JHSR Journal of Historical Studies and ResearchISSN:2583-0198
Volume 5, Number 2 (May - August,2025),PP.294-312.
Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal
Website:www.jhsr.in
Email:jhsr.editor@gmail.com

Caste, Class and Empowerment: Contribution of B.P. Mandal (1918–1982) for Socio-Political Uplifting of Other Backward Classes in India

Prof. (Dr.) Manosanta Biswas[1]

[1]Department of History
Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University
Purulia,West Bengal,India
Email: manosantabiswas@gmail.com

Abstract:*Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal (1918–1982) occupies a seminal place in India's social justice history. He was born in Bihar, India, into a Yadav family, a community traditionally classified under the Other Backward Classes. His political journey began early, influenced by the national movement and social justice causes. Mandal was elected to the Bihar Legislative Assembly in 1952 and served in various political capacities, including as the Chief Minister of Bihar for a brief period in 1968. As chairman of the Second Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission), he provided empirical tools for identifying backwardness and laid the foundation for reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This paper explores Mandal's life, political milieu, the rationale behind the Mandal Commission, and the long-term socio-political consequences of his work for OBC empowerment. It argues that Mandal's contribution was not merely administrative but a transformative intervention in India's caste-class dynamics.*

Keywords: *Caste,Class, Mandal Commission, Other Backward Classes, Upliftment etc.*

Date of Submission: 20.07.2025 **Date of Acceptance: 24.07.2025**

Introduction

Caste remains one of the most enduring social structures in India, intricately weaving together hierarchies of ritual purity, occupation, social honour, and power. Though often discussed as a relic of pre-modern India, caste has continuously reinvented itself, shaping access to resources,

political representation, and social mobility in modern times.[1] B.R. Ambedkar, one of India's foremost constitutional thinkers, famously observed that caste 'is not merely a division of labour, it is a division of labourers,' entrenching social inequality and dictating human worth.[2] The Indian Constitution, enacted in 1950, attempted to undo centuries of caste discrimination by guaranteeing formal equality and special protections for historically marginalized groups. Yet, as decades passed, it became increasingly clear that formal legal equality alone could not dismantle deeply entrenched social hierarchies. In the years following independence, the Indian state implemented affirmative action primarily for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), who occupied the lowest rungs of the caste and tribal hierarchies. However, a vast section of the population known as the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) castes socially and educationally disadvantaged but not designated as SCs or STs remained largely outside the ambit of state-led redistributive justice.[3] The neglect of OBCs raised pressing questions central to democratic theory: How should a state balance formal equality with measures of positive discrimination? Can democracy be truly representative if large segments of society remain excluded from structures of power and privilege?

These questions lie at the heart of debates on social justice and substantive equality. The notion of substantive equality, articulated in modern political theory—goes beyond identical treatment to recognize that individuals and groups may require differential support to attain actual equality of opportunity and outcomes.[4] For thinkers like Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser, equality is not merely distributive but also relational: justice demands both resource redistribution and recognition of marginalized identities.[5] In India, caste embodies both economic disadvantage and symbolic stigma**,** rendering it a unique axis of inequality that demands both redistributive and recognition-based remedies.

Into this complex historical and theoretical landscape emerged Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal (1918–1982)**,** a political leader from Bihar who would leave an indelible mark on India's social policy. As chairman of the Second Backward Classes Commission, commonly known as the Mandal Commission (1979–1980), B.P. Mandal provided not just a list of recommendations but a powerful theoretical framework that redefined backwardness as a multidimensional phenomenon. He argued that caste, even when dissociated from overt ritual hierarchies,

continued to function as a 'depressant force' that obstructed social mobility and perpetuated a deeply unequal distribution of opportunities.[6] His vision fused the sociological insights of caste as a system of stigma with empirical data about educational and economic deprivation, thus giving shape to policies of affirmative action for OBCs. Mandal's contributions must also be understood in the context of the political churning in post-independence India**.** The Congress party's hegemony, based on broad upper-caste and middle-caste coalitions, began to erode from the 1960s onward under the weight of rising regionalism, economic crises, and the emergence of caste-based identity politics. In states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, backward-caste leaders began demanding not just inclusion but political power. The Mandal Commission thus became both a product and a catalyst of this changing political order, giving intellectual legitimacy to the assertion of OBC identity and rights.[7] The implementation of Mandal's recommendations in 1990 by Prime Minister V.P. Singh ignited a political storm, leading to nationwide agitations and violent protests. Yet, despite its controversies, the Mandal moment irrevocably transformed India's political landscape. It institutionalized the idea that backward classes deserved not only social recognition but also a concrete share in educational and employment opportunities. The subsequent validation of OBC reservations by the Supreme Court in the Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992) judgment cemented Mandal's vision as part of India's constitutional fabric.[8]

This article argues that B.P. Mandal's contribution goes beyond the technicalities of reservation percentages. It lies in redefining social justice in India's democracy. Mandal's work bridged the gap between constitutional ideals and the lived realities of caste oppression, providing both a theoretical justification and a policy roadmap for the socio-political empowerment of OBCs. In examining Mandal's life, the logic of the Mandal Commission, and the far-reaching consequences of its recommendations, this article seeks to situate Mandal as one of the principal architects of India's modern social justice discourse.

