



BLOCK 5
CASTE AND POLITICS

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BLOCK 5 INTRODUCTION

In India, caste is one of the most important factors that shape politics. Indeed, it is not only caste that affects politics; politics also influences caste. Relationships between caste and politics can broadly be viewed in two aspects of politics – electoral and non-electoral. In unit 4, you have read that caste is one of the determinants of voting behaviour in elections. The two units in this block are about caste organizations and castes' politicization around different issues. Unit 11 discuss caste organizations and caste formations. Unit 12 is about politicization of castes on some important issues.



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UNIT 11 CASTE ORGANIZATIONS AND POLITICAL FORMATIONS*

Structure

- 11.0 Objectives
- 11.1 Understanding Caste System in India
- 11.2 Emergence of Caste – Based Organisations
- 11.3 Issues Raised by Caste Organisations
- 11.4 Caste Formations
- 11.5 Role of Caste in Electoral Politics
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11.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, you will be reading about the concept of caste system in India and the various organisations associated with it. The unit also looks at the role of caste in Indian politics. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the caste system in India,
- Discuss the emergence of caste based organisations, and
- Enumerate the role of caste in electoral and non-electoral politics in India.

11.1 UNDERSTANDING CASTE SYSTEM IN INDIA

Caste can be defined as a hereditary endogamous group, having a common name, common traditional occupation, common culture, relative rigidity in matters of mobility, distinctiveness of status and forming a single homogeneous community. It is derived from the Spanish and Portuguese word “casta”, meaning “lineage” or “race” or “a group having hereditary quality”. The Indian Caste System is considered as a closed system of stratification, which means that a person’s social status is obligated to which caste he/she was born into. The Indian caste system is a classification of people into four hierarchically ranked occupational groups and access to wealth called varnas. In the varnas, the Brahmans, usually priests and scholars, are ranked at the top. Next are the Kshatriyas, or political rulers and soldiers. They are followed by the Vaishyas, or merchants, and the fourth varna of consists of the Shudras, who are usually labourers, peasants, artisans, and servants. Outside system varna system there existed social castes who were considered the untouchables. Each Varna includes within it several castes and sub-castes.

The caste system in India experienced many changes because of several socio-religious and protest movements from the latter half of the nineteenth century to

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the post-Independence period. These movements brought about changes in the peoples' outlook towards a caste-ridden society. The socio-religious movements included the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission movement and the Theosophical society etc. The protest movements included the Satya Sodhak Samaj movement led by Jyoti Rao Phule in Puna, the non-Brahmin movement led by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, known as Periyar in Madras and anti-untouchability movements led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi. In the post-independent period, the urbanization, industrialization, spread of education, socio-religious reforms, 'westernisation', 'spatial mobility', 'growth of market economy' etc and implementation of constitutional provisions such as Fundamental Rights (Articles 14, 15, 16, 17) and Directive Principles of State Policy also contributed to transformation of the caste system. Specially, education made people liberal, broadminded, rational and democratic. These factors led to considerable relaxation of rules related to the caste system. This consequently facilitated closer contact and collaboration between different castes. Caste no longer restricts the individual freedom, does not determine the occupational career of an individual. Inter-caste social relations have increased in the contemporary period.

11.2 EMERGENCE OF CASTE – BASED ORGANISATIONS

Caste and democratic political system signify opposite value systems. Caste is hierarchical in which the status of an individual in the social system is determined by birth. On the other hand, democratic political system supports freedom of an individual and equality of status with an emphasis that no one is above the rule of law. Following the introduction of democratic institutions as per the Indian Constitution, Indian society has changed to a considerable extent. This has been reflected in the change in nature of politics. Rajni Kothari in *Caste in Indian Politics* argues that in India politicisation of caste has taken place. Caste and politics entered a relationship which has changed the both. Consequently, secularisation of caste has taken place. Secularisation of caste denotes that castes role is not confined to its traditional role defined by principles of purity and impurity. It helps in mobilisation of castes for secular interests such as power and employment. Secularisation of caste has helped in formation of inter-caste alliances and coalitions.

Castes is assuming new role. They are setting up their organizations known as caste associations. They raise issues of respective castes social, economic and political issues. Caste associations make representation to the government demanding educational facilities, land ownership and its distribution, government jobs etc. for their caste members. They raise issues concerning their castes by submitting memoranda to government, organise public meetings.

