Role of Caste Identities in Shaping Democratic Processes in Madhubani District of Bihar

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Abstract

The present study examines the role of caste identities in shaping democratic processes in Madhubani district of Bihar, a region deeply embedded in the Mithila cultural landscape where caste-based social hierarchies continue to influence political behaviour. The primary objectives of this research are to analyze the extent to which caste identities determine voting patterns and to assess caste-based representation in electoral politics within Madhubani district. The study employs a descriptive-analytical research design, utilizing secondary data sourced from the Election Commission of India, Census of India 2011, and published scholarly literature. The hypothesis posits that caste identities significantly determine voter preferences and candidate selection processes in Madhubani. The findings reveal that caste remains a decisive variable in electoral mobilization, candidate nomination, and alliance formation. Upper castes, OBCs, and Scheduled Castes demonstrate distinct voting alignments linked to specific political parties. The discussion highlights that while developmental narratives have gained some traction, caste arithmetic continues to dominate seat-level electoral strategies. The study concludes that democratic processes in Madhubani are substantially mediated through caste identities, necessitating policy interventions that promote issue-based political engagement over identity-driven mobilization.

Keywords: Caste Identity, Democratic Process, Electoral Behaviour, Madhubani, Bihar Politics

1. Introduction

Caste has been an enduring feature of India's social and political fabric since independence. The democratic framework envisioned by the Constitution intended to dismantle hierarchical social structures through universal adult franchise, reservation policies, and affirmative action. However, the interplay between caste and democracy has produced a paradoxical outcome wherein democratic processes themselves have become vehicles for caste assertion rather than instruments for social equalization (Kothari, 1970). Bihar, among all Indian states, represents the most vivid illustration of this phenomenon, where electoral politics has historically revolved around caste consolidation, fragmentation, and realignment (Jaffrelot, 2003). Madhubani district, situated in the Mithila region of northern Bihar, presents a particularly compelling case for studying caste-democracy dynamics. With a total population of 4,487,379 as per Census 2011, the district is overwhelmingly rural with 96.4% population residing in rural areas and a literacy

rate of merely 58.62%, significantly below the national average (Census of India, 2011). Scheduled Castes constitute 13.08% of the population while Scheduled Tribes account for only 0.09%. The district's social composition comprises dominant upper-caste groups such as Brahmins and Kayasthas, alongside substantial OBC populations including Yadavs and Koeris, and Dalit communities primarily comprising Paswans and Musahars (Witsoe, 2013).

The political landscape of Madhubani has been historically shaped by the interplay of Maithil Brahmin hegemony and the subsequent assertion of backward castes following the Mandal Commission era. The rise of Lalu Prasad Yadav in 1990 fundamentally transformed Bihar's political geography by mobilizing a Muslim-Yadav coalition against upper-caste dominance, a shift that Jaffrelot (2003) termed a "silent revolution" in North Indian politics. Subsequently, Nitish Kumar's governance model from 2005 onward attempted to construct a broader coalition incorporating Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs) and Mahadalits alongside upper-caste support (Kumar, 2013). These macro-level political shifts have had direct implications on Madhubani's democratic processes, where assembly constituencies such as Madhubani, Benipatti, Harlakhi, Khajauli, Rajnagar, and Babubarhi have consistently demonstrated caste-determined electoral outcomes (Election Commission of India, 2020). This study investigates how caste identities mediate democratic participation, representation, and political mobilization in Madhubani district, contributing to the growing body of scholarship on sub-regional electoral politics in India (Biswas, 2023; Yadav, 1999).

2. Literature Review

The scholarly engagement with caste and democracy in India has evolved through multiple theoretical frameworks. Rajni Kothari's (1970) seminal work established that caste in Indian politics does not simply represent a traditional institution intruding into modern politics but rather demonstrates a process of mutual interpenetration whereby caste gets politicized and politics gets casteized. This foundational insight remains relevant to understanding Madhubani's political dynamics. Christophe Jaffrelot (2003) extended this analysis in his comprehensive study of lower-caste political assertion in North India, demonstrating how backward-caste movements transformed Bihar's political landscape from upper-caste Congress hegemony to a competitive multi-party system structured around caste coalitions. Yogendra Yadav (1999) conceptualized India's evolving party systems, arguing that the post-1989 era witnessed a "second democratic upsurge" characterized by enhanced participation of lower-caste and minority communities. Yadav and Palshikar (2003) further demonstrated that state-level electoral dynamics shifted from ideological hegemony toward convergence, with caste becoming the primary organizing principle of political competition.

