

In spite of the ushering in of a republican democratic India in 1950, it is not that post-independent India witnessed a declining trend of caste identity. In fact, Andre Beteille pointed out that, outside the family, the relation between caste and politics has become much more transparent during this period. The same line of argument is echoed by Dipankar Gupta, who observed that while caste as a system has declined in post-independent India, caste as an identity has become much more transparent; it is not that caste as an identity has been erased.

Let us now examine this matter—that is, the relationship between caste and politics in post-independent India—in a more detailed and structured manner.

We have noticed that the basic thrust of the Indian Constitution was to create an egalitarian democratic society. For that purpose, it incorporated specific provisions for the Scheduled Castes, aimed at ensuring social justice and political representation. Notwithstanding these constitutional safeguards, we observe that from 1950 to 1977 there existed a phase of one-party dominance, as described by W. H. Morris-Jones in the Indian context.

Although cracks in the Indian National Congress began to appear from the late 1960s, when several states elected non-Congress governments, the overall political scenario remained one of overwhelming Congress dominance during the period 1950–1977.

If we examine the dynamics of caste during this phase, it becomes evident that the dominant or upper castes largely aligned themselves with the Congress. At the same time, the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes were not yet in a strong position to assert their political identity in a pronounced manner. Consequently, their support too, to a considerable extent, remained within the Congress fold.

However, an important development during this period was the initiative of B. R. Ambedkar, who founded the Republican Party of India with the objective of mobilizing the Scheduled Castes and securing socio-economic concessions for their upliftment. Subsequently, Ambedkar renounced the caste system altogether by embracing Buddhism and encouraged his followers to do the same. Despite this, the formation of the Republican Party marked a significant moment in the political mobilization of Scheduled Castes.

Since 1977, however, a new phase emerged, and different kinds of political equations began to take shape with regard to the relationship between caste and politics in India.

One major aspect in the changing relationship between caste and politics after the late 1960s and especially post-1977 is the **rise of the middle peasant castes**, particularly in North India—most prominently in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This transformation was not accidental; rather, it was shaped by a series of deliberate structural interventions undertaken by the Indian state to promote an egalitarian social order. These developments can be analytically understood through three major processes:

1. Centralized Administration and Reservation Policy

One of the foundational steps taken by the Indian state was the creation of a **centralized administrative system** guided by constitutional principles of equality and social justice. Within this framework, the policy of **reservation (affirmative action)** enabled members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and, later, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) to enter government services and public institutions.

This had several important consequences:

- **Political inclusion:** Individuals from historically marginalized castes gained entry into bureaucratic structures such as the IAS, IPS, and other public services.
- **Creation of a new middle class:** A section of SCs and OBCs began to acquire education, stable income, and social mobility.
- **Symbolic empowerment:** Representation in state institutions enhanced the visibility and legitimacy of these groups in the public sphere.

Thus, the centralized administrative structure did not merely function as a governance mechanism; it became an instrument of **social transformation**, allowing caste groups previously excluded from power to participate in state authority.

2. Industrialization, Urbanization, and Market Expansion

The second major factor was the state-led push towards **industrialization and modernization**, particularly during the Nehruvian period and thereafter. This process was accompanied by gradual **urbanization** and the limited but growing penetration of the **market economy**.

These changes weakened traditional caste barriers in several ways:

- **Occupational mobility:** Industrial and urban jobs were less tied to caste-based hereditary occupations, allowing individuals from lower castes to enter new professions.
- **Anonymity of urban life:** In cities, caste identities became less rigidly enforced compared to rural settings.
- **Expansion of education and skills:** Access to education and technical training enabled upward mobility.

As a result, caste began to lose some of its rigid structural control over economic life, even though it continued to persist as an identity marker. This transition is crucial in understanding how caste adapted to modern economic processes rather than disappearing.

3. The Green Revolution and Agrarian Transformation

The third and perhaps most decisive factor in North India was the **Green Revolution**, particularly in regions like Punjab, Haryana, and parts of Uttar Pradesh.

