



## Role of caste system in rural governance - A study

Banoth Elender

Department of Political Science, Kakatiya University, Telangana, India

### Abstract

The role of caste in contemporary India remains significant despite ongoing efforts to address its impact. The caste system, a social hierarchy based on birth, categorizes individuals into distinct groups with specific roles and responsibilities. This system influences various aspects of life, including social interactions, education, employment, political representation, and access to resources. Caste-based discrimination and prejudice continue to marginalize lower-caste individuals, limiting their opportunities and perpetuating social inequalities. Reservation policies have been implemented to address historical disadvantages, but their effectiveness and equitable implementation remain subjects of debate. Caste plays a crucial role in Indian politics, with political parties aligning themselves with specific castes and caste-based voting patterns influencing electoral outcomes. Economic disparities linked to caste persist, as dominant castes often control resources and opportunities, while lower-caste individuals face limited access to capital and occupational restrictions. Caste intersects with other factors such as gender, religion, and language, creating unique experiences and challenges for marginalized groups. People born in particular race have their separate caste. It defines all social, economic and political relationships for the individual. Caste is a notable foundation of social stratification in India. Indian politics is caste-ridden politics. Caste determines the nature, organization, and working of political parties, interest groups, and all political structures and their functions. Indian society has been highly segmented along the lines of castes, religion, class, etc, it eventually prevents the true working of Parliamentary democracy. The influence of caste extends beyond rural areas, impacting urban spaces, cultural practices, healthcare access, and migration patterns. Efforts towards social activism, awareness campaigns, and legal reforms aim to challenge caste-based discrimination and promote social justice. However, achieving a casteless society remains a complex and ongoing challenge that requires sustained efforts from various stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Caste system, rural governance, caste and politics

### Introduction

Politics is nothing but achieving power and gaining political influence. It can be depending upon various social factors and it is different from place to place, society to society. In Indian society, especially in rural areas, caste played significant role in all the spheres and the impact of caste lies everywhere in the social structure. Political system is one of the main social Institutions in the social structure. There is a closed co-relation between the caste and Political power. Caste become as a deciding factor in Indian Political system. It influences the power dynamics, resource mobilization and political representation. Many anthropologists and sociologists specified the important of the caste system in rural society. Every activity in the rural society is associated with the caste system. Likewise, the political landscape also caste centric through the ages. Many Sociologists assumed that involvement of the caste hinders the beauty of democracy. But, yet the importance and impact of the caste system on political Institutions improving day by day.

### What is Caste?

Caste is the basic unit of rural society. It is a complex social phenomenon which is divided the human being into several social groups. The word caste is derived from the Portuges word 'Casta' which means race and in English it is Jati. It is a closed social group which no one can enter into this social group expect from taking the birth into that community. It is a hereditary component.

In Indian society, the human beings are divided into four social groups such as Brahmin, Kahstria, Vysya and

Shudras. Every Varna has its own occupation. The Brahmins are at the top of the table and they are assigned the role as priests that they have to offer pujas to the gods and goddess. The Kshatriyas are next the hierarchy and they have to protect the people and rule the country. Vyshyas are next to the Kshatriyas whose role is selling the commodities i.e., business and the remaining shudras at the bottom of the table were assigned the role as working class or service communities whose role is serving to the above. The shudras further classified into two groups i.e., shudras and Ati-shudras based on the concept of purity and pollution and also their traditional occupations.

### Dominant Caste

Understanding the concept of dominant caste is crucial to understand the rural social structure. In rural community there are several caste groups with different kinds of occupations. Few castes among them are powerful and dominated once in entire village. These communities are power centric. The eminent Sociologist of India M.N. Srinivas developed a concept of "dominant caste". He defined it as numerically strong and also exercises major economic and political powers and maintains social status<sup>[1]</sup>. In other hand Louis Dumont emphasised that the dominance arises solely from economic power rather than factors such as numerical strength, and that this power flows exclusively from control of land<sup>[2]</sup>.

**Example:** Reddies and Velmas in Telangana and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh are dominated communities socially, economically and also politically.

