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Q8(c)

Explain how caste as a social category is also becoming a political category in the democratic politics of India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Making of the Indian Constitution

Making of the Indian Constitution: Legacies of the British rule; different social and political perspectives.

Core demand of the question

- Explain how caste as a social category is also becoming a political category in the democratic politics of India. (15 marks)

Revision summary

Caste is a social ranking that democracy turned into a vote-and-office identity.

The Constitution both abolishes untouchability and uses caste for reservation, which politicises it.

Kothari's Congress factions, the **Rudolphs'** caste associations, and **Jaffrelot's** OBC-Dalit parties are the sequence.

Mandal made backward caste a national political category.

Politicisation yields representation and can also freeze caste as an electoral brand.

Introduction

Caste began as a social grammar of marriage, occupation, and honour. Adult franchise turned that grammar into a count of votes. **Rajni Kothari**, the **Rudolphs**, and **Christophe Jaffrelot** explain how a social category became a political one without ceasing to be social.

Body

From social to political

- A social category ranks persons in everyday life. A political category organises tickets, alliances, reservations, and ministries.
- The Constitution attacked caste as hierarchy (**Article 17**) and then used caste as a remedy (reservations). That double move politicised it.
- The **First Amendment** and **Champakam** already showed caste in the law of education. **Mandal** (1990) and **Indra Sawhney** (1992) made OBC a national political language.

How democracy converts the category

- **Kothari's** Congress system absorbed caste factions inside a dominant party. Caste was already political, but as faction, not always as a named party of the excluded.
- **The Rudolphs argued that caste associations become modern interest groups:** the "modernity of tradition".
- **Jaffrelot** traces the rise of OBCs and Dalit parties, especially in the Hindi belt, when Congress could no longer monopolise mediation.

- First-past-the-post and federal Assemblies reward a locally concentrated jati cluster with seats, which is **Easton's** allocation through cleavage.

Becoming, not finished

- Caste as politics now includes demand for a caste census, sub-quotas, and creamy-layer fights: the category is remade in the state.
- It also includes majoritarian attempts to overwrite caste with a religious majority, which never fully erases jati bargaining at the booth.
- **Ambedkar** wanted annihilation. Politicisation can freeze caste as a permanent electoral brand even as it yields office to the backward.
- **Explanation:** democracy did not invent caste. It gave caste a new career as a legitimate claim-making identity.

Flow diagram

Caste as social hierarchy -> Caste as political category
Caste as political category -> Kothari factions
Caste as political category -> Jaffrelot OBC Dalit parties
Caste as political category -> Mandal reservations

Conclusion

Caste becomes a political category when votes, reservations, and parties use a social hierarchy as a resource of mobilisation. **Kothari**, the Rudolphs, and **Jaffrelot** map that conversion. Mandal is the national hinge. The social category remains; politics gives it a second life.

Facts & figures

Mandal, 1990

Implementation of OBC reservation in Union services; a hinge of caste-as-politics.

Indra Sawhney, 1992

Judicial settlement of OBC reservation and creamy layer, a legal form of the political category.

Jaffrelot

India's Silent Revolution and related work on the rise of lower castes in politics.

Kothari

Caste in Indian Politics: caste as a unit inside the party system, not only a village custom.