Early Life and Political Career

Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal was born on 25 August 1918 in Murho village, Madhepura district, in the region now part of Bihar.[9] He belonged to the Yadav community**,** a caste historically

associated with cattle rearing and agriculture and classified as part of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). His family held a position of local prominence, being small zamindars under the colonial land revenue system.[10] This dual identity—as both a member of a backward caste and a landholding family would shape Mandal's understanding of caste and class in Indian society. Mandal's early education took place in Madhepura, after which he proceeded to Patna University, one of the intellectual hubs of nationalist activity during the interwar years.[11] Patna University in the 1930s and 1940s was a melting pot of ideological ferment, influenced by nationalist leaders, social reformers, and leftist intellectuals who debated the intertwined questions of caste, land reforms, and economic justice.[12] Exposure to these discourses informed Mandal's conviction that social upliftment could not be separated from political action. His formal political career began soon after India's independence. In the first general elections of 1952, Mandal was elected as a member of the Bihar Legislative Assembly.[13] He quickly emerged as an articulate advocate for the interests of backward classes, focusing on issues such as: Land reforms and redistribution to break the economic hold of upper-caste zamindars.[14] Expansion of educational opportunities for backward communities and greater political representation for socially marginalized groups.

These positions aligned Mandal with the broader currents of socialist politics in Bihar, led by figures like Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan, who were vociferous critics of upper-caste dominance in the Congress Party and advocates of social justice.[15] Mandal's political stature grew steadily, culminating in his appointment as the Chief Minister of Bihar in February 1968. However, his tenure was short-lived, lasting only until March 1968, as political instability and factionalism brought down his government.[16] Despite the brevity of his chief ministership, Mandal's elevation symbolized a significant shift: it marked one of the earliest instances of a leader from a backward caste assuming the highest political office in a state long dominated by upper-caste elites.[17] His leadership was emblematic of the emerging political aspirations of backward classes in North India. After his tenure as Chief Minister, Mandal continued to serve in various legislative and political roles, maintaining a reputation as a consistent advocate for backward-class rights. His political journey ultimately positioned him as a natural choice to chair the Second Backward Classes Commission, established in 1979. His selection reflected both his

personal commitment to social justice and the broader political recognition that OBC issues had become central to India's democratic discourse.[18] Mandal's experiences—as a member of a backward caste with local influence, as a politician in the turbulent decades following independence, and as a leader in a caste-conscious society—equipped him uniquely for his later role in shaping one of India's most significant social policy interventions.

Political Context of Bihar: Rise of B.P. Mandal

The political milieu of Bihar in the first half of the twentieth century was deeply shaped by the interlocking forces of colonial rule, land relations, caste hierarchies, and nationalist movements**.** These currents produced a social landscape of stark inequalities but also one of significant political ferment, ultimately providing the context in which figures like B.P. Mandal would emerge. Under British rule, Bihar's social structure was entrenched through the Permanent Settlement of 1793**,** which created a powerful class of zamindars responsible for collecting revenue on behalf of the colonial state.[19] These zamindars were predominantly drawn from upper castes—Bhumihars, Rajputs, Kayasths, and Brahmins—who consolidated both economic resources and social prestige. [20] The result was a dual oppression: peasants and tenants suffered from exploitative rents and forced labor, while lower castes, particularly in rural areas, were further subjugated by ritual hierarchies that restricted their social mobility. [21] Scholars such as J.C. Jha argues that this convergence of economic and ritual power meant that colonial governance reinforced traditional hierarchies rather than dismantling them. [22]

Despite—or perhaps because of—this oppressive structure, Bihar became a significant center for nationalist activity. The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22) and the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) saw widespread participation, including among peasants and lower-caste groups affected by high rents and colonial taxation.[23] Nationalist leaders like Rajendra Prasad and Sri Krishna Sinha emerged from Bihar, advocating not only for political freedom but for social reforms to address caste discrimination and landlordism.[24] However, even within the Congress Party, tensions simmered between upper-caste leaders, who often controlled organizational machinery, and emerging backward-caste politicians seeking greater

representation. These tensions presaged the post-independence politics of caste assertion. A particularly crucial development in the political landscape of Mandal's formative years was the emergence of the Triveni Sangh in the early 1930s. Formed primarily by Yadavs, Kurmis, and Koeris—collectively known as backward peasant castes—the Triveni Sangh sought:

