MAJOR TURNING EPISODES OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN POST – INDIPENDENT INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Identity Politics plays a significant role in shaping political dynamics in diverse societies like India. Identity politics has become a prominent subject of politics and political activities all over the world today. Identity politics, as an aspect of movements and struggles for recognition, is an important part of the contemporary period. The paper contains a detailed explication of Major Turning Episodes of Identity Politics in Post-Independent India and its development process through an analytical overview in present scenario. The present paper tries to explain how different approaches define the process of identity formation. This research paper explores the profound impact of identity politics on the socio-political landscape of post-independent India. Since gaining independence in 1947, India has navigated the complex terrain of identity politics, which has significantly influenced its democratic process, governance, social harmony, and development. By examining the theoretical framework, historical context, key developments, and the multifaceted outcomes of identity politics, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of its role and repercussions in contemporary Indian society. This research paper explores how identity politics in terms of caste, religion, language, and ethnicity created a challenge to unity and integrity in post-independent India.

Objectives: The primary objective of this paper is to analyze how India's post-independence identity has been shaped by caste, religion, language, and ethnicity**.** It proposes a conceptual framework for understanding identity politics in India. It analyses major turning episodes that reshaped identity politics. Also, it investigates contemporary trends and transformations in identity politics.

Methodology: The study uses a qualitative, historical-analytical research design to investigate how significant episodes of identity politics impacted post-independence India. Identity politics entails socio-political processes, collective mobilization, and narrative production, which necessitate interpretive analysis rather than numerical measurement. The study is descriptive**,** interpretative**,** and contextual. Since the topic is historical and socio-political, secondary sources constitute the primary data base. In this paper, secondary data is generally taken as a source from various books, research papers, articles, newspapers, and government reports. In this paper, identify and analyze the existing literature based on the diversity of Indian identity issue since independence. For secondary sources, purposive sampling is used. Sources are selected based on the relevance to identity politics, credibility and scholarly depth, coverage of different ideological perspectives and representation of major identity categories like caste, religion, region, language, ethnicity, gender etc., Data is analyzed thematically by identifying recurring patterns relating to identity formation, mobilization strategies, State response, electoral consequences, legal/constitutional shifts, socio-economic outcomes etc., Key turning episodes may include reorganization of states on linguistic lines (1956), mandal commission and OBC mobilization (1990), rise of Hindutva and Ram Janmabhoomi movement, Assam Movement and ethnic assertions, Dalit movements and the BSP's rise etc., Political speeches, media framing, and parliamentary debates are examined to understand how identity categories were constructed and politically activated.

Keywords: Identity Politics, Multiculturalism, Ethnicity, Indian society.

1. INTRODUCTION

Identity politics in India has its roots deeply embedded in the colonial era, but it took a distinctive shape after India achieved independence. The term refers to political positions based on the interests and perspectives of social groups with which people identify, such as caste, religion, gender, and ethnicity. Identity politics has become one of the most widely contested issues in the contemporary political order. It emerged as a mainstream study in the second half of the twentieth century in the form of social movements, women's movement, multiculturalism, civil and group rights movement, ethnic

and nationalist movement in different parts of the world. In the Indian context, identity politics has played a crucial role in shaping electoral politics, governance models, social policies, and conflict resolution mechanisms. India's post-independence identity political environment has been crucial in determining the nation's socio-political dynamics, cultural, and economic paths. It has emerged out of the injustice and ignorant behaviour towards some groups. This article reviews the impact of identity politics through various lenses to understand its implications on India's unity, democracy, and development. The makers of India's constitution recognized the value of the identity issue once the country became independent and included specific articles protecting the rights and interests of marginalized group. But identity politics has far-reaching impacts in post-independent India that go well beyond the words of the constitution. It has had a significant impact on educational fields, political movements, and the development of regionalism. In order to better understand the complicated implications of the variety of identity in post-independent India, this study will look at how it affects cohesiveness in society, political representation, economic growth, and the country's overall development.

