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Caste Identity in Transition: From Ritual Status to Political Assertion in North India

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Abstract

Caste in India has long been understood as a system of ritual hierarchy grounded in ideas of purity, pollution and inherited social status, yet contemporary social realities in North India reveal a significant transformation in how caste is experienced, articulated, mobilized etc. This paper attempts to examine the changing nature of caste identity tracing its movement from a predominantly ritual and status-based order toward a more assertive political and symbolic form. Drawing on sociological theory and secondary sources, the study argues that caste has not disappeared in the context of modernization, democracy and economic change; rather it has been reconfigured into a dynamic identity shaped by power, recognition and collective action. The decline of ritual authority in everyday life coupled with the expansion of education, urbanization, state-led welfare policies has weakened traditional forms of caste domination while simultaneously creating new arenas for identity negotiation. Electoral democracy, reservation policies and the rise of caste-based organizations have enabled marginalized communities to transform caste from a marker of stigma into a resource for political assertion and social visibility. At the same time, this process has produced new contradictions as political empowerment does not always translate into social equality or the erosion of everyday discrimination. The paper highlights how caste identity today operates simultaneously as a legacy of historical oppression and as a strategic tool for collective mobilization. By focusing on North India, the study contributes to ongoing debates on caste, democracy and social change emphasizing that caste identity is neither static nor purely ritual but a contested and evolving social reality embedded in contemporary power relations.

Keywords: Caste identity, Ritual status, Political assertion, North India, Social mobility, Democracy, Power and recognition, Social change

Introduction

Caste in India has historically functioned as a deeply structured system of hierarchy and social regulation organizing everyday life through inherited status, occupational roles and rigid norms governing interaction, marriage, access to resources particularly in the social landscape of North India where caste hierarchies were closely tied to ritual authority and agrarian relations. Classical sociological and Indological understandings of caste emphasized principles of purity and pollution, ritual ranking and endogamy, most notably articulated in Louis Dumont's formulation of caste as a holistic system of hierarchical values in which social inequality was legitimized through religious symbolism rather than economic power alone (Dumont, 1970) [6]. Within this framework caste identity was largely passive and ascriptive, imposed at birth and reproduced through everyday practices that normalized inequality as moral order. However, the social realities of post-colonial North India have undergone significant transformation due to a complex interplay of political democratization, constitutional safeguards, land reforms, expansion of education, urbanization and the growth of market relations, all of which have disrupted the ritual foundations of caste without eliminating caste itself (Srinivas, 1962; Jaffrelot, 2003) [20, 9]. These changes have weakened the authority of traditional ritual elites while opening new spaces for social mobility, collective organization, political participation etc. among historically marginalized castes. As a result, caste identity has increasingly shifted from being primarily a marker of ritual status to becoming a site of assertion, negotiation and political articulation. This shift is particularly evident in the rise of caste-based movements, associations, electoral mobilization where caste is no longer merely endured but strategically invoked to claim rights, recognition, state resources (Yadav, 2000) [22].