- Political representation for backward castes in legislative councils and local bodies.
- Opposition to the social dominance of upper castes in rural society.
- Advocacy for land reforms and tenant rights. [25]

The Triveni Sangh contested elections in the 1930s but struggled to break the Congress Party's hegemony, partly because of internal divisions and partly due to Congress leaders co-opting backward-caste leaders to dilute opposition.[26] Nevertheless, it established a template for caste-based political mobilization that would resonate decades later in Mandal's own career. With independence in 1947, Bihar entered a new phase. The Congress Party retained overwhelming dominance, but the party itself became the battleground for competing caste interests. While the upper-caste political elite retained control over administration, new generations of backward-caste leaders began demanding both representation and redistribution.[27] Land reforms became a particularly contentious issue. The Bihar Land Reforms Act of 1950 aimed to abolish zamindari, yet the actual redistribution of land was limited, with many zamindars managing to retain control through legal loopholes and administrative delays.[28] consequently, economic inequalities persisted**,** and caste hierarchies remained largely intact. [29]

This period also witnessed the rise of socialist politics**,** with leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia and Jayaprakash Narayan critiquing Congress dominance and advocating for social justice, especially for backward and marginalized communities.[30] Their influence would profoundly shape political discourse in Bihar and provide ideological grounding for leaders like Mandal, who viewed social justice not merely as economic redistribution but as a radical restructuring of social hierarchies. In this environment, Mandal's early political consciousness was forged. Born into the Yadav community—a backward caste but also a community with growing economic and social confidence—he witnessed firsthand the paradoxes of social power: ritual inferiority coexisting with rising economic aspirations.[31] His participation in politics during the 1950s and 1960s must be seen against this backdrop of a society in transition—where the old structures of

caste-based dominance were under challenge, yet deeply resilient. The ferment of backward-caste mobilization, debates on land reform, and the ideological influence of socialism provided both the grievances and the ideological tools that Mandal would later channel into his leadership of the Mandal Commission. Thus, the political context of Bihar during Mandal's early years was one of sharp contradictions—a society caught between colonial legacies and democratic promises, between ritual hierarchy and aspirations for equality. It is precisely these contradictions that explain both the emergence of Mandal as a political leader and the significance of his contributions to the cause of social justice in India.

Caste and Political Mobilization in Bihar after Independence

The post-independence political landscape of Bihar was marked by the persistence of caste hierarchies, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and social justice. Caste did not disappear from public life; rather, it evolved into a principal axis of political mobilization, particularly from the 1960s onward. Bihar, with its deeply stratified rural society and enduring agrarian inequalities, became one of the most important laboratories for caste-based politics in postcolonial India. [32] In the immediate aftermath of independence, the Indian National Congress maintained political hegemony in Bihar, largely dominated by upper-caste leaders such as Sri Krishna Sinha (a Kayastha) and Anugrah Narayan Sinha (a Rajput).[33] These leaders were part of the national movement and were associated with developmentalist ideals, but their leadership structure remained exclusionary in social composition. While the Congress claimed to be caste-neutral, in practice it often functioned through upper-caste patronage networks, particularly in rural areas.[34] Despite electoral inclusion, the backward and Dalit castes were systematically underrepresented in both party leadership and the state bureaucracy. Political scientist Rajni Kothari has noted that during this period, Congress functioned as a system of 'elite accommodation', co-opting rising backward leaders' only as symbolic representatives, without redistributing real power. [35]

The seeds of caste-based mobilization in Bihar were sown by the socialist movements of the 1950s and 1960s, especially under the influence of leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia, who

