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Dalits and OBCs in Indian Democracy: Between Emancipation and Assertion

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political and social assertion of Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in post-independence India, highlighting their transformative role in reshaping the country's caste-driven power structures. The study traces the evolution of Dalit mobilisation from the Republican Party of India to the Dalit Panthers and the Bahujan Samaj Party, emphasizing shifts from symbolic resistance to strategic electoral politics. It contrasts this trajectory with the OBC assertion, which often stems from agrarian and intermediary caste groups that converted land-based power into political influence, particularly in North and South India. While Dalit movements seek dignity and citizenship rights rooted in historical exclusion, OBC mobilisation reflects a consolidation of emerging elites seeking broader representation. The study also explores the role of Leftist movements and caste-based organisations in articulating class and caste grievances.

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INTRODUCTION

The last few decades have witnessed an assertive mobilisation of Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in India, marking a decisive shift in the socio-political dynamics of the country. This assertion has not been limited to electoral participation but has extended into demands for dignity, cultural autonomy, and a rightful share in political power. These groups now play a central role in the politics of numerous Indian states and have become influential actors in shaping national political discourse. Their emergence represents not just a demographic reality but a redefinition of power relations within a historically hierarchical society.[1]

The Dalit assertion is rooted in their historical exclusion and occupational marginalisation. Identified constitutionally as Scheduled Castes, Dalits were historically engaged in stigmatised occupations such as leatherwork, manual scavenging, and agrarian labour. Post-independence land reforms largely bypassed them, leaving them landless and economically dependent. Welfare schemes introduced by the State had varied success across regions, offering some improvements in living conditions, yet failing to eradicate systemic exclusion. Constitutional provisions like reservations in education and political representation facilitated the emergence of a vocal and politically aware segment among Dalits. This group has been instrumental in articulating collective grievances, thereby initiating processes of social transformation.[2]

However, this transformation has not occurred uniformly across India. Rural regions, in particular, continue to witness the daily reproduction of caste-based indignities. Despite constitutional guarantees, such as Article 17 abolishing untouchability, discrimination remains deeply embedded in social practice. Marc Galanter rightly observed that the Indian Constitution, despite its elaborate vision for social reconstruction, lacked detailed mechanisms to dismantle entrenched caste hierarchies. The persistence of untouchability reflects the gap between constitutional ideals and actual enforcement.

Legal provisions, though theoretically powerful, often fail in practice. Affirmative action policies have been limited in scope, particularly in the private sector, which remains exempt from obligations of caste-based social justice. Calls for reservation in private industry have met with resistance from economically and socially dominant groups, revealing the structural resistance to caste equity in market-driven sectors. As a result, Dalit demands for inclusion continue to confront entrenched privilege and institutional inertia. The OBCs present a different configuration of caste-based mobilisation. Constitutionally classified as socially and educationally backward, the OBCs include a highly differentiated set of castes that span a broad socio-economic spectrum. Unlike Dalits, many OBC castes—particularly the landowning intermediary groups—have enjoyed considerable political and economic influence. This group includes the Jats, Yadavs, Kurmis, Lodhs, Gujjars in North India; Marathas and Patels in Maharashtra and Gujarat; and Reddies, Kammas, Lingayats, and Vokkaligas in the South. These castes not only dominate agrarian economies but also possess substantial influence over regional political institutions.[3]

Their rise to power has been facilitated by the economic benefits of land reforms and the Green Revolution, which disproportionately advantaged those already in control of land. Unlike Dalits, these groups entered modernity from a position of economic strength. Their access to agricultural wealth allowed them to diversify into urban and semi-urban economies, thereby expanding their influence across both rural and urban spheres. Their assertion in the political realm is rooted not merely in a search for dignity but in the defence and expansion of existing class interests.[4]

The internal diversity within the OBC category complicates the notion of backwardness. Many among them are no longer socially or economically disadvantaged, even though they continue to benefit from affirmative action policies. Political mobilisation among OBCs, therefore, must be understood as a negotiation for power rather than an emancipatory struggle akin to that of the Dalits. The interests of dominant OBC groups are often in conflict with those of landless service castes, whose claim to backward status is more empirically grounded.

