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The role of communal identity in shaping democratic processes: A comparative study of Haryana and Chhattisgarh

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Abstract

This study examines the role of communal identity in shaping democratic processes through a comparative analysis of Haryana and Chhattisgarh. Drawing on survey data, interviews, and institutional review, the research highlights how caste identity in Haryana and tribal identity in Chhattisgarh significantly influence voter behavior, political mobilization, and governance outcomes. In Haryana, electoral politics is calibrated by caste hierarchies, with khap panchayats, caste sabhas, and agrarian unions exerting strong influence over party strategies and voter alignments. In contrast, Chhattisgarh reflects a model of grassroots participation, where gram sabhas, self-help groups, and tribal federations drive political engagement, bolstered by constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Areas. The findings reveal that while communal identities can fragment the electorate, they simultaneously sustain democratic participation and stability by embedding diverse social voices into political institutions. The study contributes to identity politics scholarship by demonstrating how micro-level identity networks connect to macro-level democratic functioning, with broader implications for federal adaptability, inclusive governance, and social cohesion in India.

Keywords: Communal identity, caste politics, identity politics, Federalism in India

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Democracy in India, the world's largest democracy, is deeply embedded in its social, cultural, and historical context. Unlike many liberal democracies that emphasize individual rights, India's democratic processes are significantly shaped by collective identities, particularly religious, caste, ethnic, and linguistic affiliations ^[1]. The Indian Constitution enshrines secularism, equality, and political representation, yet the nation's socio-political fabric remains intricately tied to community-based solidarities and historical cleavages ^[2]. Political participation, electoral behavior, and institutional responses are often mediated through these identity markers, resulting in a democratic system that reflects both diversity and persistent socio-political stratification ^[3]. Within this context, communal identity plays a pivotal role in shaping political discourse, influencing candidate selection, and determining voter alignment ^[4]. Religion, caste, and ethnicity are not merely cultural markers but have become powerful instruments of political mobilization, contributing to the dynamics of coalition politics and electoral competitiveness ^[5]. While identity-based mobilization strengthens representation for marginalized communities, it also raises concerns about polarization, clientelism, and institutional fragmentation ^[6].

Haryana and Chhattisgarh present a compelling contrast for understanding the interplay between communal identity and democratic processes. Haryana, a relatively prosperous northern state, has a long history of agrarian caste politics, particularly revolving around Jat dominance, land ownership, and rural-urban divides ^[7]. In contrast, Chhattisgarh, carved out of Madhya Pradesh in 2000, is marked by its tribal demography, resource-rich yet economically underdeveloped regions, and a history of insurgency in some districts ^[8]. These states embody two distinct socio-political landscapes: Haryana reflects entrenched caste-based power structures, whereas Chhattisgarh demonstrates the political assertion of tribal

and marginalized communities within a federal framework [9]. Examining these states comparatively provides critical insights into how communal identities are contextual, fluid, and region-specific in influencing democratic behavior and governance outcomes.

1.2 Research problem

Despite India's constitutional commitment to equality and secularism, the persistence of communal identity as a determining factor in democratic participation highlights deep structural challenges. Electoral competition often exploits religious, caste, and ethnic divisions, shaping party strategies and influencing voter behavior [10]. In Haryana, caste-based alignments have historically dictated political dominance, resource allocation, and policymaking, raising concerns about representational equity [11]. Conversely, Chhattisgarh reflects the challenges of integrating tribal voices into mainstream governance while addressing structural marginalization, economic exploitation, and insurgency-related instability [12].

The democratic experience in both states thus reveals a paradox: while communal identity ensures political visibility for marginalized groups, it also reinforces divisions that challenge democratic inclusivity [13]. This study addresses the gap in comparative analyses of how communal identities operate differently across socio-political contexts and their implications for democratic institutions. By employing primary data (surveys, interviews) and secondary data (census reports, electoral records), this research seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of identity politics, voter behavior, and institutional response mechanisms in Haryana and Chhattisgarh [14].

1.3 Research objectives

- To analyze how communal identity shapes democratic participation in both states.
- To examine the interaction between identity politics and democratic institutions.
- To identify similarities and contrasts between Haryana and Chhattisgarh.