challenged the Congress party's caste-blind politics. Lohia's call for 'social justice' and his slogan '*Sansopa ne baandhi gaanth, pichhda paave sau mein saath'* (The Socialist Party has decided that backward castes must get 60 out of 100) became a rallying cry for lower OBC mobilization. [36] In Bihar, Lohia's ideas resonated with a new generation of backward-caste leaders, including Karpoori Thakur, Jagdeo Prasad, and later Lalu Prasad Yadav, who began to organize around the principle that political democracy had to be accompanied by social and caste-based democracy.[37] Karpoori Thakur, for example, implemented reservations for backward classes in state services during his tenure as Chief Minister in 1978—predating the implementation of the Mandal Commission by over a decade.[38] By the late 1960s and 1970s, the erosion of Congress dominance coincided with increasing assertiveness among OBC communities, especially the Yadavs, Kurmis, Koeris, and other intermediate castes. These groups economically empowered through agriculture and educational expansion began demanding proportional representation in political institutions.[39] The formation of the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) and other backward-caste-centric political platforms offered viable alternatives to Congress for emerging backward leaders. B.P. Mandal himself, although briefly associated with the Congress, became increasingly aligned with the Janata Party coalition, which brought backward caste issues to the center of political discourse in the late 1970s. [40] The culmination of this political shift was the Mandal moment of the 1990s, when the implementation of OBC reservations reshaped Bihar's political arithmetic. But its origins lie in the post-independence mobilizations, where caste identity was transformed from a private social marker into a powerful public and electoral identity.[41] Caste-based mobilization in Bihar has had a dual effect on democratic politics. On one hand, it enabled marginalized communities to access political power and demand inclusion. On the other, it led to fragmentation of the polity along narrow sub-caste lines. For example, while Yadavs gained prominence through leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav, other OBC groups like the Koeris and Kurmis later sought separate representation, leading to intra-OBC competition and caste polarization.[42] Moreover, Dalits—especially the Mahadalits—and Muslim backward classes often remained peripheral even within the OBC-dominated regimes.[43] Thus, while caste served as an effective vehicle for social empowerment, it also revealed the limitations of identity politics in addressing broader structural

inequalities. The political mobilization of caste in Bihar after independence reflects a larger Indian paradox: while the democratic process allowed for the articulation of group identities, real power remained elusive for many. Leaders like B.P. Mandal emerged from this historical backdrop, advocating for structural reforms and institutional mechanisms—most notably through the Mandal Commission—to correct the enduring imbalances of caste and class. By the 1980s, caste was no longer invisible in politics; it had become a central organizing principle of political participation and public discourse. Mandal's role, therefore, must be understood not only as a product of this transformation but also as one of its most influential architects.

Background of the Backward Classes Commission

The establishment of the Backward Classes Commission under the chairmanship of B.P. Mandal in 1979 must be situated within the constitutional vision of social justice and the protracted debates over the meaning of 'backwardness' in independent India. The idea of recognizing and addressing the disadvantages of social groups beyond the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was present in both the constituent debates and early policy documents, but it remained politically contentious and administratively unresolved for decades.[44] Articles 15(4) and 16(4) of the Indian Constitution provided a foundational basis for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes.[45] Article 15(4), added by the First Amendment in 1951, explicitly empowered the state to make special provisions for their advancement. Article 16(4) authorized reservations in public employment for 'any backward class of citizens which, in the opinion of the State, is not adequately represented in the services under the State.'[46] The Constitution did not define 'backward classes', nor did it offer a clear set of criteria to identify them. This conceptual ambiguity resulted in divergent state-level approaches and a lack of uniformity across India.

To address this lacuna, the First Backward Classes Commission, chaired by Kaka Kalelkar, was appointed in 1953 under Article 340. The Kalelkar Commission submitted its report in 1955, recommending that 70% reservations in educational institutions for backward classes and identification of backward classes primarily on the basis of caste but also considering

economic and educational criteria.[47] However, the Kalelkar Report faced intense opposition from various quarters, particularly on the ground that it relied excessively on caste as the primary marker of backwardness. Kalelkar himself expressed reservations about some recommendations in his covering letter. As a result, the report was not implemented, and its recommendations remained largely symbolic.[48] The failure to act on the Kalelkar Commission created a policy vacuum and left OBC issues unresolved, further deepening the frustrations among backward communities.

By the late 1960s and 1970s, India's political landscape underwent a profound transformation. Several developments converged such as the decline of Congress hegemony at the state level created space for regional and socialist parties, many of which drew support from backward castes. Leaders like Karpoori Thakur in Bihar and Devaraj Urs in Karnataka pioneered policies of reservations and welfare targeting OBCs. Social justice became a central plank of anti-Congress coalitions, which criticized the party's failure to address the systematic exclusion of backward groups. [49] The Janata Party's victory in 1977, riding on the wave of discontent against the Emergency (1975–1977), was significantly supported by backward-caste communities who expected structural reforms. The Janata government's leadership included several politicians sympathetic to the cause of backward classes.[50] Against this backdrop, the demand to revisit the question of backwardness, this time with greater methodological rigor, became politically compelling.