Castes articulate their interests by forming caste organisations. There are two kinds of organizations: Caste associations and caste federations. In order to pursue their interests (claim for representation to the government demanding educational facilities, land ownership and its distribution, government jobs etc. for their caste members) and social mobility, castes have established their organizations. Origin of castes organisations can be traced to pre-Independence period. In the initial

stages, caste organizations largely concerned themselves with the idea of giving representation and voice to the marginalized, however, with the entrenchment of liberal democracy and expansion of adult franchise, their aim began to change with the rise in demand for their representation in the administrative, educational and political spheres. In this context, Rudolph and Rudolph summarise the role of caste associations in politics in the following way: “Caste associations attempted to have their own members nominated for elective office, working through existing parties or forming their own; to maximize caste representation and influence in state cabinets and lesser governing bodies; and to use ministerial, legislative and administrative channels to press for action on caste objectives in the welfare, educational and economic realms. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the caste association in the contemporary era, however, is its capacity to organize politically illiterate mass electorate, thus making possible in some measure the realization of its aspirations and educating large section of it in the methods and values of political democracy”. This strategy strengthened their bargaining position in the political system in terms of demanding increase in power structure and getting their demands accepted.

Change in nature of caste has occurred because of interaction between caste and political institutions. Rajni Kothari emphasised three aspects while discussion about the interaction between caste and politics in India: The first aspect can be seen in the form of ‘secularisation of caste through their political involvement. This will alter the traditionally maintained rigid features and lead to a breakup of the old (socio-political) order. This enables to process of alignment and realignment of various strata and gradually embracing the process of social mobility. The second aspect is related to the integration dimension. The caste system not only differentiates individuals on the basis of their caste/social identity but also distinguishes on the basis of occupational and economic roles. ‘At the same time, it is an integral structure of a specific type, namely one that is more intense in its small group orientation and particularistic loyalties and where wider loyalties operate only when they are structured through the prevailing differentiations. This aspect is important in understanding the structural impact of democratic nation-building’. The third aspect is related to consciousness, that is, caste enters politics through consciousness and then gets politicised. The practice of adult franchise in association with the provision of political reservation for the Dalits has further strengthened consciousness among the concerned communities. Therefore, three consequences of such interaction between caste associations and political parties can be deduced. Firstly, caste members particularly poor and marginalized who previously remained untouched by the political processes got politicized and began to participate in electoral politics with an expectation that their interests would be served. Secondly, caste members get split among various political parties weakening hold of the caste. Thirdly, numerically large castes get representation in decision-making bodies and strength of the traditionally dominant castes get weaken.

Generally, caste organizations have relationship with political parties. Often activities and programmes of castes and parties associated with Dalits overlap. During elections several caste organisations hold their *panchayat* or *sammelans* (meetings) to decide to which parties they would support in elections. Generally, they resolve to support such parties which would address their issues, which include general and caste-specific issues. There are three consequences of such

interaction between caste associations and political parties. One, it increased political participations of various castes; two, it also divided a caste support among various parties diluting the rigidity of caste system; and three numerically large castes – Dalits and OBCs get more representation in decision-making bodies than the high castes. This weakened the dominance of the latter in politics and made it more inclusive.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

1) Discuss the impact of social and religious movements on castes

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2) Discuss the emergence of caste-based organizations.

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11.3 ISSUES RAISED BY CASTE ORGANIZATIONS

The issues raised by caste organizations centre around the dignity and self-respect, human rights, redistributive justice through share in employment opportunities and resources, political representation and internal problems within the castes. While Dalit and OBC organisations attempt to defend the existing reservation in public institutions and demand its extension to the private sector, several high caste organizations are also demanding extension of reservation to them. In response, the 124th Constitutional Amendment sought to recommend 10 percent reservation to the economically backward classes including the high castes. According to Rudolph and Rudolph the caste association are playing a democratic role by empowering castes. Although all kinds castes – high castes, Dalits and the OBCs have formed caste organizations, the caste organizations of Dalits and backward classes play more empowering role in the sense that they empower the castes which traditionally suffered caste-based humiliation and discrimination. The caste organisations not only settle internal disputes of the castes such as family feuds, expenses in the marriages, they also mobilise castes to participate in elections and non-electoral mobilization. By taking issues involving self-respect, caste-based violence such including harassment, physical assault and

untouchability, etc, reservation in public institutions, the caste organisations, especially those of the Dalits and the backward classes take up human right issues. These are human right issues because as per the UN Human rights' definition, all rights which individuals deserve by the fact of being humans are human rights. Caste organizations also felicitate members of their caste who perform well examinations, sports or any other activities. They organize functions in honour of such individuals, especially students. Especially, several Dalit organizations names after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar spread ideas and ideology of Dr. Ambedkar by organizing social and cultural functions.

