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CASTE, CLASS, AND POLITICAL POWER: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND ELECTORAL POLITICS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Caste and class have historically served as the twin pillars of India's social stratification system, profoundly influencing patterns of economic opportunity, identity, and political participation. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, caste continues to shape representation and voter alignment. However, growing class mobility, urbanization, and welfare expansion are reconfiguring how social hierarchies manifest in democratic politics. This study explores how caste persists as a political category while being mediated by emerging class structures. Adopting a mixed-methods analytical and descriptive design, the study employs a comparative case approach across four Indian states-Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra. It draws exclusively on secondary data from the Election Commission of India, the National Sample Survey Office, the Census of India, Lokniti-CSDS surveys, and NITI Aayog reports. Quantitative analysis examines correlations between caste dominance, economic indicators, and electoral outcomes, while qualitative discourse analysis explores identity-based mobilization and political rhetoric. Findings reveal that caste remains the dominant axis of political representation, though its influence is increasingly moderated by class-based differentiation. The rise of an OBC middle class and shifts in regional politics indicate growing fluidity between identity and economic aspiration. Regional contrasts persist, with caste blocs dominating in northern states and class-conscious welfare politics gaining prominence in the south. Caste continues to anchor India's democratic politics, yet its expression is transforming under class mobility and regional diversity. Achieving genuine equality requires integrating socio-economic justice with political inclusion.

KEYWORDS: Caste; Class; Political representation; India

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian social organisation has been conventionally built on a complicated caste and class system that led to the formation of a certain stratification that has never been that extensive and stable. The caste system was based on the ancient stratifications of varna and jati where it was applied to define the identity, occupation and social mobility (Desai and Dubey, 2012). Caste continues to contribute to the access to economic resources and educational opportunities, as well as political representation although this is provided by the constitution. The fact that the system has lasted so long in the era of modernity shows the paradox of India according to Beteille (2012) which is a democracy that is maintained by hierarchical social underpinnings.

Caste contributed to the development of political behaviour in a slightly different way with the introduction of universal suffrage. The caste is a social identification as well as a determinant of political identification, creating alliances, patterns of party system and representation (Chhibber and Verma, 2018). Despite Indian urbanisation and industrialisation, patronage and clientelism still have caste embedded within it, influencing welfare access and political brokerage (Auerbach and Thachil, 2018). But the relations of class mobility have begun to mediate this effect. The research on intergenerational mobility indicates limited yet notable changes of occupational and income distribution across caste lines, which is a signal of historical dividing barriers being slowly blurred (Hnatkovska et al., 2013; Asher et al., 2018). The caste and class phenomenon intersect to shape the changing social reality in India. The liberalisation of economy, the extension of education, affirmative action has developed new layers around old layers in which the members of backward and scheduled castes are moving up to the middle class (Munshi, 2019; Krishna, 2017). But, as Jodhka (2017) observes, caste consciousness has not vanished in the past as a remnant of tradition but emerged a contemporary tool of group identity and political statement. Although urbanisation has led to an increase in the interactions between classes, it has also re-arranged the caste solidarities in the electoral politics (Jaffrelot and Kumar, 2015). This change has been illustrated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) when they succeeded in organising different caste coalitions in 2014, with identity politics combined with developmental and governing ideals (Heath, 2015). The politics of caste has historically influenced the Indian journey of political mobilisation which began

