

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19636797

RELIGION, CASTE, AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN INDIA: A LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH STUDY ON SOCIAL DIVISIONS, POLITICAL MOBILIZATION, AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Dr Ravi Khangai^{1*}, Satri Veera Kesalu², Dr. P P Sajimon³, Dr. Gaurav Shah⁴, Nibedita Bora⁵, Dr Babita⁶, Dr. Pauchungnung Vaiphei⁷

1Department of History and Archaeology, Central University of Karnataka

2School of Social Sciences and Humanities, VIT- AP University, Amaravati- 522237, AP, India

3Department of Postgraduate Studies and Research in Economics, Specialization in Economics, St Aloysius (Deemed to be University), Mangalore, Pin code: 575003, India

4Mass Communication and ICSSR Post Doctoral Fellow, School of Management Sciences, Varanasi

5Mahapurusha Srimanta sankaradeva Visyavidyalaya(MSSV)

6 School of Legal Studies, CGC University, Mohali, 140307, India

7Department of Political Science, Specialization in Tribal studies, Churachandpur College (Autonomous)

Received: 19/11/2025

Accepted: 21/01/2026

Corresponding Author: Ravi Khangai
(ravikhangai@cuk.ac.in)

ABSTRACT

Religion and caste have been one of the most resolute factors in the formation of electoral politics and democratic government in India that have shaped political affiliations as well as social changes since independence. These identities have survived and evolved contrary to the expectations of modernization theories that they would decline, and have become the main resources of political mobilization in democratic competition. The proposed research follows a longitudinal, historical-comparative design based on the electoral data, survey research, party documentation, and secondary literature to examine the developments in four phases: the reign of the Congress system in 1950s-1970s, the crisis and emergence of identity politics in 1980s, the consolidation of caste- and religion-based parties in 1990s-2000s, and the ascendancy of religious nationalism in 2010s-2020s. The results indicate that caste and religion were originally implicit systems but subsequently evolved to explicit systems of party systems and voter alliances. The growth of caste parties gave marginalized groups a chance to be represented and at the same time, strengthened the social boundaries. The emergence of Hindu nationalism also changed this situation, as the religious identity became a majoritarian political project, which resulted in the appearance of the second dominant party system, the Bharatiya Janata Party. The paper identifies democratic paradox: caste and religion increase participation and representation but interfere with secularism and inclusiveness. Finding these dynamics in the context of history, the article offers a critical insight into the evolving character of the interrelationship between identity and democracy in India.

Keywords: Religion, Caste, Electoral Politics, Hindu Nationalism, Democratic Governance

1. INTRODUCTION

The interaction of religion, caste and electoral politics in India is a long-term academic concern since the first general elections in the country in 1952.

Indian democracy is both the largest and one of the most complex democracy in the world, operating within a stratified society with caste hierarchies, multi-religious traditions and legacies of colonial rule. Such socio-cultural differences have influenced political action, party politics and rule over decades. Their intersections are therefore of critical interest to the resilience and paradoxes of Indian democracy, which can only be examined in longitudinal inquiry.

It has long been known that caste was one of the key stratification axes of the Indian society (Bhatt, 1972). It has been described as an entirety of social order founded on cultural and religious values (Dumont, 1980). Despite the fact that caste identities were initially believed to be fixed, they have over time been made politically flexible and restructured into mobilizing instruments as democratic institutions took root. India also experienced a major alteration in the political system. The system of Congress in the early decades was that of a dominant party that absorbed the cleavages that were divergent in its organizational umbrella (Kothari, 1964). This paradigm muted the caste and religious role on a temporary basis, yet the further weakening of the Congress dominance created the possibility of explicitly identity-based mobilization (Weiner, 2015).

