



ROLE OF CASTE IN INDIAN POLITICS: A CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL ANALYSIS

Moumita Saha Roy

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details: Former Student,
Department of Political Science,
University of North Bengal, Siliguri,
West Bengal, India

Corresponding Author: Moumita
Saha Roy

DOI:
<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.240205011>

Abstract

Caste is an integral part of Indian society. Caste exists in almost every political and social process in India. The concept of caste is not new because caste has been known since ancient times. In ancient times, there were four divisions of the caste- Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Leaders of some political parties use it for their interests. Varna determines the nature of an organization, the working of political parties, interest groups, and all political structure and their functions. Large sections of people come out to cast their votes to support their candidate who belongs to their caste. It is the reality of our Indian societies that caste is deeply rooted in almost every aspect of our lives. Caste, religion, and class divide Indian society, which hinders India's parliamentary democracy and national unity from working independently. I have tried in this paper to analyze the role of caste in Indian politics. Moreover, I discuss how it becomes a major cause of serious concern and hindrance to national integration.

Keywords: *Caste, Class, Constitution, Democracy, Election, Government, Politics, Society*

Introduction

The varna system or caste is a traditional feature of Indian society. This system is based on the purity and pollution concept. The caste system is not only present in Hindus but it also crept into Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs. Caste is deeply rooted in Indian society. It has become the identity of Indian society.

Indian society is mainly divided into four varnas; these are Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. There are different perspectives regarding the origin of the caste system in India. Manu Smriti writes all four varnas are born from different body parts of Lord Brahma. Brahmin originated from the mouth of Brahma, who performs the functions of a priest and teacher. Kshatriya was born from the arm of Lord Brahma, who is a warrior class. Vaishya was born from the thigh of Lord Brahma, who is a merchant and trader class. Shudras were born from the feet of Lord Brahma and were peasants and laborers.

Each adult in the country has the right to vote. However, caste has a special effect on a person's voting behavior. Caste has always been an essential component of the Indian political infrastructure. Most political parties use caste for their interest. Political leaders use caste-based slogans to get maximum votes. Such caste-based politics further fosters casteism. Some political leaders divide the people of the society and caste-based politics becomes their primary objective. It obliterates the harmony of the society and creates violence. Many times, political parties select candidates based on caste so that the candidate wins the election by getting a majority of votes of his caste. Therefore, it is said that Indians do not cast their votes, they vote their caste.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar writes about the origin of the caste system as a conspiracy of the Brahmin class against the rebel Kshatriya class who challenged the hegemony of Brahmin. To separate them Brahminism started upanayana and became vegetarian as a symbol of purity and discriminated against those who did not do upanayana and eat meat. This division became very deep over hundreds of years and the practice of discrimination against lower caste by upper caste became a part of the caste system.

Objective of the Study: The following are some objectives of the study-

1. To analyze the role of caste in Indian politics.
2. To study the constitutional provisions for casteless society.
3. To explain the relationship between caste and politics.

4. To provide valuable suggestions.

Definition of Caste

The literal translation of the word 'Caste' in most Indian languages is jati. The term *caste* derives from the Spanish and Portuguese word *casta*; which means 'race, lineage, tribe or breed'. Portuguese first used the term caste in the context of Indian society, in the 16th century. The complex nature of the term makes definition of the term a difficult task. The writers and thinkers disagree about the definition and characteristics of caste. Therefore, different writers have defined the term differently. The definition of Sir Edward Arthur Henry Blunt is the most significant of all the definitions of race that are available. According to him, a caste is an endogenous group and a collective of groups with a common name, whose membership is hereditary, imposes certain restrictions on its members in terms of social intercourse, either follows a common traditional occupation to claim a source of income and is generally a homogeneous community.

Indian anthropologists Dharendra Nath Majumdar and Triloki Nath Madan say that race is a closed group.

According to Robert Morrison MacIver and Charles Harrison Page, when the status is wholly predetermined so that men are born to their lot without any hope of changing it, then class takes the extreme form of caste.

American sociologist Charles Cooley says that when a class is somewhat strictly hereditary we may call it caste.

Following Andre Beteille, a nation is a system in which a small group of people with different names exists, and the members of each group follow intermarriage, hereditary membership, and a specific life. This life is usually more or less associated with a particular type of scholarship or with different religious ranks under a classified system. Based on this practice the idea of purity and impurity prevails.

From the above definitions, we come to know that caste is a social system that stratifies the people living in society into divisions and such divisions or ranks are generally based on decent, marriage, and occupation.

