

Politics of Representation and Relevance of Caste Identity: A Comparative Study between BJP and Congress Governments in India

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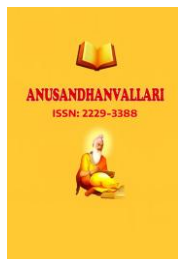
Abstract: Indian democracy has reconfigured caste from a historically entrenched structure of social stratification into a consequential category of electoral mobilisation and representation. The paper is theoretically grounded at the convergence of representative democracy, substantive representation, and the socio-political study of caste. Building upon Hanna Pitkin's distinction between substantive and descriptive representation and Charles Taylor's 'politics of recognition' further provides a framework to examine how caste-based identities are publicly recognised and politically legitimised. The study engages with Rajni Kothari's examination of caste identity and political mobilisation, which conceptualises caste as a significant foundation of political structuring and electoral contestation in India. Although both political parties have sought to diversify their social alliances through caste-centered representation, their political strategies differ in their modes of incorporation, political communication, welfare interventions, and their perspective on caste identities. This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of political strategies employed by the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party in representing and mobilising caste identities, with a specific focus on Dalits and OBCs. The paper argues that both parties vary in the ways they seek to transform caste identity into political representation. It argues that caste continues to be a significant axis of Indian democratic politics, even as its political interpretation and patterns of mobilisation continue to change.

Keywords: Caste Identity; Political Representation; Substantive Representation; Descriptive Representation; Politics of Recognition; Social Justice; BJP; Congress; Dalits; OBCs.

Introduction

Caste occupies a contradictory position in the Indian democratic order. On the one hand, the Constitution aims to institutionalise equality, democratic citizenship and protection against discrimination; on the other hand, caste continues to influence access to social, material, and political opportunities. In the intricate tapestry of the Indian democratic system, caste continues to remain not simply an inherited social institution but a living, breathing force that structures voting behaviour, cabinets, and the fundamental character of political representation. As Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of India's Constitution and trenchant critic of hierarchical social structure, observed with profound clarity, "*Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind.*" This ideological framework continues to determine whose interests and aspirations are recognised as worthy of power in the world's largest electoral democracy.

Rather than diminishing with the establishment of electoral democracy, caste has increasingly been transformed into a language of political mobilisation through which social groups express political demands of political recognition, representation and redistribution. Democracy has facilitated the reorganisation of caste-based identities by creating new spaces for electoral mobilisation and representation. Jaffrelot (2012) argues that caste has not declined with Indian democracy; rather, it has been politically transformed.



Ambedkar's subsequent warning remains relevant with greater urgency: "Political democracy cannot last unless it lies at the base of its social democracy" (Ambedkar, 1936, p. 234). Without substantive social equality, constitutional political rights are ineffective. This study examines a comparative assessment process by embedding caste within institutional frameworks as a politically legitimate basis for assertions. Political mobilisation has reconfigured caste identity into an explicit political discourse of political representation and electoral bargaining. These demographic conditions and institutional developments transformed caste from ascribed social status into a basis for political claims to political recognition and distributive justice.

Representation is a multi-layered political relationship encompassing identity, group interests, institutional power, and policy outcomes. Hanna Pitkin's seminal work, *The Concept of Representation*, provides an important conceptual foundation for this distinction. Pitkin (1967) distinguishes between several aspects of representation, including formal, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the degree of representatives' reflection of the social attributes of those they represent, whereas substantive representation concerns the extent to which representatives act on behalf of the interests of those represented.

This analytical distinction is pertinent in the setting of the caste. A social group may assert recognition of its caste identity while also demanding access to education, employment, political authority and other welfare resources. Political recognition without distributive representation may produce symbolic incorporation without restructuring hierarchical relations. Representation should be examined not merely through presence but through capacity for political action to dismantle the structures of exclusion.

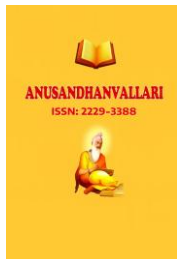
Congress, BJP and the Changing Grammar of Caste Representation

Indian electoral politics cannot be comprehensively understood through conventional understanding of identity and patronage-based distributive politics. The comparative analysis of Congress and BJP governments becomes analytically significant because both have negotiated with caste but within distinct historical and ideological arrangements of Indian politics.

The Congress's political trajectory is strongly associated with the formation of a heterogeneous social coalition, bringing together different caste, class, and religious groups. However, the weakening of Congress's hegemonic social coalition facilitated the emergence of explicitly caste-orientated electoral mobilisation, notably among OBCs and Dalits. The Mandal era profoundly transformed the political order by making backward-caste representation a pivotal issue of competitive democratic politics (Chhibber & Verma, 2019). The subsequent segmentation of caste-based constituencies challenged the Congress's capacity to maintain its pre-existing inter-caste coalition.