On 1 January 1979, the Government of India constituted the Second Backward Classes Commission under Article 340, appointing B.P. Mandal as Chairman. The notification specified its terms of reference were to determine the criteria for defining socially and educationally backward classes, to recommend steps for their advancement, including reservations and to examine the desirability of any other measures necessary to improve their condition. [51] The appointment of B.P. Mandal was symbolically significant. As a backward-caste leader from Bihar who had briefly served as Chief Minister, he embodied both the social identity and political aspirations of OBCs. His selection signaled the Janata government's intent to undertake a serious and credible assessment of backwardness, rather than the purely symbolic exercise many perceived in the *Kalelkar Commission.*[52] One of the distinctive features of the Mandal

Commission was its multi-dimensional approach to backwardness. Learning from the criticisms of the *Kalelkar Commission*, it aimed to base its recommendations on an extensive field investigations and data collection, including household surveys, a composite index combining social, educational, and economic indicators and transparent criteria to justify inclusion in the OBC category. This methodological orientation would distinguish the Mandal Commission's work and give its recommendations empirical legitimacy, even in the face of intense political opposition. In that way the Backward Classes Commission became the institutional expression of both constitutional egalitarianism and the rising political assertiveness of OBC communities, setting the stage for one of India's most significant social policy interventions.

Report of the Mandal Commission and Mandal's Legacy

The submission of the Second Backward Classes Commission's report in December 1980, under the chairmanship of B.P. Mandal, was a landmark event in India's post-independence history. Popularly known as the Mandal Commission Report, it not only documented the socio-economic conditions of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) but provided an empirical and ideological framework for affirmative action, fundamentally reshaping India's understanding of social justice, democracy, and caste.[53] Learning from the criticisms of the earlier *Kalelkar Commission* (1955), which lacked rigorous methodology, the Mandal Commission adopted a multidimensional approach. It defined 'social and educational backwardness' not merely through caste identity, but through a composite index combining social, educational, and economic indicators.[54]

The Commission developed an 11-point criteria list divided into three categories:

- Social Indicators: Low social status, low caste-based representation in administration, marriage practices indicating backwardness (e.g., early marriage age), presence of women's work outside home under distress.[55]
- Educational Indicators: High dropout rates, low levels of higher education enrollment.
- Economic Indicators: Low family income, dependence on manual labor, lack of access to productive assets.

A group scoring more than 50% on this composite scale was classified as 'backward.' Using this methodology, the Commission identified 3,743 castes as OBCs, accounting for approximately 52% of India's total population.[56]

The Mandal Commission's most significant and controversial recommendation was the reservation of 27% of government jobs and educational institution seats for OBCs, bringing the total reservations for SCs, STs, and OBCs to 49.5%, just under the constitutional ceiling of 50%.[57] Beyond reservations, the Commission proposed: Land reforms and redistribution of surplus land among backward classes, Special educational schemes to improve literacy and higher education participation among OBCs, and Financial assistance and skill development programs to reduce economic inequalities.[58] The underlying logic was clear: caste remained the most significant determinant of social and economic backwardness in India. Even when economic mobility occurred, social discrimination persisted, obstructing equal access to opportunities and social dignity.[59] Mandal argued that 'Caste is also a class of citizens, and as long as it remains a class, special measures for its advancement are constitutionally valid.' [60]

Though the Mandal Commission submitted its report in 1980, it remained politically dormant for a decade. The Congress governments of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi did not implement the recommendations, partly due to fears of social unrest and partly because upper-caste sections formed a crucial electoral constituency.[61] B.P. Mandal passed away in 1982 without seeing the implementation of his proposals, but his report continued to circulate among backward-caste political leaders and activists who invoked it as the ideological and statistical justification for their demands. The political earthquake came in August 1990, when Prime Minister V.P. Singh announced the decision to implement the Mandal Commission's recommendations. The announcement led to: Nationwide protests, especially among upper-caste youth who felt their future in government jobs was threatened, Instances of self-immolation and intense social polarization, and the emergence of Mandal vs. Kamandal politics, with Hindutva forces positioning themselves as defenders of upper-caste interests and social unity.[62] Yet, despite the turmoil, the Supreme Court, in its landmark judgment Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992), upheld the constitutional validity of OBC reservations, albeit with important caveats, including the 'exclusion of the 'creamy layer.' [63] The judgment cemented the Mandal

Commission's place in India's constitutional framework. The Mandal Commission's impact has been profound and multidimensional:

- It institutionalized the category of OBCs as a recognized constitutional constituency with entitlements in public employment and education. [64]
- It transformed electoral politics, leading to the rise of OBC-led regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, and others across North India. [65]
- It ignited a public discourse on caste, pushing debates beyond Dalit and tribal issues to the wider spectrum of intermediate castes marginalized by both colonial and upper-caste dominance.

Scholars such as Christophe Jaffrelot argue that Mandal's legacy represents the 'second democratic upsurge' in India, as lower and middle castes acquired political voice and institutional representation.[66] While critiques remain—such as accusations of perpetuating caste divisions and neglecting the most marginalized within OBCs—there is broad consensus that B.P. Mandal's work fundamentally altered the architecture of social justice in India. In essence, Mandal's contribution transcends policy prescriptions. It lies in his recognition that democracy in India could not survive on the myth of caste-neutrality. Instead, he asserted that the state must actively dismantle the historical structures of exclusion embedded in caste hierarchies. His legacy remains both a symbol of hope for backward classes and a subject of fierce debate in India's ongoing quest for equality.