The knowledge of caste also underwent intellectual criticisms that changed into a regime of oppression and political struggle (Thorat and AM, 2007). The Ambedkar and Gandhi controversy highlighted the contradictions of the Indian social structure and theorized caste as the cultural capital and the political asset (Roy, 2020). These impressions highlight the caste indivisibility, social justice and democratic practice. Religion has also been a major factor. India has a unique secular paradigm that is founded on the idea of equidistance rather than separation (Bhargava, 1998). In many electoral mobilizations, however, this setup has been questioned. Groups often use cultural and religious idioms to establish agency, and democracy participation is typically vernacularized (Chatterjee, 2006). The reality that traditional identities are being weakened by modernization is disapproved of by the continued existence of caste and religion. Where political competition is present, however, communal identities are growing (Brass, 1991). This contradiction shows how caste and religion have become enduring political assets in Indian democracy rather than remnants of a pre-modern

society. The ramifications of these processes are both disruptive and empowering. The mobilization of caste and religious organizations has increased the political representation of underprivileged populations, but it has also polarized them and weakened secular-democratic norms (Sen, 2012). India's democratic paradox is that its participation mechanisms promote both separation and inclusion. This paper expands on these arguments by tracking the intersections of religion, caste, and electoral politics through broad historical periods: the Congress hegemony of the 1950s-70s, identity politics of the 1980s, the consolidation of caste- and religion-based parties of the 1990s-2000s, and the rise of religious nationalism of the 2014s. It will look at how caste and religion have remained as enduring cleavages and yet changed in nature and purpose by using historical analysis and current electoral data. This question is framed by three guiding questions:

1. How have caste and religion shaped electoral competition and party politics across different historical phases?
2. What shifts in mobilization strategies are visible in the post-1990s period?
3. What implications do these trends hold for democratic governance in India?

The study aims to address these questions and offer a more complex understanding of the paradoxical ways in which caste and religion both uphold and undermine democratic norms. The literature is incorporated, the methodological approach is described, a phase-by-phase analysis of the electoral changes is given, and the consequences of the governance changes are discussed in the sections that follow.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature explains how the identities have been shaped both by democracy and exploited as immovable resources and fixed cleavages. This summary provides the literature overview of electoral competitiveness, caste, and religion's linkages both theoretically and empirically. In India, where electoral politics has been meeting caste and religion, there has been rich research terrain in political science, sociology, and cultural studies.

2.1 Religion and Hindu Nationalism

One of the main political trends in India has been Hindu nationalism. Theorized, it has been a movement that had involved identity-building, grassroots implantation, and political mobilization especially in the 1920s to 1990s (Jaffrelot, 1999). Later collections provided a wider selection of texts which

document the ideological roots and policy directions of Hindu nationalist organizations (Jaffrelot, 2009). The growth of these movements proves how religion has become a decisive axis of political competition. The relationship between ethnic and religious conflict has also been analyzed with the help of comparative studies. It is established that the communal tensions between the Hindus and the Muslims are contingent on the strength of the civic networks whereby the regions with stronger associational ties have witnessed less violence (Varshney, 2003). The electoral arena competition on the other hand has escalated communal tension in most instances and in other instances resulting in riots which are planned strategically in relation to the political cycles (Wilkinson, 2006). These processes outline the importance of religion as a personal belief system, as well as an electoral resource that parties utilize to mobilize.

Hindu nationalism is also mass appealing and is used to elicit the symbolic and cultural dimensions of the religious politics. The religious revival story has been described as a wave that is redefining the democratic world of India and challenging secularism (Hansen, 1999). More recently, it was explained that democracy has been vernacularized whereby the idioms of religion and culture are integrated into the local democratic practice (Michelutti, 2020). Together, these pieces put religion as an ideological project and a practical instrument of electoral politics.

2.2 Caste and Electoral Systems

Caste, while rooted in hierarchical social stratification, has proven politically adaptable. This flexibility has been reflected in the electoral systems in India, and scholars have found changes in phases. The third Indian electoral system that developed in the late 1980s was characterized by the heightened caste-based rivalry, in which the marginalized groups demanded their voices to be heard in the democratic arena (Yadav, 1999). On this basis, state level studies provided ten theses of Indian politics, with a focus on decentralization of power and growing importance of caste alignments in outcome determination (Yadav and Palshikar, 2008). Caste has also been re-conceptualized by conceptual work as a social category experiencing changes in the modernization and democratization context (Jodhka, 2012). Caste-based parties have succeeded in Indian elections not merely due to identity politics, but due to the tactical use of patronage and head counts, which allow them to provide voters with real advantages (Chandra, 2007). These arguments point out the fact that caste has ceased being a traditional

institution and has become a modern political category that has been redefined by the imperatives of elections. The connection between ideology and identity has also been discussed according to the researches on the changing party systems in India. The victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was a deviation from social coalitions based on caste and ideological convergence (Chhibber and Verma, 2018). In order to establish a durable political hegemony, the BJP has been reimagined as a process that combined religious nationalism with calculated caste-based mobilization (Palshikar et al., 2017). Such evidence proves that caste and religion are used jointly in political parties, indicating identity politics in India as hybrid.