11.4 CASTE FORMATIONS

Change in nature of caste – dilution of caste rigidity bound by ritual norms, known as secularization of caste made it possible for different castes to make political alliances. Such alliances can be termed as caste formations. The castes which forge such formations may belong to different social ranking. But their secular interests – share in political power, economic opportunities or social justice (particularly the organizations of Dalit and OBCs) motivate them to make cross-caste formations. As you have read above, caste organizations are of two types – single caste organizations or caste associations or alliances of several caste associations known as caste federations. But caste alliances are not always made through caste organizations. They can be made without caste organizations as well: Caste associations may be part of such formations just by dint of the fact that they are organizations of castes which make caste formations. Often such caste formations are made with reference to electoral politics. With the purpose of winning elections various castes form caste formations. It is important to note that generally political parties wanting to get support of different castes are involved in encouraging formations of caste formations. In academic and popular parlance, the castes formations are addressed in abbreviated forms through some acronym by the first name of the caste to which they belong. Caste formations influenced politics in India both in pre and post-independence scenarios. Here are some instances of caste formations, the reasons for making them and the acronyms by which they came to be known. Two examples of caste formation during the pre-Independence are relevant here: One, formation of the Triveni Sangh in Bihar in the 1930s; and two, AJGAR, an acronym around the same time in Punjab, which constituted Haryana and Punjab as they exist these days. The AJGAR stood for the castes which constituted it: A for Ahirs, J for Jats, G for Gujars and R for Rajputs. It was proposed by Chhotu Ram, a farmer leader from Punjab. Although these castes belonged to middle and high caste ranking order, the fact that they shared common economic problems as cultivating communities enabled forging of their alliance. In the post-independence era – in the late 1960s-early 1970s, the multiple caste alliance known as AJGAR was used by Charan Singh to challenge the monopoly of Indian National Congress in the national and regional politics. The alphabets in AJGAR stood for Ahirs, Jats, Gujars and Rajputs respectively. By mobilising the support of AJGAR, Charan Singh-led party Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD) in electoral posed a formidable challenge to the dominance of the Congress in north India. This combination enabled Charan Singh to become the first non-Congress Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in 1967.

Among the most important examples of caste formations is that of caste alliances of subaltern castes – Dalits and OBCs such as BAMCEF and DS4. The BAMCEF stood for Backward and Minority Classes Employees Federation and the DS4 stood for Dalit and four times English alphabet S or Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti. These organizations were founded by Kashi Ram. He founded BAMCEF in 1978. He broadened the scope of BAMCEF to include disadvantaged groups – backward classes, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and religious minorities including employees at every level of hierarchy and from all states. Following Ambedkar’s teaching, the DS4 launched an English publication “The Oppressed Indian”. Through this organ, Kashi Ram launched a campaign to spread the message of Ambedkar for the oppressed sections to “educate, organise and agitate” in order to gain social equality and self-respect. In 1984, he founded a political party, the BSP. The BSP emerged as a strong political party in north India, especially in Uttar Pradesh, where its leader Mayawati became chief minister four times. Indeed, emergence of the caste formations is a continuous process; according to the need of times new formations emerge which may disappear after some time, and again new formations may appear.

11.5 ROLE OF CASTE IN ELECTORAL POLITICS

Caste is one of the most important determinants of the Indian politics. The increasing consciousness of caste affiliations and rise of caste-based organization has transformed the contours of the Indian political system. With the introduction of the universal adult franchise in India for all the social groups, including the previously excluded ones, caste emerged as one of the most significant forces of political mobilization. As you will read in unit 12, castes and politics are interrelated. In this context, it needs to be recognized that caste in electoral politics consists of two aspects: One, caste profiles of the elected representatives, or consideration of castes in distribution of tickets by the parties to contest elections and leaders of political parties, and second, support bases of castes to political parties. The first dimension shows the inclusion of castes in the parties and legislative bodies; the second dimension is indicative of the role of caste in determining the electoral success. The second aspect can also explain the relative weight of caste and other issues such as employment, health, education and governance, etc. in electoral politics. In view of these aspects, caste has been a major factor in determining political strategies to mobilise support of various castes. Although all kinds of factors influence voters’ decision to support political parties, caste also is one of them. Indeed, some caste or group of castes form support base of some parties. For example, the Dalits form a substantial support base of the BSP. Till the 1980s, the Congress party’s support base in north India largely consisted of Dalits, backward classes and the High castes. Paul R. Brass termed it as “coalition of castes”. Following these strategies different parties take into consideration the caste composition of a constituency and make assessment as to which caste-candidate should be allotted tickets to contest election. Even the voters quite often take into consideration the castes of the candidates while casting votes in elections. Several studies have underlined the role of caste in empowering the people, especially those from the marginalised sections of the society. Some examples these studies include: Jaffralot and Kumar (eds. 2011) the book *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face on Indian Legislative Assemblies* shows that in the post-Independence period the social

profiles of several legislative assemblies in India has seen the increase in number of persons from plebeian or marginalized caste groups such as the Dalits and the OBCs; in his book *Who Wants Democracy?* Javed Alam suggests that the low castes find caste as an empowering tool. Pratap Bhanu Mehta in *Burden of Democracy* argues democracy has inherited inequality and there is a gap between representation and responsiveness; scares state and more demands, more discretion of the state. Yogendra Yadav observes shift in changing participation of different social groups in terms of democratic upsurge. He divides this upsurge into two phases: phase of first democratic upsurge; second phase of democratic upsurge. The first democratic upsurge indicated the rise of backward classes during the 1960s-1970s, and the second democratic upsurge shows the increasing participation of Dalits. This has been due to the effective role played by the caste organizations.