The Green Revolution involved:

- Introduction of **high-yielding variety (HYV) seeds**
- Expansion of **irrigation facilities**
- Use of **fertilizers and modern agricultural techniques**
- Provision of **state subsidies and institutional credit**

This led to a significant increase in agricultural productivity and created a class of **prosperous middle peasants**—often belonging to intermediate castes such as Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis, and others.

Key consequences included:

- **Economic empowerment:** These groups accumulated wealth through increased agricultural output.
- **Political assertion:** Economic strength translated into demands for political representation and leadership.
- **Shift in rural power structure:** Traditional upper-caste landlords were increasingly challenged by these upwardly mobile agrarian groups.

4. Abolition of Zamindari System

Another crucial reform was the **abolition of the zamindari system**, which dismantled the intermediary landlord class that had historically controlled both economic and political power in rural India.

Its impact was significant:

- **Decline of traditional elites:** Upper-caste zamindars lost their monopoly over land and authority.
- **Redistribution of power:** Although land redistribution was uneven, it still weakened feudal hierarchies.
- **Rise of new rural elites:** Middle peasant castes, benefiting from land reforms and agricultural growth, emerged as influential actors.

Subsequent changes in India's political economy led to the emergence of a **middle peasant category**, especially in northern India. These groups—often belonging to intermediate or backward castes such as Yadavs, Kurmis, Jats, and Koeris—benefited from land reforms, the Green Revolution, and access to state resources. As their **economic base strengthened**, they began to translate this material power into **political assertion**. This marked a crucial shift: caste was no longer only a marker of hierarchy, but also a **basis of organized political power**.

A major turning point in this transformation was the intervention of Kanshi Ram. In 1981, on the occasion of the death anniversary of B. R. Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram mobilized Dalit consciousness through organizations like BAMCEF (Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation). This mobilization culminated in the formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984.

The BSP introduced a powerful ideological shift through the idea of the “**Bahujan**” (the majority comprising Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and minorities). Its strategy was to convert numerical strength into electoral power. This **disturbed the traditional caste-based political equilibrium**, which had earlier been dominated by upper castes under the umbrella of the Indian National Congress. The BSP’s rise demonstrated that marginalized groups could organize independently and challenge established power structures.

Simultaneously, another significant development was the **rise of Yadavs as a dominant political force** in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Yadavs, traditionally categorized as an OBC group, benefited from agrarian changes and gradually consolidated their socio-political identity. This led to the emergence of powerful regional leaders such as Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh and Lalu Prasad Yadav in Bihar.

These leaders symbolized a **new phase of political representation**, where backward caste leadership replaced the earlier dominance of upper-caste elites. Their political strategies often combined caste mobilization with broader social coalitions—for instance, alliances between OBCs and Muslims. Importantly, this phase also coincided with the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, which expanded reservations for OBCs and further strengthened their political consciousness.

However, while discussing these developments, it is essential to avoid oversimplification. The rise of caste-based parties and leaders did **not imply a uniform voting pattern**:

- Members of a single caste do not always vote for one party.
- There exist **intra-caste divisions** (differences within the same caste based on class, region, or faction).
- There are also **inter-caste divisions** among various backward and marginalized groups competing for resources and representation.

Thus, caste politics in India is not monolithic but highly **fragmented and negotiated**.

Caste in Voting Behaviour

In the unfolding drama of Indian electoral politics, caste does not operate as a rigid script but rather as a fluid, negotiated force that shapes both the strategies of political actors and the choices of voters. Political parties, like careful social

cartographers, map constituencies not merely through geography but through caste arithmetic—distributing tickets by weighing the numerical strength and influence of caste groups, while candidates present themselves as defenders of specific social and economic interests. Simultaneously, caste leaders have historically mobilized communities with striking appeals—urging solidarity through slogans that fused kinship, honour, and political duty—yet this apparent unity often masks deeper fractures. Even in early decades, such as the 1950s, caste associations oscillated between neutrality and partisan alignment, at times urging members to vote strictly along caste lines, and at others framing political support as a matter of collective “dharma” tied to national development .

