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ISSUE OF CASTE AND CASTE BASED RESERVATION IN INDIA

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Abstract

Caste politics in contemporary India remains a complex and significant aspect of its social and political landscape. This paper explores the role of caste in contemporary Indian politics, focusing on how caste-based parties, affirmative action policies, and social movements have shaped the political arena. The paper also discusses the role of caste in shaping party platforms, coalition politics, and public discourse, with a focus on the continued relevance of caste in elections and governance in the 21st century. Reservation introduced after India's independence, the policy aims to correct historical injustices and facilitate the inclusion of these communities in education, employment, and political representation. While the policy has contributed to greater opportunities for disadvantaged groups, it has also sparked considerable debate. Supporters argue that reservation is essential for ensuring equality and addressing systemic discrimination, while critics contend it fosters caste-based divisions and compromises meritocracy. This paper explores the challenges and consequences of India's reservation system, analyzing its impact on marginalized communities and discussing whether reforms are necessary to ensure it benefits the truly disadvantaged while promoting national development.

Keywords: Caste, Reservation Policy, Social Justice, Affirmative Action, Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), Caste-based Politics and Political Reservation

Introduction

Caste, a social hierarchy deeply embedded in the fabric of Indian society, continues to exert significant influence over the political landscape of the country. Despite the constitutional abolition of untouchability and the introduction of various affirmative action policies aimed at promoting social equality, caste-based identities persist in shaping political behavior, policy-making, and social movements. In contemporary India, caste plays a crucial role in electoral dynamics, with caste-based parties mobilizing communities for political gains, and reservations in education and employment continuing to fuel debates over social justice and merit.

Reservation in India is a policy embedded in the country's Constitution with the aim of uplifting historically disadvantaged and marginalized communities. The origins of reservation can be traced to the colonial era, but its legal foundation was laid after India's independence, primarily through the provisions in the Indian Constitution. Key Articles such as 15, 16, and 46 guarantee reservations in public institutions and government employment as measures of social justice, ensuring the rights of these marginalized groups. The Mandal Commission Report of 1980 was particularly significant, as it extended the reservation policy to include OBCs, a move that further reshaped the political landscape in India.

This research seeks to explore the role of caste in contemporary Indian politics, investigating how caste-based political mobilization continues to affect electoral outcomes, governance, and social policies. This paper also seeks to explore the complexities of reservation politics in India, delving into its legal underpinnings, the beneficiaries, and its social and economic impacts. It will examine the continuing challenges in the system's execution and address the broader debate on its effectiveness.

At the heart of this study is the question of how caste identities have evolved in the post-independence era and how they continue to influence India's democratic processes. Despite efforts to promote an egalitarian society, caste remains a divisive and often contentious issue, especially in terms of political representation, affirmative action policies, and social integration. Finally, the article will propose potential reforms to ensure that the reservation policy remains an effective tool for empowerment and social justice, while adapting to the evolving socio-political landscape of India.



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Manifestation of Caste in Indian Politics

Caste and Electoral Politics

The relationship between caste and electoral politics in India has been a subject of intense academic scrutiny. Scholars have widely acknowledged the persistent role of caste in influencing electoral outcomes, party strategies, and voting patterns.

Persistence of Caste in Political Structures

While India has made significant strides toward democratization and social reform, caste continues to influence political mobilization and electoral outcomes. Caste-based parties and movements are powerful forces in many parts of the country, and caste identity plays a crucial role in shaping voting behavior. Understanding the role of caste in contemporary political structures is essential for any study of Indian democracy.

Caste-Based Affirmative Action:

Caste-based affirmative action policies, such as reservations in education and employment, have been a focal point of political and social debate for decades. This study aims to critically assess the efficacy of these policies in achieving social mobility and reducing caste-based inequalities. By focusing on the political ramifications of such policies, this research will provide insights into how caste continues to shape social and economic opportunities in India.

