

IDENTITY POLITICS- RELEVANCE IN TODAY'S INDIAN POLITICAL CULTURE

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 20th February 2026 Accepted: 01st March 2026 Published: 07th March 2026 Keywords: <i>Identity Politics, Political Parties, Civic Participation, Leadership, Empowerment</i>	Identity politics has become a defining feature of contemporary democracies, and India provides one of the most complex and revealing case studies of its impact. Rooted in colonial legacies of communal electorates and census classifications, identity-based mobilization in India has evolved through the freedom struggle, post-independence nation-building, and the institutionalization of caste politics via the Mandal Commission. Today, identity politics manifests across caste, religion, region, gender, and minority categories, shaping both political leadership and civic participation. On one hand, it has empowered marginalized communities, expanded representation, and brought diverse voices into the democratic process. On the other, it has entrenched divisions, fostered populism, and reduced politics to symbolic gestures rather than substantive policy debates. Political parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party, Bharatiya Janata Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, and Shiv Sena illustrate the varied ways identity politics is deployed to mobilize constituencies. This paper critically evaluates the dual nature of identity politics in India, arguing that while it has democratized access to power, it has also weakened issue-based governance and deliberative democracy. The conclusion emphasizes the need for reforms that strengthen institutions, promote civic education, and encourage leaders to transcend narrow identities while respecting diversity. Balancing identity recognition with inclusive national growth remains essential for India's democratic future.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The study of political leadership and civic participation in contemporary democracies has increasingly turned toward the role of identity politics as both a mobilizing force and a divisive element. Identity politics, broadly understood as the organization of political action around shared characteristics such as caste, religion, ethnicity, language, or gender, has become one of the most defining features of democratic practice in the twenty-first century. In India, the world's largest democracy, identity politics is not merely a peripheral phenomenon but a central axis around which political competition, leadership strategies, and citizen participation revolve. Its relevance in today's Indian political culture cannot be overstated, as it shapes electoral outcomes, policy priorities, and the very nature of democratic discourse.

The roots of identity politics in India are deeply historical, stretching back to the colonial period when the British institutionalized divisions through census classifications and communal electorates. These policies entrenched identities as political categories, laying the groundwork for their continued salience in independent India. The nationalist movement attempted to transcend these divisions, with leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi emphasizing unity across caste and religious lines. Yet, the persistence of social hierarchies and communal tensions meant that identity remained a powerful mobilizing tool. After independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru envisioned a secular, modern nation-state where citizenship would transcend narrow identities. However, the realities of caste inequality, regional diversity, and religious pluralism ensured that identity politics continued to shape political life.

The post-independence decades witnessed the gradual institutionalization of identity politics, particularly through affirmative action policies and the rise of regional parties. The Mandal Commission in the late 1980s and early 1990s marked a watershed moment, as its recommendations for reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) entrenched caste-based mobilization in electoral politics. Simultaneously, the rise of Hindutva politics, spearheaded by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its ideological affiliates, redefined national identity around Hindu majoritarianism. Regional movements, such as the Dravidian assertion in Tamil Nadu and the demand for Telangana statehood, further demonstrated the enduring power of linguistic and cultural identities.

In contemporary India, identity politics manifests in multiple forms: caste-based vote-bank strategies, religious polarization, regional chauvinism, and the mobilization of gender and minority identities. Political leadership often revolves around managing these identities, with leaders positioning themselves as representatives of particular communities rather than as national figures. Civic participation, too, is shaped by identity, as citizens frequently vote along caste, religious, or regional lines rather than evaluating policies or governance performance. Social media and digital platforms have amplified these dynamics, creating new spaces for identity-based mobilization while also intensifying polarization.

The dual nature of identity politics presents a critical challenge for Indian democracy. On one hand, it has democratized access to power by empowering marginalized communities and ensuring their representation in political institutions. On the other, it has fragmented the polity, weakened issue-based governance, and reduced democratic discourse to symbolic gestures. Political leadership risks becoming performative, focused on identity recognition rather than substantive policy-making. Civic participation, while numerically robust, risks being qualitatively shallow, driven by loyalty to identity categories rather

than informed citizenship.

