Exclusive Excerpt

Deconstructing India’s Democracy: Essays In Honour Of James Manor

Edited by Rob Jenkins and Louise Tillin

Edited by Rob Jenkins, professor of political science at Hunter College and The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY), and Louise Tillin, professor of politics at King’s India Institute, King’s College London, both of whom completed their PhDs under Manor’s supervision at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, the essays in the compilation take a closer look at contemporary Indian democracy and the challenges it faces.

Political decay and political regeneration are central themes in Manor’s work, and the essays follow these threads through explorations of identity, caste, sub-nationalisms, the role of political leaders, parties and brokers, autocracy, clientelism, patronage, elections, popular movements and decentralisation.

The contributors include Christophe Jaffrelot, Surinder S Jodhka, Suhas Palshikar, Zoya Hasan, Niraja Gopal Jayal and others.

The excerpt below is from a chapter on the dynamics of caste dominance in the post-Mandal era, by political scientist Suhas Palshikar, honorary co-director of Lokniti-CSDS, Delhi, and editor of Lokniti’s biannual journal, *Studies in Indian Politics*.

Excerpt

India’s democratic politics has witnessed many different patterns of interface with caste. Since the 1990s, scholarship has tended to focus more on two phenomena: the politics of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalit politics. The debate around the Mandal Commission Report produced an analytical ecosystem in which the study of caste-politics interaction got entangled in questions of justice rather than questions of democratisation and political power. While this emphasis has been justified and has paid rich dividends, it has also left a critical gap regarding the so-called ‘middle’ or ‘intermediate’ castes. In parts of north India, groups such as Jats have been recognised as ‘backward’ despite the many advantages the community has traditionally enjoyed. Other intermediate castes are seeking the same recognition. Indeed, some middle castes were historically the first to derive advantage from democratic politics and are now among the latest to obtain backward status to avail benefits that will perpetuate their privileged status.

This chapter is about the political dilemmas facing middle-caste groups in the ‘post-Mandal’ era. These crucial actors find themselves caught between the discourse of ‘backwardness’ and vestiges of the advantages that have accompanied their relative political dominance. Following the mobilisations that some middle castes unleashed to demand reservations, scholarly interest in their economic condition increased. While these academic writings are discussed in passing, the main aim here is not to comment on the demands for reservations, nor to discuss the location of these castes in the contemporary political economy of India. Instead, this chapter traces the contemporary trajectory of selected middle-peasant castes through a series of case studies. The focus on these intermediate groups directs attention to broader questions about the intersection between social dominance and political power, while also underscoring arguments made about the importance of states and cross-state comparisons (Yadav and Palshikar 2008).

Early Democratic Advance

The terms middle castes or ‘intermediate castes’ (used when referring to mostly peasant proprietary castes that sometimes claimed a status higher than the Shudra castes) are by no means conclusive or satisfactory. But many Indian states witnessed an initial transformation in the post-Independence period when political stewardship shifted away from the upper castes—away from the Brahmins and Baniyas in particular. This development helped to shape how the interaction between caste and politics in post-Independence India would be mediated by democratic contestation.

The shift away from upper-caste dominance over politics also had significant roots in developments that took place during the colonial period. From the early twentieth century, democratic politics assumed the vocabulary and costume of caste. This was not unnatural because democratisation (even of a limited nature, as was the case in the colonial context) brought into sharp focus deep-rooted caste-based asymmetries. In that initial opening up of democratic spaces, anti-caste ideology found its expression through the political aspirations of communities and groups that took the first steps to counter Brahmin dominance. These were mostly rural agrarian communities. While in some regions the explicit articulation of anti-Brahmin language was pronounced, in others the evolution of political self-interest was sufficient for them to situate their political claims effectively. Their political rise—not necessarily uniform across different parts of India—gathered momentum as democracy became institutionally rooted after the promulgation of the Constitution in 1950, and the first general election under the Republic of India in 1952.

By the 1960s, a sharp departure from the traditional caste composition of the political elite occurred in southern and western India. (The north and east were spared this trend due to differences in social structure, in land-ownership patterns and in the nature and extent of ‘social reform’ movements.) The castes that grasped the initial opportunity to make political headway were, besides being

agrarian in terms of occupation, also often located at a somewhat ambivalent social location. Some of these castes claimed Kshatriya status, which was not recognised by Brahmins. This ambivalent location helped them to muster an identity that combined modern democratic rationality with pride in a status that members of these castes feel has been denied them historically. Marshalling their numeric strength and particularly their access to rural agrarian resources, many 'middle castes' acquired significant control over how public resources were allocated following the Green Revolution. They came to be known as 'bullock capitalists' (Rudolph and Rudolph 1987: 50). The 1990s saw the rise of 'backward-class' politics, while in the beginning of the twenty-first century middle castes were squeezed from two directions: they were beginning to lose political clout, while at the same time economic compulsions pushed them toward demanding reservations.

