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Q2(b)

What is caste politics? Substantiate your answer with examples of how identities are defined by caste dynamics

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Perspectives on the study of Indian society

Perspectives on the study of Indian society: Indology (G.S. Ghurye); Structural functionalism (M.N. Srinivas); Marxist sociology (A.R. Desai).

Core demand of the question

- What is caste politics? Substantiate your answer with examples of how identities are defined by caste dynamics

Revision summary

Caste politics turns jati into votes, offices and honour.

Kothari saw politics reshaping caste, not only caste capturing the state.

Mandal, BSP and Dravidian parties defined new political selves.

Dominant-caste land and numbers still organise local tickets.

Endogamy and atrocity show identity is not only electoral branding.

Introduction

Caste politics is the use of jati and varna as public identity for votes, offices, and honour. Identities are not ancient fossils; parties, censuses, and movements define who counts as a political 'we'.

Body

Meaning

- **Rajni Kothari** argued that politics democratised caste as much as caste captured politics. Associations, federations, and parties translate ranked groups into blocs.
- **Identity here is situational:** a man may be a kisan in a mandi, an OBC in a quota form, and a jati in a marriage search.
- **Andre Beteille's disharmonic order fits:** equality is the constitutional creed, while caste remains the organising fact of mobilisation.

How dynamics define identity

- Sanskritization once defined prestige as copying a higher ritual style. Electoral politics now defines prestige as numbers, alliances, and a share of the state.
- **Mandal** and OBC lists turned 'backwardness' into a census identity. The creamy-layer debate shows class inside that identity.
- The Bahujan Samaj Party and BAMCEF defined Dalit-Bahujan as a political people from an Ambedkarite reading of exclusion, not from temple rank.

- Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu defined a regional non-Brahmin self against Sanskritic honour. Yadav and Kurmi mobilisation in the Hindi belt defined kisan-OBC pride around land and office.
- Dominant castes, in Srinivas's sense, enter politics as farmers' unions and as gatekeepers of local tickets, so identity is land plus numbers.

Illustrations of definition, not essence

- Urban campuses and jobs mix occupations, yet hostels, marriages, and atrocity cases re-inscribe caste as identity.
- Online matrimonials make jati a search filter, a modern definition of the same endogamy Ghurye listed as a feature.

Limit

- Caste politics is not the whole of Indian politics. Class, region, and religion cut blocs. It remains a primary grammar of who is 'us'.

Flow diagram

Jati rank -> Associations parties quotas
Associations parties quotas -> Political identity
Mandal BSP Dravidian -> Political identity
Dominant caste land -> Political identity

Conclusion

Caste politics is the conversion of ranked groups into democratic identities. Examples from **Mandal**, **BSP**, Dravidian parties, and dominant-caste farmer blocs show that caste dynamics still name the political self, even when the Constitution speaks equality.

Facts & figures

Rajni Kothari

Argued that democratic politics gave caste a new associative life.

Mandal

OBC reservation that defined backwardness as a public identity.

BSP

Party that named a Bahujan political people from Dalit assertion.

Dominant caste

Srinivas's local blend of land, numbers, and office that becomes a political bloc.