At first, identity-based politics were viewed as a means of empowering marginalized and lower caste populations in India's emerging democracy by giving them a voice and access to resources. Policies like affirmative action and reservations in government employment and educational institutions made it clear. Nonetheless, identity politics has developed throughout time and has escalated into a political mobilizing tool that occasionally compromises the more general objectives of national growth and togetherness. The influence of identity politics in post-independence India will be examined in this article through an analysis of significant movements and events, including the establishment of regional parties, the recommendations made by the Mandal Commission in the 1980s, and current majoritarian trends. The study will center on the ways in which identity politics have reshaped power dynamics, impacted the formulation of public policy, and transformed the daily experiences of common Indians. Ultimately, the analysis will consider the precarious equilibrium that exists between variety and cohesion within a multifaceted democracy such as India. The purpose of this research paper is to critically explore the important watershed moments that affected the trajectory of identity politics in post-independence India. The study tries to understand how significant political, social, and constitutional moments affected the mobilization of caste, religion, region, language, ethnicity, and other identities, and how these episodes reshaped political participation, state-society interactions, and democratic processes. This study seeks to identify the historical contexts, ideological motivations, and policy decisions that sparked significant transformations in identity-based mobilization, as well as to assess their long-term implications for Indian democracy. Finally, the study aims to provide a more contextualized understanding of how identity politics has changed over time and continues to influence current political dynamics in India. It analyzes major turning episodes that reshaped identity politics. Also it investigates contemporary trends and transformations in identity politics.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After gaining independence in 1947, India faced the difficulty of integrating a large and diverse people divided by language, caste, religion, ethnicity, and location. The Indian Constitution, adopted in 1950, recognized the multiple structure of Indian society and sought to promote equality while protecting diversity. However, these distinctions later served as the foundation for identity-based political mobilization. The partition of British India into the Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan in 1947 set a precedent for identity-based politics. The division, primarily on religious lines, highlighted the potential of identity politics to radically alter national boundaries and social fabrics (Pandey, 2001). In the following decades, the Indian political landscape witnessed the rise of various political entities that mobilized support based on caste, religion, and linguistic identities, and the issue of Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the debates about a nationwide caste census further embedded identity politics in the country's democratic processes.

2.1. The Role of Caste in Indian Politics:

The caste system, a traditional social hierarchy in India, has significantly influenced identity politics. Caste has remained one of the most persistent bases of identity politics in post-independence India. The Constitution (Articles 15, 16, 17, and 46) outlawed caste discrimination and mandated affirmative action to benefit Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). However, caste identities quickly evolved into powerful political tools. In the 1950s and 1960s, prominent castes such as the Yadavs, Jats, and Marathas began to exert their regional political power. Political parties often cater to specific castes or caste coalitions, impacting electoral strategies, governance, and social justice initiatives. The Mandal Commission report of 1980, and its implementation in 1990 by Prime Minister V. P. Singh, marked a watershed moment in political history, recommending reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs and educational institutions. This marked a political turn in caste-based politics, leading to widespread political mobilization and agitation. This led to the rise of regional parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and Samajwadi Party (SP), etc. They mobilized voters around caste identity and social justice issue (Jaffrelot, 2003).

2.2. Religious Identity and Politics:

Religion has been another cornerstone of identity politics in India. Religious identity has also heavily influenced political discourse. After independence, India experienced multiple instances in which religion became a

significant axis of mobilization. The partition of 1947 produced deep social memories that influenced early political narratives. The rise of Hindu nationalism, represented by political entities like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has reshaped the political discourse, focusing on Hindu identity and its place in India's secular framework (Hansen,1999). The Ram Janmabhoomi movement, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), converted Hindu identity into a popular political mobilization platform from the 1980s to the 1990s, culminating in the 1992 demolition of the Babri Masjid (Brass, 2003). The BJP's ascent in national politics represented the mainstreaming of Hindutva ideology, signaling a move from secular to religiously polarized politics. This focus has led to communal tensions, riots, and debates over citizenship laws, illustrating the profound impact of religious identity on national politics (Varshney, 2002).