Criticism,Debate and Impact in Indian Politics

The implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations in 1990 marks one of the most contested and transformative moments in India's post-independence history. While hailed as a vital step towards social justice, it ignited intense criticism, political realignment, and philosophical debates over the nature of equality, meritocracy, and the meaning of Indian democracy. 67 Critiques of the Mandal Commission's recommendations have emerged from diverse ideological and social quarters, focusing on several core concerns: One of the fiercest

criticisms has been that caste was used as the primary indicator of backwardness, thereby reinforcing caste identities rather than eroding them. Critics argued that by institutionalizing caste-based reservations, the state risked perpetuating social fragmentation. 68 As T.N. Madan observed: 'The Mandal moment transformed caste from a social identity into a fiercely politicized category, making it the principal axis of political mobilization.'69 Others, such as André Béteille, worried that caste-based policies might entrench caste consciousness rather than diminish it, undermining the ideal of a caste-less society. 70

Another significant critique focused on the benefits accruing disproportionately to relatively better-off segments within OBC communities, popularly termed the creamy layer.71 Critics argued that without internal differentiation, reservations would fail to reach the poorest and most marginalized within the OBC category.72 In response, the Supreme Court in Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992) upheld OBC reservations but introduced the doctrine of excluding the 'creamy layer,' thus attempting to ensure that benefits reached genuinely disadvantaged sections.73 Upper-caste and middle-class critics warned that reservations would erode meritocratic principles in education and employment. The protests in 1990, often led by urban, upper-caste youth, reflected fears that the policy would reduce opportunities for those outside reserved categories.74 However, proponents countered that merit cannot be separated from social privilege. As Mandal himself argued, social discrimination shapes access to quality schooling, resources, and networks long before competitive exams.75 The Mandal controversy sparked profound debates in legal, philosophical, and academic circles over the meaning of equality. Two dominant visions emerged:

- Formal Equality, emphasizing equal treatment regardless of social background. Critics of Mandal believed that the state's role was to eliminate discrimination, not to institutionalize group-based privileges.[76]
- Substantive Equality, advocating positive measures to ensure that historically marginalized groups have equal chances. Supporters of Mandal argued that true equality requires compensating for centuries of social and educational exclusion.[77]

This debate remains unresolved, continuing to shape India's constitutional discourse and judicial interpretations. While criticisms were fierce, the Mandal Commission's implementation

produced profound political consequences, transforming the architecture of Indian politics. The post-Mandal era saw an unprecedented rise of OBC political parties and leaders, including Lalu Prasad Yadav in Bihar, Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh and Nitish Kumar and others who articulated backward caste interests. These leaders crafted an identity politics that combined caste assertion with populist economic policies, often referred to as the 'Mandalization' of Indian politics.[78] The Mandal decision also catalyzed the growth of the Hindu Right, leading to what scholars term the Mandal vs. Kamandal divide. While backward-caste politics focused on social justice and reservations, Hindutva politics attempted to transcend caste identities under a larger Hindu identity, symbolized by movements like the 'Ram Janmabhoomi agitation.'[79] Christophe Jaffrelot observes that the BJP's ideological consolidation in the 1990s can be partly explained as a reaction to the Mandal moment, seeking to retain upper-caste support while making inroads among OBCs through Hindutva rhetoric.[80] Despite criticism, the Mandal Commission's influence is undeniable: OBC reservations have become institutionalized, with states implementing their own lists and quotas beyond the central government's 27%.[81] The political rise of OBCs has dismantled upper-caste monopolies in electoral politics, bureaucracy, and regional leadership. Mandal's logic has spilled over into new demands for reservations based on economic criteria, and debates over extending quotas to private sector employment.[82] However, significant challenges persist: Intra-OBC inequalities have become pronounced, with smaller or less influential backward groups sometimes excluded from political power and policy benefits.[83] The Mandal legacy remains entangled with vote-bank politics; leading to accusations of tokenism and selective implementation.[84] Debates over reservations continue to provoke deep societal polarization, reflecting unresolved questions about India's vision of equality. The Mandal Commission and B.P. Mandal's legacy occupy a paradoxical space in Indian politics and society. They represent an extraordinary assertion of democratic inclusion, ensuring that large segments of the population once consigned to social margins are visible in public life. Yet, they have also become symbols of enduring debates over caste, merit, and the future of Indian democracy. As India navigates its 21st-century social contract, the Mandal moment remains both a source of inspiration and contention a testament to the complexities of achieving social justice in a deeply hierarchical society.