This paper seeks to critically examine the relevance of identity politics in today's Indian political culture, with particular attention to its historical roots, evolution, effects on leadership and civic participation, and implications for national growth. It will analyze case studies of major political parties that deploy identity politics, including the Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajwadi Party, Bharatiya Janata Party, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Shiv Sena, and the Indian National Congress. The paper will argue that while identity politics has been instrumental in expanding democratic participation, it has also entrenched divisions and undermined the quality of governance. The challenge for India lies in balancing identity recognition with issue-based politics, fostering leadership that transcends narrow identities while respecting diversity, and promoting civic participation that is informed, deliberative, and oriented toward collective national growth. By situating identity politics within the broader framework of political leadership and civic participation, this paper contributes to ongoing debates in political science about the nature of democracy in diverse societies. It underscores the need for critical engagement with identity politics, recognizing both its empowering potential and its divisive consequences. Ultimately, the relevance of identity politics in India today lies not only in its ability to mobilize constituencies but also in its capacity to shape the trajectory of democratic development.

2. HISTORICAL PROCESS OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN INDIA

The historical trajectory of identity politics in India is deeply intertwined with the country's colonial past, nationalist struggle, and post-independence democratic evolution. Understanding this process is essential to grasp why identity remains such a powerful force in contemporary Indian political culture.

The British colonial administration played a decisive role in institutionalizing identity categories. Through the **census system**, communities were classified along caste, religion, and linguistic lines, transforming fluid social identities into rigid political categories. The introduction of **communal electorates** under the Morley-Minto Reforms (1909) and later expanded in the Government of India Act (1919) entrenched religious divisions by granting separate representation to Muslims, Sikhs, and other communities. This "divide and rule" strategy ensured that political mobilization was framed around identity rather than shared national interests. By the time India approached independence, identity politics was already embedded in the political imagination.

During the nationalist movement, leaders attempted to transcend identity divisions, but they also relied on them for mobilization. **Mahatma Gandhi** emphasized unity across caste and religion, yet his campaigns against untouchability and for Hindu-Muslim harmony acknowledged the salience of identity. The **Muslim League's demand for Pakistan** exemplified how religious identity could become the basis for political sovereignty. Meanwhile, caste-based movements such as those led by **B.R. Ambedkar** highlighted the structural inequalities of Hindu society and demanded political safeguards for Dalits. Thus, the freedom struggle was both a unifying project and a site of identity assertion.

After independence in 1947, Prime Minister **Jawaharlal Nehru** envisioned a secular, modern India where citizenship would transcend narrow identities. The Constitution enshrined equality and prohibited discrimination, while also providing affirmative action for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled

Tribes. However, the persistence of caste hierarchies and communal tensions meant that identity politics continued to shape political life. The **linguistic reorganization of states in 1956** institutionalized regional identities, while communal riots in the 1960s and 1980s underscored the enduring power of religious identity.

The **Mandal Commission Report (1980)** and its implementation in 1990 marked a watershed moment in Indian politics. By recommending reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs), the Commission expanded affirmative action beyond Scheduled Castes and Tribes, reshaping electoral politics. The decision sparked widespread protests but also consolidated OBC identity as a powerful political force. Parties such as the **Samajwadi Party (SP)** and **Janata Dal** capitalized on this new caste arithmetic, transforming the political landscape of North India. Identity politics thus shifted from being primarily about religion to being equally about caste-based representation.

The post-Mandal era witnessed the proliferation of regional parties rooted in identity mobilization. The **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)**, founded by Kanshi Ram and later led by Mayawati, positioned Dalit identity at the center of its political strategy. In Tamil Nadu, the **Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)** and **AIADMK** mobilized linguistic and cultural pride, challenging the dominance of Hindi and North Indian politics. The **Akali Dal** in Punjab emphasized Sikh identity, while the **Shiv Sena** in Maharashtra championed Marathi pride. These parties demonstrated that identity politics could be a successful strategy for challenging national parties and asserting regional autonomy.

The late twentieth century also saw the rise of religious identity politics, particularly through the **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** and its ideological affiliates. The **Ram Janmabhoomi movement** in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, marked the ascendancy of Hindutva politics.

By framing Hindu identity as synonymous with national identity, the BJP redefined the terms of political competition. This religious mobilization not only reshaped electoral politics but also altered civic participation, polarizing communities along religious lines.

The historical process of identity politics in India reveals a paradox. On one hand, identity has been a vehicle for empowerment, enabling marginalized communities to demand recognition and representation. On the other, it has entrenched divisions, often at the expense of national unity and issue-based politics. From colonial classifications to contemporary Hindutva, identity politics has remained a constant, evolving in form but persistent in influence. Its historical roots explain why identity continues to dominate Indian political culture today, shaping both leadership strategies and civic participation.

3. EVOLUTION OF IDENTITY POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

The trajectory of identity politics in India since the 1990s reveals both continuity with historical patterns and significant transformations shaped by globalization, liberalization, and the digital revolution. While caste and religion remain dominant axes of mobilization, new forms of identity politics have emerged around regionalism, gender, and minority rights. The evolution of identity politics in contemporary India demonstrates how democratic participation has expanded, but also how polarization and populism have intensified.