Features of the Caste System: The main features of the caste system are:

1. **Hierarchical Division of Society:** A major feature of the caste system is that it divides members into different grades. For instance, in the Hindu caste system, the Brahmins enjoy the highest grade and hence they are placed at the top of the caste hierarchy. Similarly, the so-called 'untouchables' are placed at the lowest level of caste hierarchy.
2. **Restrictions on Social Relations:** In traditional caste-religious societies, there is an idea of 'pollution'. This means that the touch of a lower caste person (particularly an 'untouchable') will pollute a higher caste person. Even his shadow is considered to pollute a high-caste man. For example, in Kerala, a Nair could approach a Nambudiris Brahmin (the highest-ranking caste in Kerala) but could not touch him. This practice continued for a long time. In Tamil Nadu, the toddy tappers of Shanar had to keep a distance of 24 spaces while approaching a Brahmin. All this resulted in the practice of 'untouchability'.
3. **Restriction on Marriage:** The caste system imposes certain restrictions on marriage. Being an endogamy group, it imposes endogamy rules. According to this rule of marriage, an individual has to marry within his or her group.

Caste and Indian Constitution: India is a democratic country. Every person has equal rights. Our Constitution makers were very familiar with the social and political conditions of India. They knew the worst social and political conditions of the lower caste. To remove this problem, they made many provisions to improve their condition.

1. **Fundamental Rights:** Indian Constitution provides us with six Fundamental Rights. These rights are equal for every Indian citizen. Our first fundamental right under article 14-18 provides RIGHT TO EQUALITY to every Indian. The rights under this article are:

Article 14 – Equality before the law.

Article 15 – Prohibition of discrimination based on religion, race, caste, gender, and color.

Article 16 – Equal opportunities in public employment.

Article 17 – Abolition of untouchability.

Article 18 – Abolition of titles.

These articles remove caste-based discrimination. Not only Fundamental Rights infect Fundamental Duties and Directive Principles of State Policy try to remove this evil from society.

2. **Fundamental Duty:** Fundamental Duties under article 51A (E) provision for equality are- To promote harmony and the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious and linguistic and abandon regional or sectional diversity and practices derogatory to the dignity of women.

3. **Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP):** There are some Directive Principles in the Indian Constitution that provide equality and try to remove all inequality from society. These articles are:

Article 38 – To promote the welfare of the people by securing a social order permeated by social, economic, and political justice and to reduce inequalities in income, status, privilege, and opportunities.

Article 46 – To promote the educational and economic interests of SCs, STs, and other weaker sections of society and to save them from social injustice and exploitation.

Article 330 – Reservation of seats in Lok Sabha for SCs and STs.

Article 332 – Reservation of seats in State Assembly for SCs and STs.

4. **Acts & Constitutional Provisions:** India has one of the best Constitutions, but these are rarely fully implemented. The below provisions are the results of the earnest efforts of Great Indians:

- Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1976
- Prevention of atrocities against SC's & ST's Act, 1989

This caste system is very harmful for the development of the whole society and to remove this, it is necessary to change the thinking of society. The caste system cannot be eliminated without changing the mindset of the people. This problem persists largely due to the illiteracy and ignorance of the people. Hence, they do not accept any social change.

Caste and Politics: Scope

The scope of caste and politics covers various issues concerning different castes and institutions that mobilize them. These institutions include caste organizations and political parties. At the core of caste politics are relations of subordination and dominance within caste, caste-based violence, reservation in public institutions for jobs, social welfare schemes, social and cultural recognition, self-respect, human rights, social justice, etc. The competition among castes virtually becomes a competition among political parties and political conflicts and competition among castes to get power. The political parties devise strategies to unite castes to win elections. Power sharing through representation in institutions and policies can result in caste empowerment. This share can be achieved by the representation of castes in political institutions, especially Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha or Local institutions, and in educational and administrative structures. Since India has a federal political structure, the relationship between caste and politics can be viewed at different of this structure: the institutions of local governance, the Vidhan Sabha elections at state levels, and the Lok Sabha at national level.