In this context, Rajni Kothari underscores that the alleged 'casteism in politics' is thus no more or no less than politicization of caste. In other words, it is not politics that gets impacted by caste, it is caste that gets politicised. Caste is one of the most important aspects of social and political life in India. As a social institution, it is strongly entrenched and despite the modernisation trends in India (as a result of urbanisation, improved means of communication and development of secular education) the caste factor persists. Although caste has undergone many changes it has become a factor to be reckoned with in politics and no political party ignores it.

11.6 ROLE OF CASTE IN NON-ELECTORAL POLITICS

The caste system in its attempts to adjust itself to the changed conditions of life has tried to reformulate itself in new roles. Due to industrialisation and urbanisation, and other factors such as Westernisation, reorganisation of Indian states, spread of education, socio-religious reforms, spatial and occupational mobility and growth of market economy have greatly affected the caste system. Changes in the role of caste must also be understood in the light of the influence of these factors. As discussed in the previous section, caste plays a crucial role in the politics of the country - it is also true that caste plays a crucial role in non-electoral spheres.

It is expected that spread of education would make people liberal, broad-minded, rationale and democratic. Hence, with the growing literacy rate in India, caste-mindedness and casteism would take a back-stage. However, rising literacy has resulted in the increasing caste-consciousness of the members of the group or community. This has resulted in every caste wanting to safeguard their interests, which has been accomplished by organising themselves as unions as pressure groups. These groups mainly cater to the issues of educational, medical and religious needs of their members, these organisations are running hostels and hospitals, schools and colleges, reading-rooms and libraries, *dharmashalas* and temples and so on. These caste-based organisations are also trying to project the leadership of some of their members to serve as their spokesmen. Caste organisations are increasing and are making every attempt to obtain the loyalty of their members and to strengthen their caste-identity and solidarity.

Although, Caste Panchayats are deteriorating, caste organisations are on the increase. Some of these organisations have their own written constitutions and managing committees through which they try to preserve some of the caste rules and practices. Some of the Caste organisations run their own papers, bulletins, periodicals, monthlies etc., through which they regularly feed information to the members regarding the activities of caste organizations and achievements of caste-members. There are several attempts which are made to increase caste integration through the establishment of caste-based trusts and trust-units. These trusts arrange annual gatherings, get-togethers, annual dinners, occasional festival celebrations, etc. They offer scholarships to the poor students of the caste. Some of them run schools, colleges, hostels, maternity-homes for caste members. These organisations are making efforts to improve the economic conditions of caste members by establishing cooperative credit and industrial societies.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- Note:** i) Use the space below for your answers.
ii) Check your answers with the model answers given at the end of this unit.

1) What are the issues raised by the caste organizations?

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2) Explain the role of caste in electoral and non-electoral politics.

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11.7 LET US SUM UP

Caste acts both as divisive and cohesive factor in Indian Politics. It provides a basis for the emergence of several interest groups in the Indian political system each of which competes with every other grouping in their struggle for recognition and power. The caste-consciousness has led to the emergence of new trends in the India politics whereby the previous caste affiliations with different political parties are getting broken down and new caste equations are emerging to replace the old ones. Under the impact of modern politics, associations of caste have become the hall- mark of political mobilization. They have emerged with the object, of pursuing political power, social status and economic interest. Members of certain caste groups, who were considered low or the lowest in socio economic hierarchy a few decades ago, now amalgamate together into a common

organization to press for their demands. With the growing confidence and status, they not only actively participate in the political process but also assert their identity and even strive for positions.

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11.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Social and religious movements brought about changes in peoples' attitude about caste. These made castes conscious about the significance of equality, freedom and social mobility.
- 2) Caste-based organisation emerged with the purpose of articulating the interests of castes. They led to democratization of Indian society as well as politicization of caste. Caste organizations exists as single caste associations and as federations of several caste associations.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) These issues generally include availability economic opportunities, political representation and empowerment of castes, and social equality to them.
- 2) In electoral politics castes work as support-base of political parties, and in non-electoral politics caste work as agency of raising social, cultural, political and economic issues when elections do not take place.