Caste has long been a central axis of Indian politics, but its role has evolved significantly in recent decades. The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 consolidated OBC identity as a powerful political force. Parties such as the **Samajwadi Party (SP)** in Uttar Pradesh and the **Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)** in Bihar built their electoral strategies around OBC mobilization, while the **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)** positioned Dalit identity at the center of its politics. Initially, these movements were framed as struggles for social justice and empowerment. However, over time, caste politics has increasingly become a matter of electoral arithmetic, with parties calculating vote shares based on caste alliances rather than substantive policy agendas. This shift has diluted the emancipatory potential of caste-based mobilization, reducing it to transactional politics.

Religious identity politics has gained unprecedented prominence in contemporary India, particularly through the rise of Hindutva. The **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)**, supported by the **Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)**, has redefined national identity around Hindu majoritarianism. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the 1980s and 1990s marked the ascendancy of religious mobilization, culminating in the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. Since then, Hindutva has become a central plank of Indian politics, influencing not only electoral outcomes but also civic discourse. Religious identity politics has polarized communities, reshaped leadership strategies, and redefined civic participation, often reducing it to loyalty to religious narratives rather than engagement with policy debates.

Regional and linguistic identities have also evolved as powerful forces in contemporary India. The demand for **Telangana statehood**, achieved in 2014, exemplifies how regional identity can mobilize mass movements and reshape political geography. In Tamil Nadu, the **Dravidian parties (DMK and AIADMK)** continue to assert linguistic and cultural pride, challenging the dominance of Hindi and North Indian politics. The **Shiv Sena** in Maharashtra has historically mobilized Marathi identity, though its politics have evolved to include broader Hindutva themes. Regionalism demonstrates the resilience of sub-national identities in India, highlighting the tension between national integration and regional autonomy.

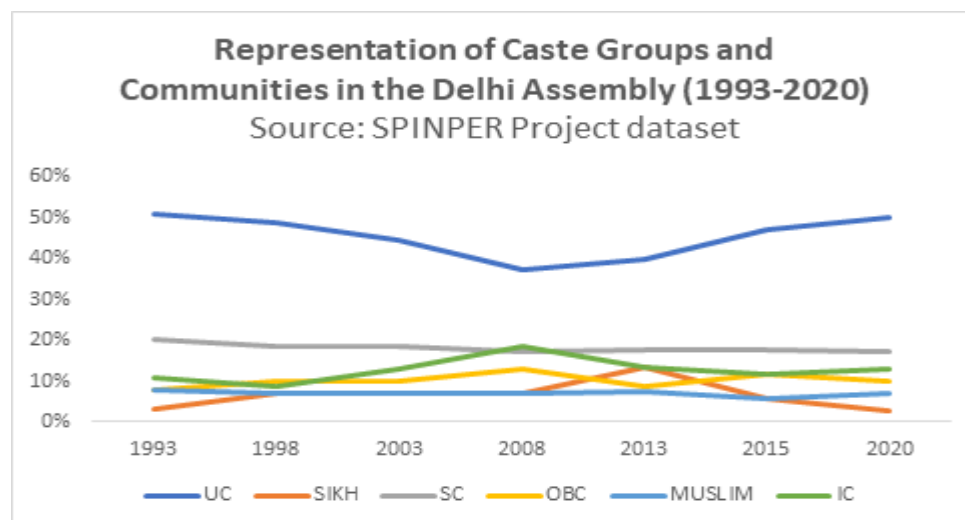
In recent years, identity politics has expanded beyond caste and religion to include gender and minority identities. The debate over **women's reservation in legislatures** reflects the growing recognition of gender as a political category. Movements for **LGBTQ+ rights**, culminating in the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2018, illustrate how minority identities are increasingly part of the political discourse. Tribal and indigenous communities have also mobilized for recognition and rights, particularly in states like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. These developments show that identity politics in contemporary India is not static but continually evolving to include new categories of representation.

The digital revolution has transformed identity politics by creating new platforms for mobilization. Social media amplifies identity narratives, enabling rapid dissemination of political messages and fostering online communities around shared identities. While this has democratized access to political discourse, it has also intensified polarization, with echo chambers reinforcing identity-based divisions. Digital identity politics has reshaped civic participation, particularly among youth, who engage with politics through online campaigns, hashtags, and viral content. However, the reliance on digital platforms also raises concerns about misinformation, manipulation, and the erosion of deliberative democracy.