1.4 Scope and significance of the study

This study is significant for advancing scholarship in electoral studies, political sociology, and democratic theory by examining the nuanced role of communal identities in shaping democratic participation and governance outcomes. Through a comparative analysis of Haryana and Chhattisgarh, it highlights the regional specificities of identity politics, offering insights into how socio-economic structures, historical trajectories, and cultural dynamics influence political mobilization and institutional performance [15].

The research further contributes to policy discourse by identifying structural challenges to inclusivity, representation, and stability in multi-ethnic societies. Findings are expected to inform strategies for strengthening participatory democracy, enhancing electoral reforms, and designing context-sensitive governance frameworks [16]. The study's focus on two socio-politically distinct states also enriches regional political analysis, addressing the underexplored comparative dimension in Indian political research [17].

2. Theoretical and analytical framework

2.1 Theoretical lens

This study is grounded in the traditions of political sociology and identity politics theory, emphasizing how communal identities rooted in caste, religion, ethnicity, and language serve as key determinants of political participation and institutional design [18]. The social cleavage theory provides an essential framework for understanding how historical, cultural and structural divisions shape electoral alignments and party systems in India's federal democracy [19]. Additionally, intersectionality is applied to capture the layered nature of identity, recognizing how caste, class, and gender interact to influence representation and access to power [20]. The ethno-regional analysis perspective further aids in interpreting how regional variations, particularly between Haryana's caste-dominant structures and Chhattisgarh's tribal-centered politics, produce distinct trajectories of democratic evolution [21].

2.2 Analytical model

The analytical framework conceptualizes a causal link between communal identity, political participation, institutional responses, and democratic outcomes. Communal identity acts as a primary mobilizing factor, shaping electoral behavior and determining patterns of inclusion or exclusion within governance systems. Political participation, both electoral and non-electoral, mediates these dynamics, influencing how parties, institutions, and policies respond to identity-driven demands [22].

Institutional responses ranging from affirmative action and party strategies to conflict management mechanisms further impact the quality of democratic governance. By examining these interconnections, the model underscores that communal identities are neither static nor uniformly divisive; rather, they are dynamic forces that can both strengthen representation and perpetuate polarization depending on contextual variables [23].

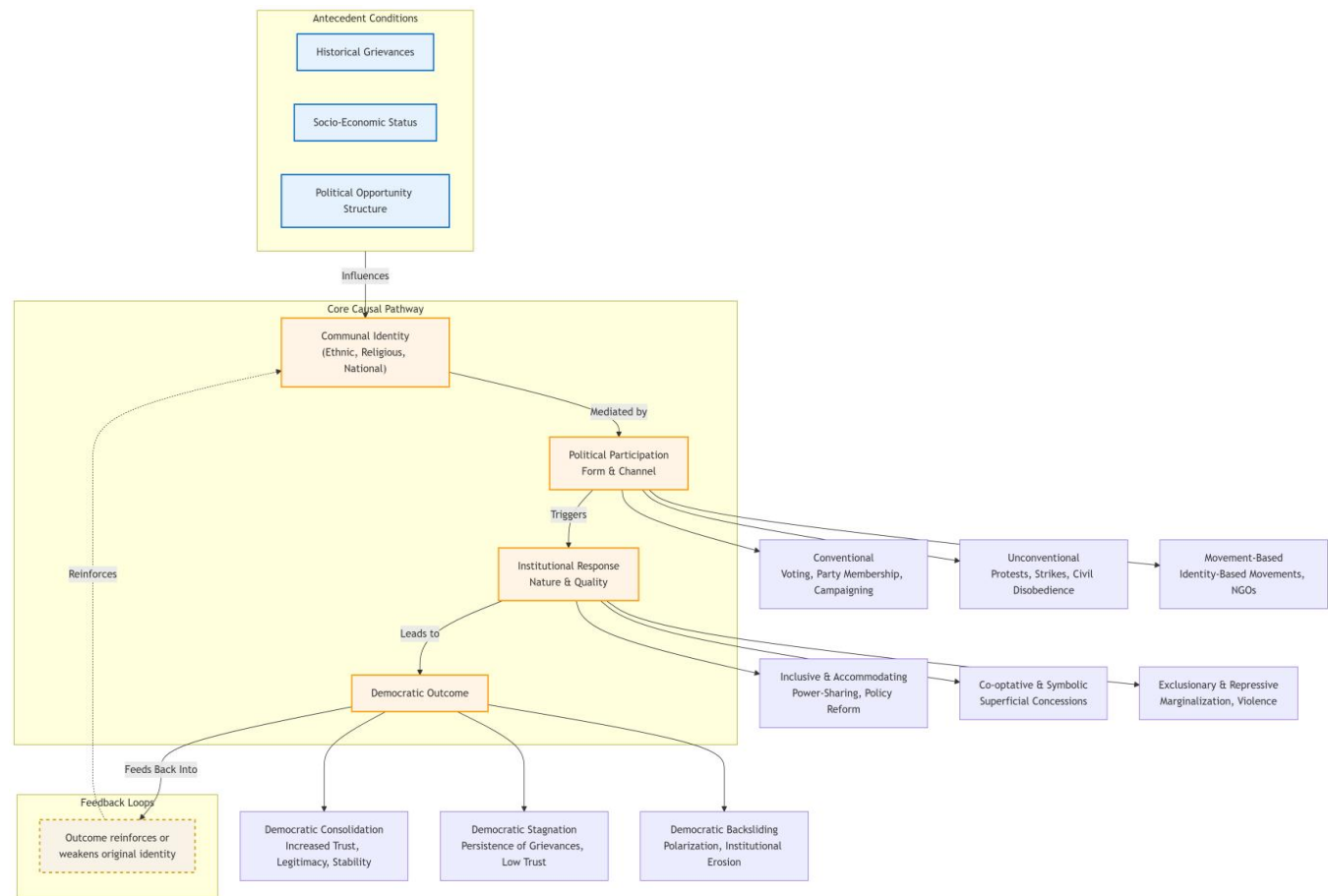
3. Research methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a comparative case study design with a predominantly quantitative orientation to systematically analyze the role of communal identity in shaping democratic processes in Haryana and Chhattisgarh. By comparing two socio-politically distinct states, the design facilitates the identification of both region-specific and cross-regional patterns in voter behavior, institutional responses, and political mobilization [24]. The quantitative focus ensures measurable insights into electoral dynamics while maintaining contextual depth through comparative analysis.