with the anti-Brahmin movements in the pre-independence period and the OBC assertion in the post-Mandal period. The emergence of caste representation in democratic competition was institutionalised through the emergence of regional parties, including DMK, BSP, and SP (Palshikar et al., 2014; Ziegfeld, 2016). Through a more pragmatic adjustment of caste politics to the realities of electoral politics, the elite-led parties have figured out how to attract poorer caste communities by simply giving them targeted political favours and symbolic inclusion (Thachil, 2014). This intersection of identity, ideology and welfare is how the contemporary India practises democracy. This means that caste and class merge as twin forces of movement and standing, as well as affirming and changing the other. The democratic course of India indicates this paradox a modern and egalitarian system that operates in a very strong social divide, in which the process of representation tends to be both empowerment and a symbolic acknowledgment (Chauchard, 2017). Although the Indian constitution encourages equality and secularism, caste continues to be a strong determinant with regard to political behaviour and representation (Thorat and Neuman, 2012). Although the affirmative action policies have enhanced access to education and government jobs, modernization in the interaction between economic classes mobility and caste identity is yet to be studied. Despite the fact that part of lower-caste groups has already become part of middle-income, it has been indicated that social exclusion continues in latent ways that influence the opportunities in both economic and political spheres (Deshpande, 2016; Das, 2011). In addition, the fact that untouchability and occupational segregation still persist is a sign that the decadence of caste hierarchies has been partial and uneven (Sooryamoorthy, 2008). Caste still forms a political basis of party tactics and electorate bases to the point of usurping ideology or policy choices. However, the redistributive potential of the federalism and affirmative action has not been even in all states as indicated by Tillin (2013) and Haq and Ojha (2010). As a result, although caste has democratized representation, it has also solidarized identity-based politics that tends to restrain greater class-based solidarity. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how caste and class intersect to shape the structure of political power in India's democracy. It analyses how caste-based and class-based identities affect the outcome of the electoral process, patterns of representation, and voter behaviour and how old hierarchies fit into a fast modernising society. Also, the research evaluates the

regional differences in caste-class congruencies and their development in the various party systems in India. It attempts to provide answers to how economic mobility and social stratification remain the outlines of democratic participation and representation in modern India by combining both the empirical data and theoretical views.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

The given study is based on an analytical and descriptive research design with a mixed-method approach to analysing the interdependence between caste, class, and political power in India. The design incorporates the quantitative and qualitative analysis to reflect the structural, behavioural as well as ideological aspects of social stratification and the election results. The trend of differences in caste-class composition and its political consequences in regions has been examined using a comparative case study framework. These four states Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra were chosen deliberately because all states had different social-political histories as well as varied approaches to caste- and class-mobilisation. The example of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar is the process of caste-based political assertion consolidation, and the example of Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra is the regions affected by reformist and class-oriented movements. The comparative method allows gaining a very extensive picture of the various modes of manifestation of caste and class relations in Indian electoral democracy.

2.2 Data Sources

The study is based entirely on secondary data that has been obtained using official government and institutional sources, which are complemented by the developed academic literature. These reports and data sets will offer detailed and dependable information on the electoral patterns, socio-economic stratifications and the political representation patterns within India.

Key data sources include:

- Election Commission of India (2024) - Statistical Reports of General Elections (Lok Sabha and State Assemblies), 1951-2024, are sources that contain official data of elections, voter turnout and party performance.
- National Sample Survey Office (NSSO, 2025) - National Sample Survey rounds on employment, consumption and social groups which provides detailed socio-economic indicators like the occupational structure,

income distribution and consumption expenditure.

- Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India (2011) - Census of India 2011-Primary Census Abstracts, which are demographic profiles, levels of literacy and miscellaneous social group compositions of the regions.
- Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS, various years) - National Election Surveys (NES) and State of Democracy in South Asia surveys, which provide information on the voting patterns, partisan identification, and the influence of the caste and class on the participation in politics.
- NITI Aayog (2023) - National Multidimensional Poverty Index, presenting composite measures of poverty and inequality that help assess the economic dimensions of social stratification.
- Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (2022) - Annual Report on Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, providing information on welfare schemes, reservation policies, and state-level social equity initiatives.

The integration of these sources is what makes it possible to develop a multi-scalar and holistic study of the intersection between socio-economic hierarchies and the patterns of political representation in India.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The analytical paradigm integrates the intersectionality theory, Marxian theory of classes and Weberian sociology to explain the intricate connexions between caste, classes and political power.

1. Theoretical Orientation

- Intersectionality is studied to understand how to interpret the interaction relationship between caste and class with other social factors, such as gender, region, and religion to form stratified inequalities.
- Marxian theory is the basis of analysing the material forms of relations of classes, economic dependence and development of political consciousness.
- Weberian sociology is an addition that provides a thought on status, honor and authority and emphasizes the symbolic and institutional power housed within caste hierarchies.

2. Quantitative Analysis: The quantitative methods applied in the study are to determine the relationship between caste dominance, caste

indicators of classes, and politics representation. The pattern of voter demographics, income distribution, and education levels in the regions are analysed, with the help of data of the Election Commission of India (2024), NSSO (2025), and Census of India (2011).