2.3 Majoritarianism and Representation

Hindu nationalism, wherein democratic institutions are being reshaped to promote a specific religious identity, has been associated with the consolidation of a majoritarian state (Chatterji et al., 2019). The question of how to reconcile secularism and democratic participation becomes pertinent. Meanwhile, research into voter alignments demonstrates how parties such as the Congress were once able to forge broad-based alliances by extending across caste and religious divides (Heath and Yadav, 1999). The party system's breakdown and the entry of identity politics are concurrent with the breakdown of such inclusive strategies. That such a development presents a dilemma is suggested by the following. Caste and religious mobilizations have, on the one hand, deepened political participation and given voice to historically marginalized communities in the democratic process. On the other, they have eroded secularism, tested inclusive governance, and become ever more polarizing.

2.4 Theoretical Implications

There are some important theoretical implications that are supported by the literature. First, despite being longstanding social divisions, caste and religion are still renegotiated in the context of political disputes. Second, modernization replaces and incorporates traditional divisions into democratic processes, as evidenced by India's identity politics. Third, patronage-based networks are linked with material and ideological appeals through political mobilization strategies. A paradigm for elucidating the enduring impacts of caste and religion on Indian electoral politics could be developed by combining these observations. They emphasize that political competition must be placed within a broader sociocultural framework and that

Indian democracy is not just an abstract institutional framework but rather a practice that is enacted and embedded within identities.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The longitudinal, historical-comparative design of the study investigates the ways in which caste and religion interact with election politics in India. Unlike the cross-sectional design, which only records one election year, the study design allows tracking continuities and variations over decades. The longitudinal approach is especially well-suited to the democratic experience of India, where political orientations, party structures, and social mobilization tactics gradually changed to create electoral patterns rather than abruptly. Election data provides a clear understanding of voter turnout and party performance, and the study blends qualitative and quantitative components. The study intends to find contextual variations and structural continuities in the ways that caste and religion influence electoral politics by combining process-tracing and trend analysis.

3.2 Periodization

The analysis of the study is divided into phases. During the first phase of Congress hegemony, which lasted from 1952 to the 1970s, caste and religion were dormant divisions but were primarily absorbed into the Indian National Congress's organizational framework. There was a restriction of electoral competition in this period and participation in politics was mediated by broad coalitions. The second stage, the 1980s, was the crisis of Congress hegemony and the emergence of identity politics, when the Mandal Commission debates and the Ayodhya movement put caste and religion in the open agenda of politics, and the implicit mobilization became overt identity-based mobilization. The third stage, which occurred in the 1990s-2000s, was the period of caste and religious parties consolidation, the regional formations based on caste identities becoming more prominent as national politics became more fragmented under coalition governments which relied on caste and religious blocs. The last period, 2014-2024, saw the rise of religious nationalism and electoral realignment, and the Bharatiya Janata Party established itself as a dominant party with a combination of Hindu nationalism and strategic caste realignments, which saw greater centralization of power and ideological consolidation. The study is consistent across seven decades and provides a methodical lens through which shifts in electoral politics can be analyzed.

3.3 Data Sources

The research relies on both primary and secondary sources. The main data comes from statistical reports published by the Election Commission of India. These reports provide information on vote shares, seat shares, and voter turnout for parliamentary elections held from 1952 to 2024. We also used survey data, particularly from before and during the elections, from sources like Lokniti-CSDS. This data offers insights into voter opinions, caste identity, and religious affiliation. We examined party manifestos, election speeches, and policy declarations to see how parties used religion and caste over different election periods. Secondary research added value through peer-reviewed books, monographs, and articles that offered theories and historical context. Media archives, including newspapers, magazines, and online sources, provided context for electoral outcomes by reflecting on significant elections and campaigns. Combining all these sources provides a wealth of history, empirical rigor, and reliable analysis.