Role of Caste in Indian Politics

1. **Caste and Political Parties:** Caste is used as an important component of the Indian party system. Most political parties in India are directly or indirectly caste-based and protect the interests of a particular caste. The influence of caste is particularly noticeable among regional political parties. For example, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) in Tamil Nadu are Brahmin and non-Brahmin political parties. In Punjab, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) has a community identity and is influenced by the issue of Jats vs. non-Jats. It can also be said that most of the regional political parties in Bihar were formed based on caste. For example, the Lok Janshakti Party, and Samajwadi Party in UP are considered Yadav Party; the Bahujan Samaj Party is considered a Scheduled Caste Party; and Shiv Sena Party in Maharashtra is considered as Marathi Party.
2. **Caste and Election:** Caste plays an important role in the electoral system of Indian politics. While nominating candidates, political parties keep in mind the caste of the candidate in a constituency and the caste of the voters of that particular constituency, so that the candidate is sure to get the votes of his caste. All these political parties use caste as a means to win elections. Candidates also make various promises before the election such as socio-economic development, poverty alleviation, a good education system, etc. However, after the election, political parties cannot fulfil most of their promises.
3. **Caste and Socialization:** People of different castes have their loyalties and beliefs towards different political parties and their ideologies. From birth, a person grows up to be a member of a particular caste and is bound by this caste system. Some of them are of high caste and some of them are low caste. In many cases, a person's thinking is also based on his caste, and he supports parties that value his caste interests. Thus, the caste system has a special impact on socialization.
4. **Caste and Pressure Groups:** A pressure group is an organization that tries to put pressure on the government for the common interests and objectives of some people. However, several pressure groups in India are formed in the interests of particular castes. Caste also has special effects on the working of pressure groups, which force the government to work for the interest of certain castes. There are several caste-based pressure groups like Scheduled Caste Federation, Arya Samaj Sabha, Sanatan Dharma Sabha, etc.
5. **Caste and Government:** Formulating public policy is a very important function of the government for good governance and the betterment of the society but caste has a special influence in making various policies and programs of the government. Political parties keep caste in mind while making decisions. Caste also affects individual voting behavior, political participation, and party formation. The caste also plays a special role in the formation of the Council of Ministers and the appointment of various political positions in the government.
6. **Caste and Indian Constitution:** Before independence, certain sections of Indian society were economically, socially, and politically backward, such as SCs, STs, and OBCs. They had to live on dependence and as a result, they had to face various problems. Therefore, after independence, the Indian Constitution included some provisions for the development of these least advantaged groups, which provided those equal rights as well as reservation of seats for them in various fields. Article 46 enjoins the State to act for the welfare of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and take steps to protect their interests. It will protect SCs and STs from all forms of injustice and oppression. Article 330 provides for reservation of Lok Sabha seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Similarly, Article 332 provides for the reservation of seats in every State Legislative Assembly for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
7. **Caste and Local Politics:** Panchayati Raj is a system of local self-government that is prevalent in India. It fixes local administration issues in rural areas that should be resolved through local government through elected members. The Panchayati Raj system played a significant role in India and brought the system of governance to the people of the

villages. The Panchayati Raj system makes the governance system of the country more effective. However, this caste system has a special effect on local politics. The upper castes gained more privileges because they were economically and politically strong and the lower castes were very less privileged than they were. It can be said that this caste-based political system hinders the independent functioning of the Panchayati Raj Institution.

8. **Caste and Violence:** Although the caste system in India was removed from the law in 1950, caste-based discrimination is still present in the society. Caste-based violence is rampant in India in various ways. The nature of caste is hereditary. A person's caste is defined by his birth. This caste system has been going on historically which not only divides a person into classes but also divides his work based on caste. Historically marginalized classes such as SCs and STs have been subjected to various discriminatory and superstitious practices by the upper classes of society. Like harassment, illegal land grabbing, forced evictions, etc., this indulges in violence.
9. **Caste and Administration:** Administration is an important part of any country's governance system. Indian administration is also not escape from the influence of caste. In many cases, special importance is given to particular castes in administrative work. Sometimes these political parties give appointments, transfer promotions, etc. to the administrators based on their caste. Because of this, administrators have to work keeping in mind the interests of the political parties in some cases.
10. **Caste and Leadership:** Most Indians support political party actuators of their caste and religion. Identity politics play an effective role in the electoral process. This is because most people have mistrust in leaders outside their community. Upper castes in particular have little faith in leaders outside their caste.

Caste and Electoral Politics

Caste and electoral politics are interrelated. Since the 1950s, various scholars have studied the role of caste in electoral politics. In India, the leading role in conducting election studies has been played by the Centre for Political Studies, located in Delhi. Several studies have observed that there is relationship between caste and electoral politics has undergone tremendous changes since the first general election was held in 1952.

For the first few decades after independence, electoral politics was dominated by the traditional dominant castes of different regions of the country. Although constitutionally every adult irrespective of his or her caste had the right to vote, on several occasions the dominant caste did not allow the Dalits and other lower castes to vote. This practice was known as 'Booth Capturing'. During the phase of Congress dominance during the 1950s-1960s, in most parts of the country, the Congress party got the support of multiple castes. Its leadership was provided by the high or middle castes and it was supported in elections by cast across social hierarchy. Due to the support of various caste groups, Paul R. Brass considered the Congress party to be a caste alliance. However, since the 1970s, Congress has not remained a dominant party in the country. It was indicated by the defeat of the Congress in several state elections in 1967 and 1969.

Along with the decline of Congress, there was the emergence of state-level leaders in several states who formed state-level parties and mobilized middle-caste farming communities such as Jats, Yadav, and Kurmis. Charan Singh provided the main leadership to these groups in north India. They formed an important segment of the Janata Party formed after an emergency. The Janata Party governments in UP and Bihar gave more representations to the backward and framing communalities in comparison to Congress governments which gave more representation to the high castes.