The Dalit-OBC assertion has reshaped Indian democracy by challenging upper-caste dominance and forcing political parties to reckon with new social coalitions. However, their trajectories remain distinct. Dalit mobilisation is primarily driven by a historical legacy of exclusion and a demand for equal citizenship. In contrast, OBC mobilisation often reflects the consolidation of emerging elites who seek to convert economic capital into political power. The democratic system has served as a conduit for both forms of assertion, but the motivations, strategies, and consequences differ sharply.[5]

ASSERTION OF DALITS

The assertion of Dalits in post-independence India has unfolded through a succession of political, social, and cultural movements, each reflecting evolving strategies for securing equality, dignity, and representation. Unlike earlier efforts that focused on specific rights such as temple entry and political reservations, the post-Ambedkar Dalit movements diversified in form and scope. This transformation marks a transition from appeals for inclusion to organized efforts aimed at reshaping the political structure itself.

Three major phases define this assertion: the Republican Party of India (RPI), the Dalit Panther movement, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Though each emerged under distinct historical circumstances, they all represent responses to the continued exclusion and marginalisation of Dalits in India's democratic system. These movements drew on Ambedkar's ideological legacy, but extended it into new terrains of political engagement, social critique, and cultural resistance.[6]

The Republican Party of India (RPI)

The RPI, initiated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar shortly before his death, aimed to provide Dalits with a political vehicle to challenge caste-based oppression and to attain power through democratic

means. Following his demise, the party found support from a growing educated Dalit middle class, especially in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. In Uttar Pradesh, the RPI succeeded in forging an electoral alliance among Dalits, Muslims, and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), briefly emerging as a viable political force during the 1960s.[7]

Despite early promise, the RPI's trajectory was undermined by factionalism and co-optation. In Maharashtra, the party fractured into ideologically disparate factions, while in Uttar Pradesh, key leaders were absorbed into the Congress Party, diluting the RPI's independent political character. However, its cultural legacy endured. The mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism under Ambedkar's influence and the subsequent spread of Ambedkarite ideology, often described as "Ambedkarisation" by scholars like Jagpal Singh, created a sustained cultural identity that transcended electoral setbacks.

The Dalit Panther Movement

The Dalit Panther movement, founded in Maharashtra in 1972, was primarily led by Dalit intellectuals influenced by Ambedkarite thought, Marxism, and African-American civil rights literature. The name itself drew inspiration from the Black Panther Party in the United States, reflecting a transnational framework of resistance. The movement distinguished itself through its aggressive critique of the caste system, employing literature, public discourse, and protest to challenge Hindu orthodoxy.[8]

Unlike the RPI, the Dalit Panthers functioned more as a cultural and ideological movement than an electoral force. Its efforts to rename Marathwada University after Ambedkar exemplify its focus on symbolic resistance. However, the movement remained largely confined to urban areas and eventually disintegrated due to ideological rifts and personal rivalries. Despite its limited organisational reach, the Dalit Panther movement contributed to a renewed political consciousness among Dalits, particularly youth.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)

The BSP marks the most sustained political success of the Dalit assertion. Founded by Kanshi Ram in 1984, the party sought to consolidate the majority population—Dalits, OBCs, Tribals, and minorities—under the umbrella term *Bahujan Samaj*. Unlike earlier Dalit movements that operated within limited social bases, the BSP aimed to convert demographic majority into electoral dominance. Its ideological stance challenged the political monopoly of upper castes, particularly Brahmins, Rajputs, and Banias, who were seen as historical beneficiaries of minority rule through vote fragmentation.[9]

The rise of BSP in Uttar Pradesh culminated in Mayawati's multiple terms as Chief Minister. The party implemented targeted welfare schemes such as the designation of Ambedkar villages, where developmental initiatives focused on Dalit populations. Despite these achievements, the BSP's strategy to maintain a cohesive *Bahujan* alliance proved unsustainable.

OBCs, Muslims, and sections of non-Jatav Dalits gradually distanced themselves from the party. The BSP's alliance with the Samajwadi Party in 1993 initially delivered electoral gains but collapsed shortly after, revealing the fragility of social coalitions built purely on numerical majority.[10]

In response to this fragmentation, the BSP shifted strategy. Abandoning its earlier antagonism towards upper castes, it adopted a broader electoral approach through *Sarva Samaj* politics—allocating tickets to upper-caste candidates and seeking their support while retaining its core Dalit base. This pragmatic repositioning reflects both the adaptability and limitations of caste-based mobilisation in a multi-caste electorate.