Caste, Class and Empowerment: Contribution of B.P. Mandal (1918–1982) for Socio-Political Uplifting of Other Backward Classes in India

Conclusion

The life and work of Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal represents a critical inflection point in India's democratic journey, a moment when the question of social justice was irreversibly tethered to the realities of caste and class. From his early years in Bihar's politically stratified society to his leadership of the Second Backward Classes Commission, Mandal emerged as both a product and an architect of the profound social churn that reshaped post-independence India.[85] Mandal's vision was rooted in a pragmatic yet radical assertion: that Indian democracy, if it was to be meaningful, could not remain indifferent to entrenched social hierarchies. His Mandal Commission Report (1980) gave empirical grounding to the argument that caste remained the single most decisive axis of social and educational deprivation. By recommending 27% reservations for OBCs in public employment and education, Mandal challenged the dominant notion of a caste-blind meritocracy, asserting instead that formal equality must be supplemented by substantive measures of inclusion.[86] The implementation of the Mandal recommendations in 1990, though delayed, catalyzed a tectonic shift in Indian politics. It empowered backward castes to claim leadership roles, reshaping electoral landscapes across North India and ushering in what scholars describe as the 'second democratic upsurge.'[87] Simultaneously, the policy triggered intense backlash, spawning debates about merit, national integration, and the potential entrenchment of caste identities. The Supreme Court's interventions, particularly in the Indra Sawhney case (1992), sought a constitutional balance, upholding reservations while introducing safeguards like the exclusion of the creamy layer. [88]

Despite legitimate criticisms and the ongoing complexities of intra-OBC inequalities, there is no denying that Mandal's legacy has deepened Indian democracy's representative character. He helped institutionalize a framework whereby the state acknowledges and addresses historical injustices, turning caste from a purely social marker into a legitimate basis for policy intervention. In doing so, Mandal forced the nation to confront the reality that democracy is not merely about votes, but about the redistribution of dignity, opportunity, and power.[89] Today,

debates surrounding the Mandal legacy remain alive, as demands for reservations expand into new domains such as the private sector and higher judiciary. Even amidst such controversies, the fundamental principle Mandal articulated endures: that the quest for equality in India must be anchored in both recognition of historical disadvantage and institutional mechanisms to rectify it. In the ultimate analysis, B.P. Mandal's contribution transcends statistics and policy prescriptions. His work represents a transformative vision of social justice, which continues to shape the contours of Indian politics and the lived experiences of millions. Mandal's legacy is thus both historical and contemporary, a reminder that India's democratic experiment remains unfinished until it truly includes all its citizens in both structure and spirit.[90]

Notes and References

1. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. London: Hurst & Company, 2003, pp. 21–24.
2. Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste*. Bombay: 1936, reprint in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 1. Government of Maharashtra, 1979, p. 47.
3. Government of India. *Report of the Backward Classes Commission (Mandal Commission)*, Vol. I. New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1980, pp. 1–2.
4. Austin, Granville. *Working a Democratic Constitution: The Indian Experience*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 273–274.
5. Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, 16–23; Fraser, Nancy. *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*. New York: Routledge, 1997, pp. 11–15.
6. Government of India, *Mandal Commission Report*, 1980, op., cit., p. 54.
7. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit., pp. 152–157.
8. Austin, Granville. *Working a Democratic Constitution*, op., cit., *pp*. 279–281.
9. Jha, P. 'B.P. Mandal: A Profile,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 3, 1991, p. 98.
10. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution* op., cit., 2003, p. 152.
11. Hasan, Zoya. *Quest for Power: Oppositional Movements and Post-Congress Politics in Uttar Pradesh*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 56.
12. Ibid, p.57.
13. Jha, 'B.P. Mandal, op., cit., 1991, p.98.
14. Jha, H.C. *Land Reforms in Bihar*, Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1988, p.112.
15. Hasan, Quest *for Power*, op., cit., 1998, pp.59–60.
16. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit., 2003, p.153.
17. Ibid, pp.153–154.
18. Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission, op., cit.,*1980, pp.1–2.
19. Jha, H.C. *Land Reforms in Bihar*, *op., cit.*, 1988, p.23.
20. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution op., cit.* 2003, pp.45–46.