Emerging Dynamics of Caste in Urban Areas:

Caste politics has traditionally been seen as a rural phenomenon, but urbanization has changed the dynamics of caste identity and political behavior. This study will explore how caste manifests in urban settings, where class-based issues often take precedence. The interaction of caste with other forms of identity—such as religion, class, and gender—adds complexity to the understanding of contemporary caste politics.

Caste-Based Political Parties:

The rise of caste-based political parties has transformed the Indian political landscape. These parties not only advocate for the interests of their respective communities but have also challenged the traditional political dominance of upper-caste groups. This study seeks to explore how caste-based parties shape policy, governance, and political discourse, particularly in relation to marginalized communities.

Social Justice and Caste:

While caste-based movements have contributed significantly to advocating for the rights of marginalized communities, social justice has not been fully achieved. Issues of economic inequality, educational access, and discrimination remain deeply embedded in society. This study will examine the role of caste politics in shaping policy decisions related to welfare, social justice, and economic development.



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Constitutional Provisions for Caste based reservation

- **Article 15:** This article prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. It allows the state to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and economically backward classes, including SCs and STs.
- **Article 16:** Provides for equality of opportunity in public employment, but allows for reservations in employment for SCs, STs, and OBCs to ensure equitable representation in the civil services and government jobs.
- **Article 46:** This article mandates the state to promote the educational and economic interests of SCs, STs, and other weaker sections of society. It encourages the state to take measures that would help in the upliftment of these groups, especially in educational and economic domains.
- **Reservations for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS):** In 2019, the Indian government introduced a **10% reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)** in higher education and government jobs. This was a significant move, as it expanded the reservation system beyond caste-based criteria, focusing on economic disadvantage. The **103rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 2019** made this provision, allowing economically disadvantaged individuals, irrespective of their caste, to avail of the benefits of reservation in education and employment.
- **Reservation in Local Governance:** The Constitution also provides for reservations in local governance through the **73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments** (1992), which established the framework for Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and urban local bodies. These amendments reserve one-third of the seats in rural and urban local bodies for women, and additional provisions are made for SCs, STs, and OBCs to ensure their representation at the grassroots level.

Caste Benefiting from Reservation in India

The reservation system in India is designed to address historical and social disadvantages faced by specific groups in society. The beneficiaries of this system include. These categories have been identified to receive specific quotas in education, employment, and political representation. Below is an overview of each category and its role in the reservation system:

1. Scheduled Castes (SCs)

- **Reservation Benefits:**
 - **Education:** SCs are given reserved seats in educational institutions, including schools, colleges, and universities, to ensure access to quality education.
 - **Employment:** The reservation for SCs in government jobs is intended **Political Representation:** A certain percentage of seats in legislative bodies and local governance institutions, such as Panchayats, are reserved for SC candidates to ensure their political representation.
- **Constitutional Basis:** Reservation for SCs is mandated under **Article 15(4)**, **Article 16(4)**, and **Article 46** of the Indian Constitution.

2. Scheduled Tribes (STs)

- **Reservation Benefits:**
 - **Education:** STs receive reserved seats in educational institutions to ensure that they have access to formal education and skill development.



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- **Employment:** Similar to SCs, STs are given reservation in government jobs to promote their socio-economic development and representation in various public services.
- **Political Representation:** Specific legislative seats are reserved for ST candidates to ensure their participation in governance and decision-making.
- **Constitutional Basis:** Reservation for STs is provided under **Article 15(4)**, **Article 16(4)**, and **Article 46** of the Indian Constitution.

Positive Impacts of Reservation

The reservation system in India has had a profound social and economic impact, particularly for historically marginalized communities. While it has contributed to the upliftment of these groups in several areas, there are ongoing debates about its effectiveness in addressing deeper systemic issues. Below are the key social and economic impacts of the reservation system:

Improved Access to Education and Employment

- Reserved seats in schools, colleges, and universities have allowed many students from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue higher education and specialize in fields that were once inaccessible to them. This has helped bridge the educational gap between upper-caste and marginalized communities.
- The reservation system has played a vital role in providing job opportunities in the public sector for historically disadvantaged groups. Reserved positions in government offices, public sector undertakings, and other institutions have allowed individuals from SC, ST, OBC, and EWS categories to secure employment, thereby improving their economic standing and reducing unemployment rates among these groups.