## Caste and Politics

The architect of Indian Constitution Dr. B. R Ambedkarsaid "Political power is the master key". He believed that political power is essential for the upliftment of marginalized communities to assert their rights and demand social and economic justice<sup>[3]</sup>. He believed that due to poor socio-economic condition, lacking of land holding, the downtrodden communities are invisible from the political landscape. Lacking of involvement in political scenario and decision making, these underprivileged communities remained as under developed socially and economically. With the motto of bringing them into the main stream, Ambedkar imposed the reservations in Indian Constitution which gives them rights to enter into the politics.

Through the ages the dominance of caste system is co-existed with the political system. The unofficial social norms were exiting in the society that the Kshatriyas holds the rights to rule the country. The political autonomy was hold by the few sections of people and it was recognized as hereditary right at that time. It was treated as an ascribed status. After that the Indian society gradually adopted democratic principles. But the caste based Political domination was there during the pre-independence as well. The political Parties emerged during the Freedom struggle and like Indian National Congress lead by Brahmin community. With the caste consciousness, the leaders like Ambedkar along with few Dalit leaders was established Republican Party of India with the motto of political involvement of downtrodden. After Post Independence, many political parties emerged and swept their caste-based votes. We can see two dimensions here few regional parties like Samajwadi by Yadavs in UP and Bahujan Samajwadi Party by Dalit's in UP and AIMIM by Muslim minorities was emerged based on their numerical strength in the state. In other side, the regional political parties like Telugu Deshams Party led by Kammas in Andhra Pradesh and TRS party led by Velamas etc. was emerged based on their socio-economic strength and social identity rather than their numerical strength. Even though having lesser population in their respective states the political parties like TDP and TRS came into power which shows their success in vote polarization from the other section of people

Let us discuss the key areas where the caste system can influence politically,

### 1. Economy and Political Power is Interdependent

As Dumont mentioned, the political power and economic power is interdependent. Economically dominated communities are power centric communities in India political system, land is the key for that. In both Telugu states, the Reddies are treated as politically dominated communities. They are the major landholdings in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. They are more connected with the other castes in rural areas. Having these wider ranges of human connections is one of the major political sources for the Reddy's and it stood them as politically dominant<sup>[4]</sup>. As we know Indian society is an agrarian society, due to economic backwardness, the remaining communities are depends upon the land holding communities for their livelihood; this action helps them stronger in political scenario.

### 2. Caste Consciousness among the Voters

In the electoral process, the caste system turned as polarization agent. Today's world the Caste consciousness among the people improving gradually. They wish that the leader from their community will help them; on that note mostly, they voted for the candidate from their community. Sometimes it causes to emergence of caste based political moments. Today, the Telangana politics are evolved to the backward castes, as they demanded for the fair share in elections. This kind of voting behaviour appears mostly in the local body elections especially in rural areas. As M.N. Srinivas mentioned the numerically large communities got benefited in rural political structure. Earlier the caste consciousness wasn't appeared in the society. But due to advancement in education sector, today the voter's rallies 'We-Feeling' and it reflects in voting pattern.

### 3. The Primary Social Controllers play key Role in Voting Behaviour

In Indian society especially in Rural and Tribal areas primary social controllers playing key role in political structure. Primary social controlling unit is an unofficial agency that holds the control over entire community. Mostly It is visible in rural and tribal societies. Head of the caste holds the authoritarian powers over the entire community's socio-political activities; He acts as unofficial political head. He can influence the behaviour of the entire community. So, naturally during the elections, the political leaders try to approach the Head of the caste and offer them some kind of payoffs to get the support of entire community. Though it is against to the democracy but yet many political parties and political leaders are following this approach. We can see the oath from the entire community about casting their votes at the time of elections.

### 4. Caste – Influence in decision making

The caste is one of the key factors in the process of decision making. Decision making is the key function of political power. The political empowerment of the downtrodden communities lies in their capacity in decision making. But even after the 78 years of Independence and 75 years of republic the downtrodden failed in empowering politically. The Dominate castes people playing vital role in the decision making even today where the downtrodden led the political institution. Though the power is officially hold by the weaker sections yet the dominate caste leaders treated as unofficial power centres. They are the influential elements in decision making especially in rural societies.