The evolution of identity politics in contemporary India reveals a complex picture. On one hand, it has expanded democratic participation by including new voices and identities. On the other, it has entrenched divisions, reduced politics to symbolic gestures, and weakened issue-based governance. Caste politics has shifted from social justice to vote-bank arithmetic; religious identity has polarized communities; regionalism has challenged national integration; gender and minority identities have broadened the scope of representation; and digital platforms have amplified both empowerment and polarization. Together, these dynamics illustrate the enduring relevance of identity politics in India, while also highlighting the urgent need for reforms that balance identity recognition with inclusive national growth.

4. EFFECTS OF IDENTITY POLITICS ON POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

Political leadership in India has been profoundly shaped by identity politics. Leaders often rise to prominence not merely on the basis of policy innovation or governance capacity, but through their ability to mobilize constituencies around shared identities. This dynamic has produced both empowering outcomes for marginalized groups and troubling consequences for democratic governance.



Positive Effects: Empowerment and Representation

One of the most significant contributions of identity politics to leadership has been the empowerment of historically marginalized communities. Leaders such as **B.R. Ambedkar** laid the foundation for Dalit political assertion, and later figures like **Mayawati** of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) transformed Dalit identity into a powerful electoral force. Similarly, leaders from OBC backgrounds, such as **Mulayam Singh Yadav** and **Lalu Prasad Yadav**, rose to prominence by mobilizing caste identities that had long been excluded from political power. These leaders provided representation to communities that had been structurally marginalized, ensuring their voices were heard in legislative and executive institutions.

Identity politics has also diversified leadership at the regional level. In Tamil Nadu, the **Dravidian movement** produced leaders like **C.N. Annadurai** and **M. Karunanidhi**, who championed Tamil linguistic and cultural pride. In Punjab, leaders of the **Akali Dal** positioned themselves as representatives of Sikh identity, while in Maharashtra, **Bal Thackeray** mobilized Marathi pride through

the Shiv Sena. These leaders demonstrated that identity politics could challenge the dominance of national parties and create space for regional autonomy.

Negative Effects: Fragmentation and Populism

While identity politics has expanded representation, it has also fragmented leadership. Leaders often become “identity managers,” focusing on symbolic recognition of their constituencies rather than substantive governance. For example, caste-based leaders may prioritize distributing patronage to their communities rather than pursuing broader developmental policies. This reduces leadership to transactional politics, where loyalty is exchanged for symbolic gestures or material benefits.

Religious identity politics has further polarized leadership. The rise of Hindutva under the BJP has produced leaders who frame themselves as defenders of Hindu identity, often at the expense of minority inclusion. This has redefined leadership as majoritarian assertion, weakening the secular foundations of Indian democracy. Leaders who rely heavily on religious mobilization risk alienating minority communities and undermining national unity.

Populism is another consequence of identity-based leadership. Leaders often resort to populist rhetoric, promising immediate benefits to their constituencies without addressing structural issues. This short-termism undermines policy innovation and reduces governance to electoral calculations. For instance, caste-based reservation promises or religious appeals may secure votes but do little to address systemic inequalities or developmental challenges.

Leadership Style and Symbolism

Identity politics has also shaped the style of leadership in India. Leaders often rely on symbolic gestures to reinforce their identity credentials. Mayawati’s construction of Dalit memorials and statues in Uttar Pradesh, for example, was a symbolic assertion of Dalit pride. Similarly, leaders associated with Hindutva emphasize religious rituals and cultural symbolism to reinforce their legitimacy. While such gestures can empower communities, they can also divert attention from substantive governance.

Institutional Consequences

The dominance of identity politics in leadership has significant institutional consequences. It can weaken merit-based leadership by prioritizing identity credentials over governance capacity. It can also erode institutional trust when policies are perceived as pandering to specific communities rather than serving the national interest. Leadership shaped by identity politics often struggles to balance community representation with broader developmental goals, creating tensions within democratic institutions.

Critical Reflection

The effects of identity politics on political leadership in India are deeply ambivalent. On one hand, identity politics has democratized leadership by empowering marginalized communities and diversifying representation. On the other, it has fragmented leadership, fostered populism, and weakened issue-based governance. Leaders often become symbolic representatives of identities rather than visionary nation-builders. The challenge for Indian democracy is to cultivate leadership that transcends narrow identities while respecting diversity, fostering inclusive governance that balances representation with developmental priorities.

5. EFFECTS ON CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Civic participation in India, defined as the involvement of citizens in political processes such as voting, campaigning, protesting, and engaging in public discourse, has been profoundly shaped by identity politics. While identity-based mobilization has expanded participation by bringing marginalized groups into the democratic fold, it has also distorted the nature of engagement, reducing it to loyalty to identity categories rather than informed deliberation.

