

The Mandal Era: Identity Politics and the Change of Indian Society (1990-2000)

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Abstract:

The ten years from 1990 to 2000 were a time of major change in modern Indian history. While the 1991 New Economic Policy is often seen as the key event that started economic reforms, this paper argues that putting the Mandal Commission Report into action in 1990 was the more important social and political break of that time (Jaffrelot, 2003). The choice to give 27% of central government jobs to Other Backward Classes (OBCs) released forces that completely changed the Indian political scene. This study uses a historical-political method, looking at parliamentary debates, party election documents, important academic works, and news reports from that time. It shows how Prime Minister V.P. Singh's decision caused widespread protests against reservations. This then led the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to start the Ram Janmabhoomi movement as a planned response (Brass, 1994). This dynamic realigned the party system around the issue of caste and began a time of strong backward caste politics. The paper concludes that the "Mandal moment" permanently changed the main ideas of social justice and secularism in India, creating the basic patterns for 21st-century politics.

Keywords: Mandal Commission, Identity Politics, Caste, V.P. Singh, BJP, Reservation, Social Justice, Indian Politics, 1990s, and OBCs.

Introduction:

The last ten years of the 20th century were a time of deep change for India. The year 1991 is often called the turning point, marking the start of economic liberalization through the New Economic Policy. This policy broke the Licence Raj and connected India to the global economy. However, this story focuses too much on economics and hides a deeper, more important social and political shift that started a year earlier. On August 7, 1990, Prime Minister V.P. Singh announced his government's plan to follow the suggestions of the Mandal Commission (Government of India, 1990). This meant reserving 27% of central government jobs for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This decision released powerful forces that forever changed India's political world. This was not just a simple policy change; it was a political explosion that remade the material of Indian democracy. This paper puts forward the main idea that the Mandal action was the most important social and political event of the

1990-2000 period. While economic reforms changed policy, Mandal changed the very language of Indian politics. It caused a major shift away from the national agreement after independence, led by the Indian National Congress, towards a strong and often chaotic politics of identity (Yadav, 1999). This move broke apart long-standing voter groups, gave power to social groups that were previously pushed to the margins, and started a counter-movement that redefined majority politics. This set the stage for the political forces that would rule the 21st century. Therefore, the turmoil of the 1990s cannot be understood only through liberalization; it must be seen as the "Mandal Decade".

Objective:

The main goals of this research are three. First, it looks at the immediate political reasons and motivations behind the choice to use the Mandal Commission's suggestions. It goes beyond the talk of social justice to study the raw political tactics of the time. Second, it studies the many results of this decision. This includes the violent anti-Mandal protests, the strategic political realignment shown in the "Mandal vs. Mandir" divide, and the long-term change of the Indian party system from one dominated by Congress to a broken, coalition-based one. Finally, it looks at how the Mandal issue basically changed core constitutional ideas of social justice, secularism, and representation in Indian democracy. It forced a difficult but necessary national conversation about inequality, privilege, and citizenship (Galanter, 1991).

Research Methodology:

This study is based on a qualitative research design that combines historical and political science approaches. The method involves describing and analyzing events to build a clear story of cause and effect from many different sources. The aim is to show Mandal not as a single event but as the central point in a network of changing processes. Data collection comes from many streams to make sure the analysis is complete. Primary sources are the main evidence for this research. These include the original Report of the Backward Classes Commission (Mandal, 1980), the important Government of India order dated August 13, 1990, that officially made the policy law (Government of India, 1990), and official records of parliamentary debates from 1990-1991 (Lok Sabha Debates, 1990). These records show the heated and divisive discussions among the country's lawmakers at this important time. These primary documents are supported by strong academic writing from leading political scientists and sociologists. The works of scholars provide the needed theoretical frameworks and deep analysis for understanding the events. Also, media files from major national newspapers and weekly magazines from 1990-1992 have been studied (Sheth, 1990). This helps record the real-time order of events, measure public feeling, and understand how the national discussion developed

as it happened. Finally, to understand political strategy and language, key political speeches and election documents from central figures have been examined. The parliamentary speeches of V.P. Singh, the rallying calls of L.K. Advani during his Rath Yatra, and the populist statements of regional leaders, along with the election documents of the Janata Dal and BJP, are studied as texts that show hidden motives and strategic plans. For data analysis, this research uses two key methods. First, critical discourse analysis is used to understand the language, symbols, and framing used by different actors. Second, the method of process tracing is used to establish a clear chain of causes and effects. This supports the main claim that the Mandal decision was the key trigger for the decade's defining changes.