The BJP's organisational expansion demonstrates a different but equally significant trajectory. Its increasing support among OBC communities has progressively challenged the conventional understanding of the party as largely articulating upper-caste interests. Scholarship on contemporary electoral politics demonstrates that caste remains significant to BJP electoral strategy, including candidate selection and the mobilisation of specific jatis at the state and constituency levels (Jaffrelot, 2019).

The shifting configuration of caste-based representation under Congress and BJP governments since 2001 is most clear in the representational composition of the Lok Sabha and Union Council of Ministers. In the Lok Sabha, representation of Scheduled Caste (SC) is institutionally predetermined by the 84 reserved seats (roughly 15.5% of 543), so both parties elect SC MPs largely proportionate to the seats won in SC reserved constituencies. OBC representation, conversely, has shown more pronounced variation. Data collected by the *SPINPER* project (Trivedi Centre for Political Data), systematically examined by Gilles Verniers, show that total OBC MPs increased from around 22–23% in the 2001–2019 period to around 25–26% (about 138 MPs) in



2024. Within parties in 2024, BJP MPs were about 23% OBC and 38% upper caste, while Congress MPs were roughly 14% OBC (with higher shares among its coalition partners).

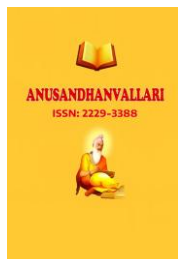
The policy orientations of the Congress and BJP towards the representation of caste groups embody two distinct conceptualisations of the political significance of caste in contemporary Indian politics. Since independence, Congress governments did not undertake a comprehensive enumeration of caste groups as part of the regular decennial census, although Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) continued to be enumerated separately. Congress has increasingly positioned caste enumeration within a broader discourse of social justice, arguing that comprehensive caste data are necessary to assess patterns of inequality and strengthen claims for equitable representation and redistribution (Vithayathil, 2018, 2025). The shortcoming of this approach is that in certain instances it reduces the question of caste justice to enumerating communities and enlarging reservations. Demographic figures are important, but numbers alone cannot clarify why some communities continue to experience social and economic disadvantages. In this sense, Congress faces the challenge of explaining what should happen following caste enumeration. The post-independence government policy was to terminate the enumeration of castes other than SCs and STs in the regular census, a position that persisted from the 1951 census onwards (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2013).

However, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government partially departed from this position to a limited extent by undertaking the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011. Importantly, the SECC was not part of the decennial Population Census; it was an independent administrative exercise carried out under the authority of the Ministry of Rural Development and the then Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, with technical support from the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2015). The exercise recorded comprehensive information on caste, including caste and tribe names, alongside socioeconomic information. Nevertheless, the caste data component did not eventually become publicly released in its full form. The government disclosed the socioeconomic data, but the caste data remained subject to classification and categorisation, with the raw caste data transferred to the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2016, 2022).

Consequently, while it would be misleading to assert that Congress never collected caste information, it is more accurate to state that Congress-led governments never carried out a systematic caste census as part of the official decennial population census since independence.

The BJP-led union government has formulated a comparatively broader institutional strategy by announcing in April 2025 to conduct caste enumeration as an integral component of the national census 2027 rather than pursuing it as a caste survey. The government has characterised it as a way of acquiring comprehensive and consistent nation-wide data while keeping caste enumeration within the institutional census framework. This approach has a notable institutional advantage: instead of conceptualising caste data only as a mechanism for electoral claims, it places caste information within a broader national exercise of socio-economic demographic data collection. The 2027 census will also be India's first digitally conducted census, with caste information to be recorded during the second stage of population enumeration. From this perspective, the BJP approach can be viewed as shifting from caste politics on numerical claims towards data-driven governance and greater integration within state institutions.

Congress places greater emphasis on caste as an indicator of entrenched inequality requiring greater resource redistribution and compensatory measures, whereas the BJP-led government frames enumeration within a policy framework of social inclusion, empowerment, welfare and nationwide evidence-based governance. The evolving direction of caste politics should transcend towards reliable data for need-based, transparent, and effective empowerment.



The contemporary political context of caste reflects neither the disappearance of caste nor a straightforward continuation of established forms of caste mobilisation. It represents a reconfiguration in the political functions of caste identities. Congress and BJP governments may follow distinct trajectories in their political languages, institutional approaches and political objectives, yet both function within a democratic political framework in which caste remains an important determinant of political representation.