Suggestions: Apart from the above discussion, some important suggestions are written below:

1. The most important way to end this caste-based politics is education. It is possible to reduce the influence of caste by spreading education in society.
2. All schools must encourage community living by organizing community meals and all students should be included in it.
3. School textbooks must be revised carefully. The study material should teach the students that man makes the caste system.
4. The basis of the reservation should be economic not caste so that all the poor sections of society are benefitted from it.
5. To stop caste-based violence, a sense of brotherhood must be awakened among people.
6. Political parties should stop using caste-based politics.
7. Political parties should nominate candidates based on education and merit rather than based on caste or self-interest.
8. Political parties should not spread any kind of caste-based slogans and statements.
9. Every person in society should vote based on merit and the social work of the candidate.
10. Appointments based on caste in various political positions and administrative fields should stop.
11. Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) should work for rural development without any distinction between upper and lower castes.
12. The media should play a neutral role.
13. Children should be taught the importance of equality in family and school from an early age.
14. People in society should be made aware of the negative effects of caste in various ways.

Conclusion

Caste is deeply rooted in our societies. Over-indulgence in caste-based identity politics will surely hinder our development, rather than strengthen our democracy. India is a democratic state where all individuals are given equal rights and freedoms.

Caste-based electoral politics kill the spirit of democratic values. It becomes very important from party formation to decision-making. After the introduction of the Adult Franchise, every vote became very important and each party tried to influence more and more voters. Caste divides a person into upper and lower castes, which undermines the freedom of Indian democracy. India adopts a liberal democratic system, which is characterized by equal rights, justice, and freedom.

Caste and democracy work against each other. Just as caste hinders the life of the individual, so democracy helps to survive independently. We should not forget what Dr. Ambedkar wrote in his book '*Annihilation of Caste*'. He wrote that casteism has killed the public spirit. Caste has taken away the sense of charity, it has made public opinion impossible, virtue has become caste-ridden, morality has become caste bound, this is what we feel today in caste-ridden societies.

The role of caste is increasing this very sad thing day by day. Caste and politics both influence each other. This will certainly be a hurdle for our country's development. Therefore, it can be said that caste will continue to play a special role in Indian politics if individuals vote based on caste, not based on work for the society of the candidates, then India will lose the real essence of democracy.

Our education system also plays a special role in ending this caste system, as children should be taught equality and brotherhood from the very beginning so that this caste system is destroyed later. Increasing the literacy rate of people will also help in reducing the values of caste in societies. Various social agencies, schools, and mass media should be given the responsibility to build a broad perspective among the people so that the attitude of caste can be reduced. People need to be made aware of the negative effects of this traditionally practiced caste system. It is very important for the development of the world's biggest democracy. We must strive to save the idea of India.

Acknowledgement: No

Authors Contribution: Data Collection, Literature Review, Methodology, Analysis, Drafting, Referencing

Funding: No funding.

Declarations/Consent for Publication: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

References:

1. Brass, P. R. (1994). *The Politics of India Since Independence*. Cambridge University Press.
2. Devi, N. (2017). Role of Caste in Indian Politics. *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education*, 13(2), 693-695.
3. Dutta, A. R. (2013). *Politics in India: Issues, Institutions and Processes*. Arun Prakashan.
4. Fadia, B. L. & Fadia, K. (2023). *Indian Government and Politics*. Sahitya Bhawan Publication.
5. Hasan, Z. (2002). *Parties and Party Politics in India*. Oxford University Press.
6. Johari, J. C. (1996). *Indian Political System: A Critical Study of the Constitutional Structure and the Emerging Trends of Indian Politics*. Anmol Publications.
7. Kaur, H. (2018). Role of Caste in Indian Politics. *Indian Journal of Scientific Research*, 5(1), 118-122.
8. Konesar, Y. A. (2018). Caste, Religion and Ethnicity in Indian Politics. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 6(2), 504-509.
9. Kothari, R. (1970). *Caste in Indian Politics*. Orient Longman.
10. Kothari, R. (1970). *Politics in India*. Orient Longman.
11. Kothari, R. (1989). *Politics and the People: In Search of a Humane India*. Ajanta Publications.
12. Rana, S. S. (2017). Caste and Political Parties in Indian Politics. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, 5(1), 153-159.
13. Ravivenkat, B. & Venkatesha, U. (2013). Role of Caste in Indian Politics. *Elixir International Journal*, 14404-14406.
14. Srinivas, M. N. (1962). *Caste in Modern India: And Other Essays*. Asia Publishing House.

Publisher's Note

The Social Science Review A Multidisciplinary Journal remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published data, map and institutional affiliations.

©The Author(s) 2024. Open Access.

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>