

Social Change and the Polity

Introduction

The relationship between politics and social change in India is a dynamic one, where political institutions act as both drivers and reflections of societal transformation.

In modern society, the establishment of **democracy and nationalism** has become the dominant source of political legitimacy.

Sociologists and political scientists observe that while the state claims to represent the nation, it can become insulated from its people, potentially turning **authoritarian** when those in power are not held accountable.

To understand social change in India, one must examine the legal framework of the **Constitution**, the competitive arena of **political parties and pressure groups**, and the grassroots governance of the **Panchayati Raj** system.

I. The Constitution as an Instrument of Social Change

The Indian Constitution is more than a legal document; it is a foundational framework designed to initiate and sustain social justice.

1. Basic Norms and Social Justice The Constitution is based on the basic norms of **social justice**, giving it the capacity to help people actively. It serves as a nation's tenets and acts as the "basic norm" under which all other laws are made and implemented.

Sociologically, a distinction is made between **law and justice**: the essence of law is its force and state-backed power to coerce obedience, while the essence of justice is **fairness**.

The Constitution seeks to bridge this gap by establishing authorities and procedures that prioritize fairness in a highly stratified society.

2. From Directive Principles to Constitutional Imperatives A significant feature of the Constitution is its ability to evolve through amendments to address social needs.

A primary example is the **Directive Principle on Village Panchayats**, which was initially an aspirational goal moved by K. Santhanam in the Constituent Assembly.

After forty years, the **73rd Amendment in 1992** transformed this from a directive into a constitutional imperative, mandating local governance.

3. The Role of the Judiciary and Social Movements The Constitution acts as a living document through the interpretations of the **Supreme Court**, the ultimate interpreter of its provisions.

Social movements have frequently aided courts in interpreting rights in line with contemporary understandings of social justice. Key judicial interpretations include:

- **Right to Information (RTI):** In 1993, the Supreme Court held that RTI is incidental to the **Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression** under Article 19(1)(a).
- **Equal Pay for Equal Work:** The Court read this Directive Principle into the **Fundamental Right to Equality** (Article 14), providing vital relief to agricultural and plantation labourers.
- **Abolition of Untouchability:** Article 17 explicitly abolished untouchability, though the state's inability to undermine the economic basis of caste inequality meant that further legislation, like the **Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989**, was required to strengthen these protections.

II. Parties, Pressure Groups, and Democratic Politics

In a democratic system, the competition for power and the articulation of interests are managed through various political organisations.

1. Political Parties: Actors for Power A political party is defined as an organisation established to achieve legitimate control of government through an **electoral process** to pursue a specific programme.

Parties are based on specific understandings of how society "ought to be". In India, they serve as the primary vehicle for representing different group interests.



2. Interest Groups and Pressure Groups When groups feel their interests are not adequately addressed by existing parties, they may form **interest groups** or **pressure groups**.

These are organised to pursue specific interests in the political arena, operating primarily by **lobbying** members of legislative bodies.

- **Industrialists:** Associations like the **Federation of Indian Chambers and Commerce (FICCI)** and **ASSOCHAM** lobby for business interests.
- **Workers:** Trade unions such as **INTUC** and **CITU** represent the labour class.
- **Farmers:** Groups like **Shetkari Sangathan** advocate for agricultural interests.

3. The Inequality of Political Access A critical sociological concern is that not all groups have equal access to influence the government. Some argue that the concept of "pressure groups" may underestimate the power of **dominant social classes**, castes, or genders.

Critics like **Rajni Kothari** have argued that elite capture of state institutions in the 1970s led to a surge in social movements because formal electoral representation was no longer effective for the poor.

Consequently, people left out of the formal system often join **non-party political formations** to put pressure on the state from the outside.

III. Panchayati Raj and the Challenges of Social Transformation

The **Panchayati Raj** system, or "governance by five individuals," represents the ideal of ensuring a vibrant democracy at the village level.

1. The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1992) While grassroots democracy has ancient roots in India, it was only given **constitutional status** in 1992. These amendments made it compulsory for local self-government bodies in rural and municipal areas to be elected every five years. They also shifted control over local resources to these elected bodies.

2. The Three-Tier Structure The system is structured like a pyramid:

- **Gram Sabha:** The base of the structure, consisting of the entire body of citizens in a village. It elects the local government and serves as a forum for inclusion and development discussion.
- **Panchayat Samiti:** The intermediate level.
- **Zilla Parishad:** The district level, which includes **District Planning Committees** to develop plans for the entire district.

3. Enfranchisement and Reservation The 73rd Amendment was a monumental step in

enfranchising marginalised groups by providing mandatory seat reservations for:

- **Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.**
- **Women:** One-third (33%) of all seats in local bodies are reserved for women.
- **Impact:** The 1993–94 elections alone brought **800,000 women** into the political process, granting them formal decision-making powers for the first time.

4. Powers, Responsibilities, and Transparency

Panchayats are authorized to prepare plans for **economic development** and promote schemes for **social justice**. Their responsibilities range from maintaining social welfare (child welfare, maternity centres, burial grounds) to development activities like constructing roads, schools, and minor irrigation works.

To ensure transparency, they are required to put up boards listing funds received and their utilization, enabling citizens to exercise their **Right to Information** and scrutinise financial aid.

IV. Challenges of Social Transformation

Despite the legal and structural frameworks, several challenges hinder the democratic transformation of Indian society.

1. Persistent Social Inequality Democratisation is difficult in a society with a long history of inequality based on **caste, community, and gender**.

In many villages, **Gram Sabha** members are still controlled by a small coterie of **rich landlords** from dominant castes or landed peasantry.

These elites often make decisions on funds and development, leaving the "silent majority" as mere onlookers.

2. Traditional vs. Modern Governance In many tribal areas, such as **Meghalaya**, traditional political institutions like the '**Durbar Kur**' (clan councils) have existed for centuries.

While policymakers initially avoided interfering with these systems, sociologists like **Tiplut Nongbri** point out that traditional tribal institutions are not always democratic.

They are often marked by **intolerance toward women** and internal stratification, making it difficult to reconcile them with modern democratic norms.

3. The Persistence of Caste Panchayats Alongside the modern PRIs, traditional **caste panchayats** often continue to operate.

These bodies frequently represent dominant groups and hold **conservative views** that may go against democratic procedures and norms.

4. Digital and Educational Divides Mass media and communication have a phenomenal influence on society, yet there is a sharp **digital divide**.

The ability to use mass media for political participation varies across sections of the population, impacting how effectively different groups can engage with the polity.



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V. Civil Society and Active Citizenship

Beyond the state and the market lies the arena of **civil society**, which is crucial for a plural and unequal society.

1. Definition and Composition Civil society consists of **voluntary associations** and organisations formed by citizens, such as political parties, trade unions, **NGOs**, and religious organisations. To be considered part of civil society, an organisation should not be state-controlled or a purely commercial profit-making entity.

2. The Sphere of Active Citizenship Civil society is the sphere where individuals take up social issues and try to influence the state. Their activities include:

- **Advocacy and Lobbying:** Working with national and international agencies.
- **Diverse Struggles:** Issues range from tribal land rights and slum housing to primary education reform and distribution of land to Dalits.
- **Watchdog Function:** Civil liberties organisations keep a watch on the state, forcing it to obey the law and protecting citizens from the **wrongful use of authority**.



3. The Synergistic Role of RTI The **Right to Information** movement is a prime example of how civil society action can lead to transformative legislation.

It allows citizens to take samples of materials, obtain printouts of records, and hold the bureaucracy accountable, thereby deepening the democratic process.