One of the most significant contributions of identity politics has been the expansion of civic participation among historically excluded communities. Dalits, OBCs, and tribal groups, who were once marginalized from mainstream politics, have found a voice through identity-based movements and parties. The rise of the **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)** in Uttar Pradesh, for example, mobilized Dalit communities to participate actively in elections, transforming them from passive voters into assertive political actors. Similarly, the implementation of caste-based reservations encouraged OBCs to engage more fully in democratic processes, reshaping the electoral landscape of North India.

Religious identity politics has also mobilized communities, albeit in more polarizing ways. The **Ram Janmabhoomi movement** in the late 1980s and early 1990s galvanized Hindu participation, while minority communities mobilized defensively to protect their rights. Regional movements, such as the demand for Telangana, demonstrated how linguistic and cultural identities could mobilize mass civic participation, leading to significant political outcomes.

While identity politics has expanded participation, it has also distorted its quality. Voting behavior in India is often driven by identity loyalty rather than policy evaluation. Citizens frequently cast their votes based on caste, religion, or regional affiliation, reducing elections to contests of identity arithmetic. This phenomenon, known as **vote-bank politics**, undermines the deliberative aspect of democracy, as citizens prioritize identity solidarity over critical assessment of governance performance. For example, in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, electoral outcomes are often determined by caste alliances rather than developmental agendas. Similarly, religious polarization has led to voting patterns where communities align with parties perceived as protectors of their identity, regardless of their policy record. This reduces civic participation to ritualistic voting, weakening the accountability mechanisms of democracy.

Identity politics has also contributed to the decline of deliberative democracy in India. Public discourse is increasingly framed in terms of identity binaries—Hindu versus Muslim, Dalit versus upper caste, regional versus national—rather than substantive policy debates. Media coverage and political campaigns often reinforce these divisions, focusing on identity-based appeals rather than issue-based discussions. This undermines the quality of civic participation, as citizens engage in politics through symbolic gestures and emotional appeals rather than rational deliberation.

The digital revolution has reshaped civic participation, particularly among youth. Social media platforms have become arenas for identity-based mobilization, with hashtags, viral campaigns, and online communities reinforcing identity narratives. While this has democratized access to political discourse, it has also intensified polarization, as echo chambers amplify identity-based divisions. Youth engagement, once seen as a potential force for issue-based politics, is increasingly shaped by identity narratives online.

This raises concerns about misinformation, manipulation, and the erosion of critical civic engagement.

Identity politics also influences civic participation beyond voting. Protests, demonstrations, and grassroots movements are often organized around identity categories. Dalit protests against caste-based violence, minority mobilizations against discriminatory policies, and regional movements for autonomy exemplify how identity shapes civic activism. While such movements can empower communities, they can also entrench divisions and foster antagonism between groups.

Hindus, Muslims most likely to favor political involvement in religious affairs

% of Indian adults who say politicians should have _____ influence in religious matters

	A large/ some 62%	Not too much/ none at all 31%
General population		
Hindus	64	29
Muslims	59	35
Christians	50	44
Sikhs	42	52
Buddhists	44	52
Jains	51	47
Men	62	33
Women	62	29
Ages 18-34	61	32
35+	62	31
Less than college	62	31
College graduate	59	38
General Category	62	32
Scheduled Caste/Tribe	60	32
Other/Most Backward Class	64	31
Religion very important	63	31
Religion less important	57	34
Favorable view of BJP	66	30
Unfavorable view of BJP	60	37

Note: Don't know/Refused responses not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Nov. 17, 2019-March 23, 2020, among adults in India. See Methodology for details.

"Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Critical Reflection

The effects of identity politics on civic participation in India are deeply ambivalent. On one hand, identity politics has expanded participation by empowering marginalized communities and diversifying democratic engagement. On the other, it has distorted participation by reducing it to identity loyalty, undermining deliberative democracy, and fostering polarization. Civic participation risks becoming quantitatively robust but qualitatively shallow, driven by symbolic gestures rather than informed citizenship. The challenge for Indian democracy is to cultivate civic participation that balances identity recognition with issue-based engagement, fostering a more deliberative and inclusive democratic culture.

6. CASE STUDIES: PARTIES USING IDENTITY POLITICS

Identity politics in India is not an abstract phenomenon; it is deeply embedded in the strategies of political parties. Examining specific case studies reveals how parties mobilize identities to secure electoral support, shape leadership, and influence civic participation.