Left Mobilisation and the Dalit Question

Leftist engagement with the Dalit issue has been shaped by a class-based framework that initially subordinated caste to economic exploitation. Naxalite groups, particularly in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh, addressed Dalit issues through the lens of dual oppression—caste and class—using radical tactics, including armed struggle. Groups such as the People's War Group (PWG) and Indian People's Front confronted feudal structures and challenged landlord dominance. These efforts often provoked violent reprisals from upper-caste militias like Lorik Sena and Bhoomi Sena.[11]

The major parliamentary Left parties—the CPI and CPI(M)—for a long time failed to acknowledge caste as a distinct axis of oppression. Their focus remained on economic class, with the belief that economic upliftment would automatically resolve caste discrimination. However, continued Dalit mobilisation compelled a shift in this approach. The CPI(M)'s party programme eventually recognised the entrenched nature of caste and its complicity with capitalist development. Paragraph 5.12 of the party document acknowledges the persistence of caste prejudice and affirms the need to fight caste oppression alongside class exploitation. This realignment reflects a growing recognition that caste cannot be collapsed into class. The unique social humiliations and structural exclusions faced by Dalits demand targeted interventions. Even within Left frameworks, caste now occupies a more prominent place in political analysis and organisational strategy.[12]

ASSERTION OF BACKWARD CLASSES

The assertion of backward classes in post-independence India reflects a fundamental transformation in the social and political order of both North and South India. What began as a gradual mobilisation in the initial decades after independence evolved into a structured political movement with clear ideological goals, leadership strategies, and institutional impact. This process, however, unfolded differently across regions due to historical, cultural, and economic variations.[13]

North India: Assertion Through Electoral Politics and Agrarian Leadership

In North India, the assertion of backward classes has been primarily led by the intermediary or middle castes—Jats, Yadavs, Gujjars, Kurmis, and Lodhs. These groups, concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Haryana, rose to prominence from the 1970s onwards. Their rise was not mirrored among the lower backward castes, such as artisans and service providers, whose presence in political leadership remained marginal. Although Karpoori Thakur, a member of a service caste, served twice as Bihar's Chief Minister, his political trajectory aligned more closely with the interests of intermediary castes than with those of the lower backward sections.[14] The initial decades following independence saw minimal representation of backward castes in politics. Their consolidation began in earnest with Charan Singh, whose political strategies fundamentally reshaped the role of these groups. Though his own caste, the Jats, were not officially classified as OBCs in Uttar Pradesh until 2002, Charan Singh aligned himself with OBC groups such as Yadavs, Kurmis, and Gujjars. His leadership reflected a conscious shift away from upper-caste dominance in the Congress Party. He toured eastern Uttar Pradesh, addressed rural backward-class audiences, and spoke against policies such as cooperative farming and agricultural cess that were perceived as hostile to peasant interests. These initiatives allowed him to construct a backward-caste constituency rooted in agrarian discontent and post-zamindari reforms.[15]

The upper-caste leadership within Congress viewed Charan Singh's mobilisation efforts with suspicion, eventually resulting in his exit and the formation of the Bharatiya Kranti Dal in 1969. This occurred at a time when the Congress suffered electoral defeats in multiple states, creating space for alternative political configurations. Charan Singh's departure allowed him to openly champion backward-caste interests and grant them unprecedented representation in his ministry.[16]

Alongside Charan Singh, socialist leaders influenced by Ram Manohar Lohia also contributed to backward-caste mobilisation. The emergence of political coalitions such as AJGAR (Ahir, Jat, Gujjar, Rajput) in North India and KHAM (Kshatriyas, Harijans, Adivasis, Muslims) in Gujarat reflected attempts to consolidate caste blocs for electoral advantage. The 1974 merger between the Bharatiya Kranti Dal and the Samyukta Socialist Party united Gandhian and socialist currents in support of backward-class politics.[17] The Janata Party government (1977–1980) brought backward-caste issues into national political discourse. One of the enduring outcomes of this phase was the appointment of the Mandal Commission, tasked with identifying socially and educationally backward classes. The commission's recommendations, implemented in 1989 under V.P. Singh's leadership, marked a critical juncture in institutional recognition of backward-caste claims. The decision provoked anti-Mandal agitations, particularly among upper castes, but it also reaffirmed the growing political weight of backward-class mobilisation.