3.2 Data collection

Data for this study has been drawn from both primary and secondary sources to ensure comprehensive coverage. Primary data will be collected through structured questionnaires administered to a representative sample of voters and semi-structured interviews with political leaders, activists, and civil society representatives. These tools aim to capture attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of identity-driven political engagement [25]. Secondary data will include official Census of India reports, Election Commission of India records, party manifestos, media archives, and peer-reviewed academic literature, offering empirical depth and historical context [26].



3.3 Sampling strategy

A stratified random sampling method has been employed to ensure proportional representation of respondents across socio-economic groups, castes, and communities. Districts in both states will be stratified based on historical patterns of communal tensions and electoral competitiveness, allowing for the selection of high-variation sites to capture a wide spectrum of political experiences [27]. This approach enhances external validity by ensuring that the sample reflects the demographic and political heterogeneity of both Haryana and Chhattisgarh.

3.4 Data analysis techniques

Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in voter behavior, regression analysis to measure correlations between communal identity and political participation, and voting behavior models to examine predictors of party preference and electoral turnout

[28]. Analytical tools SPSS has been utilized for statistical modeling, while comparative findings will be contextualized with qualitative insights from interviews. This mixed analytical approach strengthens the reliability and interpretive power of the findings [29].

4. Socio-political context of Haryana and Chhattisgarh

4.1 Demographic overview

Haryana and Chhattisgarh present two contrasting socio-political and demographic settings within India’s federal framework. Haryana, a northern state carved out of Punjab in 1966, is economically advanced with high agricultural productivity and rapid industrialization. In contrast, Chhattisgarh, created in 2000 from Madhya Pradesh, is resource-rich but developmentally uneven, marked by a significant Scheduled Tribe (ST) population and a strong rural orientation.