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)

The BSP, founded by Kanshi Ram and later led by Mayawati, is one of the most prominent examples of caste-based identity politics. Rooted in Dalit assertion, the party positioned itself as the political voice of marginalized communities. Mayawati's leadership style emphasized symbolic empowerment, such as the construction of Dalit memorials and statues, alongside policies aimed at social justice. While the BSP succeeded in mobilizing Dalit participation and securing political representation, critics argue that its reliance on symbolic gestures often overshadowed substantive governance. The BSP illustrates both the empowering potential and the limitations of caste-based identity politics.

Samajwadi Party (SP)

The SP, founded by Mulayam Singh Yadav, built its political base around OBC mobilization, particularly the Yadav community, and minority support. By capitalizing on the Mandal Commission's legacy, the SP positioned itself as a champion of social justice and backward caste empowerment. However, over time, the party's reliance on caste arithmetic and minority vote-banks reduced its politics to transactional alliances. Leadership within the SP often revolved around maintaining caste loyalty rather than pursuing broader developmental agendas. This case highlights how identity politics can entrench vote-bank strategies, limiting the scope of issue-based governance.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

The BJP represents the most significant example of religious identity politics in contemporary India. Rooted in the ideology of Hindutva, the party has redefined national identity around Hindu majoritarianism. The Ram Janmabhoomi movement and subsequent mobilization around Hindu religious symbols exemplify how the BJP has used identity politics to consolidate support. Leadership within the BJP, particularly under figures like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi, has emphasized Hindu cultural pride and nationalistic rhetoric. While this has mobilized vast constituencies and reshaped civic participation, critics argue that it has polarized communities, marginalized minorities, and weakened secular foundations. The BJP demonstrates how religious identity politics can dominate national discourse, transforming leadership into majoritarian assertion.

Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)

The DMK in Tamil Nadu exemplifies linguistic and cultural identity politics. Emerging from the Dravidian movement, the party positioned itself as a defender of Tamil pride and autonomy against perceived North Indian dominance. Leaders like C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi emphasized Tamil language, culture, and regional autonomy, challenging the imposition of Hindi and central authority. The DMK's success illustrates how regional identity politics can empower sub-national communities and reshape federal dynamics. However, critics note that excessive reliance on linguistic identity can foster regional chauvinism, limiting integration with national politics.

Shiv Sena

The Shiv Sena, founded by Bal Thackeray, initially mobilized Marathi identity, emphasizing the rights of "sons of the soil" against migrants in Mumbai. Over time, the party expanded its identity politics to include Hindutva themes, aligning with the BJP. Leadership within the Shiv Sena has been characterized by aggressive rhetoric and symbolic assertion of Marathi pride. While the party succeeded in mobilizing civic participation among Marathi communities, its politics often fostered exclusion and

antagonism toward outsiders. The Shiv Sena demonstrates how regional identity politics can evolve into broader religious mobilization, reshaping leadership strategies.

Indian National Congress

The Congress Party, historically associated with secular nationalism, has also engaged in identity politics. While its leadership under Nehru emphasized transcending identities, the party has often relied on caste and minority alliances to secure electoral support. Critics accuse the Congress of practicing “soft identity politics,” appealing to minority communities and caste groups without overtly framing itself as an identity-based party. This strategy has allowed the Congress to maintain broad coalitions but has also led to accusations of opportunism and inconsistency. The Congress case illustrates how even ostensibly secular parties cannot escape the logic of identity politics in India.

Critical Reflection

These case studies reveal the pervasive role of identity politics in Indian party strategies. Whether through caste (BSP, SP), religion (BJP), region (DMK, Shiv Sena), or minority alliances (Congress), identity politics shapes leadership styles and civic participation. While identity-based mobilization has empowered marginalized communities and diversified representation, it has also entrenched divisions, fostered populism, and weakened issue-based governance. The dominance of identity politics across parties demonstrates its centrality in Indian political culture, highlighting both its relevance and its challenges for democratic development.

7. CRITICAL EVALUATION

The role of identity politics in India’s democratic culture is profoundly ambivalent. It has simultaneously acted as a force for empowerment and inclusion, while also entrenching divisions and weakening the quality of governance. A critical evaluation requires acknowledging both dimensions and examining how they interact to shape political leadership and civic participation.

Identity politics has undeniably democratized access to power. By mobilizing caste, religious, regional, and minority identities, it has brought historically marginalized communities into the political mainstream. Dalit assertion through the **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)**, OBC mobilization through the **Samajwadi Party (SP)**, and regional pride through the **Dravidian movement** in Tamil Nadu exemplify how identity politics has expanded representation. These movements have challenged elite dominance, diversified leadership, and ensured that voices from the margins are heard in legislative and executive institutions.

Moreover, identity politics has fostered civic participation among groups that were previously excluded. Communities that once lacked political agency now engage actively in elections, protests, and public discourse. This expansion of participation strengthens the democratic fabric by making it more inclusive and representative.

