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Shifting Grounds: Society and Politics in Haryana

By: Satendra Kumar

Haryana's social and political landscape is in the midst of a transition, with both backward castes and the younger generation of Jats seeking to break away from the old agrarian order. So far, only the BJP has managed to tap into these sentiments.

Haryana's political landscape has been significantly altered by an ongoing agrarian crisis and the fragmentation of rural and caste communities by neoliberal policies. The shifts have given rise to new social and economic groups, and fresh political aspirations. Traditional Jat authority has been undermined not only by previously subordinate (and client) groups but also by sections of Jats who no longer have the same stakes in the continuation of the old agrarian order.

These changes have facilitated the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state over the past decade. By appealing to upwardly mobile Jats, backward castes, and Dalits disillusioned with agrarian politics and stunted by the ongoing agricultural crisis, the BJP has effectively challenged the entrenched power of agrarian Jat elites and dynastic leaders, and changed the power structure in Haryana. The shifting axis of politics has broader political implications for the state.

The rise and decline of the Jats

Jats have dominated Haryana since the state was formed in 1966. Making up a quarter of Haryana's population, the Jats benefited greatly from the land reforms of the 1960s and 1970s (Jaffrelot 2000), which made many of them landowners. The expansion of canal irrigation and the introduction of the Green Revolution brought them prosperity. This agrarian prosperity helped give them political leverage in national and regional politics.

The contemporary Jat political identity was largely forged by their mobilisation under Chaudhari Charan Singh, who united them under the broad identity of the kisan. Singh romanticised rural and agrarian life, presenting the Jat farmer as “master of his own destiny,” standing against the encroachment of urban-centred politics (Singh 1959).

This was the foundation upon which the Jats built the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU). Singh's tenure as deputy prime minister and finance minister in the Morarji Desai government of 1977–79, embedded many of the BKU's demands into policy. His ‘kulak budget’ of 1979 focused on reducing indirect taxes on items crucial to agricultural production, such as mechanical tillers, diesel for electric water pumps, and chemical fertilisers.

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The BKU and Singh claimed to champion kisan interests, but it was clear that the Jats alone were to be the beneficiaries in the Haryana countryside. The landless poor – mostly Dalit – and artisan-service castes – the more disadvantaged sections of the Other Backward Classes – were sidelined and Jat dominance was reinforced. This control over rural and agricultural life persisted into the 1980s, before new economic policies began to reshape the agrarian landscape and allowed Dalits and other subordinated castes to gain a degree of autonomy and freedom.

In the wake of the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s, the countryside was hit by a combination of economically unsustainable agriculture, rapid urbanisation, and rural-to-urban migration. Agriculture's share in Haryana's economy declined to 13.5% in the 2000s from 28% in the 1980s, even as significant corporate sector subsidies and tax exemptions boosted the service sector (Kennedy 2014). Between 1980 and 2010, Haryana's service sector grew 9.2% annually on average, compared with the national average of 7.7% (Jaffrelot & Kalaiyarasan 2019). In the 2000s, the service sector accounted for about 61% of Haryana's overall economic growth, closely aligned with the all-India rate of 66%.

Into the present, the average size of cultivated landholdings has declined, leaving most Jat farmers as marginal landholders with limited education and low incomes.

In contrast, members of the service castes found new economic opportunities in towns. Increased access to reservations, education, and skill acquisition facilitated upward mobility amongst Dalits (Chowdhry 2009). A few Dalits became self-employed, often engaged in small-scale enterprises like street vending or tailoring, though with limited assets. While working conditions in the emerging service sector have been precarious and insecure, these jobs provided better wages than on farms, payment in cash, relative dignity at the workplace, and freedom from the village caste structure.

The rural landscape that has emerged is fragmented. There is a growing economic divide, shaped by unequal access to resources and trajectories for upward mobility in the market economy. New classes, straddling the rural and the urban are developing political aspirations distinct from those of the traditional agrarian classes. Non-farm employment and the deepening of voting rights have become the tools for subordinated castes to escape Jat domination.

Restructuring of the rural

In Chota Majara, located near Ladwa town in Kurukshetra district, the Sainis – traditionally small or marginal landowners and tenants – have largely shifted to cultivating vegetables, capitalising on the demand from urban markets over the past three decades. The wealth from these ventures has been invested in education, and produced an educated middle class amongst them (Saini 2023).

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Unlike the Sainis, the Jats of the village perceive vegetable farming and street vending as low-status work, incompatible with their social standing. Consequently, many Jats have been economically dislocated from their former positions of influence. The Sainis are now political competitors, challenging the Jats' traditional dominance.

In other instances, not all Jats are able to emulate the progress of other castes. In Shandhan village in Hisar district, for example, upper caste landowners, like the Baniyas, have successfully established local businesses such as grain trading, fertiliser and seed shops, and grocery stores (Yadav 2021). A small group of affluent Jat farmers in the village – those with more than 4 hectares of land – have similarly diversified by investing in education, non-farm businesses, and political roles. Some of these Jats have become rentiers in real estate or entered agro-businesses, trading in grains and vegetables. But the majority of Jat farmers, who own less than one hectare of land, have had to take up employment in public sectors such as the army, police, and electricity departments, while others have taken up jobs as lab assistants, deliverymen, and drivers.

