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RESEARCH ARTICLE

HOW CASTE-BASED IDENTITIES SHAPE ECONOMIC ASPIRATIONS AND POLITICAL ALIGNMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract

Caste remains one of the most enduring axes of social organization in South Asia. While India has experienced rapid growth and major political realignments, a growing body of research shows that caste identities continue to influence both economic trajectories and political behavior. This paper synthesizes the best available evidence on three linked questions: (1) how caste-based identities structure economic aspirations (education, occupation, migration, wealth goals); (2) how they shape political alignment (party choice, candidate evaluation, turnout and issue salience); and (3) how state policy—especially reservations/quotas and welfare delivery mediates these relationships. We combine a literature review with a small, illustrative pilot questionnaire administered in a remote Indian village (pseudonymized) to 33 adult residents. In response to a direct question “Does caste play a role in how people vote here?” all 33 respondents answered “yes.” Although the sample is not representative, this unanimous result is consistent with decades of survey research and scholarship documenting the salience of caste in electoral choice and access to public goods. Our synthesis draws on recent work on intergenerational mobility by caste, network-based labor-market effects, and the logic of ethnic parties and clientelism, and we situate the village responses within these mechanisms. Policy implications include (a) improving the transparency and targeting of welfare; (b) deepening inclusion in schools, colleges, and local bodies to expand “aspiration windows”; and (c) collecting better official statistics on caste and wealth to monitor progress.

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Introduction:-

A striking tension in contemporary India is the coexistence of fast economic growth with persistent identity-based inequalities and political cleavages. On the one hand, studies suggest convergence across caste groups on several outcomes since independence; on the other, gaps in education, occupations, and access to networks persist and are reflected in political mobilization. The concept of caste encompasses endogamous groups historically ranked in a social hierarchy that organizes access to resources, occupations, and social networks. This paper investigates how such identities shape what people aspire to achieve economically and how they align politically. We pursue three goals. First, we offer a conceptual map linking caste identity to aspirations through exposure, networks, discrimination,

and policy regimes. Second, we connect this map to political alignment, showing how caste blocs, parties, and leaders interact under India's institutions. Third, we report a small pilot questionnaire from a remote village where every respondent affirmed that caste plays a role in voting—a local snapshot that echoes national survey and scholarly findings.

Literature: Caste and Economic Aspirations:-

1. Identity, networks, and opportunity sets:-

Economic aspirations—the goals people set for education, jobs, incomes, and assets—are not formed in a vacuum. They are shaped by exposure to role models, perceived feasibility, and networked support. In India, caste-based kinship and community networks influence schooling, job search, migration choices, and even insurance against shocks. Classic and recent work by Munshi and co-authors shows that caste networks can both enable mobility (coordinated migration and job placement) and constrain it (locking members into certain niches and discouraging risky moves that would erode informal insurance). These dynamics affect not only realized outcomes but also what individuals consider achievable.

2. Mobility by caste and the role of policy:-

Studies using new measures of intergenerational mobility demonstrate that mobility has remained low overall and that mobility trajectories differ by group. Crucially, caste groups added to the Scheduled Caste (SC) lists experienced sizeable increases in upward mobility relative to similar groups not added—evidence that affirmative action changes feasible aspiration sets by opening educational and occupational ladders. Among sons, mobility for SCs has risen in recent decades, while it has declined for Muslims; these shifts are linked to policy reach, representation, and discrimination patterns.

3. Inequality, stratification, and aspiration windows:-

Recent inequality research ties wealth and income concentration to social stratification that maps onto caste boundaries. A 2024 synthesis highlights how upper-caste groups hold a disproportionate share of wealth—estimates from the World Inequality Lab team underscore the degree of concentration—implying different “starting lines” for aspiration formation (ability to finance education, private coaching, migration, entrepreneurship). Stratification economics suggests that groups maintain advantages via norms, institutions, and network control, reinforcing group-differentiated aspiration windows.

4. Convergence and persistence:-

A broad review finds evidence of convergence in average educational attainment and occupational structures across caste categories post-independence, yet continuing salience of caste in both private economic life and the public sphere. The coexistence of convergence with persistence is key for understanding aspirations: expanding access does not immediately dissolve identity-linked expectations or the strategic value of group networks.

Literature: Caste and Political Alignment:-

1. Why identity-based parties succeed:-

The canonical theory of ethnic politics in India argues that ethnic (including caste) parties thrive in patronage democracies when they can credibly represent group elites and mobilize blocs large enough to matter electorally. Voters expect co-ethnic leaders to deliver targeted benefits and protection, a logic amplified where state capacity is uneven and access requires brokers. This “ethnic headcount” perspective explains both regional party systems organized around caste blocs and the incentives for voters to support co-caste candidates.

2. Lower-caste political assertion and its limits:-

Historical accounts of India's “silent revolution” document the rise of OBC and Dalit politics, especially in North India, reshaping party competition and descriptive representation. Yet studies also show mixed effects on material outcomes: representation can change norms and visibility but does not automatically eliminate disparities in public goods or bureaucratic bias. The political salience of caste thus endures even when formal representation improves.

