



Research Article

Caste Identity and Demand for Recognition: The Present Scenario of the Kurmi Community in West Bengal

Fulchand Mahato *

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Vishwavidyalaya
Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India

Corresponding Author: *Fulchand Mahato

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Abstract

This study looks at the current caste identity dynamics and the Kurmi community's demand for recognition in West Bengal. The Kurmis, who have historically been linked to agricultural activities, have seen substantial socioeconomic diversification in recent decades. Even with advancements in political engagement, work prospects and education, concerns about official recognition and social standing still influence public opinion and community mobilisation. The study investigates the ways in which political participation, community organisations, shared cultural practices and collective memory are used to create and express caste identity.

The paper examines the community's need for acknowledgement in light of governmental policies about social justice and reservations, with a particular focus on the current situation. Claims for admission under particular tribal categories are analysed in light of regional politics, intercaste rivalry and constitutional provisions. The study also emphasises how local groups, youth involvement and grassroots leadership may organise movements around identity-based problems and strengthen collective consciousness.

The study makes the case that caste identity among Kurmis serves as a strategic weapon for socio-political negotiation as well as a marker of cultural belonging, using both qualitative and secondary data sources. The need for recognition reflects ongoing concerns about representation, access to welfare programs and equitable development, even while economic mobility has varied livelihood patterns. The study comes to the conclusion that the current position of the Kurmi community in West Bengal serves as an example of the intricate relationship that exists in modern caste politics between tradition, political assertion and official acknowledgement.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In modern India, caste identification still has a big influence on social interactions, political engagement and access to public resources. Caste has rapidly resurfaced as a significant axis of mobilisation and recognition in West Bengal, where class politics and regional factors have historically shaped public discourse. The Kurmi community holds a unique place in this environment. Although the Kurmis have historically been linked to agricultural livelihoods and have made significant contributions to local government and rural production, their social standing and official recognition under the state's caste system are still up for discussion.

Kurmis in West Bengal are demanding recognition, which is a reflection of more general concerns about representation, identity and affirmative action policies. The Kurmis are classified as Other Backward Classes (OBC) in a number of Indian states but in West Bengal, this categorisation has sparked community assertion and political activism. Demands for social justice, reservation advantages and historical recognition have been articulated in part by groups like the Akhil Bharatiya Kurmi Kshatriya Mahasabha. These initiatives demonstrate how caste identity is dynamic and actively negotiated within political and legal contexts rather than being passively inherited.

In recent years, public demonstrations, community meetings and negotiations with the state government have intensified discussions around Kurmi recognition. These developments indicate a growing collective consciousness and political awareness within the community. At the same time, internal socio-economic diversity shaped by education, migration and occupational shifts has influenced how identity is perceived and mobilized.

This paper seeks to examine the present scenario of the Kurmi community in West Bengal by analyzing the interplay between caste identity and the demand for recognition. By situating the Kurmi experience within broader debates on caste politics and state policy, the study aims to provide insight into how communities negotiate status, rights and representation in contemporary society.

Theoretical Framework

Caste, socioeconomic stratification and identity politics theories form the basis of the study Caste Identity and Demand for Recognition: The Present Scenario of the Kurmi Community in West Bengal. In India, caste has traditionally served as a hierarchical social structure that shapes political power, status and resource availability. While subsequent scholars like M. N. Srinivas focused on processes like social mobility and status negotiation within caste structures, scholars like Louis Dumont conceptualised caste as a system based on hierarchy and purity. These viewpoints contribute to the explanation of how caste identity is constantly contested in response to shifting political and socioeconomic circumstances rather than being passively inherited. In the context of the Kurmi community in West Bengal, caste identity operates both as a marker of traditional

agrarian roots and as a strategic category for collective mobilization.

