iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 13 **Issue:** VIII **Month of publication:** August 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2025.73825

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 13 Issue VIII Aug 2025- Available at www.ijraset.com

Caste, Class, and Democracy: Emerging Patterns in Indian Electoral Politics

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Abstract: ***This paper examines the evolving dynamics of caste, class, and democratic politics in contemporary India, analyzing how these social structures continue to shape electoral outcomes while simultaneously being transformed by democratic processes. Through an examination of electoral trends, party strategies, and voter behavior patterns, this study argues that while caste remains a significant factor in Indian politics, its influence is increasingly mediated by class considerations, regional variations, and generational changes. The paper explores how India's democratic institutions have both perpetuated and challenged traditional hierarchies, creating new forms of political mobilization that transcend conventional caste-class boundaries.***

Keywords: Indian democracy, caste politics, electoral behavior, social stratification, political mobilization.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's democratic experiment, spanning over seven decades, presents one of the most fascinating cases of how traditional social structures interact with modern political institutions. The relationship between caste, class, and democracy in India defies simple categorization, representing a complex web of continuity and change that continues to evolve with each electoral cycle. This paper seeks to understand these emerging patterns, examining how caste and class considerations shape electoral politics while being simultaneously transformed by democratic participation.

The significance of this analysis extends beyond academic interest. As the world's largest democracy, India's experience offers crucial insights into how deeply entrenched social hierarchies can coexist with, and be gradually transformed by, democratic processes. The Indian case challenges conventional wisdom about the prerequisites for successful democratization and provides valuable lessons for understanding democracy in diverse, stratified societies.

This research employs a multi-dimensional approach, analyzing electoral data, party manifestos, campaign strategies, and voting patterns across different states and time periods. The paper argues that while caste continues to play a significant role in Indian electoral politics, its influence is increasingly complex and mediated by factors such as economic development, education, urbanization, and generational change.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Classical Perspectives on Caste and Politics

The relationship between caste and politics in India has been extensively studied since the country's independence. Early scholars like M.N. Srinivas and Andre Beteille provided foundational insights into how traditional caste hierarchies would interact with democratic institutions. Srinivas's concept of "Sanskritization" suggested that lower castes would seek upward mobility through the adoption of upper-caste practices, while his later work on "dominant castes" highlighted how numerically significant castes could leverage democratic processes to gain political power.

Rajni Kothari's seminal work "Caste in Indian Politics" argued that rather than democracy eliminating caste, it had actually strengthened caste identities by making them politically relevant. This perspective suggested that democratic competition would intensify caste consciousness as political parties sought to mobilize caste-based vote banks.

B. Contemporary Theoretical Frameworks

More recent scholarship has moved beyond the simple caste-democracy binary to explore more nuanced relationships. Scholars like Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar have argued for understanding caste as a "modern" phenomenon that has been reconstructed and reimagined through democratic processes. Their work suggests that contemporary caste identities are fundamentally different from pre-independence hierarchies, having been transformed through political mobilization and democratic participation.

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The emergence of Dalit studies, led by scholars like Gopal Guru and Anand Teltumbde, has brought critical perspectives to bear on how democratic institutions have both empowered and constrained the political agency of formerly marginalized communities. This literature emphasizes the need to understand caste not merely as a cultural phenomenon but as a system of power relations that intersects with economic and political structures.

C. Class-Based Analyses

The role of class in Indian politics has received comparatively less attention than caste, partly due to the apparent weakness of class-based political mobilization. However, scholars like Pranab Bardhan and Ashutosh Varshney have argued that class considerations are increasingly important, particularly in urban areas and among younger voters. The rise of economic issues in electoral campaigns and the growing importance of development-oriented politics suggest that class-based concerns are gaining prominence alongside caste identities.

III. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of electoral data with qualitative examination of political developments and case studies. The research draws on election results from 1950 to 2024, analyzing voting patterns across different states, constituencies, and demographic groups. The quantitative analysis focuses on correlation patterns between caste composition, economic indicators, and electoral outcomes. This includes examination of reserved constituencies, the performance of caste-based parties, and the relationship between development indicators and voting behavior.

Qualitative analysis includes content analysis of party manifestos, campaign materials, and political speeches to understand how parties frame appeals to different social groups. Case studies of specific states and constituencies provide deeper insights into how local dynamics shape the broader patterns observed in national data.