However, the voter’s mind resists such simplification. Empirical evidence consistently disrupts the myth of monolithic caste voting. While certain communities may show patterns of party identification—such as Jats aligning with agrarian-focused parties or segments of Scheduled Castes supporting parties like the BSP—these tendencies are never absolute. Class divisions, occupational identities, and perceptions of economic benefit intervene powerfully. For instance, poorer sections within a caste may favour one party due to redistributive promises, while relatively affluent members of the same caste gravitate elsewhere, guided by different material interests. Survey data further reveals that caste, contrary to popular belief, is rarely the sole or even primary determinant of voting; rather, it operates as one variable within a broader calculus involving party performance, candidate accessibility, and perceived capacity to deliver benefits .

Thus, Indian democracy reveals a more complex sociological truth: caste is neither obsolete nor omnipotent. It persists as a meaningful identity, shaping political mobilization and representation, yet it is continually refracted through class, ideology, and lived experience. Voters do not simply vote *as* members of a caste—they vote as individuals situated within overlapping structures of aspiration, memory, and pragmatic judgment. In this sense, caste in elections is less a deterministic force and more a dynamic field of negotiation, where identity meets interest, and tradition encounters the evolving logic of democratic choice.

1. The Party Dimension: The "Ticket" Strategy

Imagine a constituency called **Rampur**, where 40% of the population belongs to the **Yadav** caste, 30% are **Dalits**, and the rest are a mix of other groups.

When political parties sit down to pick a candidate, they aren't just looking for the smartest person; they are looking at the "**Caste Equation.**"

The Strategy: Party A thinks, "If we field a Yadav candidate, we might capture that 40% block immediately."

The Appeal: The candidate doesn't just say "I am a Yadav." They say, "I am a champion for the farmers and the working class (who happen to be mostly Yadavs here)." They project themselves as the "protector" of that group’s specific economic interests.

2. The Voter Dimension: Interests Over Identity

Now, look at the voters in Rampur. While it's easy to assume every Yadav will vote for the Yadav candidate, the reality is much more complex. Voters are asking: "**Who will actually help me?**"

The "Exclusive" Vote (The 1950s Style)

In the early days of independence, caste associations were very rigid. You might have heard slogans like:

"Do not give your daughter or your vote to anyone but a [Caste Name]."

In this scenario, the vote is **exclusive**. The loyalty is to the bloodline, regardless of the party's platform.

The Modern Reality: Interest-Based Voting

Today, as the text suggests, voting is rarely a "100% caste block." Let's look at why a Yadav voter in Rampur might **not** vote for the Yadav candidate:

Class Differences: A wealthy Yadav businessman might feel the BJP protects his interests better, while a poor Yadav laborer might stick with a socialist party like the SP or RJD.

Party Loyalty: A voter might think, "The candidate is my caste, but his party is weak and won't win. If I vote for him, my vote is wasted. I'd rather vote for a different caste candidate from a powerful party that can actually build the roads in my village."

Performance: If a "caste leader" gets elected but fails to provide jobs or safety, the voters will eventually abandon them. This is why famous leaders often lose in their own strongholds when they switch parties or lose popularity.

In analytical terms, what emerges after 1977 can be described as the **second phase of Indian politics in relation to caste**:

- The first phase (1950-1977): Dominance of a broad-based party system with limited visible caste assertion.
- The second phase (post-1977): **Explicit politicization of caste**, rise of regional parties, and assertion of backward and marginalized groups.

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This second phase represents a deeper democratization of Indian politics, where previously excluded groups not only participated in elections but **actively shaped political power structures**. Caste, therefore, did not decline; rather, it was **reconstituted as a dynamic and competitive political identity**, closely intertwined with economic change and democratic mobilization.

Although the Republican Party of India had been formed prior to this phase, we may analytically identify the period from **1977 to 1989 as the second phase of caste-politics relations in India**. The choice of these two years is not arbitrary; rather, it is grounded in concrete political transformations.

