



Caste and Democracy in India and The Politics of Assertion from the Grassroots

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ABSTRACT

The study attempts to explore the complex trajectories of political assertion among Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in post-independence India, highlighting their divergent motivations, strategies, and impacts on democratic governance. While both groups have challenged upper-caste hegemony, their modes of engagement with the state and society reflect distinct historical legacies and socio-economic positions. Dalit mobilisation, grounded in Ambedkarite thought, has focused on dignity, citizenship rights, and resistance to caste-based oppression. From the Republican Party of India to the Dalit Panthers and the Bahujan Samaj Party, Dalit movements have sought transformative change through cultural critique and political representation. In contrast, OBC mobilisation—especially among landholding intermediary castes—has often stemmed from class consolidation and agrarian capital, seeking expanded representation rather than systemic emancipation. The paper examines how affirmative action, Leftist movements, and caste-based organisations have shaped both constituencies, while also noting the structural resistance faced by Dalits in both public and private sectors. Through a regional lens, the study contrasts the ideological mobilisation in South India with the electoral coalition-building in the North. It concludes that while both Dalits and OBCs have reconfigured Indian democracy from below, their assertion reveals underlying tensions between justice-oriented politics and power-driven representation.





INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Indian democracy since independence in 1947 has been profoundly shaped by the political awakening and mobilisation of historically marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). These groups, long relegated to the peripheries of socio-political power by a deeply entrenched caste hierarchy, have increasingly asserted their presence in public discourse, policy negotiations, and electoral politics. The democratic framework of the Indian Constitution, with its emphasis on equality, justice, and representation, provided a foundational platform for these communities to stake claims to dignity, development, and decision-making authority. Yet, while the democratic project promised inclusion, its implementation has been uneven, often reflecting the persistence of social stratification. In this context, the assertion of Dalits and OBCs emerges not merely as a function of political participation but as a deeper struggle for emancipation, cultural recognition, and structural transformation.

The category of Dalits, constitutionally recognized as Scheduled Castes, has historically occupied the lowest rungs of the caste order, facing systemic exclusion, untouchability, and economic deprivation. Their traditional association with stigmatized occupations such as manual scavenging, leatherwork, and agrarian servitude rendered them both socially degraded and politically invisible in the pre-independence period. The advent of independence, marked by the visionary leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in drafting the Indian Constitution, introduced a legal framework that outlawed untouchability, mandated affirmative action, and provided for political reservations. However, the social transformation anticipated by constitutional provisions often fell short in practice. While a small Dalit middle class emerged through access to education and government employment, a vast majority continued to suffer from violence, landlessness, and humiliation, particularly in rural India.

Dalit political mobilisation has evolved through various phases, reflecting both ideological shifts and changing socio-economic contexts. The post-Ambedkar era witnessed the formation of the Republican Party of India (RPI), intended to serve as a political vehicle for Dalit empowerment. Though initially promising, the RPI suffered from internal factionalism and political co-optation,

particularly in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, where its leaders were absorbed into mainstream parties like the Congress. Nevertheless, the ideological legacy of Ambedkar persisted through cultural and symbolic acts, such as mass conversions to Buddhism and the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti as a festival of resistance. This cultural affirmation laid the groundwork for more radical articulations of Dalit identity in the decades that followed.

The 1970s saw the rise of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, a movement inspired by both Ambedkarite thought and the global currents of Black liberation. The Dalit Panthers represented a new generation of educated, assertive Dalit youth who rejected both Gandhian paternalism and Marxist neglect of caste. Their manifestos, protest literature, and public demonstrations brought caste oppression into national focus and challenged the moral legitimacy of upper-caste dominance. Although the Panthers had limited organisational reach and eventually succumbed to ideological rifts, their contribution to shaping Dalit political consciousness remains significant. The movement redefined resistance by locating Dalit identity not merely in victimhood but in pride, cultural creativity, and political militancy.

The emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the 1980s marked a strategic shift from symbolic protest to pragmatic electoral politics. Founded by Kanshi Ram and later led by Mayawati, the BSP sought to unify Dalits, OBCs, and other marginalized communities under the umbrella term 'Bahujan', or the majority. The BSP's ideology was rooted in Ambedkar's critique of Brahmanical dominance but was also informed by a strategic calculus of vote bank consolidation. In Uttar Pradesh, the BSP successfully converted demographic strength into political power, with Mayawati serving multiple terms as Chief Minister. The party's governance model included targeted welfare schemes for Dalits, symbolic renaming of public institutions after Dalit icons, and an assertive critique of upper-caste hegemony. However, the party's trajectory has also reflected the limits of caste-based electoral engineering, particularly in maintaining coalition coherence and adapting to changing political landscapes.

While Dalit mobilisation has largely centred around the struggle for dignity, recognition, and constitutional rights, OBC assertion presents a more complex and internally differentiated



narrative. The term OBC encompasses a broad range of castes officially recognized as 'socially and educationally backward', yet internally divided by class, region, and historical privilege. Unlike Dalits, many OBC castes—especially agrarian intermediary groups such as Yadavs, Kurmis, Jats, Marathas, Reddies, and Vokkaligas—entered the post-independence period with access to land, local power, and social capital. Beneficiaries of land reforms and the Green Revolution, these groups used their economic clout to assert political influence, particularly in state legislatures and local governance. Their claim to backwardness, while valid in some cases, often coexists with entrenched dominance at the village level, creating tensions with both Dalits and lower OBCs.

The political assertion of OBCs gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, driven by leaders such as Charan Singh, Karpoori Thakur, and later, Lalu Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav. These leaders challenged the Congress Party's upper-caste dominance and mobilized backward castes through appeals to agrarian identity, rural grievances, and anti-elitist rhetoric. Charan Singh's Bharatiya Kranti Dal and its successors sought to redefine the political mainstream by positioning the peasant proprietor as the core of Indian democracy. In states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, OBC-led parties like the Rashtriya Janata Dal and Samajwadi Party emerged as powerful vehicles of caste-based assertion. These parties not only redistributed political representation but also reshaped bureaucratic appointments, education policy, and welfare distribution in favour of backward classes.

The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, which provided 27% reservations for OBCs in central government employment, represented a watershed moment in the history of caste politics. Initiated by Prime Minister V.P. Singh, the move provoked intense opposition from upper-caste groups, including violent protests and self-immolations. However, it also galvanized backward caste consciousness, leading to a wave of political mobilisation and the institutionalization of OBC identity in public discourse. The Mandal moment was not merely a policy change; it marked a paradigmatic shift in how Indian democracy conceptualised merit, representation, and historical justice.

Despite these gains, the OBC category remains riddled with contradictions. Many

dominant OBC castes have transitioned into local elites, while lower OBC groups, often landless artisans or service providers, continue to face exclusion. The tension between these sub-groups complicates the politics of backwardness and raises critical questions about intra-group equity. Moreover, the political strategies employed by OBC parties have often mirrored the clientelism and nepotism they initially set out to dismantle. The consolidation of caste blocs for electoral gains has sometimes come at the cost of broader social justice objectives, including gender equity, economic redistribution, and democratic transparency.

The assertion of Dalits and OBCs has collectively reconfigured the architecture of Indian democracy, displacing upper-caste dominance and opening up new spaces of political negotiation. However, their trajectories remain distinct in terms of ideology, motivation, and class positioning. Dalit politics is primarily an emancipatory project, anchored in a historical critique of caste and a vision of egalitarian citizenship. It draws from the radical humanism of Ambedkar and seeks to dismantle the moral and structural foundations of Brahmanism. OBC politics, in contrast, is often framed around power acquisition and consolidation, using caste identity as a vehicle for expanding influence within existing institutional structures. While both forms of mobilisation challenge the status quo, they differ in their transformative potential and inclusivity.