Economic Mobility

- The reservation system has played a significant role in the economic empowerment of marginalized communities by providing access to education and employment that leads to economic mobility. Many individuals from SC, ST, and OBC backgrounds have moved from rural or semi-urban poverty to middle-class status, thanks to opportunities made available by reservations.

Social Justice and Inequality

- The reservation system is often seen as a tool for social justice in India, addressing the historical discrimination and marginalization faced by SCs, STs, and OBCs. By providing reserved seats in education, jobs, and political representation, the reservation system has helped these communities gain a voice and opportunities that were previously denied to them. This has been instrumental in breaking the cycle of caste-based discrimination and social exclusion.

Challenges associated with reservation politics

1. Social and Political Divisions

- **Caste-Based Tensions:** The reservation system, though intended to uplift marginalized communities, has often deepened caste-based divisions in society. Communities that do not benefit from reservations may feel excluded, leading to social unrest and resentment. The visibility of caste identities in politics has fostered a sense of division, rather than unity.
- **Social Cohesion:** Instead of fostering social cohesion, the reservation system sometimes reinforces the perception of inequalities, making it difficult to bridge the gap between different caste groups. This has led to inter-caste conflicts and tensions in various parts of the country.



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- **Continued Caste-Based Discrimination:** Although the reservation system has contributed to reducing caste-based exclusion, discrimination based on caste persists in many parts of India, particularly in rural areas. This social stigma often limits the impact of reservations in terms of social integration and equality. Furthermore, reservation benefits are sometimes restricted to a limited section of these communities, leaving out those who remain socially and economically disadvantaged despite being part of a reserved category.

2. Reservation for the 'Deserving'

- **Affluent Exploitation:** One of the most contentious aspects of the reservation system is the argument that some members of reserved categories, particularly OBCs, misuse the system. Affluent or socially influential individuals from these groups often take advantage of the system, leaving behind the truly marginalized sections of society who need it the most.
- **Targeting the Needy:** Critics argue that the reservation system does not always reach the poorest and most disadvantaged individuals within the reserved categories. Instead, it often benefits those who are already better-off, thereby failing to address the root causes of inequality effectively.

3. Economic Impact

- **Meritocracy vs. Equality:** The economic implications of reservation include concerns about its effect on meritocracy. Critics argue that reservation quotas may compromise the quality of education and workforce productivity by admitting individuals into professional courses and jobs based on caste, rather than merit. This may lead to a perceived decline in standards, especially in highly competitive fields.
- **Economic Growth:** Some economists argue that the reservation system may have adverse effects on India's overall economic growth, as it might not always result in the optimal allocation of resources. The system may sometimes prioritize social justice over efficiency and productivity, particularly in industries that require highly skilled labor.
- **Quality of Education:** In educational institutions, reservations can sometimes result in a mismatch between students' abilities and the rigorous demands of higher education. This can hinder overall academic excellence, particularly in specialized fields where expertise is critical.

4. Urban-Rural Divide

- **Disproportionate Benefits for Rural Areas:** The reservation system tends to disproportionately benefit rural populations, where the majority of SCs, STs, and OBCs reside. This has led to an imbalance, as individuals from urban areas within reserved categories may not always get the same level of support, despite having access to better resources and opportunities.
- **Challenges for Urban Elites:** While rural populations benefit from reservations in education and jobs, urban elites within the reserved categories argue that their situation is not as dire. These individuals may feel that the reservation system fails to take into account the regional and economic disparities within the same caste group, thereby benefiting less deserving individuals while excluding those in more competitive, urban environments.