2.3. Ethnicity and Linguistic Identity

India's diversity in language and ethnicity has also fueled identity politics, particularly in regions seeking greater autonomy or independence. After independence, language emerged as a vital source of political mobilization. The linguistic rearrangement of states (1956) was a watershed moment, following widespread protests and regional movements demanding statehood based on language identity (Brass, 1990). Movements in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab demonstrated the assertion of linguistic and regional identities. In Tamil Nadu, the Dravidian movement led by the DMK and AIADMK opposed Hindi imposition and advocated Tamil identity, altering state politics for decades (Subramanian, 1999). Movements in Kashmir, Punjab, and the Northeastern states reflect the complexities of managing ethnic and linguistic identities within a democratic framework (Baruah, 2005). These movements have often challenged the central government's ability to maintain unity while accommodating diverse identities. In the northeastern states and other border regions, ethnic identities sparked autonomy and separatist movements (Weiner, 1978). The Naga movement (1950s), the Mizo insurgency (1960s), and the Assam movement (1979-1985) all represented ethnic protests against perceived neglect and cultural dominance. The establishment of new states such as Nagaland (1963), Meghalaya (1972), and Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Uttarakhand (2000) was motivated by a desire to recognize ethnic and regional differences (Baruah, 2003). While caste, religion, and language dominated prior decades, gender-based identity politics became more visible from the 1990s. The Women's Reservation Bill and struggles for gender rights represented the changing character of identity politics, which now includes feminist and intersectional perspectives (Kumar, 1993).

2.4. Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)

The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2019, was introduced in the Lok Sabha by the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Amit Shah, on December 9, 2019. The Act prohibits illegal migrants from acquiring Indian citizenship. The CAA alters the Citizenship Act of 1955 to accelerate citizenship for members of six specified religious minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who entered India before December 31, 2014. By specifically using religion to decide who gets citizenship first, the CAA turns citizenship law into a matter of serious identity politics; it puts religious identity at the forefront of legal membership, and critics say it weakens the idea of equality that is supposed to be secular. The Act caused countrywide protests (late 2019 onward) and a heated judicial and political discussion concerning secularism, majoritarianism, and minority rights (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2019). These debates continue to shape public discourse, with many arguing that the CAA undermines the foundational principles of the Indian Constitution. As tensions escalate, the implications for communal harmony and social cohesion remain at the forefront of national concern.

2.5. National Register of Citizens (NRC)

The Assam NRC update (released on August 31, 2019) tried to compile a definitive list of Indian residents in the state, resulting in both inclusion and—critically—large numbers of exclusions. The NRC process demonstrates how administrative procedures (documentation and verification) can transform ambiguous social identities into legally binding categories. This transformation has profound implications for individuals and communities, often leading to heightened anxiety and uncertainty regarding citizenship status. As a result, many people have been left in a precarious situation, navigating the complex interplay between legality and identity. When paired with regulations such as the CAA (which provides a religiously selective path to citizenship), NRC dynamics heightened concerns among groups that exclusion from the register would have varied impacts based on religion and ethnicity. The Assam NRC has also sparked significant local political disputes over regional identity, migration, and ethnicity (Barbora, 2019).

2.6. Caste Census Debates

The 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) produced extensive caste data at the household level; however, its release and interpretation have been challenged, and successive governments and political actors have debated the need for a formal, nationwide caste enumeration to inform affirmative action policies. Demand for a caste census is politically significant because fresh caste data can modify numerical claims of advantage/disadvantage, reshaping the competitive strategies of political parties and social movements (thereby increasing the political salience of previously undercounted groups). Recent announcements and

reporting indicate intensified efforts to collect caste data as part of future demographic exercises, which might mark a watershed moment for caste-based politics (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2022).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF IDENTITY POLITICS

Identity politics is the political mobilisation of individuals or groups based on specific social identities, such as caste, religion, race, language, gender, or region, to seek recognition, representation, and power redistribution. Identity politics is theoretically based on sociological and political theories that explain how collective identities are produced, politicized, and mobilized in a democratic context.