IV. HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CASTE-CLASS-DEMOCRACY INTERACTIONS

1) The Nehru Era (1947-1964)

The early decades of Indian democracy were characterized by the Congress Party's attempt to build a broad coalition that transcended caste lines while simultaneously implementing affirmative action policies for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Nehru's vision of a modern, secular India sought to marginalize caste considerations in favor of class-based development policies.

However, even during this period, caste considerations were never entirely absent from political calculations. The Congress Party's success lay partly in its ability to accommodate diverse caste groups within its broad coalition, with careful attention to caste balance in ticket distribution and leadership positions. The introduction of reservations in legislatures and government employment represented an acknowledgment that formal equality was insufficient to address historical disadvantages. This marked the beginning of a tension between liberal democratic ideals and the recognition of group-based inequalities that would characterize Indian politics throughout its history.

2) The Rise of Backward Classes Politics (1960s-1980s)

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the emergence of explicitly caste-based political movements, particularly among Other Backward Classes (OBCs). The Mandal Commission, established in 1978, represented a watershed moment in recognizing the political claims of backward castes, though its recommendations would not be implemented until 1990. During this period, regional parties began to challenge Congress dominance by mobilizing specific caste groups. Parties like the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar emerged as vehicles for backward caste assertion, fundamentally altering the landscape of Indian politics. The Emergency period (1975-1977) temporarily disrupted these emerging patterns, but the subsequent Janata Party victory demonstrated the potential for anti-Congress coalitions built around caste and regional identities.

3) The Mandal Era and Its Aftermath (1990s-2000s)

The implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990 marked a decisive shift toward more explicit recognition of caste in Indian politics. The violent protests that followed and the subsequent political realignments demonstrated both the continued salience of caste identities and the transformative potential of democratic institutions. The 1990s saw the rise of explicitly Dalit parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which sought to create an alternative political vision based on the unity of marginalized communities. The BSP's success in Uttar Pradesh demonstrated that democratic institutions could provide pathways for political empowerment previously unavailable to marginalized groups.

Simultaneously, the Hindu nationalist movement, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), sought to create a unified Hindu identity that would transcend caste divisions. This represented a different strategy for managing caste diversity within democratic institutions.

4) Contemporary Developments (2010s-2020s)

Recent decades have witnessed increasingly complex patterns of caste-class interaction. The rise of aspirational politics, driven by economic growth and increased access to education and media, has created new forms of political identity that combine caste consciousness with class aspirations.

The BJP's electoral success since 2014 has been attributed to its ability to create new coalitions that cut across traditional caste lines while maintaining its upper-caste base. The party's focus on nationalism and development has provided alternative frameworks for political mobilization that compete with caste-based appeals.

V. EMERGING PATTERNS IN CONTEMPORARY ELECTORAL POLITICS

A. The Persistence of Caste in Electoral Calculations

Despite predictions of caste's declining relevance, empirical evidence suggests that caste considerations remain important in electoral politics. Analysis of candidate selection, vote share patterns, and post-election surveys consistently shows the continued salience of caste identities in voter behavior.

However, the nature of caste politics has evolved significantly. Rather than simple caste-based voting, contemporary patterns show more strategic and conditional forms of caste mobilization. Voters increasingly consider multiple factors alongside caste identity, including candidate characteristics, party performance, and issue positions.

Reserved constituencies continue to show distinct patterns, with Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe constituencies often exhibiting different electoral dynamics compared to general constituencies. The success of parties in these constituencies depends heavily on their ability to appeal to the specific concerns of these communities while building broader coalitions.

B. The Growing Influence of Class Considerations

Economic development and increased prosperity have introduced new dimensions to electoral politics. Urban constituencies, in particular, show evidence of class-based voting patterns, with middle-class voters increasingly prioritizing governance and development issues over traditional identity considerations.

The rise of regional parties focused on development and good governance, such as the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and Punjab, suggests that class-based concerns can provide viable alternatives to caste-based mobilization. These parties' success among educated, middle-class voters demonstrates the potential for new forms of political coalition-building.

However, the relationship between class and caste is not simply one of substitution. In many cases, class mobility has strengthened rather than weakened caste identities, as successful members of particular castes use their resources to benefit their broader caste community.

C. Regional Variations and State-Specific Patterns

One of the most striking features of contemporary Indian politics is the significant variation across states in the salience of caste and class considerations. States like Tamil Nadu have developed strong regional identities that compete with caste-based appeals, while states like Bihar continue to show strong patterns of caste-based voting.