Yet, identity politics has also entrenched divisions, fragmenting the polity along caste, religious, and regional lines. Leaders often become “identity managers,” prioritizing symbolic recognition of their constituencies over substantive governance. This reduces politics to transactional exchanges, where loyalty is rewarded with patronage or symbolic gestures rather than policy innovation.

Religious identity politics, particularly the rise of Hindutva, has polarized communities and weakened

secular foundations. By framing national identity around Hindu majoritarianism, the **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** has mobilized vast constituencies but also marginalized minorities, fostering antagonism and eroding trust in democratic institutions. Similarly, regional identity politics, while empowering sub-national communities, can foster chauvinism and weaken national integration.

Identity politics has reshaped leadership styles, often reducing them to symbolic assertion rather than visionary nation-building. Leaders like Mayawati emphasized Dalit pride through memorials and statues, while Hindutva leaders emphasize religious rituals and cultural symbolism. While such gestures empower communities, they can also divert attention from substantive governance. Leadership risks becoming performative, focused on identity recognition rather than developmental priorities.

Civic participation under identity politics is quantitatively robust but qualitatively shallow. Citizens often vote along identity lines rather than evaluating policies or governance performance. This undermines accountability and reduces democracy to ritualistic voting. Public discourse is increasingly framed in terms of identity binaries rather than substantive policy debates, weakening deliberative democracy. Social media has amplified these dynamics, creating echo chambers that reinforce identity-based divisions and intensify polarization.

The dominance of identity politics has significant institutional implications. It can erode trust in institutions when policies are perceived as pandering to specific communities rather than serving the national interest. It can weaken merit-based leadership by prioritizing identity credentials over governance capacity. It can also foster populism, where leaders promise immediate benefits to their constituencies without addressing structural issues. These dynamics undermine the long-term stability and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

Identity politics in India is both a source of strength and a source of weakness. It has empowered marginalized communities and diversified representation, making democracy more inclusive. Yet, it has also entrenched divisions, fostered populism, and weakened issue-based governance. The challenge for Indian democracy is to balance identity recognition with inclusive national growth, cultivating leadership that transcends narrow identities while respecting diversity, and fostering civic participation that is informed, deliberative, and oriented toward collective progress.

8. WHAT CAN BE DONE BETTER FOR NATIONAL GROWTH

The persistence of identity politics in India underscores the need for reforms that balance recognition of diversity with issue-based governance. While identity politics has empowered marginalized communities, its dominance has also fragmented civic participation and weakened developmental priorities. For India to achieve sustainable national growth, several critical measures can be undertaken.

a. Strengthening Issue-Based Politics

A central challenge is to shift the focus of political competition from identity categories to substantive issues such as education, healthcare, employment, and environmental sustainability. Political parties must be incentivized to present clear policy platforms rather than relying solely on caste or religious appeals. Civil society organizations, think tanks, and media can play a role in fostering issue-based debates, ensuring that elections are contested on developmental agendas rather than identity

arithmetic.

b. Reforming Electoral Incentives

India's electoral system often rewards identity-based mobilization. Reforms such as **proportional representation** could reduce the dominance of vote-bank politics by encouraging coalition-building across identities. Campaign finance reforms can also limit the influence of patronage networks, ensuring that leaders are accountable to broader constituencies rather than narrow identity groups.

c. Promoting Civic Education

Civic education is essential to cultivate informed citizenship. Citizens must be equipped to critically evaluate policies, governance performance, and institutional integrity rather than relying on identity loyalty. Educational curricula should emphasize democratic values, pluralism, and deliberative engagement. Public campaigns can also raise awareness about the dangers of excessive identity politics, encouraging citizens to prioritize collective national interests.

d. Inclusive Leadership Models

India requires leaders who can transcend narrow identities while respecting diversity. Leadership development programs within political parties should emphasize inclusivity, merit, and issue-based governance. Leaders must be encouraged to build cross-identity coalitions, demonstrating that national growth depends on unity in diversity. The cultivation of visionary leadership, capable of articulating a shared national agenda, is critical for overcoming the limitations of identity politics.

e. Digital Literacy and Media Responsibility

The digital revolution has amplified identity narratives, often intensifying polarization. Promoting digital literacy can help citizens critically engage with online content, reducing susceptibility to misinformation and manipulation.