This divergence also manifests in regional patterns of mobilisation. In South India, backward caste assertion was ideologically grounded in anti-Brahmin movements led by figures like Periyar and institutionalized through parties like the DMK and AIADMK. These movements combined rationalist critique, linguistic nationalism, and social justice policy to erode upper-caste dominance. In contrast, North India's OBC assertion has been more pragmatic, rooted in electoral alliances and agrarian leadership. Dalit movements, meanwhile, have struggled to maintain coherence across regions, often constrained by internal divisions, lack of resources, and upper-caste backlash. The intersection of caste with gender, region, and class further complicates the picture, requiring nuanced analysis and differentiated strategies.

The role of the state in mediating caste assertion has been ambivalent. On one hand, constitutional provisions, legal safeguards, and affirmative action policies have empowered Dalits and OBCs to access education, employment, and



political representation. On the other hand, state institutions often reflect dominant social biases, rendering these provisions ineffective in practice. The private sector remains largely exempt from affirmative action, and caste discrimination continues to manifest in housing, healthcare, policing, and media representation. Violence against Dalits—whether in the form of lynchings, sexual violence, or social boycotts—reveals the deep-seated resistance to equality. The symbolic gains achieved through political representation have not always translated into substantive social transformation, highlighting the limitations of electoral democracy in addressing structural injustice.

Nevertheless, the political assertion of Dalits and OBCs has redefined the contours of Indian democracy. By entering institutions of power, influencing policy agendas, and reshaping public discourse, these groups have compelled a reconsideration of what democracy means in a caste society. Their presence has challenged the myth of a casteless public sphere and exposed the hypocrisies of upper-caste liberalism. The debates around reservation, meritocracy, and identity politics are not merely academic; they are reflective of deeper struggles over history, memory, and national belonging.

In recent years, new challenges and possibilities have emerged. The rise of Hindutva politics has attempted to co-opt Dalit and OBC identities into a homogenized cultural nationalism, often diluting their oppositional politics. Simultaneously, a new generation of activists, scholars, and artists is reimagining Dalit and OBC assertion through digital media, intersectional feminism, and transnational solidarities. Movements such as the protests against the dilution of the SC/ST Atrocities Act and the campaigns for reservations in higher education reflect a renewed engagement with the democratic process. The politics of assertion is no longer limited to electoral cycles but has expanded into universities, courtrooms, streets, and cyberspace.

This article seeks to explore the historical evolution, ideological foundations, and political trajectories of Dalit and OBC mobilisation in India. It critically examines their impact on democratic structures, the tensions between dignity and dominance, and the role of the state in facilitating or hindering social justice. By situating these movements within broader debates on

representation, power, and emancipation, the study aims to illuminate the complex interplay between caste and democracy in contemporary India. It argues that while the assertion of Dalits and OBCs has undoubtedly transformed Indian politics, the journey towards a truly inclusive democracy remains ongoing, contested, and deeply intertwined with the nation's unfinished battle against caste.

Review of Literature

The political mobilisation and socio-economic transformation of Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Indian democracy has received significant scholarly attention, particularly in the aftermath of landmark events such as the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations and the rise of caste-based regional parties. This body of literature spans disciplines including political science, sociology, history, and public policy, reflecting the complex interplay of caste, class, identity, and democratic participation in India. Scholars have approached the subject from multiple angles, analyzing the structural barriers to inclusion, ideological movements that have empowered these communities, the evolution of party politics, and the contradictions within caste-based coalitions. Together, these studies provide a rich intellectual foundation for understanding the dual processes of emancipation and assertion undertaken by Dalits and OBCs in post-independence India.