These variations reflect different historical trajectories, economic development patterns, and social mobilization experiences. The federal structure of Indian democracy has allowed for experimentation with different models of political mobilization, creating a natural laboratory for understanding the conditions under which caste or class considerations become more prominent.

D. Generational Changes and Youth Politics

Younger voters show different patterns of political behavior compared to older generations. Survey evidence suggests that while young people remain aware of caste identities, they are more likely to consider other factors in their voting decisions. This includes greater attention to employment opportunities, educational access, and quality of governance.

The rise of social media and increased access to information has also changed how political identities are formed and expressed. Young people are more likely to engage with politics through issue-based movements and are more critical of traditional forms of caste-based mobilization.

VI. CASE STUDIES

A. *Uttar Pradesh: The Laboratory of Indian Politics*

Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, provides a crucial case study for understanding contemporary caste-class dynamics. The state has witnessed intense competition between parties representing different caste coalitions, including the Samajwadi Party (Yadavs and Muslims), the Bahujan Samaj Party (Dalits and Brahmins), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (upper castes and other Hindu groups). The BJP's success in recent elections has been attributed to its ability to expand beyond its traditional upper-caste base to include non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits. This demonstrates the possibility of creating new caste coalitions through effective political strategy and messaging.

Economic considerations have also played an increasingly important role, with voters responding to promises of development and employment generation. The success of welfare schemes targeted at specific economic groups, such as the PM Kisan scheme for farmers, shows how class-based appeals can complement caste-based mobilization.

B. *Tamil Nadu: Regional Identity vs. Caste Politics*

Tamil Nadu presents a contrasting case where regional identity and linguistic nationalism have largely superseded caste-based politics at the state level. The dominance of Dravidian parties (DMK and AIADMK) has created a political system where caste considerations, while not absent, are subordinated to broader regional concerns.

The success of this model demonstrates the possibility of transcending caste divisions through alternative forms of identity construction. However, caste considerations remain important in local politics and candidate selection, suggesting that regional identity complements rather than completely replaces caste consciousness.

C. *Gujarat: Development Politics and Caste Accommodation*

Gujarat under BJP rule has been cited as an example of development-oriented politics that transcends caste divisions. The party's emphasis on economic growth and business-friendly policies has created a political discourse focused on class and economic interests rather than caste identities. However, closer analysis reveals that this apparent transcendence of caste has been achieved through careful caste accommodation within party structures and ticket distribution. The BJP's success lies not in eliminating caste considerations but in managing them effectively while emphasizing alternative political themes.

VII. PARTY STRATEGIES AND ELECTORAL APPEALS

A. *The Congress Party's Evolving Strategy*

The Indian National Congress, once the dominant party in Indian politics, has struggled to adapt to the changing dynamics of caste and class politics. The party's traditional strategy of building broad coalitions across caste lines has become increasingly difficult as caste-based parties have captured specific vote banks. Recent attempts to revitalize the party have included a focus on economic inequality and pro-poor policies, representing a shift toward more explicit class-based appeals. However, the party continues to grapple with the challenge of maintaining relevance in a political system increasingly characterized by sharp caste and regional divisions.

B. *The BJP's Coalition Building*

The Bharatiya Janata Party's electoral success has been built on its ability to combine traditional upper-caste support with newer coalitions that transcend caste lines. The party's emphasis on Hindu nationalism provides an overarching framework that can accommodate diverse caste groups while maintaining ideological coherence. The party's use of development discourse and welfare schemes has allowed it to make appeals to class interests while maintaining its caste-based support structures. This dual strategy represents one of the most successful examples of managing caste-class tensions in contemporary Indian politics.

C. *Regional and Caste-Based Parties*

Parties like the Samajwadi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, and Bahujan Samaj Party continue to rely primarily on caste-based mobilization, though they have increasingly incorporated class-based appeals into their messaging. These parties face the challenge of expanding beyond their core caste constituencies without alienating their traditional supporters. The success of these parties in their stronghold states demonstrates the continued viability of caste-based political mobilization, while their struggles to expand geographically highlight the limitations of such strategies in a diverse federal democracy.

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VIII. THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

A. *Urbanization and Changing Social Relations*

Rapid urbanization has created new social contexts that challenge traditional caste hierarchies while creating new forms of class-based stratification. Urban environments, with their emphasis on education, employment, and consumer culture, provide alternative sources of social identity that can compete with caste-based identities.

