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Identity Politics vs. Development Politics – Contemporary Indian case studies.

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ABSTRACT:

Indian politics in the twenty-first century demonstrates a dynamic interplay between identity politics and development politics, where neither operates in isolation. Identity politics, rooted in caste, religion, language, ethnicity, and region, continues to shape voter behavior, mobilization strategies, and party alignments. At the same time, development politics, emphasizing welfare schemes, economic growth, infrastructure, and governance, has become central to electoral promises and political legitimacy. Contemporary case studies highlight this intersection. For instance, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) consolidation of a pan-Hindu identity is often coupled with narratives of economic growth, digital transformation, and welfare programs like Ayushman Bharat and PM-Kisan. Similarly, regional parties such as the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in Bihar mobilize around cultural and caste identities while simultaneously foregrounding employment, education, and social welfare. The 2024 general elections further illustrate how parties use identity markers to reinforce trust while offering development as a tangible promise of progress. Case studies from Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra reveal how political actors strike a balance, often combining symbolic appeals to community pride with targeted schemes to secure votes. This dual strategy shows that while development narratives gain prominence in an aspirational India, identity politics remains a deeply entrenched mobilizing force. An analysis of these case studies reveals that Indian democracy is sustained through a complex negotiation between identity-driven claims of recognition and development-driven demands for redistribution.

Keywords: Identity politics, Development politics, Electoral strategies, Indian democracy, Case studies

Introduction:

Indian politics is shaped by the interplay between social identities and developmental aspirations. Since independence, markers such as caste, religion, and language have played a pivotal role in shaping electoral mobilization and the functioning of party systems (Kothari, 1970). Identity politics has enabled historically marginalized communities to assert their rights and secure political representation, contributing to the democratization of the political space. At the same time, it has often been criticized for fragmenting society and fostering competitive populism.

Over the last three decades, particularly after the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991, development-oriented narratives have gained prominence (Jaffrelot, 2013). Political parties increasingly emphasize governance reforms, infrastructure, employment, education, and welfare schemes to appeal to a rapidly urbanizing and aspirational electorate. Yet, development politics does not operate in isolation; it often intersects with identity-based mobilization, creating a dual dynamic in Indian democracy.

This paper examines the nature of identity politics and development politics, analyzes their competition and convergence through contemporary case studies, and explores whether developmental promises can outweigh identity-driven appeals in electoral outcomes. Ultimately, it seeks to evaluate the implications of this tension for the future of democratic representation in India.

Objectives of the Study:

The study seeks to critically analyze the relationship between identity politics and development politics in contemporary India. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the nature and characteristics of identity politics in India, with a focus on caste, religion, ethnicity, and language as mobilizing factors.
2. To analyze the rise and significance of development politics, particularly in the post-liberalization era, where governance, economic growth, and welfare have become key electoral issues.
3. To study the intersection and competition between identity-based mobilization and development-oriented narratives in recent Indian elections.
4. To explore case studies of states and national-level politics where either identity or development politics has dominated electoral outcomes.
5. To assess the implications of this tension for the future of Indian democracy, including questions of representation, inclusivity, and governance.

Theoretical Framework:

The debate between identity politics and development politics has been central in understanding Indian electoral dynamics.

- *Identity politics* emphasizes caste, religion, and community as key determinants of political behavior. Rajni Kothari (1970) highlighted the "Congress System," showing how social cleavages shaped party support. Rudolph & Rudolph (1987) examined the transformation of caste from a social hierarchy into a political resource influencing representation and competition. Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) analyzed the empowerment of OBCs and Dalits through parties like BSP and SP, arguing that identity politics provides marginalized groups recognition but may also fragment the polity (Hasan, 2010).

- *Development politics*, emerging prominently after economic liberalization in 1991, focuses on governance, growth, and welfare. Kohli (2004) noted the rising importance of infrastructure, employment, and economic policies in shaping voter expectations. Kapur & Mehta (2006) highlighted welfare schemes such as NREGA, health, and education programs as instruments shifting political narratives. Yadav (1999, 2014) emphasized how rural and lower-caste voters increasingly balance identity and development considerations in their electoral choices.