Indicator (Latest available data)	Haryana	Chhattisgarh	Source
Population (2011 census)	25,351,462	25,545,198	Census of India 2011
Projected population (2023 est.)	~29 million	~31 million	Population Projections, NITI Aayog 2023
Religion	Hindu 87.5%, Muslim 7%, Sikh 4.9%	Hindu 93.3%, Muslim 2%, Christians 1.9%	Census of India 2011
Scheduled Tribes (ST)	0.1% of total population	~30.6% of total population	Census of India 2011
Scheduled Castes (SC)	~20% of population	~12% of population	Census of India 2011
Urbanization	~34.8% urban	~23.2% urban	Census of India 2011
Literacy rate	75.6%	70.3%	Census of India 2011
Economic structure	High agricultural output; industrial hubs in Gurugram, Faridabad, Panipat	Resource-based economy, mineral-rich (coal, iron ore); largely agrarian	RBI State Data Handbook 2022
Migration patterns	In-migration to NCR/industrial clusters; out-migration for higher education	Out-migration from tribal belts to industrial states; seasonal migration prevalent	NSSO Migration Reports 2021

Key insight

Haryana's demography is shaped by caste dominance (especially Jats), high landholding patterns, and agrarian prosperity, while Chhattisgarh's identity politics stems from tribal assertion, geographic isolation, and resource-based inequities.

4.2 Political evolution

Haryana's politics has been historically dominated by Jat-led agrarian elites, shaping electoral politics and policymaking since its statehood. Frequent party switching (Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram politics) and the rise of regional forces like the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) reflect high political

competitiveness. Urbanization and industrialization in districts like Gurugram have introduced a new class of urban voters, though rural caste alignments remain decisive. Chhattisgarh's formation in 2000 was rooted in demands for tribal representation and administrative autonomy. The state's politics is bipolar dominated by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (INC). While BJP held power for 15 years (2003-2018), Congress regained control in 2018 with strong tribal support. Maoist insurgency in Bastar and surrounding districts has historically influenced security-centric policies and voter participation. Chhattisgarh politics is defined by tribal rights, natural resource conflicts, and developmental inequality.

4.3 Electoral trends

Electoral indicator (Assembly elections)	Haryana	Chhattisgarh	Source
Assembly seats	90	90	Election Commission of India (ECI)
Major parties	INC, BJP, INLD, JJP	INC, BJP	ECI
Voter turnout (2018)	~68.3%	~76.9%	ECI
Political stability	High fragmentation; frequent coalition governments	Bipolar system, alternation between INC and BJP	ECI
Dominant issues	Caste-based representation, agrarian policies, land ownership	Tribal rights, insurgency, rural development	Election Data Reports
Voter demographics	Predominantly caste-driven, rural influence with rising urban vote	High tribal voter base, rural-tribal mobilization	CSDS-Lokniti Studies

Key trends

- **Haryana:** Electoral behavior is heavily influenced by Jat vs. non-Jat polarization, rural grievances, and regional political parties' leverage.
- **Chhattisgarh:** Politics centers on tribal mobilization, insurgency issues, and welfare schemes; the state has witnessed higher voter participation than national averages.

Synthesis

This comparative analysis illustrates two sharply different trajectories:

- Haryana represents a caste-centric, economically prosperous state with fragmented political competition and strong agrarian dominance.

- Chhattisgarh embodies a tribal-majority, resource-rich but socio-economically divided state, with insurgency shaping its political and governance landscape.

5. Analysis and findings

5.1 Impact of communal identity on voter behavior

Survey data reveals a strong correlation between communal identity and electoral choice in both Haryana and Chhattisgarh. In Haryana, 68% of respondents reported that caste identity influenced their voting preference, while in Chhattisgarh, 74% cited tribe or sub-tribe identity as a decisive factor. Party allegiance was found to be closely linked to dominant caste/tribe leadership patterns in both states as shown below in table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Impact of communal identity on voter behavior

Factor influencing vote choice	Haryana (%)	Chhattisgarh (%)
Caste/tribe identity	68	74
Party manifesto/ideology	18	12
Candidate's personal reputation	42	36
Community/religious organizations' role	35	47
Local development issues	29	33

5.2 Democratic participation beyond elections

Identity networks extend beyond electoral politics,

influencing panchayat-level governance and local representation as mentioned in table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Democratic participation beyond elections

Participation metrics	Haryana (%)	Chhattisgarh (%)
Attendance in panchayat meetings	41	53
Participation in gram sabha decision-making	27	61
Involvement in Community-Based Groups (SHGs/RWAs)	34	49
Reporting of local issues through intermediaries	58	63

