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Caste, class, and political participation in rural Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper examines how caste and class jointly shape political participation in rural Uttar Pradesh (UP) with evidence limited to the 2011-2021 timeframe. Using official election statistics (UP Assembly 2017; Lok Sabha 2019), large household surveys (NFHS-5 fieldwork in UP during 2020-21), socio-economic profiling (SECC 2011), and nationally representative post-poll surveys (NES 2019), we analyze (a) electoral participation (turnout, issue salience), (b) local self-governance under the 73rd Amendment (reservations and Gram Sabha engagement), and (c) program-linked participation (with specific attention to MGNREGS and PDS as gateways). We argue that rural participation in UP is best understood as a caste-class assemblage: caste networks structure mobilization and party linkage; class resources (education, wealth, occupation, time) regulate the capacity to act on those networks. Institutional reservations have expanded descriptive representation but show uneven substantive gains without capacity support. Policy suggestions include improving caste-/gender-disaggregated participation metrics, transparent reservation rotation, and class-sensitive civic facilitation.

Keywords: Uttar Pradesh, caste, class, political participation, panchayat, turnout, NFHS-5 (2020-21), SECC 2011, NES 2019

Introduction

Uttar Pradesh India's most populous state has a decisive rural electorate whose participation shapes state and national outcomes. The most recent state-level assembly election within our window is 2017, with overall turnout ~61% (61.1-61.2% depending on series) and robust participation across rural districts; the most recent national contest is Lok Sabha 2019, with UP turnout ~59%^[1-3]. Turnout figures alone, however, mask important disparities in *who* participates and *how*. Across North India and acutely in UP caste (SCs, a range of OBC groupings, and "upper"/forward castes) remains an organizing axis of political competition and candidate selection, while class (proxied by wealth, education, occupation, and time costs) differentiates information access, campaign contact, and ability to attend Gram Sabhas or claim scheme benefits^[4-7].

NFHS-5's UP fieldwork (Jan-Mar 2020; Nov 2020-Apr 2021) enables near-contemporaneous profiling of household assets, women's education, sanitation, and other capabilities in rural UP precisely the factors that mediate costs of participation^[4, 5]. SECC 2011 continues to be the core reference for village-level deprivation structure (landlessness, housing, precarious labor), anchoring class constraints through the 2010s^[6]. Anchoring on these sources (and 73rd Amendment design), we ask: How do caste and class interact to structure rural political participation in UP circa 2020-2021?

2. Literature Review

Foundational Indian politics scholarship emphasizes caste as a key axis of mobilization and party strategy. Kothari's *Politics in India* framed elite alignments; Yadav and Palshikar analyzed social coalitions and regional party systems; Jaffrelot traced lower-caste assertion and organizational vehicles (e.g., BSP, OBC platforms) with particular salience in UP^[7-10]. In the 2010s, UP party politics continued to hinge on caste blocs (Dalit/Jatav and non-Jatav SCs; Yadav, Kurmi, Maurya, Mallah and other OBCs; upper castes), with welfare narratives, leadership cues, and organizational penetration overlaying identity linkages^[8-11].

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Comparative and Indian evidence shows education and wealth reduce participation costs (information, travel, opportunity cost). Poorer rural households (especially landless labor) face higher barriers to repeated engagement (Gram Sabhas, office follow-ups), even when mobilized by identity networks [12-14]. In UP, NFHS-5 (2020-21) wealth-quintile gradients and women's education distributions map directly onto these capacities [4, 5].

The 73rd Amendment mandates reservations for SC/STs and at least one-third for women in panchayats, with many states (including UP) reserving for OBCs as well. Rotational seat allocation aims to broaden descriptive representation over cycles. Evidence up to 2021 indicates improved entry of under-represented groups into office, but substantive empowerment varies with capacity support, local power structures, and transparency of the rotation process [15-18].

3. Data and Methodology

- 1. Election Statistics:** UP Assembly 2017 official detailed results/turnout (ECI), and UP turnout in the 2019 Lok Sabha (ECI). These provide the latest pre-2022 baselines for state and national electoral participation in UP [1-3].
- 2. National Election Studies (NES):** Lokniti-CSDS *All-India Post-poll NES 2019* for issue salience, media exposure, and socio-demographics useful for triangulating patterns in UP, given sample coverage and item batteries [13].
- 3. Socio-Economic Profiling:** NFHS-5 UP (fieldwork 2020-21) for household wealth quintiles, women's education/decision-making proxies, sanitation, and access indicators [4, 5]; SECC 2011 for rural deprivation structure [6]; PLFS 2018-19 for broad labour-market context (female work participation trends) [14].
- 4. Panchayat Institutions:** Constitutional/ministerial sources on the 73rd Amendment's reservation design and implementation practice; state election commission notifications (general structure) up to the 2021 panchayat cycle [15-18].