3. **Qualitative Analysis:** To enrich the statistical data, the qualitative analysis will be carried out, which will involve a critical examination of the political manifestos, scholarly sources, and narratives of the surveys obtained as a part of LoknitiCSDS and NITI Aayog datasets. Discourse analysis is used to reveal ideological contextualization of caste and class in the political speech and election policies. Using a combination of the quantitative and qualitative approaches, this framework offers a multidimensional and balanced picture of the social stratification and its political implications.

2.4 Reliability and Validity of Data

High reliability and validity are ensured by the fact that the officially recognised and methodologically rigorous data sources are used in the study. Currently, standardised, regularly updated, and popular datasets used in academic and policy studies, such as the Election Commission of India (2024), NSSO (2025), and Census of India (2011) datasets, guarantee the accuracy and comparability of data over time and place.

Internal validity is supported by cross-verification of various sources of information, including Lokniti-CSDS survey data, poverty indices by NITI Aayog (2023), and reports by the Ministry of Social Justice (2022) because they confirm the results using different sources of data. The comparative analysis using state-levels improves the external validity and the findings can be applied in a wider range of patterns within the Indian electoral behaviour. The methodological triangulation and the selection of sources allow the study to not only have empirical reliability but also depth of analysis, which in turn provides the study with evidence-based and credible conclusions in the nexus between caste, class, and political power.

3. RESULTS

The findings in this section are compiled based on the Election Commission of India (2024), NSSO (2025), Census of India (2011), Lokniti-CSDS surveys, NITI Aayog (2023), and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (2022). The findings are organised into four dimensions, which are interrelated, namely, caste-based political representation, class and

economic mobility, intersections between caste and class, and regional differences in social stratification and electoral politics.

3.1 Patterns of Caste-Based Political Representation

The Electoral Commission of India (2024) election data analysis shows a general trend where caste-based political dominance existed in both the state and national legislature. In the past, a disproportionate representation was occupied by upper castes (Brahmin, Rajput, and Bhumihar) in the parliament and assembly. But, with the formation of caste-based parties since the 1980s, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), representation has been diversified over time. OBC and Dalit representation in Lok Sabha went up to close to 43 versus 21 percent between 1991 and 2024, whereas the upper caste representation dropped to almost one-fourth to under two-fifths (ECI, 2024) (Table 1). This represents an extension of democratisation of political access in terms of caste mobilisation.

Table 1. Caste Composition of Lok Sabha Members (Selected Years)

Caste Group	1991 (%)	2004 (%)	2014 (%)	2024 (%)
Upper Castes	48	39	33	28
Other Backward Classes	18	26	32	35
Scheduled Castes (SCs)	12	14	15	17
Scheduled Tribes (STs)	8	8	8	9
Others / Mixed	14	13	12	11

Source: Election Commission of India (2024); Lokniti-CSDS (various years).

The parties that are based on caste have been instrumental in increasing the participation of the historically marginalised communities. The emergence of BSP in Uttar Pradesh, in particular, served as an example of how Dalit-based political rhetoric might undermine the status of the upper caste. Equally, the DMK and AIADMK in Tamil Nadu institutionalised the non-Brahmin caste representation using regional identity politics.

3.2 Class and Economic Mobility

The socio-economic statistics provided by NSSO (2025) and NITI Aayog (2023) indicate an increasing interconnection between economic mobility and political participation. The economic progress among OBCs has given rise to a new middle class referred to as the OBC middle class that is now more literate, has a higher income and a better political inclination than past generations (see Table 2).

Table 2. Average Monthly Household Income by Caste Group (2025)

Social Group	Average Income (INR)	Change since 2011 (%)
Upper Castes	₹32,500	+38
OBCs	₹26,000	+52
Scheduled Castes (SCs)	₹20,300	+45
Scheduled Tribes (STs)	₹18,900	+40

Source: NSSO (2025); NITI Aayog (2023).

The OBC middle-income group has become a central electoral block that has gravitated towards centrist

and development-based discourses, but has not lost caste unity. This upward mobility was enabled by educational enlargement and affirmative-action initiatives. Nonetheless, Scheduled Castes as well as Scheduled Tribes have remained poorer on income and land, limiting their political bargaining power. The positive relationship between income earned by households and voter turnout (refer to Figure 1) implies that economic empowerment does not replace caste identity in establishing the relationship between income and voter turnout.