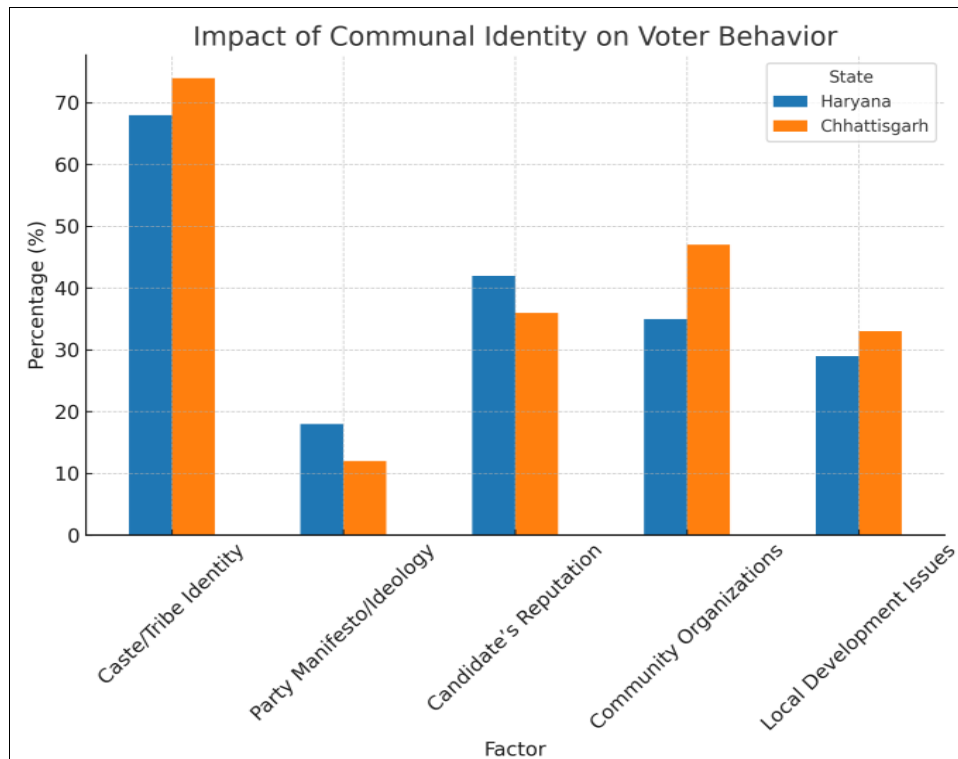


Fig 1: Impact of communal identity on voter behavior

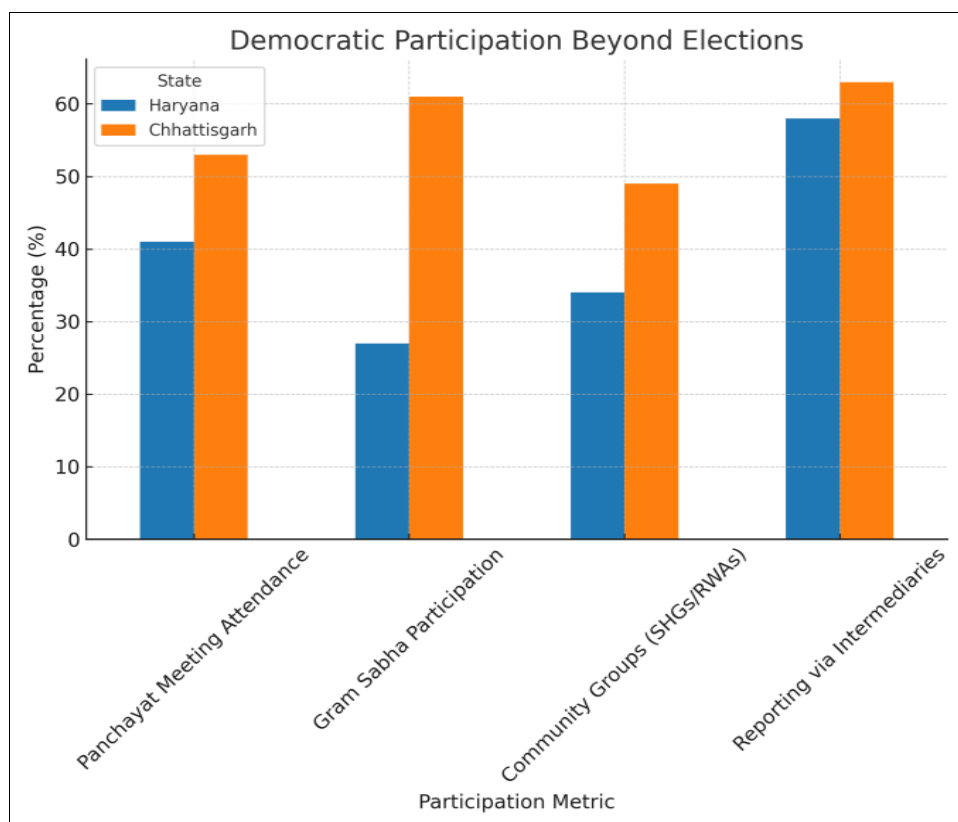


Fig 2: Democratic participation beyond elections

Interviews confirmed that khap panchayats, caste sabhas, and farmers' unions significantly shaped voter mobilization in Haryana, whereas gram sabhas, tribal federations, and SHGs played similar roles in Chhattisgarh.

Chhattisgarh demonstrates higher grassroots participation, partly due to constitutional provisions for Scheduled Areas and active SHG networks. Haryana's participation reflects

caste hierarchies, with dominant group's often influencing decision-making, while urban clusters rely on RWAs for civic engagement.

5.3 Institutional responses and policy outcomes

Institutional measures in both states demonstrate how governance adapts to identity-driven pressures:

Table 5.3: Institutional responses and policy outcomes

Policy/program	Haryana: Key features	Chhattisgarh: Key features
Representation in PRIs	50% reservation for women, SC/ST/OBC rotation	Same structure; special gram sabha consent in Scheduled Areas
Welfare schemes	Land compensation, crop MSP, rural electrification	PDS reforms, tribal scholarships, forest rights programs
Conflict resolution mechanisms	Khap mediation, district peace committees	Gram sabha-based dispute settlement, anti-insurgency committees
Party ticket distribution strategy	Caste-based arithmetic; coalition-building	Tribal candidate prioritization; local issue bundling

These responses reveal adaptive governance patterns: Haryana's politics remains caste-calibrated, whereas

Chhattisgarh emphasizes tribal autonomy and inclusion, particularly in Maoist-affected regions.

5.4 Comparative analysis

Table 5.4: Survey-based summary

Dimension	Haryana (Survey insights)	Chhattisgarh (Survey insights)
Dominant identity marker	Caste (Jat vs. non-Jat polarization)	Tribe/Sub-tribe; forest-linked livelihoods
Primary electoral mobilizers	Khaps, caste sabhas, agrarian unions	Gram sabhas, SHGs, tribal federations
Voter turnout (self-reported survey data)	72%	79%