3.4 Methods of Analysis

To cover both quantitative and qualitative aspects, the study uses three different analysis methods. Researchers coded party manifestos and election speeches for mentions of caste and religion. This allowed them to count references and perform a thematic analysis of how identity politics changed over time. They examined electoral data and created time series charts to identify long-term trends in vote shares, party performance regarding caste and religion in terms of seats, and changes in voter turnout among various caste and religious groups based on available survey data. By placing each historical period in the context of its own past, comparative historical analysis offered a broader interpretive approach, enabling a traceable overview of events across decades. This plan helped identify key points of change, such as the establishment of the Mandal Commission and the Ayodhya movement, which marked a turning point in the restructuring of political alliances. The combination of these three approaches enables the study to not only grasp the quantitative electoral changes but also the qualitative changes in the political discourse providing a holistic view of the longitudinal dynamics of caste, religion, and electoral politics in India.

4 RESULTS

4.1 Phase I: 1952–1970s – Congress Dominance and Implicit Identities

The early decades of Indian democracy were

defined by the dominance of the Congress party, which absorbed social cleavages into its broad umbrella. While caste and religion influenced patronage networks and voter alignments, they did not emerge as overt political categories. Candidate selection often reflected caste-balancing, but public discourse emphasized secular nationalism. Religion was invoked primarily to reinforce unity after Partition, rather than to divide electorates. The electoral outcomes reflected Congress hegemony, with the party consistently securing more than 70 percent of parliamentary seats in the 1950s and 1960s (Table 1). Regional and identity-based parties had minimal influence, and competition remained fragmented. Figure 1 illustrates Congress's dominance in national vote share during this phase, highlighting the limited presence of explicitly caste- or religion-based mobilization.

Table 1. Parliamentary Elections: Seat Share of Congress, 1952-1971

Election Year	Congress Seat Share (%)	Main Opposition Seat Share (%)
1952	74	8
1957	76	7
1962	73	8
1967	54	21
1971	69	15

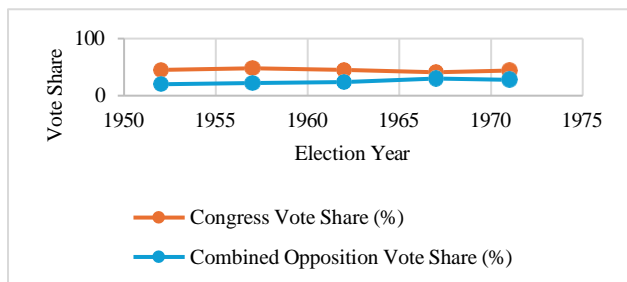


Figure 1. National Vote Share Trends, 1952-1971
(Line graph showing Congress dominance with over 40% of votes; opposition parties remain fragmented.)

4.2 Phase II: 1980s - Crisis of the Congress and Rise of Identity Politics

The decline of Congress hegemony in the 1980s coincided with the emergence of caste and religion as explicit axes of political mobilization. The Mandal Commission recommendations politicized caste, while the Ayodhya movement transformed religion into a powerful electoral instrument. Unlike earlier decades, identity politics was no longer implicit but overtly articulated through party strategies and campaign rhetoric. Table 2 summarizes the major turning points of the 1980s, demonstrating how new parties and social coalitions disrupted the Congress system. Figure 2 highlights the simultaneous rise of

the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and caste-based regional parties, showing the fragmentation of electoral competition.

