mobilization, increasingly framed through the lens of identity-based politics⁶.

The ideology of *varna* system has its roots in hindu dharmic scripture like the Rigveda, Manusmriti, and eventually Puranic and Dharmashastra literature⁷. Those early times, *varna* was closely associated with function and ethical order and was primarily a recited standard rather than a day-to-day societal practice. Gradually, the intricately detailed and numerous *jati* system had gone beyond the former and had become the main theme of the social division⁸.

During British rule, administrative practices like caste-based enumeration in censuses reified caste identities. This process often simplified and institutionalized diversity. Consequently, *jati* distinctions hardened into more rigid, politically and socially salient categories⁹. With independence, the Indian Constitution (1950) banned caste discrimination and introduced reservations for Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) in legislatures, educational institutions, and government service¹⁰. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, argued that without political representation, social emancipation would remain elusive¹¹. These institutional measures initially aimed to dismantle historic inequities and foster inclusive governance¹².

The term “vote bank” refers to a loyal, identity-based bloc—often caste-based—that reliably supports certain parties or candidates, typically in expectation of patronage or policy concessions¹³. Sociologist M.N. Srinivas coined the term in the 1950s, noting how caste leaders could function as patrons over their communities¹⁴. Over time, political parties institutionalized this strategy, using caste-based social calculations as tools for electoral gain¹⁵.

The implementation of the Mandal commission recommendations (1990), granting 27% reservation for other backward classes (OBC) in government jobs and education, marked a watershed moment¹⁶. Middle peasant castes such as Yadavs, Kurmis, and Koris, who had previously been politically marginalized despite their numbers, emerged as powerful mobilizing forces¹⁷.

Figures like Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Sharda Yadav and Nitish Kumar built influential regional political movements, signaling OBC assertion in electoral politics¹⁸.

The post Mandal period saw the rise of explicitly parties based on castes, like the Bahujan Samaj Party, founded by “Kanshi Ram” to mobilize dalits, other backward classes, and minorities under a unified “Bahujan” identity¹⁹. Mayawati’s ascent as Chief Minister in Uttar Pradesh symbolized the mainstream political success of dalit leadership²⁰. Regional parties such as “Samajwadi Party (SP)” and “Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)” relied on caste and religious coalitions (e.g., Yadav-Muslim combinations) to claim power²¹.

This evolution also enhanced political participation among historically marginalized groups. Research indicates that in the early 21st century, Dalits and Adivasis often exhibited participation levels in civic associations and local governance that matched or exceeded those of forward castes²². In recent years, caste politics has fragmented further, with sub-caste identities gaining salience. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, legislative assemblies now host caste-specific gatherings, such as those by Thakur, Lodh, Kurmi, and Brahmin MLAs reflecting a shift toward micro-identity mobilization²³.

Simultaneously, caste’s adaptation to modernity is evident in associations that encompass educational institutions, cooperative banks, and financial networks aligned along caste lines persisting vehicles of privilege or solidarity²⁴. Academic scholarship underscores caste’s resilience and adaptability; Surinder Jodhka, for instance, argues that caste far from disappearing is evolving into nuanced forms of relational dominance in contemporary India²⁵. The trajectory from *varna* to vote banks encapsulates India’s journey from ideologically grounded social stratification to politicized identity mobilization. While ancient *varna* hierarchies offered a moral map, modern caste politics grapple with real-world power structures, selection winning strategies, representation, and social justice.

Vote Bank Politics

M.N. Srinivas formulated the phrase “vote bank” in his journal “The Social System of a Mysore Village” published in 1955. In this work, Srinivas dealt with the idea as the political power that was influenced by patrons to clients, thus mentioning the first concepts of patron-client relationships which later became “vote bank

politics”²⁶.

During the 1950s, M. N. Srinivas noticed that political parties in India depended on the help of certain castes, communities, or religious groups to get elected. Such entities were called “vote banks” because their unified electoral conduct could be most likely directed towards a particular party or candidate. The term pointed to the barter system of Indian politics in which support was traded for the promise of benefits, protection, or representation²⁷.

Mandal Commission and Caste Mobilization After 1990

The launching of the Mandal Commission report suggestions in 1990 was a critical point. Through the idea of reservations for OBCs, the central authority recast caste from being a mere social identity to an active political resource. As a result, the regional leaders with deep-rooted influence who formed political parties on the basis of caste blocs emerged. Consequently, leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav from Bihar and Mulayam Singh Yadav from Uttar Pradesh became very well-known by the power they got from organizing the backward caste and minority votes²⁸. One more thing to note is how the caste-based vote bank politics evolved from mere assertion to being an integral part of the electoral system with the strategies becoming more and more overt. The period also changed the social justice concept vocabulary when political power got connected with group identity instead of the individual one or policy matters²⁹.

Caste-Based Mobilization

Political parties are using the caste identities of voters to mobilize them, offering attractive deals to them in both material and non-material forms without an end in sight³⁰.