UNIT 12 CASTE AND POLITICS*

Structure

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 Caste and Politics: Scope
- 12.3 Issues in Caste Politics: Examples
 - 12.3.1 Reservation
 - 12.3.2 Violence
 - 12.3.3 Caste Symbolism and Politics
- 12.4 Caste and Electoral Politics
- 12.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.6 References
- 12.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

12.0 OBJECTIVES

In the unit 11, you have read about caste organizations and caste formations. In this unit you study how caste and political parties interact in electoral and non-electoral politics. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain the scope of caste and politics,
- Interpret the role of caste in electoral politics, and
- Establish relationship between caste and democracy.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

Caste plays a decisive role in politics. This fact has been highlighted in several studies on relationships between caste and politics in India. Political parties and caste organizations mobilize castes to address their concerns. After Independence, Indian society has undergone significant changes. These changes have affected the nature of castes and politics in India. Caste's role has widened from its traditional role of performing caste-based occupations to impact democracy. The changes in nature of caste have been caused because of states policies such as land reforms, welfare schemes, reservation in public institutions for the marginalized communities, and infrastructural development. Over the years, the presence of Dalits and OBCs has become significant in Indian politics. This is different from the initial years of Independence when only high castes and dominant middle castes dominated political space in the country. There is a relationship between caste and politics. In this relationship, it is not only politics that impacts caste, caste also impacts politics in turn. The significance of caste in politics is indicated by the fact that in several states of the country, several political parties can be identified with some castes. Since you have studied the role of caste organizations in unit 11, this unit will mainly focus on the role of political parties in mobilization of castes.

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12.2 CASTE AND POLITICS: SCOPE

Scope of caste and politics covers various issues concerning different castes and institutions that mobilize them. These institutions include caste organizations and political parties. Main issues covered in caste politics are relations of subordination and dominance between castes, caste-based violence, reservation in public institutions for jobs, social welfare schemes, social and cultural recognition, self-respect, human rights, social justice, etc. At the centre of conflicts and competition among castes is a quest for getting share in power structure. The competition among castes virtually becomes competition among political parties and political conflicts and competition among castes to get power. The political parties devise strategies to mobilize castes to win elections. The share in power through representation in institutions and policies can result in empowerment of castes. This share can be achieved by representation of castes in political institutions, especially Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha or Local institutions, and in educational and administrative structures. It is also possible through policies meant for the welfare of communities. Thus, relationship between caste and politics is about share of castes. Broadly, the scope of caste and politics includes mobilization of castes by different political parties in electoral and non-electoral politics. This also involves mobilization of castes by caste organizations which you have read in unit 11. Since India has a federal political structure, relationship between caste and politics can be viewed at different levels of this structure: the institutions of local governance (PRIs and urban governance), the Vidhan Sabha elections at state levels and the Lok Sabha at national level.

12.3 ISSUES IN CASTE POLITICS: EXAMPLES

In this sub-section, you will read about some examples of the issues that are related to caste and politics. These issues are reservation, caste-based violence, and other issues such as cultural issues and redistributive justice.

12.3.1 Reservation

In unit 13, you will read that reservations are a device to provide jobs in public institutions and representation in political institutions to various marginalized sections of society – SCs, STs, OBCs, women, and EWS, under the affirmative action programmes of the state. This unit will focus on political dimension of reservation in relation to only one of several marginalized groups – the caste. In India, caste groups which form the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) have been entitled for reservation in public institutions: SCs for jobs, admission to educational institutions, legislative bodies, and institutions of local governance; and OBCs for jobs in public institutions, admission to educational institutions, and in the institutions of local governance such as panchayats and municipalities. The issue of reservation is embedded with caste politics. Different castes are involved in politics of reservation. Castes which are excluded from reservation either demand reservation to them, abolition of caste-based reservation or exclusion of certain castes from the category entitled for reservation. The castes entitled for reservation want to retain the provisions for reservation to them. Since the categories such as SCs and OBCs consist of various castes, which have different levels of social, educational, and economic