Table 2. Political Turning Points of the 1980s

Year	Event/Development	Electoral Impact
1980	Indira Gandhi returns, but weak dominance	Congress fragile
1985	Mandal Commission report re-emerges	Caste politics enters national stage
1989	Janata Dal coalition gains prominence	OBC mobilization expands
1989	BJP rises with Ayodhya campaign	Hindu nationalism gains electoral traction

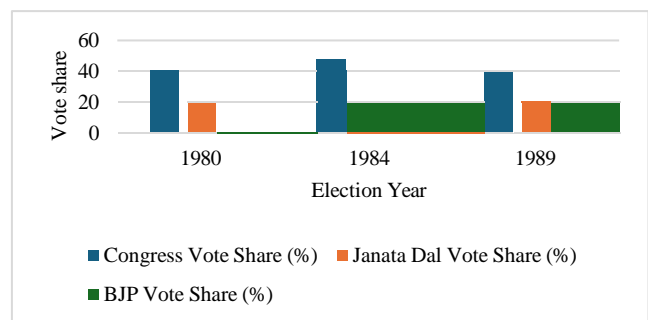


Figure 2. Fragmentation of Party System in the 1980s

(Bar chart showing decline of Congress vote share, rise of Janata Dal, and emergence of BJP.)

4.3 Phase III: 1990s-2000s - Consolidation of Caste and Religious Parties

This period marked the institutionalization of identity politics. Regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, and Rashtriya Janata Dal mobilized caste blocs successfully, while the BJP expanded its presence by blending Hindu identity with caste alliances. Coalition governments at the center reflected a fragmented party system where caste- and religion-based actors wielded disproportionate influence.

Table 3 shows the performance of major caste-based parties in key states during the 1990s-2000s. Figure 3 illustrates the BJP's growth in parliamentary seats, positioning itself as a central player in coalition politics.

Table 3. Electoral Performance of Major Caste-Based Parties, 1990s-2000s

Party	Base Caste Group	Peak Seat Share in Lok Sabha	Key States of Influence
Samajwadi Party (SP)	Yadavs, OBCs	36 (2004)	Uttar Pradesh
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	Dalits	19 (2009)	Uttar Pradesh
Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)	Yadavs, Muslims	24 (1998)	Bihar

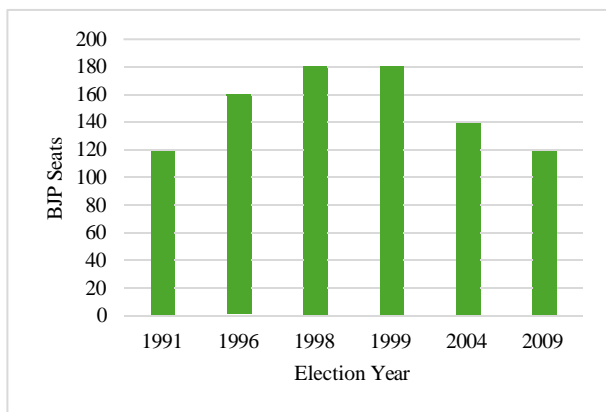


Figure 3. BJP Parliamentary Seat Growth, 1991-2009

(Line graph showing BJP’s rise from marginal presence in 1984 to 182 seats in 1999, followed by fluctuations in 2004 and 2009.)

4.4 Phase IV: 2014-2024 – Ascendancy of Religious Nationalism and Electoral Realignment

The past decade has witnessed the dominance of the BJP, combining Hindu nationalism with caste realignment strategies. The 2014 election marked a watershed, as the BJP secured a majority in the Lok Sabha for the first time in three decades. Its success was based on consolidating Hindu identity while incorporating non-Yadav OBCs and Dalit segments into its coalition.

Table 4 presents the BJP’s seat share in recent elections, demonstrating its consolidation of dominance. Figure 4 highlights the decline of regional caste-based parties relative to the BJP’s rise, showing how national politics has realigned toward a single dominant party system.