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The research problem addressed in this paper lies in understanding how and why caste continues to matter in contemporary North India despite the erosion of its ritual foundations and how its meanings have been transformed in the process. The central argument advanced here is that caste identity has not declined but has been reconstituted moving away from ritual hierarchy toward political self-assertion and symbolic negotiation within democratic and institutional frameworks. The objectives of the paper are to examine the historical shift in the basis of caste identity, to analyze the role of social-political structures in reshaping caste consciousness and to assess the implications of this transformation for social equality and democratic participation. The significance of this inquiry lies in challenging linear narratives of modernization that predict the decline of caste, and instead highlighting caste as a dynamic social reality that adapts to changing contexts of power. By situating caste identity within broader processes of social change in North India, the study contributes to a more nuanced sociological understanding of how traditional hierarchies are reworked rather than erased revealing both the emancipatory possibilities and new contradictions that emerge when caste becomes a terrain of political assertion rather than ritual subordination.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The sociological understanding of caste has evolved through multiple theoretical traditions beginning with classical formulations that viewed caste primarily as a ritual and moral order and gradually moving toward more critical perspectives that foreground power, conflict and social struggle. Louis Dumont's influential theory conceptualized caste as a hierarchical system rooted in the opposition between purity and pollution where social inequality was organized through religious values rather than economic relations, and where hierarchy was accepted as a moral principle embedded in everyday life (Dumont, 1970)^[6]. In Dumont's framework, caste identity was largely fixed, holistic, ritual-centric leaving little room for agency, resistance or transformation beyond the symbolic realm. Complementing this view M. N. Srinivas introduced the concept of Sanskritization to explain social mobility within the caste system arguing that lower castes could improve their social status by adopting the rituals, practices and lifestyles of higher castes, thereby negotiating hierarchy from within the existing structure (Srinivas, 1962)^[20]. While Srinivas acknowledged change and mobility, his approach still assumed the normative dominance of upper-caste values and treated caste transformation as imitation rather than contestation. Over time, these ritual-centric explanations have been critically re-evaluated for their inability to adequately account for structural inequalities, political mobilization and the persistence of caste-based oppression in modern India. Critics have pointed out that such perspectives underplay the role of material deprivation, state power, coercion and tend to naturalize hierarchy by framing it as cultural consensus rather than enforced inequality (Dirks, 2001)^[5]. A decisive shift in the theoretical understanding of caste emerges in B. R. Ambedkar's writings where caste is conceptualized not as a religious system but as a form of graded inequality sustained through power, exclusion, social closure. Ambedkar argued that caste fragments society horizontally and vertically preventing solidarity among the oppressed and functioning

as a mechanism of domination rather than moral order, a perspective that foregrounds conflict, resistance and the necessity of annihilating caste rather than reforming it (Ambedkar, 1936/2014)^[1]. This emphasis on power aligns closely with Max Weber's analysis of status groups where caste can be understood as a form of social closure that monopolizes honour, resources and opportunities through inherited membership and symbolic boundaries (Weber, 1978)^[21]. Pierre Bourdieu further deepens this analysis by highlighting how domination operates through symbolic power, cultural capital, habitus etc. allowing caste hierarchies to be reproduced not only through overt discrimination but also through everyday practices, dispositions and internalized perceptions of worth and limitation (Bourdieu, 1986)^[2]. From this perspective, caste identity is neither static nor purely ritual but a dynamic outcome of struggles over recognition, legitimacy and access to power within changing social fields. In contemporary North India caste increasingly functions as a political and social category shaped by democratic participation, state policies such as reservations and collective mobilization transforming it into a site of assertion rather than silent acceptance. This theoretical framework therefore treats caste identity as historically contingent and socially produced emerging from ongoing negotiations between structure and agency, domination and resistance. The analytical focus of this study rests on understanding caste not as an inherited ritual order alone but as a lived and contested identity shaped by power relations, demands for recognition and struggles for dignity within modern democratic contexts.

Methodology and Sources

The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical sociological approach to examine the transformation of caste identity in North India focusing on its movement from ritual hierarchy toward political assertion and symbolic negotiation within changing social and institutional contexts. The research design is secondary data based, an approach particularly suitable for analyzing caste as a large-scale structural phenomenon that unfolds across regions, historical periods and institutional domains rather than within a single localized setting. Secondary analysis allows the study to trace broad patterns of continuity and change in caste relations by drawing upon multiple sources that capture demographic shifts, policy interventions and evolving social discourses. The primary sources of data include Census of India reports and National Sample Survey (NSS) data which provide valuable insights into changes in education, occupation, urbanization and social mobility among different caste groups thereby offering an empirical backdrop to discussions on structural transformation. These quantitative sources are complemented by government reports on social justice, affirmative action and reservation policies which illuminate the role of the state in reshaping caste identities through legal recognition, welfare schemes and institutional inclusion. In addition, the study draws extensively on academic literature and policy documents from sociology, political science and history enabling a theoretically grounded interpretation of caste as a dynamic social category shaped by power, recognition, and collective action (Jaffrelot, 2003; Omvedt, 1994)^[9, 18]. Media reports and published ethnographic studies are also used to capture everyday expressions of caste assertion, political