### Political Impact of Caste System in Rural Governance

Caste influences the political life to a greater extent in the rural areas than in the urban, because caste consciousness is high among the rural people<sup>[5]</sup>; the rural governance is different from the urban governance where the economic factors are most influential in urban whereas the social factors are mostly influence in rural areas. The caste is the key factor in rural administration. It heavily influenced the power structure in rural areas. Even after the legal provisions given authority to the downtrodden the Power centric communities influencing the rural administration. The traditional practices given them social identity and they are controlling the local governance even today. Their interests are given priority in Political decisions. For example, in Telangana the Velams and Reddies are given

priority and respect from the other social groups in rural areas. It gives them unofficial powers in the rural governance. Unofficially they are the drivers of the rural administration. Majority of the decisions are gone in favour of their aspirations.

Many factors can influence the rural administration such as education, political awareness, economic power, social networks and traditional practices. Among all these the dominate castes are much forwarded than downtrodden in rural India.

**In Telangana**

In Telangana, the formal rural governance is in the hands of Panchayth Raj Institutions. We are following three tire model of Penchant Raj Institutions i.e., Village Level (Sarpanch), Mandal level (MandalPrajaParishaths) and District Level (ZillaPrajaParishats). The caste-based reservations are applicable for the respected areas as for Scheduled Castes 16%, for Scheduled Tribes 10%, and for Backward Castes it is 24%.

Today’sTelangana rural politics are evolving around the caste system. Though there is a lacking of political reservations to the backward castes at Assembly and Parliament level, they failed in getting equal share in competence with the Upper castes. It causes to the demand for political reservations to the backward castes. To forward in the political sphere, the backward castes are demanding for the 50% reservations in the Panchayat Raj Institutions. In Kamareddy BC declaration the congress party stated that they will increase the political reservations to the backward castes in local governance based on the BC commission recommendations.

**Objectives**

1. The main aim of this paper is to find out the Historical relationship between Caste and Governance.
2. To identify the current situation of dominate castes in Rural Governance.
3. To find out the opinion of the respondents on Caste System in Rural Administration.

**Review of Literature**

1. Andre Beteille (1971) noticed the phenomenon of status incongruence. Traditionally, the upper castes owned land and monopolised political power in the village. But now, due to various institutional changes, they have lost control in political affairs to intermediate castes without losing their land to any substantial extent<sup>[6]</sup>.
2. Yogendra Singh in his study 'Changing Power Structure of Village Communities: A Case study of six villages in Eastern Uttar Pradesh' (Singh: 1969) examined the nature of power structure and also discusses the patterns of traditional and emerging leadership. According to him in the emergence of panchayat leaders, upper castes still continue to hold power<sup>[7]</sup>.

**Research Methodology**

The data was gathered from the 60 respondents randomly in a selected village first come first out basis to record their perceptions on caste influence in Rural Governance. It covers all the Three Social categories i.e., OCs, BCs and SCs where the STs didn’t found in the selected Village. The explanatory research design was utilized for this study.

**Data analysis and Interpretation**

1. Do you think that Dominant Castes still playing significant role in Rural Administration?

Caste	Strongly disagreed	Disagreed	Neutral	Agreed	Strongly Agreed	Total
Scheduled Castes	02 (10%)	05 (25%)	01 (5%)	08 (40%)	04 (20%)	20 (100%)
Backward Castes	04 (20%)	03 (15%)	02 (20%)	07 (35%)	04 (20%)	20 (100%)
Other Castes	14 (70%)	04 (20%)	02 (10%)	-	-	20 (100%)
Total	20 (33.3%)	12 (20%)	05 (8.3%)	15 (25%)	08 (13.4%)	60 (100%)

Source: Field Data

The above table shows the opinion of the respondents on caste dominance in rural governance. Among the 60 respondent’s majority of them 20 (33.3%) are strongly disagreed with the statement that the Dominate castes playing major role in rural administration. Followed by 12 (20%) of them disagreed. 15 (25%) of them agreed and 08(13.4%) are strongly agreed and the remaining 05 (8.3%) are Neutral. There is a diversity of the opinion in among the

castes, majority of the Scheduled Castes (60%) and Backward Castes (55%) felt that the Domination of the Dominate communities still continuing in rural Political structure, but 90% Other Castes respondents doesn’t feel that they are the dominating forces in rural administration at present.