21. Jha, H.C., *Land Reforms in Bihar*, *op., cit.,* 1988, p.24.
22. J.C. Jha, *Land and Politics in Bihar*, Patna: Bihar Research Society, 1964, pp.110–112.
23. Hasan, Zoya. *Quest for Power op., cit.*, 1998, p. 42
24. Ibid, pp.43–44.
25. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit. 2003, p.48.
26. Ibid, 49–50.
27. Hasan, *Quest for Power*, op., cit., 1998, p.56.
28. Jha, *Land Reforms in Bihar*, op., cit., 1988, pp.112–114.
29. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit., 2003, p.51.
30. Hasan, *Quest for Power*, op., cit., 1998, pp.58–60.
31. Jha, P. 'B.P. Mandal, op., cit., 1991, p. 98.
32. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution* op., cit., 2003, pp. 45–50.
33. Hasan, Zoya. *Quest for Power* op., cit., 1998, pp. 51.
34. Weiner, Myron. *Sons of the Soil: Migration and Ethnic Conflict in India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978, pp. 129.
35. Kothari, Rajni. *Politics in India*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 1970, pp. 231–233.
36. Lohia, Ram Manohar. *Marx, Gandhi and Socialism*, Hyderabad: Rammanohar Lohia Samata Vidyalaya Nyas, 1952, p. 76.
37. Hasan, *Quest for Power*, op. cit., 1998, p. 57.
38. Jha, P. 'Karpoori Thakur and Backward Class Politics,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 1992, p.135.
39. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit., 2003, pp. 155–157.
40. Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission*, op., cit., 1980, pp. 2–3.
41. Hasan, Quest *for Power*, op., cit., 1998, pp. 59–60.
42. Jaffrelot, India's *Silent Revolution*, op., cit., 2003, pp. 213–215.
43. Kumar, Ashutosh. *Rethinking State Politics in India: Regions within Regions*, London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 132–133.
44. Galanter, Marc. *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 116–118.
45. Constitution of India, Articles 15(4) and 16(4).
46. Austin, Granville. *Working a Democratic Constitution* op., cit., 1999, p. 274.
47. Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Kalelkar Commission,* New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1955, pp. 32–34.
48. Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, 1984, op., cit., pp. 122–125.
49. Hasan, Zoya. *Quest for Power* op., cit., 1998, 56–57.
50. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution* op., cit., 2003, p. 154.
51. Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes* op., cit., 1980, pp. 1–2.
52. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit., 2003, pp. 154–155.
53. Galanter, Marc. *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 127–129.
54. Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission,* op., cit., 1980, p. 52.
55. Ibid, pp. 55–58.
56. Government of India, *Mandal Commission Report*, Vol. I, op., cit., pp. 13–14.
57. Austin, Granville. *Working a Democratic Constitution* op., cit., 1999, pp. 276–277.
58. Government of India, *Mandal Commission Report*, Vol. I, op., cit., pp. 69–72.
59. Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, op., cit., 1984, pp. 130–132.
60. Government of India, *Mandal Commission Report*, Vol. I, op., cit., 1980, p. 54.

61. Hasan, Zoya. *Quest for Power* op., cit., 1998, p. 57.
62. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution* op., cit., 2003, pp. 210–211.
63. Supreme Court of India, *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992 Supp (3) SCC 217.
64. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit., 2003, pp. 152–154.
65. Kumar, Ashutosh. *Rethinking State Politics in India* op., cit., 2011, pp. 128–129.
66. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit., 2003, pp. 3–5.
67. Galanter, Marc. *Competing Equalities* op., cit., 1984, pp. 148.
68. Béteille, André. *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965, pp. 214–216.
69. Madan, T.N. 'Caste in the 1990s: From System to Politics,' Economic *and Political Weekly* 26, no. 24, 1991, p. 1462.
70. Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power*, op., cit., 1965, p. 215.
71. Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, op., cit., 1984, p. 151.
72. Ibid, 152.
73. Supreme Court of India, *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992 Supp (3) SCC 217.
74. Hasan, Zoya. *Quest for Power* op., cit.,1998, p. 63.
75. Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* op., cit., 1980, p. 54.
76. Béteille, *Caste, Class and Power*, op., cit., 1965, p. 217.
77. Galanter, *Competing Equalities*, op., cit., 1984, 129.
78. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution:* op., cit., 2003, pp. 157–160.
79. Ibid, pp. 210–212.
80. Ibid, pp. 215–217.
81. Hasan, *Quest for Power*, op., cit., 1998, pp. 65–66.
82. Kumar, Ashutosh. *Rethinking State Politics in India* op., cit., 2011, p. 138.
83. Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution*, op., cit., 2003, p. 221.
84. Hasan, *Quest for Power*, op., cit., 1998, p. 69.
85. Ibid, pp. 72–73.
86. Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* op., cit., 1980, pp. 52–54.
87. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution* op., cit., 2003, p. 5.
88. Supreme Court of India, *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992 Supp (3) SCC 217.
89. Galanter, Marc. *Competing Equalities* op., cit., 1984, pp. 148–150.
90. Béteille, André. *Caste, Class and Power* op., cit., 1965, pp. 220–222.