The fluidity regarding the traditional status of middle castes, along with contemporary claims that they have been disadvantaged compared to 'forward' castes, allowed these groups to discover the necessity, and therefore virtue, of engaging in the politics of backwardness. This marks a curious slippage in the politics of these castes: after projecting themselves as the democratic inheritors of political power, they moved to a narrative of backwardness to ensure their political survival in the context of a new genre of OBC politics. This is a story of distinctly south Indian origin, but once north India entered a phase of electoral turmoil in the late 1980s, it too would become a participant, however half-hearted, in the pan-Indian phenomenon of OBC politics.

This chapter traces the political journey of some of these middle or intermediate castes during the 1990s and afterward. This is when 'OBC-politics' emerged and when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) began its rise. For middle castes, the question was which political vehicle could ensure their political dominance. The chapter examines how political choices were made by four different 'intermediate' castes. It analyses voting patterns among these four castes in elections to state legislatures, and how this differs from the choices made by other communities. The

four discussed here are: Lingayats (Karnataka), Marathas (Maharashtra), Patels (Gujarat) and Jats (Haryana). While many other states have similarly situated intermediate castes (Vanniyars and Gounders in Tamil Nadu, Kapus in Andhra), these four castes offer sufficient variation to advance some tentative claims.

All four castes have two features in common. *First*, they are primarily agricultural communities, though occupational patterns have shifted rapidly in some cases. *Second*, these particular communities are often more rightly described as caste clusters than castes. They contain groups that go by different names but share certain affinities and practices. We discuss two cases each from two different regions: Lingayats and Marathas (from the region that experienced a vigorous non-Brahmin movement in the early twentieth century), and Patidars and Jats (from the western region which did not experience such a movement). In different ways, both Karnataka and Maharashtra witnessed popular non-Brahmin movements (Manor 1989; Omvedt 1976). An active memory of non-Brahmanism does not exist as a socio-historical resource in the case of the Patidars and Jats.

A Question of Backwardness

What makes the study of the middle castes' political journey in the post-Mandal period all the more instructive is their position vis-à-vis the question of backwardness. All four castes examined here remained somewhat unconnected with issues of backwardness and social justice in their respective regions. This partly reflects their uncertain position in local caste hierarchies, but also their numeric strength, which allowed them not to form political alliances with other communities. These castes were not much enamoured by the politics of backwardness during its heyday. However, in the post-Mandal period, many intermediate castes began to rethink the question of reservations. They too were backward, after all—and therefore did they not need and deserve reservations to remedy their situation?

The Lingayats are an exception, one that anticipates issues that would emerge in

the post-Mandal context elsewhere. The community became alert to the potential for inclusion in the OBC category much earlier than the other three groups did, and following sustained efforts, Lingayats were included in the Karnataka list of OBCs (Deshpande 2014). At the same time, there is a similarity between the Lingayats of Karnataka and the three other castes examined here. All four were denied backward status by the Mandal Commission. All four, moreover, occupied the intermediate location in their local caste hierarchies—as non-Brahmins, to be sure, but with uncertainty concerning their Kshatriya status. Finally, all four castes eventually claimed to qualify as ‘backward’ and hence eligible for reservation.

In Maharashtra, the Maratha demand for reservations gathered notable momentum during 2014-17 (Palshikar and Deshpande 2021: 182-190); and as of September 2024, the agitation over this demand continues. In Gujarat, the Patidar agitation for reservations became a sudden political force around 2015-17, followed by the Jat agitation in Haryana that intensified in 2016. Thus, except for the Lingayats, the other three agitations gained strength around the same time, in the mid-2010s. Even more strikingly, they were conducted on a non-partisan basis. In none of these intermediate caste mobilisations did any one party officially guide these agitations even as no party could afford to oppose their demands openly.

The political economy of these agitations, particularly those that erupted after 2010, has been analysed in at least two studies. Using the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) data, Ashwini Deshpande and Rajesh Ramachandran (2017) argue that Jats, Patels and Marathas do not exhibit features of backwardness comparable to what is typically found among groups already identified as OBCs in their respective states. In fact, in all three communities there are indications of improved conditions. ‘Structural changes’ in the position of these castes have been invoked to explain their resort to demanding reservations. Political connections have helped them to pressure the state governments of Haryana and Maharashtra to accept their demands for reservations (Deshpande and Ramachandran 2017). As for the Jats of Haryana, Christophe Jaffrelot and A. Kalaiyarasan (2019) show that an inability to adapt to the newly liberalised

economic environment, combined with the OBC political assertiveness that marked the rise of Mandal politics, prompted the Jats to launch an aggressive mobilisation to obtain backward status. Another factor was the departure of Marathas, Patidars and Jats from the ‘bullock capitalist’ category due to rising class divisions within these groups (Jaffrelot and Kalaiyarasan 2020).

In the backdrop of their more or less similar social location, and their strikingly similar journeys from ‘middle’ caste status to claiming they are backward, these four castes present an interesting political question: how do different intermediate castes respond to the incentives thrown up by competitive politics in the midst of their search for better access to state resources, which in all four cases involved mobilising to demand reservations?

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