5. Caste-Based Politics

- **Vote-Bank Politics:** Reservation has been heavily politicized over the years, often used as a tool for **vote-bank politics**. Political parties cater to specific caste groups to secure electoral support, leading to the perpetuation of caste-based identities in the political discourse. This undermines national unity and often polarizes voters along caste lines, rather than focusing on policies based on merit and development.



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- **Impact on National Unity:** The increasing prominence of caste-based politics has the potential to fragment Indian society, weakening national unity. In the long term, the focus on caste and reservations can obscure other critical national issues, such as economic growth, infrastructure development, and social reforms.
- **Exploitation of Caste Sentiments:** Political parties often manipulate the reservation issue to garner votes from specific caste groups. This results in the politicization of the reservation system, where parties may promise or create quotas to attract votes from particular communities, rather than focusing on the genuine need for social justice.
- **Intergenerational Caste Loyalty:** Political parties often exploit caste loyalties passed down through generations, maintaining the status quo of caste-based power dynamics. This reliance on caste identity for political gain can inhibit social mobility and reinforce existing power structures.

6. Other issues:

- **Corruption and Mismanagement:** One of the major obstacles to the success of the reservation system is corruption and mismanagement at various levels of government. In some cases, officials responsible for implementing the policies may manipulate the system for personal gain, such as misappropriating reserved seats or funds allocated for the upliftment of marginalized communities.
- **Limited Economic Impact:** Despite its positive contributions, some argue that the reservation system has not fully addressed the economic disparities within these communities. While reservations provide access to jobs and education, they do not directly tackle the root causes of poverty, such as access to land, infrastructure, or capital. Moreover, in urban areas, the benefits of reservation are often less pronounced, as social stratification within these communities still limits the full economic potential of some individuals, particularly those with lower socio-economic status within the reserved categories.
- **Lack of Awareness:** Many individuals, especially in rural areas, are unaware of the reservation policies and their rights to access reserved seats in educational institutions and government jobs. This lack of awareness, combined with insufficient outreach and education about the reservation system, results in marginalized communities failing to benefit fully from these policies.
- **Challenges in Addressing Root Causes of Inequality:** The reservation system has struggled to address the root causes of inequality. While it provides opportunities for marginalized communities, it does not directly tackle deeper social issues such as land ownership, access to quality healthcare, or economic capital. These issues continue to perpetuate systemic inequality, meaning that many beneficiaries of the reservation system still face significant social and economic challenges.

Whether Reservation policy should continue or Not?

The reservation system in India, intended to uplift historically marginalized communities, has been the subject of intense debate. While it has provided benefits in some areas, the ongoing debate reflects diverse perspectives on its effectiveness, necessity, and implications.

Arguments for Continuation of Reservation

- **Affirmative Action for Social Justice:** Proponents argue that **affirmative action** is still needed to address deep-rooted **social and economic inequalities** in India. Despite significant progress, marginalized communities like **Scheduled Castes (SCs)**, **Scheduled Tribes (STs)**, and **Other Backward Classes (OBCs)** continue to face discrimination and lack access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. Reservation, they argue, is an essential tool for leveling the playing field and providing equal opportunities.



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- **Historical Injustice:** Advocates assert that the reservation system helps redress the **historical injustice** faced by certain communities due to the caste system and untouchability. The legacy of social exclusion still impacts these communities, and the continuation of reservations is seen as necessary to combat systemic marginalization.
- **Social Inclusion and Representation:** Reservation ensures that marginalized groups are represented in educational institutions, government jobs, and politics, promoting **social inclusion**. Proponents argue that without reservation, these communities would remain voiceless in decision-making processes, further entrenching their socio-economic disparities.