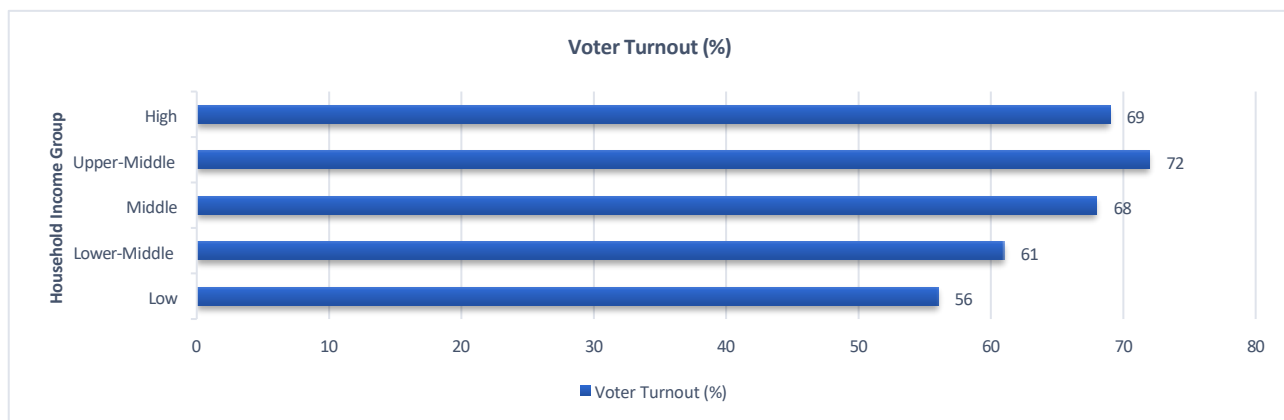


Figure 1. Correlation between Household Income and Voter Turnout (2024)

Such correlation indicates that class mobility improves civic engagement implying economic empowerment does not substitute caste identity to determine political participation.

3.3 Intersections of Caste and Class

According to the Lokniti-CSDS National Election Study (2024) data, caste and class identities do not work in a hierarchical manner, but they work simultaneously to determine political preferences. Economic differentiation within a caste causes the

differentiation to vote-richer OBCs are attracted to the pro-development parties, and poorer ones are attracted to redistributive policies.

The example of Uttar Pradesh is that historically the BSP and SP have been uniting lower-caste voters, and since 2014, economically mobile OBC populations have been shifting towards the BJP. On the contrary, non-Brahmin middle classes in Tamil Nadu have remained loyal to Dravidian parties which proves that the mobility of classes can strengthen caste-based politics.

Table 3. Caste-Class Voting Patterns in Selected States (2024 Elections)

State	Dominant Caste-Class Bloc	Major Party Supported	Electoral Outcome
Uttar Pradesh	Lower OBCs, SCs (working class)	SP, BSP	Moderate gains
Bihar	Yadavs, Kurmis (rural middle class)	RJD, JD(U)	Competitive
Tamil Nadu	Backward castes (urban middle class)	DMK, AIADMK	High stability
Maharashtra	Marathas (agrarian elites)	BJP, NCP	Fragmented vote

Source: Lokniti-CSDS (various years); ECI (2024).

As indicated in Table 3, caste-class coalitions remain the backbone of Indian electoral politics, and their fluidity across regions determines the outcome of elections.

3.4 Regional Variations

In India, regional differentiation creates various caste-class formations, which define the political mobilisation.

1. North India (Uttar Pradesh and Bihar): It is still characterised by the stubbornness of caste bloc. Parties like SP, RJD and BSP are dependent on caste based vote banks, whereas BJP has been able to mobilise non dominant OBCs and Dalits with the help of welfare based populism and Hindutva appeals. The politics of patronage still dominate and the caste hierarchy affects access to local governance systems.

2. South India (Tamil Nadu): The issues of caste and classes are closely linked with linguistic and regional identities. The social order of Dravidian movement had restructured the
3. caste system by giving power to the non-Brahmin castes and thus the casts were distributed fairly. By combining redistributive welfare and cultural nationalism, DMK and AIADMK continue to dominate.
4. Western India (Maharashtra): OBC and Dalit mobilizations have been challenging the agrarian wealth associated with the Western India which was historically dominated by the Marathas. Class alliances have been redefined with the Bahujan and the neo-Ambedkarite movements but intracaste class divisions have given rise to new political contestations.
5. Urban-Rural Divide: Urbanisation has weakened the caste boundaries and enhanced the inequality of classes. The upper-class OBCs and urban elites enjoy the benefit of a disproportion of employment in the private sector, leaving the rural people to rely on the age-old patronage and political favours. This duality perpetuates identity based politics and aspirational politics.