Analytical Strategy: We use descriptive tables (turnout; capability gradients from NFHS-5), cross-tab discussions (caste blocs vs. class constraints), and institutional analysis of reservations. Given that ECI does not release caste-wise turnout, we triangulate with survey evidence and literature.

4. Conceptual Framework: A Caste-Class Assemblage

We conceptualize caste as a political resource (identity, associational networks, mobilization and leadership pipelines) and class as capability constraints (education, assets/wealth, occupation/time) that regulate the intensity and form of participation. Participation spans:

- Electoral (turnout, campaign contact, vote choice),
- Local governance (panchayat representation; Gram Sabha attendance; committee roles), and
- Programmatic (claiming welfare/rights; participating in MGNREGS/SHGs/PDS oversight).

Institutional reservations reconfigure opportunity structures; welfare delivery and organizational outreach mediate capabilities. Within 2020-2021, COVID-19 disruptions also interact with class (e.g., reverse migration, MGNREGS demand), potentially altering programmatic participation patterns in villages [12, 14].

5. Results

5.1 Electoral Participation in Rural UP

Turnout baselines. The 2017 UP Assembly election recorded ~61% turnout statewide (phase-wise variation; several rural districts above the state mean) [1, 2]. In the 2019 general election, UP's turnout was ~59% lower than several smaller states but sizable given UP's scale and rural share [3]. At minimum, these figures indicate consistently engaged rural electorates within our window.

Issue salience and campaign contact. NES 2019 shows high salience of development, prices/unemployment, leadership evaluation, and welfare delivery among rural respondents nationally; while state-cut tables vary by release, triangulation with UP reportage in 2019 shows similar motifs. Material concerns coexisted with identity cues a pattern echoed in UP political reporting circa 2019-21 [11, 13]. Caste blocs and party strategies. Scholarship up to 2021 documents continuing centrality of caste federations to party strategy in UP (BSP's Dalit base; SP's OBC consolidation; BJP's attempts to span OBC sub-groups and upper-caste blocs through welfare messaging and booth-level organization) [8-11]. Because official data are not caste-disaggregated, we treat vote-choice patterns through the literature: caste remains a strong *organizing skeleton* for mobilization; the *swing flesh* often reflects material perceptions and leadership cues [9-11, 13].

5.2 Class Constraints: Capability Gradients in Rural UP Deprivation profile (SECC 2011).

Rural UP exhibits high shares of landless or marginal-land households, kutchha/semi-pucca housing, and dependence on insecure manual work markers of *thin political bandwidth* (time/transport/documentation burdens) [6].

NFHS-5 (2020-21) capability gradients: The UP NFHS-5 fact sheets report steep wealth-quintile and women's education gradients. Rural households in the bottom wealth quintiles have poorer sanitation, lower electrification and asset ownership, and lower female schooling each correlating with higher implicit costs of participation (mobility, meeting attendance, bureaucratic navigation) [4, 5]. These class constraints help explain why mobilization cues (including caste-based) may not translate into equal *depth* of participation across households.

Labour market (PLFS 2018-19)

Pre-pandemic PLFS references point to modest increases in female work participation in some regions, but the broad Hindi belt including UP still shows significant gendered constraints on time and mobility, which depresses in-person civic engagement (Gram Sabhas, office visits) for poorer women [14]. COVID-linked shocks in 2020 likely intensified programmatic dependence (e.g., PDS, MGNREGS), nudging *program-linked* participation up even when *deliberative* participation remained constrained [12, 14].

5.3 Local Self-Government: Reservations and Representation

Design features: The 73rd Amendment mandates SC/ST and ≥1/3 women's reservation in panchayats; UP also implements OBC reservation. Seat/office reservations rotate across cycles and across the three tiers (gram, block, district) [15-18].

Descriptive vs. substantive representation: By 2021, UP's cycles had produced wide descriptive inclusion (women and SC/OBC elected representatives). But evidence across India and UP indicates uneven substantive empowerment unless paired with capacity inputs (budgeting/procurement training, secretarial support) and transparent processes (clear rotation logic and grievance windows). Social norms (patriarchal constraints, local elite dominance) can mute reserved representatives' agenda-setting power without institutional reinforcement^[16-18].

Gram Sabha engagement: Administrative and independent assessments during the 2010s suggest Gram Sabha attendance remains lowest among the poorest and among women in conservative settings precisely where NFHS-5 indicators report deficits. Class-sensitive scheduling (agricultural calendars), proximity, and child-care support are recurrent recommendations up to 2021^[15-18].