The caste-based mode of governance in Bihar has left its imprints deeply into the grassroots level administration where the caste affiliations dominate the way resources, jobs, and welfare schemes are allocated. This patron-client system makes public services the instruments of the power, thus, reducing the chances of transparency, merit, and equality. During the period of Lalu Prasad Yadav’s regime (1990–2005), the focus on caste empowerment and social justice got eclipsed by corruption, nepotism, and the decay of institutions, thus, coining the term “Jungle Raj”³¹.

Dalit Vote Bank

‘Dalits’ have always been an important vote bank for different political parties. The power of Dalits has been the center of attention of the “Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)”, which was started by “Kanshi Ram” and is currently under the superintendency of Mayawati. Consequently, this party has grab a lot of backing from the Dalit populations in Uttar Pradesh and several other states³².

Yadav Vote Bank

The Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh is known as a party that has consistently stood for the Yadav caste, an influential group of educated Non-Creamy Layer (OBC) in the state, whose interests have been represented by it in the last few decades³³. The vote banks based on caste form the very base of the electoral strategies of several Indian states. Political parties engage, quite methodically, the three groups of castes - dominant, backward, and marginalized - to establish voter blocs that are dependable. After the Mandal Commission epoch, which recast the caste system as a vehicle for political power, this trend escalated significantly. Party leaders and politicians frequently establish such combinations as Yadav-Muslim in Uttar Pradesh or Reddy-Kapu in Andhra Pradesh to extract the maximum electoral benefit. Instead of using development or good administration as a platform, the caste appeals still depend on identity confirmation, symbolic representation, and the provision of targeted welfare. Thus, caste is still serving not only as a social system but also as a handled electoral resource.”

Among the dominant castes, for example, the Patels in Gujrat, the Marathas in Maharashtra, the Jats in Haryana, and the Reddys in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, it is not unusual for them to wield a very powerful influence over the political and economic sphere as well as the social settings because of their well-established economic and social position. These groups are very important to political parties since they bring money to the party, can help through organization and activities, and also increase the chances of winning in elections. In return, these parties usually select candidates and make policy decisions that go in line with what these groups want.

Temples, Festivals and Public Rituals

Religious symbolism is one of the most frequently

used means in the political sphere to consolidate the group identity and to attract more followers. Politicians step into temples, take part in religious processions, or mention gods in their speeches so as to link with Hindu voters. Along these lines, not only as a cultural participation, but also as political alignment with religious sentiments, are being portrayed the high-profile events like the Ram Temple in Ayodhya and public Navratri and Ganesh Chaturthi participation. These symbolic deeds are not confined merely to ritual performance. They are usually orchestrated alongside electoral cycles and further spread via media coverage to indicate the party's closeness to the core values of the target community. Such initiatives act as identity markers which, without offering any loyalty or performance-based evaluation, foster group loyalty³⁴.

Social Media Micro Targeting for Vote Banks

Social media micro-targeting enables political parties to send tailored messages to certain groups of voters that are identified by caste, religion, area, and hobbies. Campaigns can now use data analytics and digital platforms to deliver one-on-one messages to voters that are attractive and engaging and at the same time, enable them to identify with their group and thus get political support. Although this strategy can increase the effectiveness of the campaign, it still carries the risk of exacerbating social divisions as it gives users the opportunity to choose only those stories that confirm their beliefs and to limit the access to different perspectives³⁵.

Judicial and Legal Dynamic of Caste Politics

The political parties regularly utilize the caste system to increase their vote banks by using reservation policies, caste-based mobilization and caste alliances as the basis of their campaign strategies. Several landmark decisions have established the legal norms that regulate the practical application of quotas and also looked into the relationship between equal rights and social justice³⁶.

The case of *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, referenced as the case of Mandal Commission, is the most authoritative judgment in the field of Indian reservation policy. In this instance, the Apex Court was examining the question of the constitutionality of the Mandal Commission recommendations that recommended 27% reservation in public sector jobs for the socially and educationally backward classes. While approving the proposals, the Court came up with a novel concept called “creamy layer” among the OBCs. In the

Court's opinion, the OBCs are the ones to be given the benefit of reservation, however, the said benefit shall not be accorded to the creamy layer *i.e.* the economically efficient and socially advanced sections of the OBCs. The creamy layer was demarcated from the rest of the OBCs for reservation purposes³⁷.

In *M. Nagaraj v. Union of India*, the Apex Court has passed a verdict that the state governments have the authority to extend members of the SCs and STs a promotion under Article 16(4A)³⁸. The Court while sanctioning the legality of such quotas also laid down certain conditions among which were supplying measurable data of under-representation and proving the requirement of equitable representation. The Apex Court laid equal stress on merit during recruitment and promotions.