Media organizations must also exercise responsibility in framing political discourse, avoiding sensationalist coverage that reinforces identity divisions. Strengthening independent journalism can foster issue-based debates and hold leaders accountable.

f. Strengthening Institutions

Robust institutions are essential to check the excesses of identity politics. The **Election Commission of India**, judiciary, and independent media must be empowered to ensure fair competition and protect democratic values. Institutional reforms should enhance transparency, accountability, and independence, preventing the capture of institutions by identity-based interests. Strong institutions can act as guardians of issue-based politics, ensuring that identity recognition does not undermine national growth.

g. Encouraging Cross-Community Dialogue

Finally, fostering dialogue across communities is crucial to mitigate polarization. Initiatives that promote inter-caste, inter-religious, and inter-regional engagement can build trust and solidarity. Civil society organizations, universities, and grassroots movements can facilitate such dialogue, emphasizing shared national challenges and collective solutions. By encouraging citizens to see beyond narrow identities, India can cultivate a more inclusive democratic culture.

Critical Reflection

The reforms outlined above highlight the need for a multi-dimensional strategy to move beyond the limitations of identity politics. Strengthening issue-based politics, reforming electoral incentives, promoting civic education, cultivating inclusive leadership, enhancing digital literacy, empowering institutions, and fostering cross-community dialogue are all essential for India's democratic future. While identity politics will remain a part of India's political culture, its dominance must be balanced by issue-based governance and inclusive national growth. Only then can India realize its potential as a vibrant, pluralistic democracy capable of addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century.

9. CONCLUSION

The trajectory of identity politics in India reveals both its indispensability and its dangers within the democratic process. From its colonial origins to its contemporary manifestations, identity politics has remained a central axis of political mobilization, shaping leadership styles, civic participation, and institutional dynamics. The British colonial administration entrenched divisions through census classifications and communal electorates, embedding identity categories into the political imagination. The nationalist movement attempted to transcend these divisions, yet figures like Ambedkar and Gandhi acknowledged their salience, demonstrating that identity could not be ignored in the pursuit of justice and unity. Post-independence, the Mandal Commission and the rise of regional parties institutionalized caste and linguistic identities, while the ascendancy of Hindutva redefined national identity around religious majoritarianism.

In contemporary India, identity politics has evolved into a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing caste, religion, region, gender, minority rights, and digital mobilization. It has expanded democratic participation by empowering marginalized communities and diversifying representation. Dalits, OBCs, women, LGBTQ+ groups, and regional communities have found political voice through identity-based movements and parties. Civic participation has grown numerically, with communities once excluded now actively engaging in elections, protests, and public discourse. Leadership has diversified, with figures from marginalized backgrounds rising to prominence. These developments underscore the inclusive potential of identity politics, making democracy more representative and participatory.

Yet, the dominance of identity politics has also produced troubling consequences. Leadership often becomes performative, reduced to symbolic gestures rather than visionary nation-building. Civic participation, while robust, risks being qualitatively shallow, driven by loyalty to identity categories rather than informed citizenship. Public discourse is increasingly framed in terms of identity binaries, weakening deliberative democracy. Institutions are strained when policies are perceived as pandering to specific communities rather than serving the national interest. Religious polarization, particularly through Hindutva, has marginalized minorities and eroded secular foundations. Regional chauvinism has challenged national integration, while caste arithmetic has entrenched transactional politics. Together, these dynamics reveal the exclusive dimensions of identity politics, fragmenting the polity and weakening issue-based governance.

The critical evaluation of identity politics in India thus highlights its dual nature: it is both a force for empowerment and a source of division. The challenge for Indian democracy is not to eliminate

identity politics—an impossible task in a diverse society—but to balance identity recognition with inclusive national growth.

Reforms are essential to achieve this balance. Strengthening issue-based politics, reforming electoral incentives, promoting civic education, cultivating inclusive leadership, enhancing digital literacy, empowering institutions, and fostering cross-community dialogue are all necessary steps. These measures can mitigate the excesses of identity politics while preserving its empowering potential.

Ultimately, the relevance of identity politics in today's Indian political culture lies in its capacity to shape the trajectory of democratic development. It has democratized access to power, diversified leadership, and expanded participation. Yet, it has also entrenched divisions, fostered populism, and weakened governance. The future of Indian democracy depends on cultivating leaders who transcend narrow identities while respecting diversity, citizens who engage critically and deliberatively, and institutions that safeguard issue-based politics. India's democratic experiment, unique in scale and diversity, requires a delicate balance between identity recognition and collective progress.

In conclusion, identity politics is both the strength and the weakness of Indian democracy. It empowers the marginalized but risks fragmenting the nation. It expands participation but undermines deliberation. It diversifies leadership but weakens governance. The task ahead is to harness the inclusive dimensions of identity politics while mitigating its divisive consequences. Only by achieving this balance can India realize its potential as a vibrant, pluralistic democracy capable of addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century and fostering sustainable national growth.

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