We consider **1977 as the starting point** because it marks a decisive rupture in India's political history. In that year, for the first time, a non-Congress government was formed at the Union level after the Indian Emergency 1975–1977. This brought the Janata Party to power, breaking the long-standing dominance of the Indian National Congress.

A crucial figure in this transformation was Charan Singh, whose political base lay among the **middle peasant castes** of North India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh. His politics represented agrarian and backward caste interests, especially those of communities like Jats and other intermediate castes. The rise of such leadership signified that **political power was no longer monopolized by upper castes**, but was increasingly being claimed by economically empowered middle segments that had benefited from earlier state-led changes such as land reforms and the Green Revolution.

Thus, 1977 marks the beginning of a phase where:

- Middle peasant castes began to **assert themselves politically at the national level**
- Coalition politics replaced one-party dominance
- Caste identities became more **explicitly mobilized in electoral politics**

We consider **1989 as the end point** of this phase because it marks another significant transition in the logic of caste politics. By this time, a new classificatory and political category—**Other Backward Classes (OBCs)**—had emerged as a **central axis of political mobilization**. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations (announced in 1990, but politically crystallizing around 1989) transformed caste from a diffuse identity into a more **institutionally recognized and politically consolidated category**.

The 1989 general elections, which brought the Janata Dal to power under V. P. Singh, symbolized this shift. The discourse now moved from general backward caste assertion to a more **structured and policy-driven politics of OBC identity**, centered on reservation, representation, and social justice.

Therefore, the period **1977–1989** can be understood as a transitional phase:

- It begins with the **decline of Congress dominance and the rise of middle peasant caste politics**

- It ends with the **institutionalization of caste categories, especially OBCs, as a dominant political force**

1989-Present (The Rise of OBCs)

When the Constitution was adopted, the makers of the Constitution were of the opinion that, apart from the Scheduled Castes, there also existed other social groups who required some degree of **protective intervention by the state**. These groups were not situated at the same level as the Scheduled Castes, since they had not historically experienced the same intensity of social exclusion and atrocities such as untouchability. At the same time, unlike the upper castes, they did not have adequate access to education, land, and economic resources.

Thus, they occupied what may be described as an **intermediate or “middle caste” position**—socially above the Scheduled Castes but economically and educationally disadvantaged in comparison to upper castes. However, at the time of constitutional framing, no extensive and specific provisions were made for these groups in the same manner as those for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

A significant development occurred in 1979, when the Mandal Commission, headed by B. P. Mandal, submitted its report. The Commission identified **more than 3,000 castes** as belonging to the category of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and recommended **27% reservation** for them in central government jobs and educational institutions.

However, these recommendations were not immediately implemented. It was only in 1989, when V. P. Singh came to power, that serious political discussions began regarding their implementation. Eventually, in 1990, the government announced the implementation of these recommendations.

This decision led to **widespread national upheaval**. There were large-scale protests, particularly among sections of urban, educated youth who feared loss of opportunities in employment and education. In extreme cases, some individuals resorted to **self-immolation**, reflecting the intensity of opposition. The central concern among critics was whether such reservations would genuinely benefit the most disadvantaged sections or whether they might reinforce new forms of inequality.

Apart from political reactions, the Mandal Commission also generated **significant academic debate**. Several sociologists and scholars criticized the framework of the Commission on two major grounds:

First, the **criteria used to determine backwardness** were considered problematic. The Commission employed a combination of social, educational, and economic indicators. However, some of these—such as whether women of a particular caste worked outside the home—were criticized for being **contextually inappropriate**. Such criteria often reflected gender norms rather

than actual socio-economic deprivation, thereby raising questions about the accuracy of identifying “backwardness.”

Second, there was criticism regarding the **breadth and ambiguity of the OBC category itself**. If one excludes roughly:

- 12% upper castes,
- about 15% Scheduled Tribes, and
- approximately 22% Scheduled Castes,

then a very large proportion of the remaining population would fall under the OBC category. Critics argued that this made the category **too expansive and internally heterogeneous**, lacking clear boundaries. As a result, relatively better-off groups within OBCs might capture most of the benefits, leaving the truly disadvantaged still marginalized.