3.1. Social Constructivism and Identity Formation

Social constructivism, which holds that identities are socially formed through interaction, speech, and historical context, serves as a foundational theoretical framework for identity politics. Berger and Luckmann (1966) contended that social reality is created through shared meanings and common understanding. In this view, caste, religion, and language identity in India are not fixed categories but socially and historically created markers that acquire political significance through collective mobilisation.

3.2. Social Identity Theory

Henri Tajfel and John Turner established the Social Identity Theory (SIT), which offers a psychological framework for analyzing identity politics. Individuals' self-concept is influenced by their involvement in social groups, according to SIT theory. The requirement for positive individuality frequently results in in-group partiality and out-group distinction. In the Indian context, SIT describes how caste groups, linguistic communities, or religious groups foster political cohesion by sharing a common identity and opposing perceived out-groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).

3.3. Identity Politics and Intersectionality

Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality broadens the scope of identity politics by stressing how social identities (such as caste, gender, class, and religion) intersect and interact, resulting in overlapping oppression or privilege. In India, intersectionality is critical to comprehending the multifaceted experiences of oppressed groups, such as Dalit or Muslim women, whose oppression cannot be described by a single axis of identification (caste or gender).

3.4. Postcolonial Theory and Subaltern Studies

Postcolonial researchers and the Subaltern Studies collective offer another perspective on identity politics in post-independence states such as India. Frantz Fanon (1963) and Edward Said (1978) contended that colonialism created identity hierarchies that lasted in postcolonial societies. Indian scholars such as Ranajit Guha (1982) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) have studied how the "subaltern"—the marginalized masses—construct resistance and self-representation through identity-driven movements. This concept helps to understand the emergence of Dalit, tribal, and regional identity movements as a response to historical exclusion and elite dominance.

3.5. Politics of Recognition

The "Politics of Recognition" notion, developed by Charles Taylor, contends that identity is shaped by others' recognition or misrecognition. To promote dignity and equality, political communities must recognize the diversity of cultural and social identities (Taylor, 1994). In India, affirmative action policies, linguistic state reconfiguration, and minority rights legislation are examples of institutional recognition politics. Taylor's concept demonstrates how marginalized groups' demands for cultural and political legitimacy serve as the normative foundation for identity politics.

3.6. Mobilization Theory

The Resource Mobilization Theory and Rational Choice approaches to political sociology describe how identity-based organizations organize and sustain movements. McCarthy and Zald (1977) stated that identity-based movements flourish when they effectively mobilize resources like leadership, communication networks, and financial assistance. This concept explains how caste-based or linguistic parties in India (such as the BSP, DMK, and SP) institutionalized identity mobilization through electoral tactics and organizational structures.

3.7. Constructivist Approach

Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner propose a constructivist approach to ethnicity. Nationalism and ethnicity theories, particularly Anderson's (1983) concept of "Imagined Communities," contend that identities are historically produced through common narratives, symbols, and communication (similar to language or religion).

In India, linguistic nationalism (e.g., Tamil, Bengali, Marathi) and religious nationalism (Hindutva) are examples of manufactured identities that transcend individual experience and bring communities together through collective imagination.

4. POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF IDENTITY POLITICS

The focus on identity politics has had mixed outcomes for development. While targeted policies have addressed historical injustices and disparities, they have also led to allegations of appeasement, corruption, and inefficiency, sometimes diverting attention from broader developmental goals.

4.1. Political Empowerment for Marginalized Groups

One of the most notable triumphs of identity politics in post-independence India has been the political

awakening of historically oppressed groups. Leaders such as B.R. Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, and Mayawati were instrumental in mobilizing these communities to seek equality and representation. The growth of Dalit, OBC (Other Backward Classes), and tribal movements, notably after the 1980s, propelled these groups into political prominence. The growth of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) is one of the most significant positive events in Indian identity politics after independence. Founded on the empowerment of historically underprivileged populations. The BSP changed politics by offering direct representation to marginalized groups (Singh, 2012). Mayawati became Uttar Pradesh's first Dalit woman Chief Minister, conveying a strong message of empowerment. The BSP's approach of "social engineering," which formed inclusive alliances with Dalits and other communities including as Brahmins and OBCs, was a significant positive strategic innovation (Verma, 2017).