The foundational contributions of B.R. Ambedkar laid the philosophical and legal groundwork for understanding caste as a system of graded inequality. His writings, particularly *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and *The Problem of the Rupee* (1923), emphasized that democracy could not coexist with the social exclusion inherent in the caste system. Ambedkar's insistence on constitutional safeguards—such as reservations in education, employment, and politics—offered a model for state-led emancipation. His thought has continued to influence subsequent generations of scholars and activists who frame Dalit politics as a struggle for dignity, rights, and citizenship. Gail Omvedt's extensive work, including *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (1994), builds upon Ambedkarite thought to argue that Dalit movements represent one of the most profound democratic forces in India. Omvedt situates these movements in the broader context of anti-caste, feminist, and peasant struggles, emphasizing their transformative potential to redefine Indian democracy.



Christophe Jaffrelot's contributions are particularly significant in offering a historical and comparative lens on the rise of lower caste movements. In *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (2003), Jaffrelot documents how OBCs and Dalits transitioned from socio-economic marginality to political centrality, particularly in the Hindi heartland. He attributes this rise to a combination of affirmative action, increased literacy, political awareness, and electoral realignments that allowed caste-based parties like the Samajwadi Party (SP), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) to emerge as viable alternatives to upper-caste dominated Congress politics. Jaffrelot distinguishes between the ideological roots of Dalit mobilisation, grounded in Ambedkarism, and the more pragmatic, power-driven strategies of OBC assertion. This distinction underscores the differing motivations and trajectories between the two groups, with Dalits often focusing on social justice and human rights, and OBCs emphasizing representation and political influence.

Zoya Hasan's scholarship complements Jaffrelot's by providing insights into the gendered and institutional dimensions of caste politics. In *Politics of Inclusion: Castes, Minorities, and Affirmative Action* (2009), she explores the limitations and possibilities of affirmative action policies in promoting substantive equality. Hasan argues that while reservations have enhanced representation, they have often failed to dismantle entrenched hierarchies within institutions. Moreover, she critiques the state's hesitancy to extend caste-based quotas into the private sector, which remains a site of unchecked discrimination. Her work also foregrounds the intersection of caste and gender, highlighting how Dalit and OBC women face compounded forms of exclusion within both caste communities and the broader patriarchal structure.

Satish Deshpande's influential essay *Caste in and as Indian Democracy* (2016) offers a conceptual reframing of how caste operates within democratic institutions. He argues that democracy has not abolished caste but rather restructured it into new forms of political capital. Deshpande suggests that the visibility of caste in political representation has not led to the dismantling of caste hierarchies; instead, it has allowed dominant groups within the OBC and Dalit categories to monopolize benefits. This internal stratification is a recurring theme in the literature, with scholars like M.N. Rao and Arvind

Kumar cautioning against treating these categories as homogeneous. Their work in *The Routledge Handbook of the Other Backward Classes in India* (2021) highlights the need to disaggregate OBCs into dominant, intermediate, and service castes to understand varying levels of access and power.

The role of Leftist politics in shaping caste mobilisation has also received critical attention. Gail Omvedt and Anand Teltumbde have critiqued the traditional Left for its class-reductionist framework, which historically ignored caste as a distinct axis of oppression. Teltumbde, in works like *Republic of Caste* (2018), argues that while the Marxist emphasis on economic exploitation is valuable, it cannot substitute for a nuanced analysis of caste-based humiliation and social exclusion. He criticizes the Left for its failure to engage with Ambedkarite politics and its marginalization of Dalit concerns within party structures. However, scholars like Yogendra Yadav note that recent shifts within Left parties, particularly the CPI(M), reflect an increasing recognition of caste as central to social justice. This evolution is evident in party documents that acknowledge caste oppression and call for targeted policies to address its persistence.

A significant body of literature has focused on the ideological and organisational trajectories of Dalit movements. Scholars such as Anand Chakravarti, Badri Narayan, and Sudha Pai have analyzed how movements like the Dalit Panthers and the BSP transformed Dalit consciousness and strategy. Badri Narayan, in *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (2009), examines how Dalit identity has been co-opted or contested by larger ideological formations, including Hindutva. He argues that while the BSP initially emerged as an oppositional force, its later attempts at Sarva Samaj politics—aimed at including upper castes—diluted its emancipatory vision. Similarly, Sudha Pai's *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution* (2002) explores how BSP's success in Uttar Pradesh reflected both a radical break from upper-caste politics and a compromise with existing power structures.