However, urban areas also witness new forms of caste assertion, as communities seek to maintain their identities and networks in unfamiliar environments. The persistence of caste-based residential segregation in many cities demonstrates that urbanization does not automatically lead to the erosion of caste consciousness.

B. *Education and Social Mobility*

Increased access to education, particularly higher education, has created new possibilities for social mobility that can transcend traditional caste boundaries. Educational achievements provide alternative sources of social status and can reduce the salience of ascriptive identities. The implementation of caste-based reservations in educational institutions has both facilitated this mobility and reinforced the political relevance of caste categories. This creates a complex dynamic where educational opportunities both challenge and reinforce caste-based thinking.

C. *Economic Liberalization and Class Formation*

The economic reforms initiated in 1991 have accelerated class formation in Indian society, creating new forms of inequality based on access to economic opportunities rather than traditional social hierarchies. The growth of the service sector and the emergence of new forms of employment have created possibilities for economic advancement that can transcend caste boundaries.

However, existing social networks and cultural capital, often caste-based, continue to play important roles in accessing these new opportunities. This suggests that class and caste considerations are becoming intertwined in complex ways rather than simply replacing each other.

IX. IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

A. *Representation and Legitimacy*

The continued salience of caste and class considerations raises important questions about democratic representation and legitimacy. The Indian system's accommodation of group-based representation through reservations and other measures has enhanced the legitimacy of democratic institutions among previously marginalized communities.

However, this approach also creates tensions with liberal democratic ideals that emphasize individual equality and merit-based selection. The ongoing debates over reservations policy reflect these deeper tensions about the nature of democratic equality in diverse societies.

B. *Policy Making and Governance*

The influence of caste and class considerations on electoral politics has significant implications for policy making and governance. The need to maintain electoral coalitions often requires parties to balance the competing demands of different social groups, potentially limiting policy coherence and effectiveness.

However, the democratic accountability created by electoral competition also ensures that governments must remain responsive to the concerns of diverse social groups. This can lead to more inclusive policy making, even if it sometimes comes at the cost of technical efficiency.

C. *Social Cohesion and National Integration*

The persistence of caste and class divisions in electoral politics raises concerns about social cohesion and national integration. Critics argue that democratic competition based on group identities can exacerbate social divisions and undermine efforts to build a unified national identity.

However, supporters argue that democratic accommodation of group differences is preferable to forced assimilation and that electoral competition provides peaceful mechanisms for managing social diversity. The Indian experience suggests that democracy can coexist with significant social diversity, though not without ongoing tensions and challenges.

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X. CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of caste, class, and democracy in Indian electoral politics reveals a complex and evolving landscape that defies simple categorization. While caste continues to play a significant role in electoral calculations, its influence is increasingly mediated by class considerations, regional variations, generational changes, and new forms of political mobilization.

The Indian experience demonstrates that democracy can coexist with significant social diversity and deep-rooted hierarchies, though not without ongoing tensions and adaptations. The country's federal structure and competitive electoral system have provided mechanisms for accommodating diverse social groups while maintaining democratic legitimacy.

Several key findings emerge from this analysis. First, caste and class considerations do not simply replace each other but interact in complex ways that vary across regions, generations, and political contexts. Second, democratic institutions have both perpetuated and transformed traditional social hierarchies, creating new possibilities for political mobilization and social change. Third, successful political parties have learned to navigate these complexities by developing strategies that can simultaneously appeal to different social groups while maintaining ideological coherence.

The implications of these findings extend beyond the Indian context. As other diverse societies grapple with questions of democratic representation and social inclusion, the Indian experience provides valuable lessons about the possibilities and challenges of democratic governance in stratified societies.

Looking ahead, several trends are likely to shape the future evolution of Indian electoral politics. Continued economic development and social change will create new opportunities for class-based political mobilization while potentially reducing the salience of traditional caste hierarchies. Technological change will provide new tools for political communication and organization that may transform existing patterns of electoral competition. Generational change will bring new cohorts of voters with different social identities and political priorities.

However, the institutional embedding of caste categories in reservation policies and the continued relevance of caste networks in social and economic life suggest that caste considerations will remain important, even as their political expression evolves. The challenge for Indian democracy will be to continue accommodating this diversity while building the social cohesion necessary for effective governance and national development.