2. Do you think that Caste consciousness increased among the Voters?

Caste	Yes	No	Total
Scheduled Castes	11 (55%)	09 (45%)	20 (100%)
Backward Castes	15 (75%)	05 (25%)	20 (100%)
Other Castes	17 (85%)	03 (15%)	20 (100%)
Total	43 (71.67%)	17 (28.33%)	60 (100%)

Source: Field Data

The above table shows the caste consciousness among the respondents in voting process. Out of 60, majority of the respondents 43 (71.67%) felt that the caste consciousness is improved, whereas 17(28.33%) of them doesn’t feel the same. 85% of the Other Castes and 75% of the Backward

Castes respondents felt that their caste consciousness is improved and 55% of the Scheduled Castes felt the same.

3. Do you think that the leaders from the downtrodden communities taking decisions independently?

Caste	Yes	No	Total
Scheduled Castes	12 (60%)	08 (40%)	20 (100%)
Backward Castes	16 (80%)	04 (20%)	20 (100%)
Other Castes	17 (85%)	03 (15%)	20 (100%)
Total	45 (75%)	15 (25%)	60 (100%)

Source: Field Data

The above table shows the opinion of the respondents on dependency of downtrodden communities in decision making. Three-fourth of the respondents thought that the downtrodden communities independently taking the decisions whereas 25% of them thought that still they are depending upon dominate communities in decision making. Interesting majority of the Other Communities respondents answered the downtrodden leaders taking the decisions based on their perception whereas 80% of the Backward Castes respondents and 60% of the Scheduled Castes respondents feel the same. But it has to be noted that 40% of the respondents from Scheduled Castes feel that they are still dependent on Dominate Castes in decision making, 20% of the Backward Castes respondents and 15% of the Other Castes respondents feel the same.

**Findings**

1. The Data clearly proved that the in the perception of the respondents the political domination of the dominant castes is reduced, the political reservations, education, economical forwardness among the marginalised sections is the reasons for that, which shows a social change in political aspect.
2. The data clearly proved that the caste consciousness playing key role during the voting process and it is high among the upper castes and low among the scheduled castes. Economical dependency and traditional attitude of the downtrodden communities overlooks the caste consciousness. It reflects in their voting behaviour.
3. The data clearly proved that the leaders from the downtrodden castes detaching their function in decision making independently. The educational advancement and political empowerment are the major causes for that. But yet, still the considerable number of the people depends upon dominate castes in decision making.

**Conclusion**

The political power is co-existed with the caste system in rural India. Through the ages, the dominate castes holding the majority of the lands and power in their hands, but after the reservations and legal provisions imposed in the constitution, the downtrodden communities are enter into the political scenario. But yet, with their economic conditions and traditional caste identity the dominate castes continuing their political holding in rural areas. They took advantage with the innocence of the downtrodden leadership. However, with the advancement in education and economic stability, the downtrodden communities are also playing major role in rural governance. Now they took decisions according to their will. The caste consciousness is increasing day-by-day among the rural people and now they wish to cast their vote for the leader from their community, this is biggest change in political sphere. It nullifies the dominance of economic institutions in political institutions and the numerically dominated castes came into the power. It causes to the power distribution among the downtrodden who are numerically high.

**References**

1. Srinivas MN. The Dominant Caste in Rampura. American Anthropologist, 1959, 61(1).
2. Dumont L. Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications. University of Chicago Press, 1970.
3. Ambedkar BR. States and Minorities. Bombay: Thacker & Co; 1947.
4. Elliott CM. Caste and Faction among the Dominant Caste: Reddis and Kammas of Andhra. In: Kothari R, editor. Caste in Indian Politics. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1973.
5. Desai AR. Rural Sociology in India (3rd Edition). The Indian Society of Agriculture Economics: Bombay, 1961, 53.
6. Beteille A. Studies in Agrarian Social Structure. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986.
7. Singh Y. Changing Power Structure of Village Communities. Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969.