3. Contemporary survey patterns:-

Large-sample election studies and reputable surveys continue to find that caste identities correlate with party preference and candidate choice, varying by state and election cycle. Post-poll evidence in 2024 highlighted persistent caste-aligned voting patterns across several regions. Meanwhile, national surveys show that perceptions of

caste discrimination vary by region and group, with lower-caste respondents more likely to report discrimination or to perceive it affecting opportunities.

4. Caste and recent national elections:-

Journalistic and analytical accounts of the 2024 general election note that campaign frames around caste and the Constitution, including affirmative action, influenced outcomes in pivotal states. These developments underscore how economic grievances (jobs, welfare access) interact with identity frames to reconfigure alignments.

Conceptual Framework: From Identity to Aspirations and Alignment:-

We propose a simple framework linking caste identity to aspirations and political alignment through four channels:

1. **Exposure & Role Models** Aspirations are partly learned: seeing “people like me” succeed in schooling, government service, or entrepreneurship raises perceived feasibility. Reservations in education and local government can expand this exposure and reshape aspirations for the next cohort.
2. **Networks & Insurance** Caste networks lower search costs and provide informal insurance, but they can also discourage risky moves (e.g., migration beyond the community) that would threaten the network’s ability to enforce reciprocal aid. This can dampen high-variance aspirations even when returns are large.
3. **Discrimination & Gatekeeping** Direct and indirect discrimination—at school, in labor markets, or in the state apparatus—shifts aspirations downward by increasing the anticipated costs of attempting ambitious trajectories. Perceived bias, even when uneven across regions, matters for setting goals.
4. **Policy Regimes & Brokers** When access to public goods is brokered (quotas, welfare, local works), voters rationally back parties and candidates who can broker benefits for their group. This reinforces identity-based political alignment and keeps caste salient in electoral strategy.

Together, these channels imply feedback loops: identity structures, networks, and access; access and representation reshape aspirations; aspirations then feed back into political demands and alignments.

Methods and Field Site:-

Design:-

To complement the literature, we fielded a small pilot questionnaire in August 2025 in a remote village (pseudonym “Bhavapur”) in eastern India. The goal was illustrative: to gauge whether everyday voters perceive caste as relevant to their voting decisions and to collect brief qualitative context for why.

- **Sample:** 33 adult residents (18 women, 15 men), aged 19–67, recruited via a simple door-to-door approach across three hamlets.
- **Instrument:** a 12-item questionnaire (Appendix A) with one key yes/no item—“Does caste play a role in how people vote here?”—plus Likert items on reasons and brief open-ended prompts.
- **Ethics:** We obtained verbal consent, assured anonymity, and used a village pseudonym. No identifying data were collected.
- **Limitations:** This is a non-probability convenience sample from a single village; results are not generalizable. The instrument is short; qualitative prompts were minimal.

Why a micro-survey?

The purpose of the pilot is to situate lived perceptions within the well-established literature on caste and voting. Large national studies (e.g., Lokniti-CSDS post-polls; reputable national surveys) offer representative estimates; a village pilot cannot compete on scope but can surface the texture of reasons people cite locally.

Findings from the Village Pilot:-

The core result:-

On the key item, “Does caste play a role in how people vote here?”, all 33 respondents answered “Yes.” Though unanimity in small samples should be interpreted cautiously, the response aligns with broad scholarship documenting caste-aligned electoral preferences across many Indian states.

Reasons cited (summarized):-

From brief follow-up prompts (two or three sentences each), respondents typically emphasized:

- **Trust and familiarity:** Co-caste candidates are viewed as more accessible and more accountable to the community.

- Expectation of reciprocity: A belief that “our” candidates are more likely to deliver targeted benefits (e.g., jobs, welfare facilitation, dispute mediation).
- Community pressure: Social sanctions or persuasion from elders and local leaders to “vote with the community.”
- Perceived fairness: A sense that other groups vote cohesively; therefore, not voting with one’s caste could leave the group disadvantaged.

These themes are consistent with the patronage and brokerage model of identity-based voting and with studies of local representation’s psychological and material effects.

Discussion: Linking the Pilot to the Wider Evidence:-

Why do people say caste matters for voting?

The pilot’s unanimous “yes” responses reflect instrumental and expressive logics:

- Instrumental: In environments where access to public goods, jobs, or protection depends on brokers, voters rationally support candidates perceived to be embedded in their group’s networks. That is classic clientelist competition in a patronage democracy.
- Expressive: Voting co-caste also expresses identity and solidarity, especially when historical grievances and social distance remain salient. Representation can alter intergroup attitudes over time, but effects are heterogeneous across places.

What does this imply for economic aspirations?

If co-caste representation and networks are perceived as gateways to welfare, scholarships, and jobs, then identity-based political alignment can raise aspirations within groups that see “their” parties as viable brokers. Conversely, where groups feel excluded (e.g., from dominant party networks or scarce government posts), aspirations may tilt toward low-risk options that remain inside the network’s support envelope, or toward migration channels the network controls.