The Political Beginning of the Mandal Action:

To understand the earthquake of 1990, one must look at the political cracks that came before it. The Mandal Commission was set up by the Janata Party government in 1979 under B.P. Mandal. Its report, given in 1980, named 3,743 castes as OBCs, making up 52% of the population. It suggested a 27% reservation quota for them in central government jobs and public sector companies (Mandal, 1980). The Commission's methods and findings were debated, but its main argument was that backwardness was a built-in feature of Indian society, needing state action to fix it. However, for a full ten years, the report was left untouched. It was ignored by the Congress governments that followed, who were careful not to upset their mixed, cross-caste support and the existing social balance. Its sudden and dramatic use in 1990 was directly connected to the shaky political position of Prime Minister V.P. Singh. He came to power in 1989 on an anti-corruption platform after leaving the Congress. His National Front government was a weak minority coalition that needed support from both the BJP on the right and the Left Front on the left. This naturally unstable situation was made worse by internal threats. Most importantly, Singh faced a strong challenge from his Deputy Prime Minister, Devi Lal, who was building his own group inside the ruling Janata Dal.

In this situation of needing outside support and internal splits, Singh, a clever political strategist, needed a powerful tool to beat his rivals and build a strong voter base. The untouched Mandal Report was the perfect tool for this. In his important parliamentary speech on August 7, 1990, Singh described the decision in the high language of democratic inclusion and empowerment. He placed it as a moral duty to "empower the poor" and ensure "social justice" for the historically disadvantaged masses (Lok Sabha Debates, 1990).

This framing was powerful and matched the equal rights principles of the Indian constitution. Yet, under this surface of ethical duty, political experts widely saw the move as a pure act of political

tactics and "vote bank politics." As one scholar argues, it was a "well-planned political move" made clearly to "split the Hindu vote and create a new, united OBC group loyal to the Janata Dal" (Jaffrelot, 2003, p. 87). The strategic thinking had many parts. First, by appealing directly to the huge OBC population, Singh aimed to break the Congress party's traditional coalition. Second, and maybe more importantly, it was a first strike against the BJP's growing project of uniting Hindus under one, all-India religious identity. The Mandal move threatened to show the deep caste divisions inside the proposed Hindu unity. It appealed to the non-upper castes based on shared worldly disadvantage rather than shared religion. It was, in essence, an attempt to build a social justice platform that could compete with the rising wave of religious nationalism (Brass, 1994).

The Mandal Firestorm: Societal Upheaval and Political Realignment

The government's announcement caused an immediate and violent reaction, starting a firestorm of protest that spread across northern India. The centers of this upheaval were the cities of Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh, where the feeling of threat to established advantages was strongest. The leaders of this protest movement were upper-caste, urban young people, especially students from top universities and colleges. They saw the reservation policy as a direct threat to their privileged access to desired government jobs. The protests were marked by an unmatched intensity. Students led huge demonstrations that often became violent, with road blocks, public strikes, arson, and fierce fights with police. The most tragic and powerful symbols of this protest were the self-immolations by several students. These acts of extreme despair, widely covered by the national media, became burned into the nation's mind (Sheth, 1990). This anti-Mandal movement was not just about job chances; it showed a deeper social phenomenon the "anxiety of the privileged" facing a direct challenge to their long-held social and economic control. The language of the protestors often focused on the idea of "merit," which they argued was being destroyed for political gain. This talk of merit, however, was rarely placed in the context of the historical advantages of caste privilege, access to better schooling, and social connections that had long helped the upper castes (Galanter, 1991). Politically, the Mandal decision had two deep and lasting results that would reshape Indian politics for decades.

The Creation of OBC Politics and the Rise of Regional Kings:

The most direct result of the Mandal action was the political uniting of the Other Backward Classes. Mandal made caste the main, unavoidable method for political mobilization in post-Congress India. It was a loud call for OBC communities, leading to their widespread political awakening and uniting. For the first time on a national scale, a diverse and broken collection of lower castes found a

common political identity the OBC. This identity was defined against the upper castes and empowered by the state's recognition.

This empowerment helped the fast rise of powerful regional parties and leaders who built their platforms firmly on OBC assertion (Jaffrelot, 2003). The Congress's control in the key Hindi heartland states was decisively broken. In its place came parties like Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party (SP) and Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). These leaders skillfully used the symbolism of Mandal to build strong social groups that included parts of Muslims and Dalits. This phenomenon marked the rise of the lower castes in North Indian politics (Yadav, 1994). This breaking apart made detailed caste calculation and representation mandatory in politics. This effectively ended the time of one-party control at the center and began a long period of coalition governments. The federal structure of India was strengthened as regional parties, empowered by their king-making power in New Delhi, began to have unmatched influence on national policy (Yadav, 1999).