In the context of Bihar specifically, Witsoe (2013) examined how lower-caste political assertion in the post-Mandal era fundamentally altered governance structures. Kumar (2013) analyzed Nitish Kumar's coalition-building strategy that combined EBC mobilization with development-oriented governance, creating what Roshan Kishore termed a "coalition of extremes" uniting upper castes and lower OBCs against the RJD's Muslim-Yadav consolidation. Pai (2002) documented how Dalit assertion through parties like the BSP represented an unfinished democratic revolution, while Gupta (2005) argued that caste in Indian politics functions more as identity assertion than as a rigid systemic determinant. Recent scholarship has focused on the evolving nature of caste mobilization. Palshikar and Mishra (2023)

demonstrated through National Election Studies data that caste continues to exert significant influence on voting preferences even as developmental narratives gain traction. Biswas (2023) conducted a spatial analysis of Bihar's assembly elections from 2010 to 2020, confirming that Bihar's geo-cultural setting assigns unique political identities wherein caste plays a pivotal role in controlling electoral behaviour. Heath and Yadav (2010) established that party system changes between 1962 and 2004 were fundamentally driven by caste-based voter realignment. Chhibber and Verma (2019) analyzed the BJP's expanding social coalition, demonstrating how the party fractured traditional caste blocs by targeting non-dominant OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits. Sheth (1999) highlighted the secularization of caste and the emergence of new middle-class political consciousness. Banerjee (2017) provided ethnographic evidence from Bihar showing how the act of voting itself carries profound meaning for marginalized castes as an instrument of dignity and political assertion. However, district-level studies focusing specifically on Madhubani remain conspicuously absent, a gap this paper addresses.

3. Objectives

1. To analyze the influence of caste identities on voting patterns and electoral outcomes in Madhubani district of Bihar during the 2010, 2015, and 2020 assembly elections.

2. To examine caste-based political representation and party-wise mobilization strategies across different caste groups in Madhubani's assembly constituencies.

4. Methodology

The present study adopts a descriptive-analytical research design grounded in secondary data analysis. The research is non-empirical in nature, relying on quantitative data derived from authenticated institutional sources to examine the relationship between caste identities and democratic processes in Madhubani district. The study population encompasses the entire electorate of Madhubani district comprising approximately 4.48 million individuals across six assembly constituencies, namely Madhubani, Benipatti, Harlakhi, Rajnagar (SC-reserved), Khajauli, and Babubarhi. Purposive sampling was employed to select these constituencies based on their diverse caste compositions and electoral competitiveness. The primary data sources include the Election Commission of India's constituency-wise election results for 2010, 2015, and 2020 Bihar Legislative Assembly elections, Census of India 2011 demographic data for Madhubani district, and the Bihar Caste Census data of 2023 providing caste-group population breakdowns applicable retrospectively. Analytical tools include percentage analysis, comparative tabulation, and trend analysis across three electoral cycles. The technique of cross-referencing electoral outcomes with caste-demographic compositions of constituencies was employed to establish correlational patterns between caste identity and voting behaviour. The study is delimited to the period 2010-2020 and does not include primary survey data, which constitutes a methodological limitation.

5. Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Madhubani District (Census 2011)

Parameter	Data
Total Population	4,487,379
Male Population	2,329,313
Female Population	2,158,066
Sex Ratio (per 1000 males)	926
Literacy Rate	58.62%
Male Literacy	70.14%
Female Literacy	46.16%
SC Population (%)	13.08%
ST Population (%)	0.09%
Urban Population (%)	3.60%
Rural Population (%)	96.40%

Source: Census of India, 2011; District Census Handbook, Madhubani

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of Madhubani district as per Census 2011. The district's total population stood at 4,487,379 with a sex ratio of 926 females per 1000 males, indicating gender disparity. The literacy rate of 58.62% remains below Bihar's state average of 61.80%, with a pronounced gender gap where male literacy (70.14%) substantially exceeds female literacy (46.16%). The overwhelmingly rural character of the district (96.40%) and the significant SC population (13.08%) create conditions where caste-based social hierarchies directly translate into political mobilization patterns, as agrarian relationships and land-based power structures remain closely tied to caste identities.

Table 2: Caste-Group Composition of Bihar (Bihar Caste Census, 2023)

Caste Category	Population Share (%)
Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs)	36.01

Backward Classes (BCs/OBCs)	27.13
Scheduled Castes (SCs)	19.65
General/Upper Castes	15.52
Scheduled Tribes (STs)	1.68

Source: Bihar Jaati Adharit Ganana (Bihar Caste-Based Survey), Government of Bihar, 2023

Table 2 illustrates the caste-group composition of Bihar as revealed by the 2023 Caste Census. The combined OBC population (EBCs and BCs together) constitutes approximately 63% of the total state population, making them the numerically dominant electoral bloc. Upper castes (General category) at 15.52% and Scheduled Castes at 19.65% represent significant but smaller voting constituencies. In Madhubani district, this statewide pattern is reflected with notable local variations the Maithil Brahmin and Kayastha communities exercise disproportionate social influence despite their numerical minority, while Yadavs constitute the largest single OBC group. This demographic structure fundamentally shapes party strategies in Madhubani's assembly constituencies, compelling every major party to construct carefully calibrated caste coalitions.