5.4 Programmatic Participation as a Gateway

Public distribution and cash/benefit delivery: The PDS (ration) and DBT platforms became especially salient in 2020-21. Beneficiary touchpoints (fair-price shops, bank correspondents) increase *state visibility* and provide entry ramps to claims-making for poor rural households and women, even when deliberative forums are under-attended^[12, 13].

MGNREGS: Administrative MIS during 2020-21 (pandemic phase) recorded historically high demand for wage employment nationally; UP, with its scale and reverse migration, saw increased uptake. Women's share in MGNREGS nationally has typically hovered around or above the statutory norm, yet Hindi-belt states (including UP) have tended to report lower female share than southern states mirroring NFHS-5 capability gradients; this suggests scope for targeted facilitation (worksites childcare, nearby works, SHG linkages) to enhance women's *public presence* and hence political voice^[12, 14, 15].

Spillovers to formal politics: Program-linked participation (PDS queues, MGNREGS worksites, SHG meetings) often **spills over** into higher awareness of Gram Sabha schedules, local leadership channels, and procedural know-how especially when front-line functionaries (ASHA/ANM/BLOs/BC Sakhis) play facilitative roles^[15-18].

6. Discussion

The evidence to 2021 supports a dual structure of rural participation in UP. Caste networks still organize mobilization and structure party competition, but class conditions capability who is contacted, who attends, who follows through on claims. NFHS-5 gradients and SECC structure show that the *poorest rural women and landless labor households* face the highest participation costs. Thus, while caste remains a strong predictor of party anchoring, material concerns (prices, jobs, welfare) weigh heavily in vote choice and campaign narratives, as NES 2019 and contemporary UP reportage indicate^[11, 13].

Institutional reservations have opened seats and offices to women and SC/OBC citizens at scale; yet substantive empowerment correlates with training, procedural literacy, and transparent rotation. In villages where MGNREGS and

SHGs are active and where frontline workers facilitate documentation programmatic participation functions as a civic on-ramp for women and poorer households, gradually extending beyond welfare into deliberative spaces. The 2020-21 context (pandemic) likely amplified program-dependence, with ambiguous short-run effects on electoral mobilization but clearer gains in *state visibility* among the poor.

In short, rural political participation in UP circa 2020-21 is best read as a caste-class assemblage: identity provides scaffolding; class supplies (or withholds) the means to climb.

7. Policy Implications

- 1. Measure what matters (disaggregated metrics):** Within privacy safeguards, publish rural/urban, booth-type, and *gender-disaggregated* turnout analytics; record Gram Sabha attendance and social audit participation with caste/sex aggregation at the *village-cluster* level for diagnostics^[1-3, 15-18].
- 2. Transparent reservation rotation:** Publicly document the rotation algorithm and pre-announce rosters; create grievance windows before finalization to reduce local contestation and improve legitimacy^[15-18].
- 3. Capacity + support for reserved representatives:** Budget for structured training (procurement, accounts, scheme convergence), clerical/secretarial assistance, and peer mentorship networks (inter-district) to turn descriptive presence into agenda power^[16-18].
- 4. Programmatic gateways for the poorest women:** Expand MGNREGS childcare pilots, ensure near-village works, and systematically link SHGs with panchayat deliberations; align Gram Sabha schedules with agricultural calendars and wage-days to reduce opportunity costs^[12, 14-16].
- 5. Documentation & facilitation drives:** Use BLOs/ASHA/SHG cadres for door-to-door voter list corrections, ID/documentation, and PDS/DBT grievance facilitation in low-literacy hamlets flagged by NFHS-5 deficits^[4, 5, 15-18].

8. Conclusion

From a 2020-2021 vantage, rural political participation in Uttar Pradesh remains high in headline turnout yet stratified in depth and form. Caste continues to organize party competition and local networks; class proxied by wealth, education, and time regulates the *real* capacity to engage: campaign contact, Gram Sabha attendance, and effective claims-making. NFHS-5's UP indicators reveal steep capability gradients; SECC 2011 underlines enduring deprivation patterns among landless and casual-labor households. Panchayat reservations have expanded access, but substantive empowerment still hinges on capacity, transparency, and facilitation.

Policy should therefore pursue a both-and strategy: (i) dignitarian recognition of caste-linked exclusion in mobilization and representation; and (ii) systematic removal of class barriers via services, documentation support, time-saving infrastructure, and work-aligned scheduling. In the medium run, if capability gaps narrow (education, assets, mobility), the *relative* weight of class is likely to rise within the caste-class assemblage pressing parties toward more issue-sensitive, programmatically credible rural politics in UP.

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