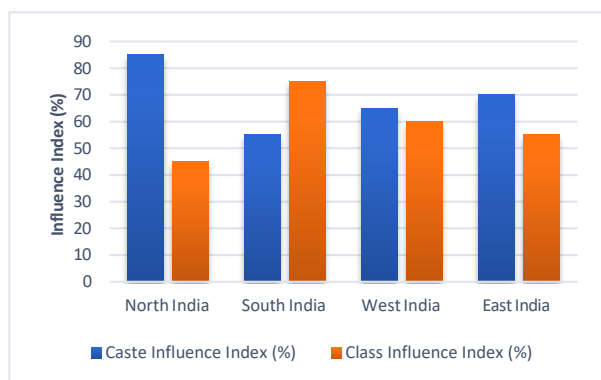


Figure 2. Regional Variations in Caste-Class Political Influence (2024)

As shown in Figure 2, darker shading in North India represents areas of stronger caste dominance, whereas lighter shading in South India reflects greater class mobility and welfare alignment (NITI Aayog, 2023). This visual comparison underscores the regional asymmetry between caste-based patronage politics in the Hindi belt and class-based welfare regimes in southern states.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm that caste remains a resilient yet transforming axis of political behavior in India's democracy. Although electoral turnout

remains stalemated on the basis of caste affiliations, the character of such affiliations is being re-balanced by economic mobility of classes and urbanisation. Political democratisation has led to the expansion of access to power, as the growing number of OBCs and Dalits at the Lok Sabha and state assembly levels shows; it has also created new intra-caste divisions between elites and the subalterns. Recent studies of political networks among the urban poor in India indicate that citizens are increasingly embracing representation by intermediary brokers and local patronage networks and systems as opposed to caste based identities (Auerbach and Thachil, 2023). This development indicates the current change in traditional patron-hierarchy to issue-based and transactional politics. However, Jaffrelot (2021) suggests that this transformation is also accompanied by the emergence of majoritarian nationalism, in which the identities of caste are reconstituted even in the larger discourses of Hindutva, frequently rewrites prior hierarchies under the banner of a homogenising culture. Class mobility is therefore softening the inflexibility of caste attachments especially in urban constituencies. The creation of an OBC middle class and greater differentiation of the economy within the Scheduled Castes have created new strategies of political negotiation with aspirations, education, and access to welfare mediating identity based politics. Nevertheless, such processes are not homogeneous and highly contextual, being highly different in every region and degree of urbanisation.

The findings challenge a critical rethink of the theories of social stratification in the context of Indian democracy. Classical approaches which consider caste and class as separate or opposing systems are not enough to understand the hybrid political actions that are witnessed in modern India. According to Beteille (2012), the democracy in India is a paradox that exists between formal equality and social stratification that constantly surround the political sociology of the country. The fact that the mobilisation in caste bases persisted even with the accelerated rate of urbanisation is a sign that economic liberalisation has changed but has not eliminated identity politics. The Weberian description of social honor and symbolic capital resonates very well with the way caste identities are replicated within the confines of modern political structures. In the meantime, Marxian frameworks which have treated class as the major source of power have to now consider caste as an overlapping mode of production and social reproduction and as a determining factor in material and symbolic access to

resources. A combination of these viewpoints results in the provision of a composite model of political behaviour in which caste acts as a status identity and class acts as a determinant of opportunity. This intersectional concept is consistent with the ideas of Michelutti (2020), who argues that a process of vernacularization has affected Indian democracy, where minor idioms of caste, religion, and class are fused into new, unique forms of politics.