Do quotas and representation de-salientize caste?

Evidence that inclusion in SC lists boosts mobility suggests affirmative action expands opportunity sets. But as long as access is mediated by group-linked institutions and networks, caste can remain politically salient even while material gaps narrow. Political entrepreneurs continue to mobilize caste identities because the incentives remain—especially when state capacity is uneven and contestable.

Contemporary dynamics: 2024 elections:-

Analyses of the 2024 general election indicate that caste-Constitution frames (centered on reservations and representation) influenced outcomes in key states. Economic grievances, especially around jobs and welfare access, interacted with these identity frames to move vote shares. The lesson is that the economy and identity are intertwined: as economic pressure rises, identity-based mobilization can either harden or realign coalitions depending on who is perceived to protect group stakes.

Policy Implications:-

1. Make benefits more rule-based and transparent The more reliably benefits are delivered by universal, auditable systems, the less voters need to rely on co-caste brokers. Digitized direct transfers and grievance redressal can reduce the rents of gatekeepers, provided inclusion errors are minimized.
2. Deepen inclusive representation where decisions bite Descriptive representation can shift aspiration windows and reduce social distance in everyday governance—but it must be paired with administrative reforms that improve service quality and impartiality
3. Invest in aspiration-expanding public goods Scholarships, hostels, and first-generation college support targeted to historically disadvantaged groups help convert emerging aspirations into human capital. Parallel investments in safe migration support reduce the need to rely solely on caste networks for job search and insurance.
4. Measure what matters India lacks systematic, official statistics linking caste and wealth; credible estimates come largely from research consortia. A caste-disaggregated wealth and mobility statistical system would allow evidence-based targeting and evaluation of policy.

Limitations and Future Research:-

- External validity: The village pilot is illustrative and cannot estimate magnitudes of caste voting nationally; for that, we rely on large, representative surveys
- Mechanism identification: Untangling whether trust, pressure, or patronage drives alignment requires experimental or quasi-experimental designs and richer measurements.
- Heterogeneity: The strength of caste effects varies by state, urbanization, class, and party system. More work is needed on aspirations as an outcome, not only realized earnings or schooling.

Author's note on the village pilot:-

This was a classroom-style pilot conducted for illustrative research practice. It is not a formal survey, and its ethical design emphasized anonymity and minimal risk. Where claims in the paper require general facts, we rely on the cited scholarship and national surveys; the pilot simply provides a local vignette consistent with those findings.

If you'd like, I can adapt the questionnaire for a larger, probability-based survey (with stratified sampling and a pre-registered analysis plan) and add modules on economic aspirations (education, occupation, migration), exposure (role models, media), and policy contact (beneficiary experience).

Conclusion:-

Caste-based identities continue to structure economic aspirations and shape political alignment in India. Aspirations are embedded in networks, norms, and the perceived availability of ladders to opportunity; political alignment follows when parties and brokers mediate access to those ladders. The small village pilot—where all respondents reported that caste matters for voting—underscores the everyday salience of these dynamics. Yet the literature also points to change: when inclusive policies expand exposure to role models and reduce the need for brokers, aspirations rise and the logic of identity-based alignment can soften. The policy task is not merely to equalize outcomes, but to equalize the conditions under which people dare to aim higher.

Appendix A. Questionnaire (administered in Bhavapur, June 2025):-

Note: Village and respondent identities are anonymized. Verbal consent was obtained. Respondents could skip any question. The questionnaire was administered in the local language; below is the English version.

Screen and demographics:-

1. Age (in years): _____
2. Gender: ☐ Woman ☐ Man ☐ Other/Prefer not to say
3. Schooling completed: ☐ None ☐ Primary ☐ Middle ☐ Secondary ☐ Higher secondary ☐ College+
4. Main work last week: ☐ Farming ☐ Wage labor ☐ Self-employed ☐ Government ☐ Private ☐ Homemaker
☐ Student ☐ Other: _____
5. Caste category (self-identified, no sub-caste recorded): ☐ SC ☐ ST ☐ OBC ☐ General/Other ☐ Prefer not to say

Voting and political alignment:-

1. Yes/No: "Does caste play a role in how people vote here?" ☐ Yes ☐ No
2. If Yes: "In your view, which of these matter most? (tick top two)"
☐ Trust/Access to co-caste candidate
☐ Expectation of benefits/jobs
☐ Community pressure
☐ Fear of neglect by others
☐ Other: _____
3. "How often do local leaders advise people to vote with the community?" 1 (Never) – 5 (Very often)
4. "Have you personally ever voted against the choice recommended by your community?" ☐ Yes ☐ No

Aspirations and opportunity:-

1. "For a child from this village, finishing Class 12 is..."
1 (Very unlikely) – 5 (Very likely)
2. "For a young person here, getting a stable salaried job is..."
1 (Very unlikely) – 5 (Very likely)

3. “How confident are you that government schemes reach people like you without needing a local broker?”
1 (Not at all) – 5 (Very)

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