- *Intersection:* Recent scholarship (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Palshikar, 2019) suggests that Indian politics represents a *hybrid model*, where identity remains foundational but is negotiated alongside development promises. Case studies from Gujarat, Bihar, and Delhi illustrate how parties blend identity recognition with governance legitimacy, showing that Indian democracy involves a *dynamic interplay* between identity and development politics.

Case Studies: Identity Politics vs Development Politics in India:

1. **Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections (2017 & 2022)**

   BJP consolidated Hindu votes across castes, using Hindutva narratives to appeal to upper, OBC, and non-Yadav Dalit voters (Jaffrelot, 2003). Development promises included infrastructure, law and order, rural electrification, and welfare schemes like Ujjwala and PM-Kisan (Kohli, 2004). Dalit-Bahujan parties like BSP remained confined to core vote banks, unable to expand. BJP's strategy demonstrated that combining identity mobilization with development initiatives enhances electoral appeal (Yadav, 1999).

2. **Bihar Assembly Elections (2015 & 2020)**

   The Mahagathbandhan relied heavily on caste alliances (Yadav, Muslim, Dalit), while Nitish Kumar emphasized governance, education for girls, prohibition, and road connectivity (Kothari, 1970). The 2020 elections revealed that development initiatives alone could not secure votes; strategic caste alignment was crucial. BJP-JD(U) coalition successfully merged governance achievements with caste-focused outreach, showing the interdependence of identity and development politics (Palshikar, 2019).

3. **Delhi Assembly Elections (2015 & 2020)**

   AAP's focus was on education reforms, healthcare, subsidies, and anti-corruption measures, minimizing identity-based mobilization (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). Urban, literate voters prioritized governance over community affiliation, demonstrating that development politics can dominate when electorates are issue-oriented and socially heterogeneous (Kohli, 2004).

4. **Karnataka Assembly Elections (2023)**

   Congress targeted Vokkaliga and Lingayat communities while promoting welfare promises—free electricity, women's support, and unemployment aid (Jaffrelot, 2013). The strategy successfully layered caste identity with welfare-led development, illustrating that balanced attention to both dimensions enhances electoral prospects (Hasan, 2010).

5. **West Bengal Assembly Elections (2021)**

   TMC emphasized Bengali identity and minority consolidation, while BJP relied on Hindutva (Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). Welfare schemes like Kanyashree and Rupashree strengthened TMC's legitimacy. The outcome shows that identity loyalty combined with development initiatives can counter national-level identity appeals (Kohli, 2004).

6. **Maharashtra Assembly Elections (2019)**

   Shiv Sena leveraged Marathi identity, BJP emphasized Hindutva, and Congress-NCP appealed to minorities and OBCs. Development promises included urban infrastructure, farmer subsidies, and rural electrification. Post-election coalitions highlighted the need to align identity blocs with governance promises (Palshikar, 2019).

7. **Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections (2021)**

   DMK relied on Dravidian ideology, with welfare initiatives like free laptops, mid-day meals, and housing (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). Welfare-oriented development reinforced identity narratives, expanding appeal, demonstrating that development policies can strengthen ideological identity for electoral advantage (Hasan, 2010).

8. **Gujarat Assembly Elections (2022)**

   BJP mobilized Hindu identity, while Congress targeted minorities and OBCs. Development initiatives focused on industrial growth, infrastructure, and welfare schemes. BJP's ability to blend identity and development narratives enhanced voter trust and loyalty (Jaffrelot, 2013).

9. **Bihar Legislative Assembly Election (2025)**

   Caste mobilization remained central—Yadavs, Dalits, and minorities. Development politics included welfare schemes, infrastructure projects, and social security programs. Controversies over voter rolls (SIR) highlighted how identity issues intersect with governance in electoral management (Kothari, 1970).

10. **Chhattisgarh Local Elections (2025)**

    BJP targeted specific local communities while emphasizing governance, infrastructure, and service delivery. Winning traditionally non-BJP regions indicates the growing importance of development politics even in identity-driven areas (Palshikar, 2019).