In addition, electoral evidence confirms that the caste-class relations are mediated by the institutional settings of party competition, electoral quotas and constituency design. Included in the logic of proportional representation and reservation systems, which are addressed by Lublin and Bowler (2018), is how the structure of electoral systems makes ethnic and caste representation conveniently balanced to accommodate inclusiveness and stability. This conceptual synthesis emphasises that Indian politics should not be interpreted in terms of a caste versus a class but rather as their constitution. The implications of the findings to the public policy, affirmative actions and democratic representation are important. Although constitutional reservations and quota systems have made the representation of marginalised castes intended, the fact that they have been associated with restricted redistributive scope when dealing with economic inequality is an indication that they might be limited in their effectiveness. As Jensenius (2017) illustrates, electoral quotas have strengthened descriptive but not substantive empowerment especially in rural constituencies where caste elites still control the flow of resources. The reforms should, therefore, shift to the broad-based socio-economic inclusion process that cuts across the inert caste groups. Skill training, urban job placement, and educational equity are also programmes that need to be applied to hold the benefits of political inclusion together. Moreover, according to Vaishnav (2017), the nexus of money, crime, and politics endangers the accountability of democracy, which strengthens inequalities both along the caste and the class lines. An open system of political financing and spending on campaigns- as the one suggested by Vaishnav (2024)- would be essential in preventing elite capture and creating fair and competitive political contests. The policy discussion should also be aware of the changing form of urban citizenship. Auerbach and Thachil (2023) point to the fact that migrant and informal-sector groups tend to be excluded when using traditional caste-based welfare programs. This implies the need to consider adaptive social policies that take into consideration mobility, informality, and cross-

regional identities in urban governance. There is longitudinal and interdisciplinary inquiry in the changing relationship between caste, class, and politics. Future studies must dwell on the caste-class mobility between generations, with the use of panel-data and life-history studies, to explore how education, occupation and migration will redefine identity-formation. The impact of changes in institutions like electoral quotas, as Bhavnani (2009) discovered, can be analysed long after the change has taken place; in much the same way, the impact of the caste-class dynamics can shed light on the long-term impact of affirmative action and welfare policies. The other potential avenue is the investigation of how digital media and youth politics can be used to affect caste-based alignments. The recent studies demonstrate that online political networks enhance the emergence of new identity claims, which overcomes conventional hierarchies and generates new echo chambers (Palshikar et al., 2017). The emergence of digital mobilization by young people in the lower middle classes especially in the regional and linguistic opportunities is a re-configuration of political participation that combines both the economic aspiration and the cultural identity. Lastly, any normative discussion about caste and democracy should consider new ways of understanding Hindu social order and modernity. According to Vaid and Datta (2019), the contemporary Hindu world experiences a conflict between religious reformism and the existence of social stratification, in which caste remains beyond merely a cultural identity and a means of exclusion. This paradox is one of the main issues of scholarship and governance that is difficult to reconcile by using inclusive democratic practises. In conclusion, it can be seen that the discussed issue shows that caste has not been abolished but transformed, fusing with the class and urbanisation to create new grounds of political mobilisation. Both theoretical and policy implications emphasise the need to shift away toward more dynamic and intersectional forms of analysis rather than the static identity frameworks. Although the Indian democracy has reached a new level of inclusion, sustained structural change, political responsibility and rekindling of scholarly interest in the lived intersections of caste, class and citizenship are what would make equality a reality.

5. CONCLUSION

This analysis affirms that caste is still the centre of political mobilisation and representation in India, although it is changing due to the effects of differentiation of classes, economic mobility and

urbanisation. Although the traditional hierarchies still stand, the democratisation of politics which is characterised by emergence of OBC and Dalit leadership has changed the caste into a tool of negotiation and empowerment that is determined by access to education, employment and welfare. Meanwhile, the politics of caste is getting exponentially mediated by class to produce new modes of engagement. The introduction of OBC middle class, urban diversification of voters and aspirational politics has brought fluidity in the Indian social structure. Economic development has undermined the inflexible caste blocs in certain areas and strengthened them in other areas with populist mobilisation. The democracy in India is therefore both progressive and paradoxical: it has been able to be more inclusive in elections, yet the inequality of

wealth and social discrimination restrict substantive equality. The caste-class interplay of democratic institutions is a sign of the capacity of India to tolerate diversity, however, it also indicates the inefficiency of inclusion where economic justice is consumed in political participation. In this paper, the author concludes that the real political equality is essential to the socio-economic justice. There should be more comprehensive policies that are providing opportunities beyond caste-through good education, inclusive development and equal access to resources that make the affirmative action. Caste continuing in Indian politics is not only a limitation, but also a lesson incompleteness of democracy to ensure representation a social justice and a substantial inclusion on the symbolic level of equality.

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