achievement, some castes among them feel that they have not benefitted from reservation policies. They argue that benefits of reservation mostly go to the better off sections among the reserved categories of castes. For example, the Most Backward Classes in Uttar Pradesh demand that the reservation quota for the OBCs should be sub-divided so that advantage of reservation is given to them, and it does not disproportionately go to the dominant castes among the OBCs. In this context, the MBCs in some Hindi states demand sub-division of quota on the lines of Karpoori Thakur Formula. As you will read in unit 13, this formula is named after chief minister of Bihar who had sub-divided OBC quota so that extremely backward classes could benefit from reservation policy. Even the farming communities such as Jats in Rajasthan in 1999 and in Haryana in 2009, Marathas in Maharashtra in 2016 and Patels in Gujarat in 2015 launched agitations for their inclusion in the OBC category. Because of the Jats' agitation in Rajasthan, the BJP government in Delhi and UP, and the Congress government in Rajasthan included Jats in OBC list in their respective states. Both groups, supporters and opponents of reservation provide arguments in support of their positions. The opponents of reservation argue that basis of reservation should be economy and merit, caste-based reservation adversely affect merit and efficiency of governance, and some castes which are included in the OBC list are economically and politically dominant. The supporters of reservation argue that caste discrimination still exists, merit is determined by social inequalities; and in the case of the OBCs, especially those belonging to economically and politically dominant OBCs, it is argued that the constitution guarantees reservation to the socially and educationally backward communities. Improvement in their social and economic conditions does not make them socially and educationally forward. Hence, constitutionally they are entitled to reservation as OBCs.

Differences among the supporters and opponents of reservation have on several occasions led to agitations and counter-agitations. These agitations have often turned violent marked by clashes between castes supporting and opposing or destruction of public property. The agitation against the implementation of Mandal Commission report in 1990 which suggested reservation to the OBCs in jobs in the central government institutions; anti-reservation agitations in Gujarat in 1981 and 1985, and in Bihar in the 1970s are some of the examples in which reservation became a contentious issue in caste politics. The agitation against Mandal Commission report affected several states in north India, especially Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar. In this agitation one student of Delhi University named Rajeev Goswami self-immolated himself. Zoya Hasan in *Quest for Power: Oppositional Agitations and Post-Congress Politics in Uttar Pradesh*, explains how in UP different castes agitated to support or oppose the implementation of Mandal Commission Report.

Studies of Ghanshyam Shah (1987) and Nikita Sud (2012) discuss two agitations on reservation that took place in 1981 and 1985. During 1981 and 1985, in Gujarat, reservation became a source of conflict between the castes which were expected to benefit from reservation and the castes that were excluded from it. The politics of reservation in Gujarat had political background. In 1972, the government in Gujarat headed by Indira Gandhi-led Congress appointed Socially and Educationally Backward Class (SEBC) Commission under the chairmanship of Justice Baxi to identify backward classes in the state for the purpose giving them

reservation in public institutions. The appointment of the Baxi Commission was a move to fulfil the promise which the Congress had made to recognize the Kshatriya as “backward”. The Kshatriyas formed a group of different castes such as Rajputs, highest in hierarchy, Bhils, semi tribals, Varias, and Koli caste (Kothari 1970). Indeed, in the 1960s, the Congress had faced challenge from the opposition parties. In 1967 and 1969 elections, many Kshatriyas who were traditionally Congress supporters had supported the opposition Swatara Party. The Indira Gandhi-led Congress sought to win over the support of Kshatriyas by recognizing them as “backward”. Recognition as backward class was an old demand of the Kshatriyas which they had made in 1954-55 before the first Backward Class Commission. The Baxi Commission submitted its report in 1976, and its recommendations were accepted in 1978 by the Janata Party government which had replaced the Congress government. The Baxi Commission identified 82 castes as ‘backward’, 62 of these castes belonged to different sub-groups of Kolis. Among the major recommendation of commission were included the following: 10 percent reservation of seats for 82 backward communities (OBCs) in medical and engineering colleges; and for state services, it recommended that 10 per cent seats should be reserved in class III and class IV, and 5 per cent of seats in class I and II types of jobs. As most of castes identified as backward by the Baxi Commission were different sub-groups of Kolis, they would be the principal beneficiaries of reservation, the Gujarat Kshatriya Sabha (GKS) and high castes had opposed the Baxi Commission recommendations. Some castes which were not recognized as backward by the Baxi Commission demanded that they should be considered backward because of their poor economic conditions and low social status. In response, the Congress (I) government headed by Madhav Singh Solanki in 1981 appointed Rane Commission under the chairmanship of Justice C V Rane to consider if any socially and educationally backward caste was left out of the OBC category. Rane Commission submitted its Report in 1983. It rejected caste as criterion of identifying backwardness and adopted economic criterion or occupation to determine backwardness. Meanwhile, conflict between two Congress (I) leaders – Madhav Singh Solanki and Jinabhai Daraji intensified to strengthen their hold on the Congress and get support of backward castes. To counter Daraji, Madhav Singh Solanki raised OBC quota from 10 to 28 per cent in 1985, while rejecting the economic criterion suggested by Rane Commission. He did so just two months before the assembly elections which were to be held in March 1985.