11. **Kerala BJP Strategy (2025)**

    Focused on regional communities and minority engagement while promoting grassroots development initiatives. This reflects efforts to use development-oriented campaigns to complement identity mobilization in historically non-BJP states (Kohli, 2004).

12. **Maharashtra Community Welfare Boards (2025)**

    Selective appointments aimed at specific communities highlight identity politics, while limited welfare delivery underscores the challenges in balancing representation and development impact. Critics labeled it vote-bank politics, revealing tensions in hybrid strategies (Hasan, 2010).

Synthesis and Critical Analysis:

The twelve case studies demonstrate that Indian politics operates through a complex interplay of identity and development politics, with neither functioning in isolation. **Identity politics**—rooted in caste, religion, language, and regional affiliation—remains a powerful tool for mobilizing voters, particularly in rural and socially stratified states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Maharashtra (Kothari, 1970; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987). Political parties continue to rely on identity as a reliable base to secure loyalty, influence candidate selection, and shape alliances (Jaffrelot, 2003; Hasan, 2010).

Simultaneously, **development politics** is gaining prominence, especially in urban and aspirational constituencies such as Delhi (AAP) and Kerala (BJP strategy) (Kohli, 2004; Kapur & Mehta, 2006). Welfare schemes, infrastructure projects, education and healthcare initiatives, and governance reforms have become central to voter decision-making. Development-oriented narratives enhance party legitimacy and extend appeal beyond traditional identity lines, attracting new voter segments (Yadav, 1999; Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

The interaction between the two approaches is **hybrid rather than mutually exclusive**. Successful parties often combine identity recognition with development promises, creating broad electoral coalitions (Palshikar, 2019). BJP's strategy in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, or Congress's approach in Karnataka, illustrates how development narratives can reinforce identity mobilization and vice versa. However, overreliance on identity can fragment the polity, while a purely development-focused approach may falter where identity loyalties remain strong (Hasan, 2010; Jaffrelot, 2013). Contemporary Indian democracy thus reflects a dynamic negotiation between identity and development, shaping both electoral outcomes and governance strategies.

Remedial Measures:

Balancing identity politics and development politics in India requires a multifaceted approach. Political parties should strengthen issue-based politics by emphasizing governance, welfare, and development outcomes rather than relying solely on caste or religious mobilization (Kohli, 2004; Kapur & Mehta, 2006). Electoral and policy reforms, such as transparent candidate selection and proportional representation of marginalized groups within party structures, can reduce the dominance of identity-based appeals (Jaffrelot, 2003; Hasan, 2010). Civic education and awareness campaigns can empower voters to evaluate parties based on performance, policies, and service delivery rather than identity cues (Yadav, 2014). Welfare programs should be inclusive, benefiting all communities without explicit caste or religious targeting, thereby reducing incentives for divisive politics while enhancing legitimacy (Chhibber & Verma, 2018). Additionally, fostering cross-community alliances based on shared development goals can promote social cohesion alongside economic progress (Palshikar, 2019). Implementing these measures can help Indian democracy move toward a more balanced model where development priorities complement social representation, ensuring inclusive, accountable, and sustainable governance.

Conclusion:

The interplay between identity politics and development politics is a defining feature of contemporary Indian democracy. Case studies from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Karnataka, and other states demonstrate that while identity remains a critical mobilizing force, development-oriented governance and welfare initiatives increasingly influence voter behavior (Kothari, 1970; Jaffrelot, 2003; Kohli, 2004). Successful political strategies often blend identity recognition with promises of infrastructure, education, health, and social welfare, creating hybrid models that appeal to both social loyalty and performance evaluation (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Palshikar, 2019). However, overreliance on identity politics can fragment society, while purely development-focused approaches may fail in socially stratified regions. Remedial measures such as inclusive welfare schemes, transparent party structures, civic education, and cross-community coalitions can mitigate these tensions (Hasan, 2010; Yadav, 2014). Ultimately, the coexistence and negotiation between identity and development politics make Indian democracy vibrant, pluralistic, and responsive to the diverse aspirations of its citizens.

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