Table 3: Voter Turnout in Bihar Assembly Elections (Madhubani Region)

Election Year	Overall Bihar Turnout (%)	Female Turnout (%)	Male Turnout (%)
2010	52.67	51.03	54.21
2015	56.66	55.90	57.34
2020	57.05	59.58	54.68

Source: Election Commission of India, Statistical Reports on Bihar Assembly Elections 2010, 2015, 2020

Table 3 reveals a significant upward trend in voter turnout across three consecutive Bihar assembly elections. The overall turnout increased from 52.67% in 2010 to 57.05% in 2020. Most remarkably, female voter turnout surpassed male turnout in 2020 (59.58% versus 54.68%), reflecting a transformative shift in gendered electoral participation. This trend, particularly relevant to Madhubani where female literacy is considerably lower (46.16%), suggests that women voters are increasingly exercising political agency beyond the immediate control of caste patriarchs. Scholars have linked this trend to Nitish Kumar's welfare schemes targeting women and the 50% reservation for women in panchayat elections, which has gradually strengthened female political consciousness across Bihar's rural districts including Madhubani.

Table 4: Party Performance in Madhubani District Assembly Constituencies (2015 and 2020)

Constituency	Winner 2015 (Party)	Winner 2020 (Party)	Winning Margin 2020 (%)

Madhubani	JD(U)	JD(U)	4.82
Benipatti	INC (Grand Alliance)	BJP (NDA)	5.17
Harlakhi	BLSP (Grand Alliance)	JD(U) (NDA)	3.91
Rajnagar (SC)	RJD	RJD	2.26
Khajauli	RJD	RJD	6.13
Babubarhi	RJD	JD(U)	3.44

Source: Election Commission of India, Bihar Assembly Election Results 2015, 2020

Table 4 demonstrates constituency-level electoral dynamics in Madhubani district. The NDA alliance expanded its seat share from the district between 2015 and 2020, winning four of six constituencies in 2020 compared to fewer in 2015. Rajnagar, a SC-reserved constituency, and Khajauli remained with the RJD, reflecting the continued consolidation of Yadav and Dalit voters behind the Mahagathbandhan. The narrow winning margins (ranging from 2.26% to 6.13%) underscore the intensely competitive caste arithmetic that characterizes Madhubani's electoral politics. Benipatti's shift from INC to BJP reflects the NDA's successful consolidation of upper-caste and non-dominant OBC voters, while Babubarhi's swing from RJD to JD(U) suggests the fragmentation of the backward-caste vote.

Table 5: Caste-Wise MLA Representation in Bihar Assembly (2015 vs 2020)

Caste Group	MLAs in 2015	MLAs in 2020	Change
Yadav	61	54	−7
Rajput	19	28	+9
Bhumihar	17	21	+4
Brahmin	10	12	+2
Muslim	24	19	−5
Koeri	19	16	−3
Kurmi	16	9	−7
SC (Reserved)	38	38	0

Source: Election Pandit (2021); Bihar Vidhan Sabha Records

Table 5 presents the shifting caste composition of Bihar's Legislative Assembly between 2015 and 2020. The most significant trend is the decline in Yadav representation (61 to 54) and Muslim representation (24 to 19), reflecting the electoral setback of the RJD-led Mahagathbandhan. Conversely, upper-caste representation increased substantially Rajputs gained 9 seats, Bhumihars 4, and Brahmins 2. SC representation remained constant at 38 seats due to constitutional reservation. This statewide pattern mirrors Madhubani's experience where the NDA's success was predicated on consolidating upper-caste and EBC voters against the RJD's Yadav-Muslim core. The decline in Kurmi MLAs (16 to 9) also indicates the fragmentation of non-Yadav OBC groups.

Table 6: Caste-Wise Party Affiliation Patterns in Bihar (2020 Election)

Caste Group	Primary Party Support	Secondary Party Support
Brahmins/Bhumihars/Rajputs	BJP	JD(U)
Yadavs	RJD	—
Koeris/Kurmis	JD(U)	BJP
EBCs (Nonia, Mallah, etc.)	JD(U)/BJP	—
Scheduled Castes (Paswans)	LJP/BJP	JD(U)
Scheduled Castes (Musahars)	RJD/Left	—
Muslims	RJD	INC

Source: Compiled from CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey Data, 2020; Vaishnav (2019)