Identity politics and recognition theories are also incorporated into the framework. According to Charles Taylor, social isolation and marginalisation can result from misrecognition, which is a fundamental human need. In a similar vein, Axel Honneth emphasises that the fight for acceptance is at the heart of social disputes in contemporary cultures. By using these theories, the Kurmi community's demand for recognition whether it be in the form of social standing, political representation or caste classification can be interpreted as a component of a larger movement for equality and dignity in public life. In addition to being a symbolic assertion, recognition also serves as a means of obtaining tangible advantages, such as state resources, welfare programs and reservations. The study engages with the concept of identity as socially constructed and politically mobilized. Drawing from Benedict Anderson's idea of "imagined communities," collective identity among the Kurmis may be seen as shaped through shared narratives, community organizations and regional movements. Caste associations, youth forums and political activism contribute to consolidating a unified voice.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the contemporary expression of caste identity among the Kurmi community in West Bengal.

This objective seeks to analyze how Kurmi identity is articulated in social, cultural and political spheres. It focuses on symbols, community organizations, public discourse and everyday practices that shape collective self-perception in the present context.

2. To analyze the nature and basis of the demand for social and political recognition.

This objective aims to explore the historical background, constitutional claims and policy dimensions behind recognition demands. It also examines mobilization strategies, leadership roles and engagement with state institutions.

3. To assess the socio-economic factors influencing identity assertion and recognition movements.

This objective investigates how education, employment, regional disparities and access to welfare schemes contribute to collective consciousness and organized demands within the Kurmi community.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **mixed-method research design** to examine caste identity and the demand for recognition among the Kurmi community in West Bengal. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used to ensure a comprehensive understanding of social perceptions, political mobilization and community aspirations. The research focuses on selected Kurmi-dominated districts of West Bengal to capture regional variations in identity assertion and recognition movements.

Structured surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with local leaders, youth representatives, caste-based organization members and community members are used to

gather primary data. Narratives pertaining to caste status, requests for governmental acknowledgement and involvement in socio-political movements receive particular focus. Government reports, census records, policy papers, media archives and scholarly works are all sources of secondary data. A purposive sampling technique is applied to select respondents representing different age groups, gender categories and occupational backgrounds. Data are analyzed using thematic analysis for qualitative responses and basic statistical tools for quantitative findings to ensure balanced interpretation and reliability.

Caste Structure and Community Networks among Kurmis

The Kurmi community in West Bengal has a caste system that has its roots in agrarian life, when social standing was determined by village leadership, land ownership and cultivation. The Kurmis were considered to be a cultivating caste and held a middle place in the rural caste system. Kinship ties, clan divides and marriage alliances serve as the foundation for their social structure, which governs interpersonal interactions and preserves internal unity. In Kurmi-dominated communities, caste identification still affects social interactions, marriage customs and group decision-making despite regional differences.

Community networks play a crucial role in sustaining caste identity and strengthening collective solidarity. Informal councils, caste associations and regional organizations function as platforms for addressing social disputes, organizing cultural programs and mobilizing community members. These networks also facilitate mutual support in times of economic distress, educational guidance and political participation. Through festivals, rituals and shared historical narratives, the Kurmis reinforce a sense of belonging and shared heritage that connects local groups to a broader community consciousness across districts.

In the current situation, community networks and caste structures have become crucial in expressing calls for inclusion in policies and social recognition. Increasingly, organised platforms push for access to welfare benefits, formal recognition and representation in governmental institutions. Using both conventional gatherings and contemporary communication methods, youth organisations and educated members actively participate in public conversation. As a result, the Kurmis' caste identity is a communal resource that influences their need for acknowledgement in modern-day West Bengal rather than just a social category.

Kurmis and Local Governance Institutions

The Kurmi community's involvement in local government organisations has grown to be a significant aspect of their modern caste identity and quest for acceptance. Many Kurmis actively participate in the Panchayati Raj system in rural West Bengal, especially in Gram Panchayats and Block-level organisations. They aim to increase their visibility and presence in local governmental organisations through grassroots leadership and electoral involvement. Political participation is a

tactic to establish communal identity within the larger caste system in addition to providing access to development resources.