In such political context, the medical students in the BJ Medical College in Ahmedabad launched an agitation against the seats reserved for SC students in the Pathology Department. Some students of this college had filed an affidavit in Gujarat High Court in November 1979 against the carry-forward, roster system, and interchangeability system of reserved seats. The student lost the case. It was followed by agitation of students demanding abolition of reservation in different cities such as Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Jamnagar, and Surat. The Dalit Panther responded that it would also launch a counter agitation, if the demand to abolish reservation was accepted. However, the state government decided to abolish the “carry forward” system in reservation of seats for SCs and STs in post-graduate studies in medicine, and chief minister said that merit would not be totally ignored in professions like medicine and teaching. In some villages in Kheda, Ahmedabad and Mehsana districts, Dalit Bastis were set on fire. In 1985, another anti-

reservation agitation took place in Gujarat. The Madhav Singh Solanki government raised reservation for the OBCs in 1985 from 10 to 28 per cent, rejecting economic criterion of Rane Commission. Like the earlier anti-reservation agitation, this agitation also started from a medical college, Morbi College in Saurashtra. The students resorted to strike and boycotted classes. In Ahmedabad, students formed All Gujarat Educational Reform Education Committee (AGERAC), which gave a call for Gujarat Bandh. The Gujarat High Court passed an order staying the increase in OBC quota, and the government appointed a committee to suggest whether quota should be increased or not and declared that it would not increase quota till the committee submitted its report. Finally, the demand of the anti-reservation was accepted. According to Shah, reservation politics in Gujarat reflected conflict within the middle class – between upper and middle caste members and new low caste entrants into the middle class. The reservations were introduced by political elite for getting votes and defusing the aspirations of the marginalized groups. The upper and high castes felt deprived because of decline in traditional social status and insecure due to the entry of low castes into middle class. The anti-reservationists were backed by capitalists and had supporters in administration and media. Similarly, in Bihar, implementation of Mungeri Lal Commission report by Karpoori Thakur government in 1978 resulted in agitations against and for reservation. The Karpoori Thakur Formula gave reservations to various castes within extremely backward caste and backward caste.

12.3.2 Violence

Violence involving caste and politics is generally related to caste-based discrimination that includes exploitation of women, economic exploitation, access to water, celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti (birthday), elections, etc. There are examples from different states in India where the low castes become victim because of unequal social status and economic inequalities. Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany in *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (1998), and Dag-Erik Berg in *Dynamics of Caste and Law: Dalits, Oppression and Constitutional Democracy* (2020) discuss some cases about caste violence in Bihar and Andhra Pradesh. In Bihar, caste-based organizations of several castes *Senas* (caste armies) emerged during the late 1970s and 1980s. These were involved in caste disputes which often turned violent. Such violence often emerged from dispute on ownership of land among other issues between Dalits and OBCs such as Kurmis or Yadav or between Dalits and high castes such as Bhumihars. One of such disputes which caught national attention occurred in Pipra village of Punpun Division of Patna district in February 1980. In the dispute over the ownership of land between Dalits and Kurmis, members of two Dalit families were shot dead and bodies of the dead and houses of Dalits were burnt. Prior to the Pipra incident took place, two Kurmi landlords were murdered in neighbouring villages, one in December 1979 and another in January 1980. There are other examples from Bihar where Dalits were killed in caste violence arising out of dispute over land or some social issue, i.e., in Belchi in 1977, in Bishrampur in 1978, and in Arwal in Jehanabad district in 1986 (Mendelsohn and Vicziani, 1998: pp. 62-64). In Andhra Pradesh, caste-based violence on Dalits including deaths occurred in three cases: in Kanchikacherla village of Krishna district in 1968, in Karmachedu village of

Krishna district on 17 July 1985, and Tsunder village of Guntur district in 1991. The Dalits had been victims of the landowning locally dominant caste. Giving example of Karmachedu massacre, Berg (2020) argues that it had occurred because of two reasons – provocation caused due to upward mobility of Dalits, and control on political power of landowning dominant peasant caste, Kamma. The Karmachedu massacre has its roots in dispute: on 17 July 1985 a Dalit (Madiga) boy rebuked a Kamma boy for washing his buffalo in the water tank from where Madiga drew water. In retaliation, the Kamma boy beat up the Dalit boy and an Madiga elderly woman who was present intervened. This led to retaliation from the Kammas, resulting to attack on residents of Madigawada. In the attack, houses of Dalits were set on fire, and six of them died. The Karmachedu massacre impacted the course of Dalit movement in Andhra Pradesh. And as an immediate response to the massacre the Dalit Mahasabha was formed in Andhra Pradesh. The incident also had significance for political parties in Andhra Pradesh. The opposition Congress underlined that the some Kamma families of the village had relations with the chief minister, the Telugu Desam Party Chief, N.T. Rama Rao.