4.2. Deepening of Democracy

Identity politics broadened the democratic arena by encouraging involvement from a variety of social groupings. It broadened Indian democracy by challenging the dominance of upper castes and elites. The emergence of regional and caste-based parties, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), demonstrates how India's democracy has become more representative over time.

4.3. Policy and Social Justice Reforms

Movements rooted in identity politics have resulted in significant policy changes. Affirmative action in education and employment, including reservations for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and OBCs, demonstrates this accomplishment (Pai, 2002). Similarly, identity-based mobilization has affected welfare policies designed to overcome regional and gender imbalances.

4.4. Preservation of Cultural Diversity

India's federal and diverse framework promotes regional and linguistic diversity. The post-independence period saw a strong drive towards restructuring the nation's administrative boundaries on a linguistic basis. This movement was grounded in the belief that linguistic states would ensure administrative convenience, promote cultural unity, and strengthen national unification. The reorganization of states on a linguistic basis in India stands as an outstanding example of how language can serve as a cornerstone in nation-building efforts.

5. NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF IDENTITY POLITICS

5.1. Communal Polarization

One of the most significant disadvantages has been the emergence of community politics based on religious identification. The politicization of religion, notably between Hindus and Muslims, has resulted in recurring communal bloodshed and eroded the secular fabric envisaged in the Constitution.

5.2. Caste Fragmentation and Vote Bank Politics

While caste-based politics can be liberating, it has frequently resulted in social division. Political parties occasionally abuse caste identities for political benefits, advocating "vote bank politics" rather than genuine socio-economic upliftment.

5.3. Regionalism and Separatist Tendencies

Regional identity politics has occasionally turned acrimonious. Movements such as the Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu and the push for Khalistan in Punjab demonstrate how identity-based mobilization may occasionally undermine national unity.

5.4. Hindrance to Developmental Politics

The emphasis on identity has occasionally overtaken developmental factors, including jobs, education, and infrastructure. The transition from policy-based to identity-based politics has hampered long-term socioeconomic planning.

6. CONCLUSION

Identity politics has both enriched and complicated India's democratic process. On one hand, it has empowered marginalized groups by providing them with platforms to voice their grievances and aspirations. On the other, it has sometimes led to polarization, undermining the broader national interest for sectional gains. While identity politics has been a tool for social justice, it has also been a source of conflict. Inter-caste and inter-religious clashes, often fueled by political agendas, have posed challenges to social harmony and national integration. Identity politics has a broad theoretical foundation that includes psychology, sociology, postcolonial theory, and political philosophy. These theories describe how identities are created, acknowledged, and organized for political involvement and power. In India, identity politics emerges as both a result of historical inequities and a democratic vehicle for representation and empowerment. Identity politics in post-independent India has been a double-edged sword. While it has played a critical role in ensuring representation and rights for various social groups, it has also led to divisions and conflicts. Balancing the demands of identity politics with the need for national unity and development remains one of India's most significant challenges. The evolution of identity politics in post-independence India reflects the country's democratic dynamism and cultural variety. It has enabled marginalized populations to seek acknowledgment, representation, and justice. However, it has also presented obstacles, such as widening divisions and communal conflicts. Finally, the evolution of identity politics emphasizes the importance of balancing group rights with national cohesion, so that India's heterogeneity becomes a source of strength rather than division. In recent decades, identity

politics has taken on increasingly complicated shapes. Intersectional identities—which combine caste, religion, gender, and class—are increasingly influencing political discourse. Furthermore, the rise of new social movements (such as women's and LGBTQ rights) demonstrates an expansion of identity- based demands outside traditional boundaries. The various effects of identity politics in post-independence India create a contradiction. On the one hand, it has democratized authority and given voice to the voiceless; on the other, it has occasionally fractured society and weakened the emphasis on shared developmental goals. The issue for India's democracy is to balance identity-based representation with a broader vision of inclusive progress and national unification. When founded in justice and equality, identity politics has the potential to empower rather than divide.

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