The Supreme Court of India, in *Subhash Kashinath Mahajan v. State of Maharashtra* case, ruled against the provision of anticipative bail under the SCs and STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. This provision was incompatible with Articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Constitution of India³⁹. Petitioners said that arrest power should be exercised only when all restrictions laid down in the CRPC like inspection, trustworthy information, and a just procedure, have been met. The Supreme Court softened the harsh character of the Act by issuing instructions to be followed. The court removed the ban on anticipative bail in all cases under the Act and at the same time emancipated bail if the court, on a prima facie view, does not find a case or it finds the complaint to be mala fide. This verdict was vehemently opposed by the backward classes and Dalit groups. As a result, they organized demonstrations and, in some cases, erupted into violent protests. The Supreme Court supported the Act's constitutionality, transformed provisions such as the court's rejection of an FIR, arrest without police superintendent's approval, and anticipatory bail only in very rare cases⁴⁰.

Uttar Pradesh, is characterized by a huge communal disparity in representation and caste identity. From these 80 constituencies, 23 (twenty-three) dominating general caste constituencies have representatives from their respective castes so that the correlation between the caste identity and the election of representatives is 100%. On the other hand, 15 (fifteen) constituencies are OBC-dominant, and their MP comes from OBC as well. Besides that, 3 (three) constituencies where Muslims are the leading caste, and the victorious candidate is of the same

caste. Out of 19 winners in the 2024 parliamentary elections, 17 were from the seats reserved for the SCs, which in turn indicates the social inequality within the political and social realm of Uttar Pradesh⁴¹.

Caste, Modernization, and Changing Dynamics

Recently, university campuses are places where the caste-based discussions and the fight against the caste system are very popular. Such phenomena are very typical for public universities, e.g., Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) (Though his work was not focused solely around caste issues, Kanhaiya Kumar (ex-JNU Students' Union President) is backed by OBC youth who see him as a leader that understands their class and caste-based neglect.), the University of Hyderabad (HCU), and Banaras Hindu University (BHU). These places have not only talked about but also seen actions or protests against caste discrimination, administrative exclusion, and institutional apathy that are led by students. The first major instance of these protests was, undoubtedly, the 2016 demonstration following Rohith Vemula's death at HCU, which revealed caste bias in higher education and sparked a vast Ambedkarite activist movement⁴².

Akhil Bhartiya Jat Aarakshan Sangharsh Samiti (Haryana, UP): The young generation of Jat community was the driving force of the youth-led Jat reservation protests (2016–2017) which resulted in mass mobilization for the demand of OBC status for Jats. The involvement of jobless Jat youth demonstrated how caste identity merged with the desire for education and government employment⁴³.

Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter and YouTube are the new locales where the Dalit, OBC, and tribal youth not only vent their anger but also defy caste hierarchy. Movement like #DalitLivesMatter (which took a leaf from BLM) and #JusticeForRohithVemula (after the incident of the student's discrimination in the institution, 2016) are still alive among young urban activists⁴⁴.

Conclusion

The Indian caste system is primarily seen as the different lifestyle habits of various communities that are an indication of their social status in all the fields. These castes are usually portrayed on the negative side as being the sources of vote bank, discrimination, domination, communal co-existence with other communities, and when castes as such lead to the breaking of peculiarity among the citizens of the state. The constitutional ideals

will be etched in the democratic system. Democracy always needs the implementation of the principles to be the active engagement of the rights holders. Hence, the political administration should issue commands and stimulate the citizens to practice those principles. Politics, however, should always be kept separate from the social structure that has a direct impact on politics⁴⁵.

The book, *The modernity of Tradition*, written by American political scientists Rudolf and S.H. Rudolf, claims that caste politics in India has changed the nature of political relationships, resulting in non-discrimination between different castes. On the contrary, casteism is still a major problem, as it not only splits political parties but also makes the whole political atmosphere dominated by castes. The election campaigns are heavily dependent on caste loyalties, and the violence during the elections is usually of a caste nature. To resolve the problem, politicians have to go through a process of self-democratization and commit themselves to meeting the simple needs of the people. The education system has to inculcate the values of equality and fraternity among the citizens.

The three precedents delivered in the Indra Sawhney, M. Nagaraj, and Jarnail Singh cases are a trilogy of historic decisions that mark a turning point in the affirmative action jurisprudence in India. These cases represent more than just court rulings; they are, in fact, milestones of the Indian Constitution, which have had a profound impact on the socio-legal communication of social division-based reservation and the struggle for substantive fairness in a community that is deeply divided along caste lines. By these landmark decisions, the Indian judiciary went through the elegant and complicated step of adjusting which aimed at reconciling the different requirements of social justice with the basic ideals of meritocracy, administrative adaptability, and the equalizing general fundamental that is enshrined in the Indian Constitution⁴⁶.

For a mature democracy, a move towards fair governance is necessary, ensuring harmony among the electorate and encouraging participation in the development process. Such a move would call for political courage, a knowledgeable citizenry, and reforms in institutions. To bring about this change, teamwork is critical among the political leaders, the society at large, the media, and the voters since such cooperation heralds the zenith of India's democracy⁴⁷.

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