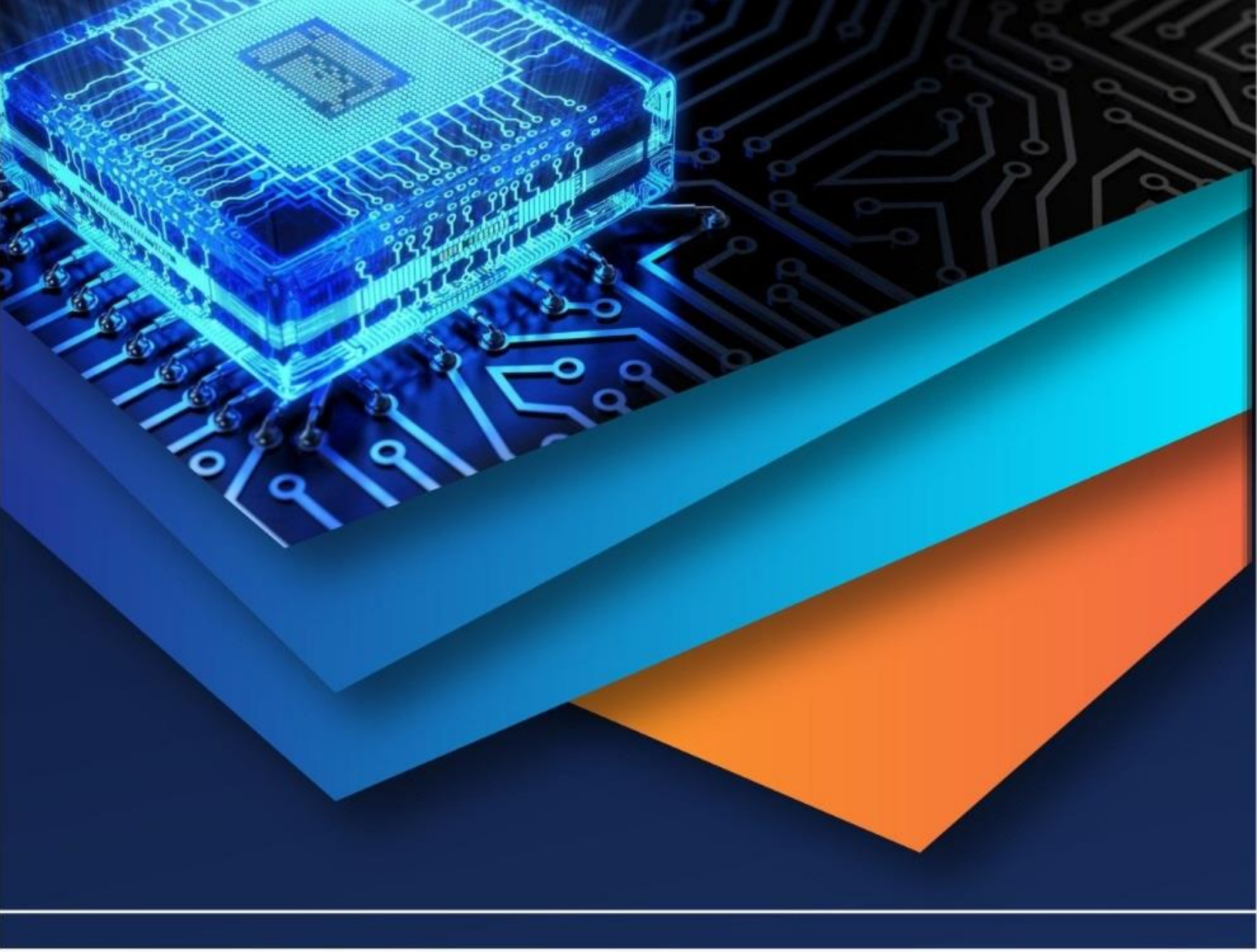
The study of caste, class, and democracy in India ultimately reveals the remarkable adaptability of democratic institutions and their capacity to evolve in response to changing social conditions. This adaptability provides grounds for optimism about the future of democratic governance in diverse societies, while also highlighting the ongoing challenges that such societies must navigate.

As India continues to develop economically and socially, the relationship between caste, class, and democracy will undoubtedly continue to evolve. Understanding these changes requires continued empirical research, theoretical innovation, and careful attention to the complex ways in which social structures and political institutions interact in democratic societies.

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