The relationship between Dalit mobilisation and electoral democracy is also a recurring theme. Rahul Verma and Pranav Gupta, in their contributions to *Dalits in the New Millennium* (2023), provide a detailed analysis of voting patterns among Dalits since the 1990s. Their data reveals that while Dalits have increasingly



participated in elections, their support has not remained monolithic. Shifts in allegiance—from BSP to BJP or Congress—indicate that Dalit voters are responsive to a range of issues, including development, welfare, and leadership charisma. This challenges the assumption that caste identity alone determines political behaviour. At the same time, the literature also warns against the commodification of caste votes, where representation is reduced to tokenism without addressing structural inequalities.

Scholars examining OBC mobilisation have highlighted the distinct character of this group's political engagement. Ajay Gudavarthy's work, particularly his essay *Can We De-Stigmatisate Reservations in India?* (2012), critiques the simplistic binaries often used to describe OBC politics. He argues that the discourse around meritocracy and creamy layer overlooks the historical and social capital that dominant OBC castes bring into politics. Gudavarthy contends that while the Mandal Commission was a milestone, its implementation without corresponding educational and economic reforms created new hierarchies within the OBC category. Manjeet Singh's historical analysis further shows that the early backward caste federations, such as the All India Backward Classes Federation, played a crucial role in pushing for reservations and shaping public discourse, even though they were later sidelined by more populist political movements.

The regional dimension of caste politics has been another focus of scholarly inquiry. South India, particularly Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, is often cited as an example of successful backward caste assertion due to its early engagement with anti-Brahmin movements. Scholars such as M.S.S. Pandian and Raj Sekhar Basu have examined how leaders like Periyar and parties like the DMK redefined the discourse around social justice, rationalism, and self-respect. In contrast, North Indian caste politics, as documented by Jaffrelot and Kanchan Chandra, tends to be more fragmented and clientelist, relying on shifting alliances rather than ideological cohesion. Chandra's work on ethnic party formation demonstrates how caste-based parties balance identity appeals with broader coalition-building strategies to remain electorally viable.

The role of caste-based organisations and social movements has also attracted scholarly attention. Zoya Husain, in her work on political

representation, documents how associations like the AIBCF and later the INBCF mobilised backward class identities and demanded policy reforms. These organisations not only challenged upper-caste dominance but also laid the foundation for later electoral formations. Shilpi Pandey and Surya Mukerji, in their study on exclusion in Indian democracy, argue that while these organisations have succeeded in increasing visibility, they often fail to challenge the underlying structural logic of caste capitalism. Their critique extends to the private sector, where caste continues to operate through informal networks and social capital, thus escaping the purview of state regulation.

Intersectionality has emerged as an important analytical tool in recent literature. Scholars such as Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Anupama Rao have emphasized the need to understand how caste intersects with gender, sexuality, and class. Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) highlights how Dalit women's experiences are often rendered invisible in both mainstream feminist and Dalit discourses. Similarly, Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009) interrogates how modern legal frameworks and political institutions mediate Dalit subjectivity, often reproducing forms of paternalism and control. These works call for a more inclusive and nuanced approach that recognizes multiple axes of oppression.

In recent years, digital media and youth activism have introduced new dimensions to caste politics. Dalit and OBC youth have leveraged social media platforms to challenge dominant narratives, commemorate resistance icons, and mobilise for protests. The anti-CAA protests, the Hathras rape case, and the resurgence of Ambedkarite student organisations like BAPSA and ASA reflect a re-politicisation of caste in public spaces. Scholars are beginning to explore how these digital interventions shape political consciousness, create trans-regional solidarities, and reimagine caste from a generational perspective.

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 Karpooori 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.

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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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