Table 4. BJP Electoral Performance, 2014-2024

Election Year	BJP Seats Won	BJP Vote Share (%)	Status of Opposition
2014	282	31.3	Congress at 44 seats
2019	303	37.4	Congress at 52 seats
2024*	290+ (proj.)	~36-37	Weak opposition

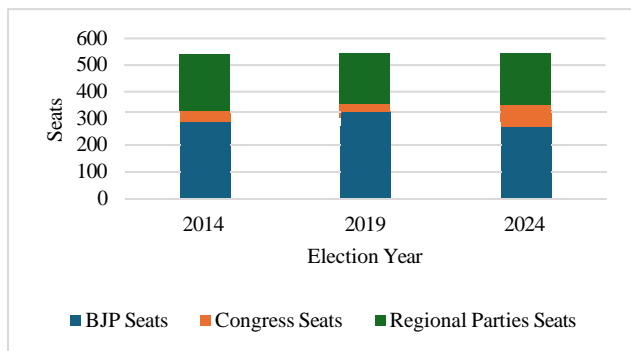


Figure 4. Realignment of National Politics, 2014-2024

(Stacked area chart showing BJP’s dominance compared to declining Congress and caste-based regional parties.)

5. DISCUSSION

These facts highlight an irony in the foundation of Indian democracy. Religion and caste have become more important and controversial. This dual role influences the four stages of electoral development. Some see religious and caste mobilization as harmful, while others view it as a step forward for participation. Regional caste parties and religious groups have raised the voices of disenfranchised communities that previously lacked political involvement. Elitist politics are fading in favor of a more diverse and competitive political landscape. This shift towards broader representation reflects a significant change. Nonetheless, it has also caused social tensions, election violence, and clientelism within the local governance systems (Nath, 2020). Disruptive systems have sometimes been disruptive to the institutional operation and it has been demonstrated that identity mobilization is better suited to promote inclusiveness but can also destabilize democracy. The independent variables are not caste and religion, but the socioeconomic factors mediate the political salience of both. The identity-cutting variables that affect voter turnout are the class, education and economic development. Empirical studies show that income inequality, unemployment, and local economic grievance affect the extent of electoral participation, and the marginalized groups rely more on the identity-based parties to gain actual benefits (Panda, 2019). These findings indicate that caste and religion cannot be easily overcome in electoral politics not only because of the cultural factors, but also because of their root in material struggles of resources and opportunities. This conflation of identity with material deprivation is what allows identity parties to persist even among the states in which economic development is occurring: development cannot eradicate social cleavages in the case of unequal distribution.

Long-term evidence similarly shows that the rise of populist leadership transformed identity politics. To gain independence in party systems, modern-day leaders tend to build their own political careers on the foundation of caste or religious identity. Such professions show that caste and religion remain the standard of political legitimacy and intersect the boundaries between institutional identification and personal charisma (Martelli, 2023). Thus, populism is based on identity politics, which serves to reassert boundaries and give newcomers in politics a point of departure. The ability to mobilize local caste loyalties with bigger ideological discourses is what allows populist leaders to gain more followers and remain believable in polarized societies. It is not an Indian

phenomenon only but a global populist phenomenon in which leaders are strategically exploiting cultural and identity symbols to win the favor of the multitude. Gender crosscuts identity-based politics even though caste and religion are the dominant discourses. Underrepresentation of women in political organizations remains a problem, but there is a sign of more women taking part in the electoral processes. Women are initiated into politics early and often through caste and religious prisms, and this influences the way women enter politics and how they bargain power within patriarchal structures (Chaudhary, 2025). Women candidates usually have to contend with the dual challenge of gender discrimination and caste hierarchy, yet their gradual rise is a sign that identity politics can also be deployed to empower women in a new way. The panchayat level women electoral quotas have begun to create an entry point into the upper politics even though this representation is normally mediated by the family or community networks. This demonstrates that gendered political participation is too bound up with caste and religion rather than a distinct category.

The rise of Bharatiya Janata Party since 2014 can be addressed as one of the significant changes in Indian politics. The results reveal how Hindu nationalism has been in a position to develop a strong electoral base by combining religious ideology and strategic caste blocs. The analysts state that the personal appeal of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in particular, had a decisive impact on the 2019 elections, which demonstrated that leadership could boost ideological currents (Shastri, 2019). This means that structural factors cannot solely be used to explain the modern electoral processes, but it must also take into consideration the role played by individual leaders in changing the dynamics between caste, religion, and democracy. A new order has been established where national discourses of development and cultural pride are more hegemonic than regional identities. This is because of the close-knit character of politics, where charm is mixed with ideology, which has diminished the relative importance of local caste leaders and centralized authority. The fact that identity politics are illegal in India is another intriguing aspect about them. Many politically inclined politicians with criminal backgrounds have been able to use caste and religious affiliations to defend their electoral positions. The leaders provide safety and preference to their societies, thereby converting coercive power into political capital (Vaishnav, 2017). This development renders the normative idea of