mobilization, symbolic redefinition, particularly in electoral politics, social movements and public discourse allowing the analysis to remain connected to lived social realities without conducting fresh fieldwork. The analytical strategy combines thematic analysis with sociological interpretation where recurring themes such as ritual decline, political mobilization, identity assertion and social recognition are identified across sources and interpreted using established theoretical frameworks drawn from Ambedkar, Weber and Bourdieu. Rather than treating data as neutral, the study critically examines how caste is represented, debated and institutionalized across different texts, paying attention to silences, contradictions, power relations embedded within them. The study acknowledges certain limitations most notably the absence of primary empirical data and the dependence on existing sources that may reflect institutional or ideological biases; however, this limitation is also its strength as secondary data enables a macro-sociological understanding of caste transformation that transcends local particularities and highlights broader structural trends shaping caste identity in contemporary North India.

From Ritual Hierarchy to Social Mobilization

The transition from ritual hierarchy to social mobilization marks one of the most significant shifts in the lived meaning of caste in North India as the authority of ritual status has steadily declined in everyday social life while new forms of collective assertion have taken shape. Traditionally, caste hierarchy was sustained through ritual dominance exercised by upper castes in religious practices, village customs and social interaction where notions of purity and pollution regulated access to temples, water sources, food-sharing and social respect. However, the gradual erosion of these ritual controls has been accelerated by structural transformations such as the expansion of formal education, increasing urbanization and the penetration of the market economy all of which have weakened the centrality of ritual authority in determining social worth. Education, in particular has played a crucial role by exposing marginalized caste groups to alternative histories, legal rights and discourses of equality, thereby challenging the moral legitimacy of inherited hierarchy (Omvedt, 1994) ^[18]. Urbanization has further diluted caste-based social surveillance as migration to towns and cities disrupts traditional village hierarchies and compels interaction across caste boundaries in workplaces, housing and public spaces. Similarly, the market economy has reconfigured social relations by attaching value to skills, income, consumption rather than ritual status alone allowing lower castes to negotiate dignity through economic participation even as discrimination persists in subtler forms (Jaffrelot, 2003) ^[19]. Alongside these structural changes, the role of social reform movements and anti-caste thought has been decisive in transforming caste consciousness from acceptance to resistance. Reformers and movements inspired by anti-caste ideologies most notably those influenced by B. R. Ambedkar reframed caste not as a divinely ordained order but as a system of oppression sustained through social power, calling for dignity, rights and annihilation rather than accommodation (Ambedkar, 1936/2014) ^[1]. These ideas circulated through pamphlets, associations, political platforms, later through print and electronic media enabling marginalized communities to reinterpret their social position and articulate counter-claims to respect and equality. This ideological shift found

organizational expression in the emergence of caste associations and community-based organizations that sought to mobilize members around shared identities, grievances and aspirations transforming caste from a silent marker of inferiority into a collective resource for negotiation with the state and society (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987) ^[19]. Such associations played a critical role in demanding access to education, employment, political representation while also producing new leadership and internal debates about identity and strategy. Equally important has been the use of cultural symbols, historical memory and counter-narratives in reshaping caste identity, as marginalized groups reclaim suppressed histories, celebrate icons of resistance and reinterpret cultural traditions to assert pride rather than shame. Through commemorations, alternative rituals, naming practices and public symbolism, caste identity has been re-signified as a source of collective memory and moral legitimacy challenging dominant narratives that once justified hierarchy (Dirks, 2001) ^[5]. This process of cultural rearticulation does not imply the disappearance of caste-based inequality, but it does signal a fundamental transformation in how caste is lived and understood moving from passive acceptance of inherited status toward active social self-definition. The key transition, therefore, lies in the shift from caste as an externally imposed ritual order to caste as a consciously mobilized identity, shaped by education, political awareness, and collective struggle, reflecting the broader dynamics of social change in post-colonial North India.