Arguments Against Continuation of Reservation

- **Perpetuating Caste-Based Divisions:** Critics argue that the reservation system perpetuates **caste-based divisions**, as it continues to define and categorize individuals based on their caste. This can lead to a **caste-conscious society**, where identities are primarily shaped by caste rather than merit, ability, or individual achievement. Critics contend that this undermines national unity and fosters social tension.
- **Meritocracy and Development:** A significant criticism of the reservation system is that it undermines **merit-based development**. Reservation quotas, critics argue, may allow individuals to gain educational and employment opportunities without the required qualifications or capabilities. This can lower standards in education and employment and compromise the quality of work in critical sectors, such as medicine, engineering, and administration, ultimately affecting the nation's development.
- **Shift Toward Economic Inclusion:** Critics suggest that instead of reserving positions based on caste, the focus should shift to **economic criteria**. They argue that poverty and inequality should be the primary determinants for reservation, not caste, as this approach would be more inclusive and would ensure that the benefits reach the economically disadvantaged, regardless of caste.
- **Time-Bound Reservations:** Some argue that reservation should be **time-bound** and gradually phased out as social and economic disparities reduce over time. They contend that continued reservations, especially in a growing economy, may no longer be necessary once the targeted communities achieve parity in education, employment, and political representation.

Suggestions for Reform

- **Focus on Economic Criteria:** One key reform proposal is to **shift the focus** of reservations from caste to **economic status**. This would allow reservations to reach a broader spectrum of individuals in need, including those from upper-caste communities who are economically disadvantaged. The **Economically Weaker Section (EWS)** reservation introduced in 2019 is an example of this approach.
- **Time-Bound and Merit-Based Reservations:** Proposals suggest that reservations should be **time-bound** and **periodically reviewed** to assess their relevance and effectiveness. Once the targeted communities have reached a certain level of educational and economic development, the need for reservations could diminish.
- **Improved Implementation:** Ensuring that reservations reach the **truly marginalized** requires better implementation. This includes better data collection to identify the real beneficiaries and ensure the reservation policies reach those who need them the most. **Awareness programs** and **capacity-building initiatives** can also be introduced to help marginalized communities take full advantage of available opportunities.
- **Transparency and Monitoring:** Strengthening the **monitoring and evaluation** of the reservation system is essential to ensure that benefits are not being diverted to those who are not in genuine need. Effective **implementation mechanisms** can help reduce inefficiencies and corruption that have hindered the success of reservation policies in some cases.



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Conclusion

Caste politics in contemporary India remains a fundamental aspect of the nation's political landscape, deeply intertwined with its social, economic, and cultural fabric. Despite significant strides in democratization and modernization, caste continues to play a prominent role in shaping electoral outcomes, political mobilization, and policy decisions. From the historical roots of caste-based discrimination to its contemporary political manifestations, caste has evolved from a rigid social hierarchy to a dynamic force within the political realm, influencing voting behavior, party strategies, and governance.

The debate surrounding the continuation of the reservation system is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, reservations are seen as a necessary tool for addressing historic injustices and reducing inequalities. On the other hand, critics argue that reservations perpetuate caste divisions, hinder merit-based advancement, and fail to address the root causes of economic disparity. Moving forward, reforming the reservation system to focus on economic criteria, time-bound reservations, and improved implementation could offer a more inclusive approach that balances social justice with merit-based progress. Moreover, case studies from different states highlight the regional variations in how reservation policies are implemented, with both successes and challenges in achieving their intended goals.

Through the analysis of caste-based political parties, the reservation system, and the role of social justice movements, this research highlights both the strengths and limitations of caste-based politics. On the one hand, caste-based mobilization has provided marginalized communities with political representation and a voice in a system that historically excluded them. It has also played a key role in pushing forward policies for **social justice** and **affirmative action**, seeking to correct centuries of social and economic disadvantages faced by Dalits, OBCs, and other marginalized groups. On the other hand, caste politics has contributed to deepened social divisions and identity-based voting, which sometimes hinder the development of a cohesive national identity and unity.

The debate surrounding caste-based reservations and affirmative action continues to stir heated discussions. While reservations have undoubtedly benefited numerous individuals and groups, they remain a contentious issue, with critics arguing that they perpetuate caste divisions and create reverse discrimination. Yet, the demand for more inclusive and equitable policies that address caste-based disparities remains relevant, especially in the context of India's rapidly changing social landscape.

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