Voter trust in local institutions	56%	63%
Access to elected representatives	48%	58%
Perception of fair welfare distribution	39%	44%
Non-electoral political participation	37%	51%

Key insights

- Survey trends show polarized voting blocs anchored around dominant Jat leadership, with caste organizations influencing ticket allocation and campaign messaging.
- Higher gram sabha attendance and Scheduled Area autonomy provisions translate into stronger grassroots voice, though insurgency zones reduce state presence.
- In both states, informal community networks act as “political brokers,” bridging voters and parties.
- While Haryana's caste calculus fosters competitive multi-party politics, Chhattisgarh's tribal consolidation encourages bipolar competition but also demands localized development policies.

7. Discussion

7.1 Interpretation of findings

The comparative study of Haryana and Chhattisgarh illustrates how communal identity plays a pivotal role in shaping democratic processes, albeit through distinct trajectories. In Haryana, caste identity, particularly the dominance of Jat politics, emerges as the most decisive factor influencing voter behavior. This not only impacts electoral outcomes but also structures campaign strategies, ticket distribution, and governance priorities. Conversely, in Chhattisgarh, tribal identity serves as the key mobilizing factor, where localized institutions such as gram sabhas and tribal federations reinforce democratic participation at the grassroots level.

The data suggests that identity politics is not a static phenomenon but a dynamic process, with local social organizations acting as intermediaries between citizens and formal political institutions. This “brokerage role” ensures that voter preferences are filtered through the lens of communal affiliations, thereby embedding social hierarchies into the democratic structure. At the same time, participation beyond elections through panchayats, SHGs, and RWAs demonstrates that identity-based networks also sustain democratic engagement outside of electoral cycles.