The economic changes have produced a pronounced class division within the Jat community. There are also tensions between the Jat patriarchs who rely mainly on agriculture and the millennial Jats with incomes from non-farm and urban employment. Many of the younger Jats see little future in stagnant, depressed agriculture and are desperate to escape it. Yet they also know that the land is their only insurance against the uncertainties of urban life where they can, at best, find precarious work. This makes their relationship with the village and its political and caste authority complex and fraught with contradictions. There is desire as well as disgust. There are only occasional moments which bring them together, like the farmer's movement of 2020–21, which created a broader coalition that cut across caste, class, and religion (Kumar 2024).

Other groups too have had divergent fortunes. Haryana's Dalits have largely moved away from agriculture labour work (Jodhka 2016), yet different caste groups within the Dalit community have distinct economic paths. While the Jatavs have utilised reservations and education to improve their lives, other groups like the Balmikis, Khatiks, and Dhanuks have faced discrimination and feel left behind.

The emergence of a new polity

In this fragmented rural space, the BJP's blend of a unified Hindu identity, trumping over caste distinctions, and support for global capitalism has emerged as the primary political choice for both upwardly mobile Jats and non-Jats who hardly see a future in distressed agriculture or in the countryside. Dalits and those from the service castes are disinterested in farm-centred politics, which they see as potentially reinforcing Jat dominance. They find little appeal in the old-style patronage and dynastic politics of the Congress, the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD), or the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP). The BJP's strategy has been to harness the political and economic aspirations of upwardly mobile groups of the backward castes and Dalits eager to escape Jat dominance.

In Haryana, the BJP has adeptly tapped into these growing divisions, insecurities, fears and aspirations for upward mobility, leveraging them to consolidate its political agenda.

In this, the BJP has been unexpectedly aided by policies otherwise criticised for their flaws. For instance, millennial backward caste and Dalit youth feel that the Jats and other agrarian castes had monopolised army and police recruitment and see the Agniveer scheme for military recruitment as opening opportunities to a broader range of castes. The scheme, brought in by the union government headed by the BJP, has been controversial for it scraps recruitment for permanent jobs for the rank and file in the military, instead offering a four-year contract.

Upwardly mobile groups see the Agniveer more as opportunity than insecurity. With public sector employment shrinking fast, the scheme opened a space that dominant rural social groups had hitherto monopolised. In the bleak landscape of jobs, Agniveer generates a sense of ‘better than nothing’ amongst backward caste and Dalit youth.

In step, the BJP has promoted non-Jat leadership – like chief ministers Manohar Lal Khattar in 2014 and Nayab Saini in 2024. It doubled down on its attacks against the Congress’ Haryana leadership in the form of the Jat Hooda dynasty. Saini’s elevation as chief minister further signalled the BJP’s intent to consolidate OBC support and undermine the influence of the farmers’ movement and the opposition alliance. The leveraged internal divisions amongst Dalit castes by directing benefits toward the more disadvantaged Dalit castes, creating further fissures within the broader community. This approach fragmented Dalit political solidarity, weakening their collective influence.

The strategy helped the BJP form a broader coalition, incorporating the backward castes, non-Jat upper castes, and Dalits to challenge the perceived corruption of the past Congress governments. Slogans like “*No Parchi, No Kharchi*” (no favouritism, no bribes) in public sector hiring and the establishment of the Haryana Kaushal Rojgar Nigam to recruit contractual workers for government departments resonated with voters frustrated by a virtual Jat monopoly on government jobs.

A new political subject

The decades since liberalisation have produced new political subjectivities by fragmenting the social in Haryana (Kumar 2018). Growing up in a neoliberal economy, and swept up by rapid urbanisation and digitalisation, young people across castes increasingly seek to escape the entrenched prejudices of gender, caste, and age, as well as the exploitation perpetuated by agrarian elites. Urbanisation and urban spaces provide an avenue for such escape but simultaneously expose them to vulnerabilities. Precarious and insecure employment only adds to the challenges of a mobile and uncertain life.

As a result, in this era of disembedded globalisation, a blend of cultural nationalism and religious identity appeals to people across classes, even as these processes fragment societies and communities. In Haryana, the BJP has adeptly tapped into these growing divisions, insecurities, fears and aspirations for upward mobility, leveraging them to consolidate its political agenda. This phenomenon is not unique to the state. It reflects a global trend wherein right-wing movements have mobilised populations against one another, weaponising the frustrations of the poor and labouring classes against migrants, minorities, and elites. In Haryana and elsewhere, the emerging political subjectivities enmeshed with precarious economic conditions require fresh political articulations grounded in local realities.

Satendra Kumar is at the Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich.

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