democracy to be complex since it shows that the formal institutions are accompanied by informal practices which are founded on the identity-based loyalty and not on the programmatic governance. In the areas where the state is weak, these characters become the mediators between communities and institutions, which reinforces the notion that the political power is not obtained with the help of legal frameworks but with the help of social identity and the power of coercion. These practices have become the norm and this demonstrates how identity politics empowers communities and implicates clientelistic forms that weaken democratic accountability.

The emergence of BJP has also been regarded as the establishment of a second dominant party system in India, to substitute the Congress system of the early decades. This change indicates that the party was capable of building a new social coalition, which included upper castes, non-Yadav OBCs, and parts of Dalits on a Hindu nationalist platform (Chhibber and Verma, 2019). The consequences of this change are immense: where the Congress system had diluted identity politics with a wide-inclusiveness, the BJP system has concentrated it in a more fundamentally ideological and majoritarian system. The present dominant party system, in contrast to the Congress era in which secularism offered a rhetorical umbrella to accommodate diversity, values majoritarianism and this begs the question of whether pluralism can be sustained. However, the sustainability of this system is determined by the ability of the BJP to remain heterogeneous coalition amidst regional economic inequalities and increasing demands of marginalized groups to be represented. Despite the fact that their expressions are evolving as institutions and society do, caste and religion are nonetheless likely to be the main topics of Indian politics. Governance is shaped by institutions' ability to transform these demands into inclusive policymaking, which is founded on both identity-based mobilization and governing. Although the Indian democracy is resilient due to its structural features—federalism, coalition politics, and judicial interventions—it is currently under pressure from populism and majoritarianism. Scholars claim that conflicts between representation and stability and identities that strengthen marginalized groups at the price of institutional coherence are a recurring feature of the Indian political system (Mitra, 2017). Indian democracy has been resilient but vulnerable to bouts of polarization because of this conflict. Federalism has been the most notable safeguard, allowing regional parties to have subnational identities. However, since 2014, the concentration of

power has increased to the point where it threatens to destroy India's fragile pluralism balance.

The results collectively support the claim that caste and religion are being reformed in the context of modern democratic competition rather than being eliminated. Majoritarian nationalism, criminalization, gendered engagement, populism, and electoral violence are the evolving manifestations of identity politics. In addition to democratizing participation by giving voice to the underrepresented groups, these processes are ironic in that they also pose a threat to polarization and the deterioration of secular-democratic principles. This dichotomy ensures that caste and religion will continue to be important factors in Indian democracy going forward. Since they are dynamic factors constantly redefining the parameters of representation, governance, and democratic legitimacy, their position in Indian politics cannot be viewed as a holdover from the past.

6. CONCLUSION

The electoral politics, religion, and caste in India have been contested and demonstrated that these are not the bygone and the dissolving forces that vanish but the ubiquitous things that always make up democratic life. The history of Indian democracy

shows how social divisions play a role in politics. It starts with the Congress's early focus on balancing identities. This has continued through the clear mobilizations seen in the Mandal and Mandir movements, leading to the rise of Hindu nationalism in recent years. Each phase has brought new strategies and forms of alignment. This demonstrates that caste and religion are not fixed categories. Instead, they are flexible resources that change with the political landscape. The findings suggest a paradox of identity-based mobilization in that it has made historically marginalized groups more represented, giving them more voice in politics, but has also led to more polarization and instability of secular-democratic institutions. The contemporary experience of the creation of a new dominant party system around Hindu nationalism is an example of how caste and religion can unify disparate groups into a large coalition and the threats of majoritarian politics to pluralism and inclusiveness. In this article, the significance of a longitudinal approach to Indian democracy is explained. Although caste and religion will continue to play a significant role in electoral politics, their meaning and mobilizations will change as institutions and society change. For India's democracy to be resilient and representational, it will be difficult to balance identity-based participation with the principles of inclusive governance.

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