Thus, the Mandal Commission recommendations triggered both:

- **Political debates** (over representation, reservation, and electoral mobilization), and
- **Academic debates** (over classification, criteria, and the sociology of backwardness).

In this way, the Mandal moment marked a crucial turning point, where caste was not only a matter of social identity or political mobilization, but also became **institutionally codified through state policy**, leading to enduring transformations in Indian democracy.

That is why, from 1989 onwards, we may analytically describe the emergence of a **third phase in the dynamics of caste and politics in India**. This phase—arguably continuing into the present—is marked by far more complex interrelations, where caste no longer operates in isolation but intersects with **class, gender, region, and electoral strategy**. Caste becomes part of a broader matrix of identity-based politics rather than a standalone hierarchical system.

1. From Caste Hierarchy to “Affirmative Identity Politics”

In this phase, the earlier ritualistic features of caste—such as strict rules of purity–pollution, hereditary occupations, and rigid social distance—have **gradually weakened**, especially under the impact of education, urbanization, and market expansion. However, this does **not mean the disappearance of caste**. Instead, caste has re-emerged in a new form:

- As a **political identity** used for mobilization
- As a **claim-making category** for rights, representation, and resources
- As part of **affirmative action discourse** (reservations, welfare policies)

Thus, caste shifts from being a **system of exclusion** to also becoming a **tool of assertion and negotiation** within democracy.

2. Intersectionality: Caste with Class, Gender, and Politics

A defining feature of this phase is the intersection of caste with other social variables:

- **Caste and Class:** Not all members of a caste share the same economic position. For example, within OBCs, some groups (like dominant agrarian castes) are economically powerful, while others remain marginalized.
- **Caste and Gender:** Women's experiences differ within caste hierarchies. Dalit women, for instance, face **double marginalization**—both caste-based and gender-based oppression.
- **Caste and Political Power:** Political representation increasingly reflects caste-based coalitions, but these are shaped by class interests and leadership structures.

This makes the analysis of caste far more nuanced than in earlier phases.

3. Regional Variations in Caste Dynamics

One of the most important aspects of this phase is that **caste dynamics are not uniform across India**. Instead, they vary significantly across regions:

(a) Northern India: Middle Caste Dominance

In states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar:

- Middle peasant castes (e.g., Yadavs, Kurmis) have become **politically dominant**
- Parties like the Samajwadi Party and Rashtriya Janata Dal reflect this shift
- Electoral politics often revolves around **caste coalitions** (e.g., OBC–Muslim alliances)

Here, caste identity is **highly visible and politically mobilized**.

(b) Southern India: Strong Anti-Caste Movements

In states like Tamil Nadu:

- Early **anti-Brahmin movements** led by figures such as E. V. Ramasamy Periyar challenged upper-caste dominance
- Dravidian parties institutionalized **social justice policies** and reservations
- Caste identity remains important, but often framed within **anti-upper caste ideology and regional pride**

Thus, caste politics here is shaped by a long tradition of **organized social reform movements**.

(c) Western India: Anti-Caste Reform and Maratha Assertion

In states like Maharashtra:

- Reformers like Jyotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar led strong anti-caste movements
- At the same time, dominant castes like Marathas have emerged as **politically influential groups**
- There is a mix of **anti-caste ideology and dominant caste assertion**

(d) Eastern and Northeastern India: Relative Weakness of Caste Politics

In regions like West Bengal, Assam, and other northeastern states:

- Caste identity is **less overtly politicized** compared to North India
- Politics has often been shaped more by **class, ethnicity, language, and regional identity**
- For example, in Assam, issues like **ethnicity, migration, and regional identity** often overshadow caste

This does not mean caste is absent, but it is **less central as a political mobilizing force**.