Political Assertion and Identity Formation

The expansion of electoral democracy in post-colonial India has profoundly reshaped the meaning and function of caste transforming it from a largely stigmatized social marker into a strategic resource for political assertion and identity formation particularly in the context of North India where caste has become central to democratic mobilization. Universal adult franchise created an unprecedented political space in which numerically significant but historically marginalized caste groups could translate social presence into electoral power, leading to what has often been described as a democratization of caste rather than its decline (Yadav, 2000) ^[20]. Caste-based mobilization emerged as a rational response to historical exclusion, enabling communities to organize collectively around shared identities, grievances and aspirations, and to negotiate representation within an increasingly competitive political arena (Jaffrelot, 2003) ^[9]. Reservation policies further institutionalized this process by granting formal state recognition to disadvantaged castes not only in education and employment but also in political representation, thereby legitimizing caste identity as a basis for claims-making within democratic frameworks (Omvedt, 1994) ^[18]. While critics often view reservations as reinforcing caste consciousness, sociological analysis suggests that these policies have played a crucial role in transforming caste from an inherited stigma into a recognized category of rights enabling new forms of leadership and political participation among lower castes. Political parties in North India have actively engaged with caste identities, constructing alliances, leadership structures and electoral strategies around caste arithmetic, vote-bank calculations, and symbolic representation which has both empowered marginalized groups and produced new forms of

instrumentalization. The rise of leaders from historically subordinated castes has disrupted elite dominance and challenged the monopolization of power even as internal hierarchies and exclusions persist within caste-based politics itself. Political assertion has also extended beyond electoral strategies into cultural and symbolic domains where language, naming practices and public representation have become key sites of identity negotiation. The adoption of alternative caste names, the use of assertive political vocabulary, the public celebration of caste icons and historical figures serve to reclaim dignity and visibility, transforming collective memory into a source of pride rather than shame (Guru, 2009) [8]. Media and digital platforms have further amplified these processes by creating new spaces for caste visibility, debate, counter-narratives etc. allowing marginalized voices to circulate beyond local boundaries and challenge dominant representations (Chakravarty & Roy, 2017) [4]. Social media, in particular has enabled the rapid dissemination of symbols, slogans and political messages that reinforce caste solidarity while also exposing caste-based discrimination to wider scrutiny. At the same time these platforms can intensify polarization and reduce complex social identities to simplified political categories, revealing the ambivalent consequences of visibility. The key insight that emerges from this discussion is that political assertion has fundamentally altered the grammar of caste identity shifting it from a mark of ritual inferiority to a strategic and negotiated identity within democratic politics. This transformation does not signal the end of caste-based inequality but it does highlight how caste has been reworked through political participation, state recognition and symbolic assertion underscoring the paradox of caste in contemporary India as both a resource for empowerment and a terrain of ongoing struggle.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the transformation of caste identity in North India demonstrating that caste has not disappeared under the forces of modernization, democracy and economic change but has instead been reconfigured from a system grounded primarily in ritual hierarchy to one increasingly shaped by political assertion, symbolic negotiation and collective mobilization. By tracing the decline of ritual authority, the impact of education and urbanization and the rise of caste-based organizations and electoral participation, the discussion has shown that caste today operates as a dynamic social reality rather than a fixed traditional order. The analysis reaffirmed that caste identity has moved beyond passive acceptance of inherited status toward active self-definition where marginalized groups strategically invoke caste to claim dignity, rights and representation within democratic institutions. This transformation carries important implications for democracy, as caste-based mobilization has expanded political participation and challenged elite domination making democratic space more inclusive in numerical and representational terms. At the same time, the paper highlighted the limits of political assertion as electoral success and state recognition do not automatically dismantle everyday practices of discrimination, social exclusion and economic inequality that continue to structure caste relations in private and public life. Political empowerment while significant often coexists with persistent social hierarchies revealing a gap between formal equality and lived experience. From a social

justice perspective, this underscores the need to move beyond symbolic recognition toward substantive equality, addressing structural inequalities in education, employment, housing, and social interaction. The study also points to broader implications for inclusion suggesting that caste-based politics must be complemented by efforts to foster inter-caste solidarity and challenge internal hierarchies within marginalized communities themselves. In terms of future research, there is considerable scope for ethnographic and comparative studies that explore how caste identity is negotiated at the everyday level particularly in urban settings, digital spaces and among younger generations, as well as longitudinal analyses of how political assertion reshapes social relations over time. The central conclusion that emerges is that the transformation of caste identity reflects both emancipation and new contradictions within Indian democracy, revealing caste as a living, contested and evolving social force rather than a relic of the past.

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