12.3.3 Caste Symbolism and Politics

Caste Symbols – caste icons, historical figures, mythologies are important tools of caste mobilization. Recognition of such symbolism gives a sense of self confidence to the castes associated with such symbols. Four Political regimes, led by Mayawati chief in Uttar Pradesh at different times between 1995 and 2012 that underlined importance of caste symbols, and mobilization on such symbols by her party, the BSP, are important examples of use of caste symbols in politics. The Mayawati governments identified several villages as Ambedkar villages in UP. These villages have substantial Dalit population. She introduced several policies for the welfare of Dalits in these villages, as well as for development of such villages. Her government also constructed Ambedkar Park in Lucknow and several monuments to honour symbols and icons relating to low castes and social emancipation. Her government also created several new districts in the names of such icons and renamed old several districts.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space below for your answer.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of this unit.

1) Reservation has been an important agenda in electoral politics of India. Explain.

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2) What is the nature of caste-based violence in India?

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12.4 CASTE AND ELECTORAL POLITICS

Caste and electoral politics are interrelated. In unit 4, you have read about an important aspect of caste and electoral politics, i.e., caste as one of the determinants of electoral behaviour. In this sub-section, you will read about other aspects of caste in electoral politics. These aspects are caste profiles of the elected representatives, party strategies to mobilize castes in electoral politics, and relationship between castes and support bases of political parties. Since 1950s, several scholars have studied the role of caste in electoral politics. And in India, the leading role to conduct election studies has been played by the Centre for Political Studies, popularly known as the CSDS, located in Delhi. Several studies have observed that the relationship between caste and electoral politics has undergone tremendous changes since the first general elections held in 1952. For the first few decades after independence, electoral politics was dominated by traditionally dominant castes of different regions of the country. Although constitutionally every adult irrespective of his or her caste had right to vote, on several occasions the dominant caste did not allow the Dalits and other lower castes to vote. This practice was popularly known as “booth capturing”. During the phase of Congress dominance in during 1950s-1960s, in most parts of the country, the Congress party got support of multiple castes. Its leadership was provided by the high or middle castes and it was supported in elections by castes across social hierarchy. Because of support of various caste groups, Paul R. Brass considers Congress party as coalition of castes. But since the 1970s, Congress did not remain a dominant party in the country. It was indicated by the defeat of Congress in elections in several states in 1967 and 1969. Along with the decline of Congress, there was emergence of state level leaders in several states who formed state level parties and mobilized middle caste farming communities such as Jats, Yadav, Kurmis or the OBCs. The main leadership to these groups in north India was provided by Charan Singh. They formed important segment of the Janata Party formed after emergency. The Janata Party governments in UP and Bihar gave more representations to the backward and farming communities in comparison to Congress governments which gave more representation to the high castes.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- Note:** i) Use the space below for your answer.
- ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of this unit.

1) Briefly analyse the role of caste in electoral politics.

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12.5 LET US SUM UP

Caste and politics are interrelated. They influence each other. Caste has different roles in national, state and local elections. The formation of political parties and organizations are based on many factors in which caste is foremost especially in North Indian political parties. Not only party formation but also selecting candidates are mainly based on the caste structure of that region. Reservation policy has extended the role of caste in electoral politics and it has also provided political participation of scheduled and backward castes. Reservation has extended political participation and political representation of many backward leaders in electoral politics. However, caste based violence has been the worst impact of reservation and political party and leaders are using it as a mean to manipulate and attract voters. Despite being a secular nation, caste is an integral part of Indian society and therefore, caste has been an important factor in politics.

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12.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Since different castes have different levels of social, economic and political status, in India caste groups such as SCs, STs, OBCs reservations for jobs in public institutions, admission to public educational institutions and legislative bodies (for SCs and STs) and in local government institutions. Reservation has been contentious issue in Indian politics. The castes which are included from benefit of reservation demand merit to be criterion of reservation, abolition of caste-based reservation. Those who are entitled for reservation argue that merit is shaped by social, educational economic reality and it is needed to provide social justice to the marginalized communities.
- 2) The nature of caste-based violence is generally related to caste-based discrimination that includes exploitation of women, economic exploitation, access to water, celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti (birthday), elections, etc. There are examples from different states in India where the low castes become victim because of unequal social status and economic inequalities. The caste-based violence often includes physical assault of dominant castes on the marginalized communities, especially Dalits.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Caste and electoral politics are inter-related. The political parties make their strategies to mobilize different castes. They do so by addressing their issues, by giving tickets to candidates to contest elections by consideration whether candidate will be able to get support of various castes, or whether his/her caste is influential enough. Parties such as the BSP and the SP have support base predominantly among the Dalits and OBCs. However, it is the coalition of different several castes which helps a candidate from a party to win elections.