(e) Kerala: Caste with Social Reform and Welfare

In Kerala:

- Strong social reform movements (e.g., led by Sree Narayana Guru) weakened caste hierarchies
- High literacy and welfare policies reduced overt caste discrimination
- Yet caste continues to influence **political alignments and community organizations**

4. Complexity and Fragmentation of Caste Politics

Unlike earlier phases, the third phase is characterized by:

- **Fragmentation within castes** (intra-caste divisions based on class, region, leadership)
- **Competition among castes** for state resources (inter-caste rivalry)
- **Coalition politics**, where caste groups align and realign strategically

For example, a party may combine:

- A dominant OBC caste
- A section of Dalits
- A religious minority

This makes caste politics **dynamic and fluid rather than fixed**.

5. Decline of Ritualism, Rise of Identity Assertion

The most crucial theoretical insight of this phase is:

- **Ritual caste (based on hierarchy)** → gradually declining
- **Political caste (based on identity and assertion)** → steadily rising

For instance:

- Inter-caste dining and occupational mobility have increased
- Yet caste-based voting patterns, demands for reservation, and identity-based movements have intensified

Thus, caste is **reconfigured, not erased**.

The third phase of caste and politics in India presents a **complex, multi-layered, and regionally differentiated picture**. It is no longer sufficient to view caste merely as a traditional social structure. Instead, it must be understood as a **modern political instrument**, interacting with democracy, economy, and identity.

In this phase, caste becomes:

- A **site of contestation**
- A **resource for mobilization**
- A **framework for negotiating power and representation**

This is precisely what makes contemporary Indian politics both **challenging to analyze and intellectually rich**—because caste, far from disappearing, has adapted itself to the changing logic of democracy and continues to shape political outcomes in diverse and evolving ways.

Concluding Remarks

At the same time, caste in India is not static—it is constantly **modified, transformed, and reshaped** over time. As Myron Weiner observed, it was neither the objective of the Constituent Assembly, nor is it practically feasible for the Indian state, to completely eliminate caste as a social category.

Caste, like religion, is deeply embedded in the **everyday life of Indian society**. It influences social relations, identity, and even political behaviour. Therefore, it is unrealistic to assume that caste can simply be abolished or made to disappear entirely.

Instead, the more meaningful approach has been to **use caste as an instrument for social change**. This means that rather than trying to erase caste, the Indian state has attempted to:

- Reduce inequalities associated with caste
- Provide opportunities to historically disadvantaged groups
- Use policies like reservation to ensure representation

In this context, several important developments can be understood clearly:

1. Rise of Middle Castes

Intermediate or backward castes (such as Yadavs, Kurmis, Jats) have become **economically and politically powerful**, especially in North India. Their rise has challenged the earlier dominance of upper castes.

2. Assertion of Backward Castes

Backward castes, which earlier did not have a strong political voice, have now become **highly assertive**:

- Formation of caste-based and regional parties
 - Demand for representation and reservations
 - Active participation in electoral politics
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3. Empowerment of Scheduled Castes

Through education, reservations, and public employment, Scheduled Castes have:

- Entered government institutions
- Gained political visibility
- Improved their socio-economic position

This has contributed to greater **social mobility and dignity**.

4. Decline of Upper-Caste Monopoly

For centuries, upper castes held a near monopoly over:

- Land and economic resources
- Administration and governance
- Political leadership

Now, due to democratic processes and state policies, this monopoly has been **gradually weakened**, leading to a more **inclusive distribution of power**.

5. Growth of Caste-Based Organizations

Modern Indian politics has seen the rise of:

- Caste associations
- Pressure groups
- Community-based political parties

These groups help in:

- Mobilizing voters
- Articulating demands
- Influencing policy decisions

Final Understanding

Caste today is not disappearing—it is **changing its role**:

- Earlier → a rigid system of hierarchy
- Now → a **dynamic political and social identity**

Thus, caste remains a **central and evolving feature of Indian politics**. Rather than being eradicated, it is being **reworked into a tool for participation, representation, and social change**, and will likely continue to shape Indian democracy in the future.