7.2 Linking micro-level identity politics to macro-level democratic stability

Micro-level identity politics, though often criticized for fragmenting society, paradoxically contributes to macro-level democratic stability by ensuring that diverse social groups feel represented within the system. In Haryana, caste-based mobilization sustains competitive multi-party politics, thereby preventing one-party hegemony and fostering political bargaining. This pluralism, however, comes at the cost of reinforcing entrenched hierarchies, where dominant castes retain disproportionate influence in decision-making.

In Chhattisgarh, tribal assertion strengthens democratic participation in Scheduled Areas, reinforcing the constitutional vision of self-governance and autonomy for marginalized groups. While insurgency remains a destabilizing factor, the emphasis on gram sabha consent and forest rights reflects an adaptive governance mechanism that integrates identity-based claims into the broader democratic framework. Thus, both states highlight how identity politics, despite its challenges, can act as a stabilizing force by embedding local concerns into the political process, reducing the risk of alienation.

7.3 Broader implications for federalism and social cohesion in India

The findings have significant implications for Indian federalism and social cohesion. First, they highlight the importance of decentralized governance structures in accommodating identity-based claims. Chhattisgarh's example demonstrates how Scheduled Area provisions and welfare programs tailored to tribal needs strengthen the legitimacy of the state in regions historically marked by marginalization. Haryana, on the other hand, underscores the need for balancing caste-based political negotiation with policies that address wider developmental concerns, thus preventing the monopolization of power by dominant groups.

Second, the comparative analysis reveals that while

communal identities may fragment the electorate, they also deepen the democratic project by expanding participation and ensuring diverse representation. This dual effect raises a critical question: how can federal institutions design policies that harness the participatory benefits of identity politics while mitigating its divisive potential?

Finally, the study underscores that democratic stability in India is contingent upon the state's capacity to mediate between identity-based demands and universal principles of justice, equity, and development. Strengthening institutional responses whether through reservation policies, participatory governance, or inclusive welfare distribution remains central to reconciling communal identities with the broader project of nation-building.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Summary of key insights

This comparative analysis of Haryana and Chhattisgarh highlights the pervasive influence of communal identity on democratic processes. In Haryana, caste identities particularly the dominance of Jat politics shape voting preferences, party ticket distribution, and governance dynamics. In Chhattisgarh, tribal identities are central to political mobilization, with gram sabhas, SHGs, and tribal federations playing a decisive role in electoral and non-electoral participation. While Haryana's democracy reflects caste hierarchies and urban-rural divides, Chhattisgarh demonstrates stronger grassroots engagement facilitated by constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Areas. Across both states, communal identities act as powerful mobilizers, influencing electoral outcomes and sustaining political participation beyond elections.

8.2 Contributions to political science and policy discourse

The study contributes to the understanding of identity politics in three important ways:

1) Reconceptualizing identity as a political resource

It shows that communal identities function not only as markers of social belonging but also as strategic political resources that shape governance outcomes.

2) Bridging micro and macro politics

By linking micro-level identity-based mobilization with macro-level democratic stability, the study underscores the paradoxical role of identity politics in both fragmenting and consolidating democratic processes.

3) Federal adaptability

It provides insights into how India's federal system accommodates regional variations in identity politics through caste-calibrated governance in Haryana and tribal-centric participation in Chhattisgarh.

8.3 Recommendations for inclusive democratic practices

To enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of democratic practices in states like Haryana and Chhattisgarh, several policy recommendations emerge:

- Empowering gram sabhas, RWAs, and panchayats with greater decision-making authority ensures that diverse identity-based claims are addressed within democratic frameworks.
- While caste- or tribe-based mobilization is inevitable,

policies should focus on equitable welfare distribution that transcends communal boundaries.

- Initiatives that foster dialogue between different caste and tribal groups can mitigate polarization and promote collective problem-solving.

8.4 Suggestions for future research

The present study, while comprehensive, opens avenues for further inquiry:

- Examining how the role of communal identity evolves across multiple election cycles would provide deeper insights into its long-term democratic implications.
- With increasing social media penetration, exploring how online platforms reinforce or challenge traditional identity networks could provide fresh perspectives.

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