Since then, parties such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar and the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh have become identified with backward-class constituencies. These

parties not only derive electoral strength from these groups but also shape their policy agendas around rural development, caste equity, and political representation.[18]

South India: Ideological Roots and Structural Transformation

In contrast to North India, the assertion of backward classes in South India began earlier and developed within a more ideologically structured framework. Rooted in the non-Brahmin and self-respect movements of the early 20th century, backward-caste mobilisation in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and parts of Maharashtra had a clearer intellectual and cultural foundation. E.V. Ramaswami Naicker, popularly known as Periyar, initiated a movement that directly challenged Brahminical hegemony in both religious and social institutions. His emphasis on atheism, rationalism, and cultural iconoclasm created a strong ideological base that extended beyond electoral politics.[19]

Leaders such as C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi carried forward this legacy through the formation and expansion of parties like the Justice Party, DMK, and AIADMK. These parties attacked the socio-cultural authority of Brahmins and pursued political strategies aimed at dismantling their dominance. The Justice Party, as early as 1950, led agitations demanding reservation for backward castes in the Madras Presidency. These efforts paved the way for the DMK government, which, after coming to power in 1967, appointed the First Backward Classes Commission in 1969. The recommendations of this commission were promptly implemented, including expanded reservations for backward and scheduled castes.[21] Unlike in the North, backward-class assertion in the South incorporated both intermediary and lower service castes. This broad inclusion contributed to the erosion of upper-caste dominance in both public and private sectors. Political representation, economic control, and cultural authority all shifted toward backward-class leaders and organisations. Unlike the North, where the implementation of Mandal Commission recommendations encountered fierce opposition, South India largely accepted the changes, reflecting an already existing redistribution of power.[21]

Political competition in South India has become closely tied to backward-caste agendas, with parties aligning themselves along caste lines to maximise support. Though divided across multiple parties, backward castes dominate both the political economy and institutional framework of these states. This has created a relatively stable and institutionalised backward-class assertion in the South, in contrast to the more fragmented and electoral coalition-based approach prevalent in the North.[22]

Organisations of Backward Castes

The emergence of backward class organisations in post-independence India marked a strategic response to historical exclusion and institutional neglect. These organisations did not simply seek representation but aimed to redefine power relations in a society traditionally dominated by upper castes, particularly Brahmins and Banias. Their evolution reveals a consistent

push towards institutional reform, political participation, and the reconfiguration of caste hierarchies.[23] By the mid-20th century, backward class associations had already proliferated across India. According to Marc Galanter, as early as 1954, there were 88 such organisations, many of which were concentrated in North India. Among the most prominent were the Uttar Pradesh Backward Classes Federation and the Bihar State Backward Classes Federation. The merger of these bodies on 26 January 1950 into the All India Backward Classes Federation (AIBCF), under the leadership of Punjab Rao Deshmukh, marked a concerted effort to create a national platform for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However, ideological divisions soon surfaced. A faction led by Deshmukh aligned with Congress, while another, headed by R. L. Chandpuri, adhered to Lohiaite socialism and later established the Indian National Backward Classes Federation (INBCF) in 1957.[24] The central demand of these organisations was the implementation of reservations for OBCs in education and public employment. Their broader objective involved dismantling the entrenched socio-political dominance of Brahmin and Baniya elites. These associations not only mobilised caste-based grievances but also cultivated political consciousness among the OBCs. This growing awareness, reinforced by land reform policies and numerical strength, laid the groundwork for a more assertive political identity.[15]

Although the AIBCF became largely inactive by the 1970s, it had already facilitated the rise of a generation of backward class leaders. Their influence became more pronounced during the Janata Party regime (1977–1980). Under pressure from this leadership, the government appointed the Second Backward Classes Commission, headed by B. P. Mandal.[26] The commission's mandate was to identify socially and educationally backward classes and recommend measures for their advancement. Its recommendation of 27% reservation for OBCs in central government employment, implemented by V. P. Singh's government in 1989, fundamentally altered the political terrain of India. It triggered both a consolidation of backward caste political identity and widespread resistance from upper-caste groups, thus deepening caste-based electoral realignments.

CONCLUSION

This phase of OBC assertion can be traced back to the pre-independence period. The appointment of the first Backward Classes Commission on 29 January 1953, known as the Kalelkar Commission, was an early attempt to institutionalise affirmative action. Headed by Kaka Kalelkar, the commission sought to establish criteria for identifying socially and educationally backward communities. Internal disagreements among the commission members—particularly on whether caste or class should serve as the primary criterion—prevented consensus. Although the commission submitted its report, the central government declined to act on its recommendations, citing these internal differences. Despite governmental inaction, the Kalelkar Report gained symbolic importance for backward class organisations, which used it to justify demands for a new commission. The Mandal Commission's eventual formation and implementation can be seen as a

direct outcome of this prolonged advocacy. The failure of the Kalelkar Commission to influence policy did not weaken the backward caste movement; instead, it reinforced the urgency of sustained political mobilisation.

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