When it comes to organising support for municipal elections, community networks are crucial. Coordination of political campaigns and collective bargaining is aided by caste affiliations, kinship relationships and unofficial leadership organisations. Kurmi representatives frequently serve as intermediaries between rural communities and the government, making social programs, agricultural subsidies and infrastructure development initiatives more accessible. Their claim to social and political acceptance at the regional level is strengthened by this institutional presence.

At the same time, the demand for official recognition and improved socio-political status influences their engagement with governance institutions. Participation in local bodies provides a platform to articulate concerns related to reservation policies, economic development and community welfare. Thus, involvement in local governance reflects both democratic participation and a broader effort to consolidate caste identity in contemporary West Bengal.

Community matrix as Political Resources

In West Bengal, the Kurmi group's quest for acknowledgement and the reinforcement of caste identity are greatly influenced by community networks. Collective mobilisation is facilitated by caste-based organisations, youth groups, village-level associations and familial relationships. These networks aid in expressing common complaints about political representation, reservation laws and social standing. Community leaders raise awareness and foster unity around the call for acknowledgement inside the state's caste system through gatherings, cultural events and concerted campaigns.

During elections and policy talks, these networks also serve as strategic political assets. Kurmi leaders can influence voting trends, interact with political parties and advocate for inclusion in welfare programs when they have organised support. In modern West Bengal, community institutions transform caste identification into a tool of political assertion and democratic participation by turning social cohesion into negotiating leverage.

Challenges and Internal Dynamics

A number of political and institutional issues influence the Kurmi community's demand for recognition in West Bengal. A significant problem is the intricacy of caste classification under the state's quota system, where political wrangling, administrative processes and legal examination are all necessary for inclusion or reclassification. The fight for recognition is made more intense by competing claims from different caste groups, which frequently causes conflict in rural regions. In addition, differences in government employment, land ownership and educational opportunities lead to unequal benefits within the community. Some groups have experienced upward mobility, but others are still experiencing rural misery

and economic instability, which intensifies internal discussions about the strategy and direction of collective mobilisation.

The expression and maintenance of caste identity are also influenced by internal dynamics. Particularly important are the distinctions between generations: older Kurmis tend to stress historical standing and traditional validity, while younger educated Kurmis want to frame recognition in terms of social fairness, constitutional rights and policy inclusion. The cohesiveness of collective action may be impacted by leadership styles in community organisations that occasionally reflect regional and class differences. Furthermore, goals have become more diverse due to migration and urban exposure, resulting in a range of interpretations of identity, from political assertion to cultural preservation. These internal differences show that caste identity within the Kurmi group is constantly contested in response to changing political and socioeconomic circumstances in West Bengal rather than being uniform or static.

4. CONCLUSION

A complicated interplay between caste identity, socioeconomic goals and the need for institutional acknowledgement is shown in the current state of the Kurmi community in West Bengal. The Kurmis have historically been an agrarian people but they now actively pursue higher education, participate in politics and work in a variety of professions. The issue of caste status and governmental acknowledgement is still a major topic of discussion in the community notwithstanding these advancements. The quest for socio-political recognition and the demand for inclusion in particular state categories have emerged as important indicators of collective mobilisation.

For the Kurmis, caste identity is not just a customary heritage rather, it is a dynamic and strategic framework that the community uses to negotiate social justice, representation and resource access. Regional associations, youth leadership and community organisations are essential for expressing common issues and fostering togetherness. At the same time, internal socio-economic differences and regional variations influence the intensity and direction of mobilization.

In general, the Kurmi community's call for recognition brings to light more general concerns about identity assertion, state policy and caste politics in modern-day West Bengal. The study emphasises that recognition involves dignity, visibility and fair involvement in development processes in addition to legal classification.

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About the corresponding author



Fulchand Mahato is a Research Scholar in the Department of Political Science at Atal Bihari Vajpayee Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, India. His academic interests include political sociology, caste politics, and regional political movements in India. He is actively engaged in research focusing on socio-political dynamics and democratic processes in contemporary society.