The BJP's Strategic Response: Mandir vs. Mandal:

The Mandal move created an existential problem for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The party's main supporters were largely upper-caste and business communities who were leading the anti-Mandal protests. Also, the Mandal logic threatened to break the broader Hindu vote along caste lines. This would seriously weaken the BJP's basic project of building a united Hindu political group. The party's response was quick, strategic, and skillful. Just weeks after the Mandal announcement, in September 1990, senior BJP leader L.K. Advani began a Rath Yatra (chariot journey). The journey was designed to gather mass support for building a Ram temple at the disputed Babri Masjid site. This well-planned move directly placed Mandir (temple/religion) against Mandal (caste). It aimed to absorb the new and divisive caste identities under a larger, united Hindu identity. It used religious nationalism and symbolism to counter the talk of caste-based social justice (Jaffrelot, 2003). This counter-movement proved very effective. It not only strengthened the BJP's traditional base but also allowed it to make important gains among non-Yadav OBC communities. The increasing polarization ended with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992. This event permanently scarred India's secular fabric and caused nationwide religious riots. The "Mandal vs. Mandir" divide thus became the central political split of the 1990s (Brass, 1994).

The Long-Term Change: Social Justice, Secularism, and Democracy:

The effects of the Mandal decision went far beyond immediate political realignments. It caused basic changes in the core principles of Indian democracy, namely social justice and secularism. The discussion of social justice was forever widened. Before Mandal, the constitutional conversation

on affirmative action was mostly limited to the historical wrongs done to Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and Scheduled Tribes (Adivasis). Mandal forcefully brought the OBCs a huge, intermediate social layer into the heart of this debate. It shifted the focus from untouchability to backwardness. This made the scene of social justice more complex and politically charged (Galanter, 1991). The policy also started a lasting and often bitter national debate on the ideas of merit, efficiency, and equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome. At the same time, the very meaning of Indian secularism was tested and changed. The Congress style of secularism had been one of top-down management of religious communities. The Mandal moment, and the BJP's Mandir response, broke this model. It opened the way for a new form of majority secularism (Bhargava, 1998). The rise of the BJP as a dominant national force was directly linked to its ability to navigate the post-Mandal scene by offering a majority identity that could, at least partly, overcome caste divisions. Also, the state and its institutions were deeply affected. The use of OBC reservations led to a significant change in the social makeup of the huge Indian bureaucracy, slowly making it more representative of the country's caste demographics. The courts were also thrown into the center of this storm. They were asked to rule on the legality and limits of reservations, ending in the important *Indra Sawhney vs. Union of India* (1992) case.

Here, the Supreme Court supported the 27% quota for OBCs but introduced the "creamy layer" rule to make sure the benefits did not get taken only by the richer sections among the backward classes (*Indra Sawhney & Ors. vs. Union of India*, 1993).

Conclusions:

Putting the Mandal Commission's suggestions into action is clearly the central political and social upheaval in India during the 1990s. It was a critical point that forever changed the working logic of Indian politics. V.P. Singh's decision, though made for short-term political needs and survival in a shaky political scene, started a societal change much greater than originally intended. It was the key that opened the door to a new, more assertive, and more representative democratic order (Yadav, 1999). The following decade saw the final end of the Congress system and the politics of national agreement. These were replaced by a politics of assertive identities—both of backward castes, empowered by Mandal, and of a united Hindu majority, brought together by the BJP's strategic response (Jaffrelot, 2003). The Mandal issue forced a hard but necessary national conversation on social justice, historical disadvantage, and political representation. It democratized Indian politics in a real way by bringing huge, previously marginalized OBC groups to the center stage. However, this changing moment came with significant costs and lasting contradictions. It further fixed caste

identities in public life. It also caused a majority counter-revolution that used religious nationalism to overcome caste divisions, leading to deep community splits. By the year 2000, the political scene was a direct result of this change: a broken system ruled by unstable coalition governments where regional, caste-based parties held king-making power. The lasting challenges of social unity, reservation debates, and identity mobilization that India still deals with in the 21st century are a direct legacy of the turbulent Mandal decade. It was a painful, yet necessary, change that broke an old order and created a new, more complex, and more truly representative political world. The shape of this world continues to guide the path of the world's largest democracy.

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