Discussion

The comparative analysis of Congress and BJP-led governments establishes that caste has not diminished as a category of political mobilisation in India; rather, its mode of political integration has changed. The core argument of this paper is that both parties have progressively acknowledged caste-based identities within democratic contestation, but they have done so in a contrasting manner.

In the discussion of caste-based representation under Congress and BJP governments, the substantial absence of Scheduled Caste (SC) Vice-Chancellors in Indian universities demonstrates a persistent structural marginalization that extends beyond party lines. Data from the union Ministry of Education, tabled in Parliament, indicate that as of April 2023, merely one university vice-chancellor among 45 central universities was from the SC community, with one from the ST social group and five from OBCs.

An earlier assessment based on RTI data around 2018 documented only six SC Vice-Chancellors from a total of 496 public universities nationwide belonging to the marginalised community. Existing evidence reveals that SC appointments to the higher academic position remain highly limited under both governments. State universities, in which governors (appointed by the central government) act as university chancellors, show similar patterns of institutional exclusion. This implies that symbolic commitments to social equality by both Congress and BJP have not been reflected in proportionate representation in higher education.

The comparison indicates that representation cannot be assessed merely through the demographic presence of Dalit, Adivasi or OBC representatives within legislatures and executive governments. Fraser's (1995) conceptual distinction between recognition and redistribution is highly relevant here: recognition of caste identities must be complemented by substantive changes in access to political power, access to education, and welfare provision.

Congress has historically treated caste identity as an explicit political instrument of social justice and electoral mobilisation. Its approach centers around constitutional recognition of historical marginalisation through demands for a nationwide caste-based census, the slogan "*Jitni abaadi, utna haq*," and the formation of alliances with influential OBC and Dalit parties. From the post-Mandal period to Rahul Gandhi's recent political campaigns, Congress has aimed to transform demographic strength into political claims, presenting itself as the custodian of reserved quotas and welfare measures intended for SC and OBC communities.

In contrast, the BJP has practised a multifaceted approach of social engineering that simultaneously recognises and attempts to transcend caste. Under the leadership of Narendra Modi—an OBC leader himself—the party has strategically broadened its electoral base among non-dominant OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits through targeted political alliances (Apna Dal, Nishad Party) and socio-welfare initiatives articulated as broadly inclusive and universal rather than caste-specific (Ujjwala, PM Awas). While the BJP has increased the numerical representation of OBC and SC in legislative institutions and cabinets, core power ministerial portfolios have predominantly remained with leaders from upper-caste groups, and the broader ideological narrative of Hindutva seeks to incorporate caste divisions within a broader Hindu political identity.

The evidence supports the paper's key argument: the contemporary politics of caste in India represent a shift from explicit caste-based claims for social justice toward more complex forms of caste recognition, political incorporation and electoral consolidation. Congress and BJP differ in political language and strategy, but neither



operates outside caste politics. The decline of Congress dominance and the rise of BJP dominance did not eliminate caste; it reorganised the political uses of caste. Thus, the paper argues that descriptive representation should not be equated with substantive empowerment. The real measure of caste representation lies in whether political inclusion changes access to state power, policy-making, and distributive resources.

Conclusion

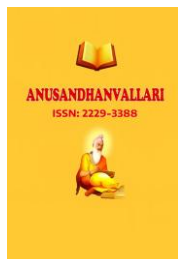
The comparative examination of caste identity and political mobilisation under the governance of Congress- and BJP-led governments establishes that caste remains a central, although continuously evolving, basis of the Indian democratic political system. Both parties have strategically engaged caste-based identities in response to evolving electoral and social conditions. In the changing dynamics of political representation and the persistent representation of caste identity, the BJP and the INC have followed sharply contrasting strategies that reflect two competing models of Indian democracy.

The principal distinction lies here: Congress gives primacy to caste as the central framework of representation and social justice, while the BJP makes strategic use of caste for expansion yet subordinates it to a majoritarian cultural political project. This analytical distinction constitutes the central conclusion of the present study. The politics of representation in present-day is about two fundamentally different languages of power—one grounded in the articulation of caste-based differentiation, the other in its strategic management within a wider nationalist framework. The future significance of caste identity will depend on which of these grammars gain greater political prominence.

The BJP–Congress comparison demonstrates that caste continues to function as a political resource for marginalised communities and an electoral resource for political parties. Caste groups do not exhibit uniform political behaviour. The BJP continues to retain substantial upper-caste electoral support while mobilising the support from the sections of OBCs and Dalits, whereas Congress promotes caste justice while struggling to convert that political discourse into a stable caste coalition. This indicates caste identity is actively constructed and politically negotiated rather than simply inherited into voting patterns.

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