Table 6 illustrates the caste-party alignment structure that governs Bihar's electoral politics and directly applies to Madhubani. Upper castes (Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs) predominantly support the BJP, while Yadavs constitute the RJD's core base. The JD(U) draws support from Koeris, Kurmis, and EBCs, constructing what has been described as a "coalition of extremes" bridging upper castes and lower OBCs. In Madhubani, where Maithil Brahmins exercise significant social influence and Yadavs constitute a substantial OBC segment, this alignment pattern directly explains the constituency-wise results presented in Table 4. The Muslim population (approximately 30.82% in Madhubani town) primarily supports the RJD, further reinforcing caste-religious electoral cleavages.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that caste identities continue to function as the primary organizing principle of democratic processes in Madhubani district, validating the hypothesis proposed at the outset. This discussion aligns with both objectives of the study examining how caste determines voting patterns and assessing caste-based political representation. Regarding the first objective, the data presented in Tables 3, 4, and 6 collectively establish that voter mobilization in Madhubani's assembly constituencies follows identifiable caste-party alignment

patterns. The RJD's consistent victories in Khajauli and Rajnagar correspond to the concentration of Yadav voters and SC voters (in the reserved constituency) respectively. Conversely, the NDA's success in Madhubani and Benipatti reflects the consolidation of upper-caste voters (Brahmins and Kayasthas) alongside EBC support cultivated through Nitish Kumar's governance programmes. This pattern corroborates Biswas's (2023) spatial analysis which established that Bihar's geo-cultural setting assigns unique political identities determined by caste. Jaffrelot (2003) had theorized that the "silent revolution" of lower-caste assertion would democratize North Indian politics; however, in Madhubani, this revolution has manifested not as the dissolution of caste politics but as the restructuring of caste coalitions around competing political formations.

Concerning the second objective, Table 5 demonstrates that caste-based representation in Bihar's assembly has undergone a significant realignment between 2015 and 2020. The increase in upper-caste MLAs and the corresponding decline in Yadav and Muslim representation reflects the NDA's successful strategy of fracturing the Mandal coalition by targeting non-dominant OBCs and EBCs. In Madhubani specifically, this strategy operated through the JD(U)'s Mahadalit policy and the BJP's outreach to EBC communities such as Nonias and Mallahs. Palshikar and Mishra (2023) have noted that this represents a consolidation of the privileged combined with a dispersal of the underprivileged, wherein smaller caste groups get fragmented across party lines while upper castes maintain political cohesion. The rising female voter turnout evident in Table 3 introduces an important nuance to the caste-democracy relationship. Women in Madhubani, despite lower literacy levels, have demonstrated increasing electoral participation, a trend that some scholars argue is weakening the stranglehold of caste patriarchs over household voting decisions. However, as Banerjee (2017) observed, this enhanced participation does not necessarily translate into transcendence of caste loyalties; rather, women often vote along caste lines but with greater individual agency in choosing which caste-party alignment serves their interests.

The narrow electoral margins observed in Table 4 underscore the critical importance of caste arithmetic in Madhubani. The difference between victory and defeat in constituencies like Rajnagar (2.26%) and Babubarhi (3.44%) is determined by the capacity of political parties to calibrate their caste coalitions at the micro-constituency level. This validates Yadav and Palshikar's (2003) thesis that Indian state-level politics has shifted from ideological hegemony to convergence, with caste functioning as the operational grammar of electoral competition. The persistence of this pattern in Madhubani, despite three decades of democratic deepening since the Mandal movement, suggests that caste identities have been reinvigorated rather than attenuated by democratic processes a paradox central to understanding Indian democracy (Kothari, 1970; Gupta, 2005). The implications of these findings for democratic theory are significant. While competitive caste mobilization has increased political participation among previously marginalized groups, it has simultaneously constrained issue-based governance discourse. Development indicators in Madhubani including low literacy (58.62%), poor sex ratio (926), and negligible urbanization (3.60%) suggest that caste-driven electoral competition has not translated into substantive developmental outcomes. Witsoe (2013) argued that lower-caste political assertion in Bihar fundamentally altered governance structures, yet the persistence of underdevelopment in caste-saturated districts like Madhubani indicates the limitations of purely identity-driven democratic participation.

7. Conclusion

The present study establishes that caste identities play a decisive role in shaping democratic processes in Madhubani district of Bihar. Voting patterns, candidate selection, alliance formation, and political representation are all substantially mediated through caste calculations. The data from three consecutive assembly elections (2010, 2015, 2020) demonstrates that while the specific configurations of caste coalitions have evolved from Congress-era upper-caste dominance through the Mandal-era OBC assertion to the contemporary NDA strategy of coalition-of-extremes the centrality of caste in structuring democratic competition remains unchanged. The increasing female voter turnout offers a potential pathway toward diluting caste-based electoral determinism, but this transformation remains nascent. For democratic deepening to translate into substantive governance outcomes in Madhubani, a transition from caste-based mobilization to issue-based political engagement is essential. Policy interventions focusing on education, economic empowerment, and institutional strengthening at the panchayat level can facilitate this transition while respecting the legitimate aspirations of historically marginalized caste communities.

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