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Why Does Odisha not have a Strong Dalit-Bahujan Movement?

By: Ganesh Gaigouria

Odisha has largely been untouched by the kind of Dalit and OBC movements that shifted the political landscape in other states. Consequently, these groups have had lesser shares of political power even as caste hierarchies and exploitation prevail.

In May 2025, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Odisha government extended [reservations](#) for members of Socially and Economically Backward Classes (SEBC) in admissions to state-owned and state-funded higher education institutions. The state had until then reservations for SEBCs only in government jobs, and even for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), the proportion of reservations in education is [smaller](#) than that for employment.¹

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Does this step herald a new moment in the politics of social justice and caste based identity consciousness in the state? And does it indicate that the BJP, as a first-time ruling party in the state, will make inroads into social justice politics? An analysis of the state's politics will suggest the answer to be no.

[Odisha's Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes](#) constitute 17.1% and 22.5%, respectively and as high as half the population is estimated to be made up of Other Backward Classes (OBC) castes. Yet, the state has largely been untouched by the kind of Dalit and OBC movements that shifted the political landscape of states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, and Haryana. Caste associations neither actively organise nor address the issues of social justice, or everyday caste based discrimination and exploitation, both which hold significant potential for mobilising through the politics of recognition and identity. Consequently, Dalits and Bahujans have had lesser shares of political power even as caste hierarchies and exploitation prevail. Politics has been dominated by upper-castes and what grassroots movements exist are in the mould of protests against mining interests by Adivasis and environmentalists ([Mohanty 2014](#)).

An Ambiguous Identity

A key factor behind the absence of strong social justice or caste-based politics in Odisha is the position of the Khandayat community, a numerically large and influential group. The silence of Khandayats is due to their caste's contentious status in the state's reservation policy. Khandayat, an upwardly mobile agricultural community, [constitute over 35%](#) population in the state, and are recognised as a Socially and Educationally Backward Class (SEBC) within the state but not as OBCs in the central list. Yet, in the social sphere, they have a more ambiguous status.

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State-produced textbooks and uncritical histories describe them as an peasant militia caste, who held land as state servitors and later shaped politics in various ways, from colonial uprisings to postcolonial leadership. The community has tried to resolve its 'status inconsistency' through demands for special status in Odisha, central OBC-list inclusion, and the establishment of an army regiment for them. ([Nayak 2017](#)) .

This ambiguous status leads to a reluctance within the community to assert a political identity in favour of Dalit and Bahujan politics. Their silence on issues of social justice aligns them more with traditionally dominant castes like the Karanas and Brahmins, further weakening the space for caste-based mobilisation.

The political landscape of Odisha, in general, lacks strong caste-based electoral movements. While caste identity appeared to some extent in the [BJP's manifesto](#) during the last general election-particularly on the issue of OBC reservations-and the appointment of an [Adivasi chief minister](#) after the election signalled a symbolic shift, these developments have not substantially transformed Odisha's political discourse toward social justice.

This observation can be broadened: many OBC communities in the state consider themselves as Kshatriya or Baniya in everyday social practices. Even though they themselves are eligible for reservations, there is a stigma against anti-caste movements and reservations for Dalits. Some of these attitudes can be traced to the political culture of the state: the stalwart leader Biju Patnaik (and the father of Naveen Patnaik, who was chief minister between 2000 and 2024) claimed that '*garibara jaati nanhi*' (the poor do not have caste) and that reservation should not be based on caste. The elder Patnaik had opposed the Mandal Commission report and [stated](#), "If the lot of backwards classes has not improved despite reservations in the past so many years, they would be no better in the next generations too."

Trajectories of Religious Conversion

Religious conversions too have shaped the absence of anti-caste politics in Odisha. As per the 2011 census, 70% of Christians are STs. While we do not have an accurate count of SCs who converted to Christians (and lost that status), it is safe to assume that they form the overwhelming majority of the remaining, general category, Christians.

Without laying out any substantive alternative ideological movement against the rooted Brahmanical hegemony at the grassroots level, the vision for social justice politics would remain a distant dream in Odisha.

Since Dalit Christians lose their reservation rights, their capacity for collective mobilisation is weakened. At the same time, Christian missionaries emphasised spiritual life rather than direct resistance to caste or Brahminism and ameliorate the terrible condition of the community by deploying education and health. Consequently, Dalit Christians, while still facing caste-based discrimination, have not developed a strong anti-caste movement; instead, they have led relatively private social and religious lives centred on the Christian community ([Wankhede 2009](#)). This is in contrast to SCs who convert to Buddhism in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, who remarkably manifest 'Dalitness' as a political identity even after conversion.

In parallel, groups including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have worked to bring tribals into the Hindu fold. Tribes like the Kondhs place themselves as Kshatriyas and the original rulers of the forests, taking on a sense of superiority over SC groups like the Panas. This has undermined efforts to build a unified Dalit Bahujan identity and social justice movement. As the political scientist Pralay Kanungo writes: "In the post-independence period, this got further crystallised with the perception that the panas, with the help of the state as well as the church, have been cornering the maximum benefits of constitutional reservation due to their educational and economic advantage. This perception is a little misplaced as a large majority of the Panas are poor, and moreover, being dalit Christians, they are constitutionally deprived of the benefits of the reservation. The kandhas, however, allege that the panas hide their Christian identity and even claim to be scheduled tribes (ST) or Hindu scheduled castes (SC) by producing forged certificates. The panas, they fear, are out to dominate them economically, politically and culturally" ([Kanungo 2008](#)). A notable outcome was the 2008 Kandhamal riots between the two groups,, which erupted after the killing of Sangh Parivar leader Laxmanananda Saraswati.

A Half Step

All political parties in Odisha have agitated on the larger issue of OBC reservation. Yet, the proposal of introducing SEBC reservation politics in the admission process will be insufficient to make an inroad for social justice politics due to the lack of awareness among larger OBCs and religious bigotry between Dalit and Adivasi. Without laying out any substantive alternative ideological movement against the rooted Brahmanical hegemony at the grassroots level, the vision for social justice politics would remain a distant dream in Odisha.

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Footnotes:

1 SCs and STs are allocated 16% and 22% reservation in employment respectively, amounting to a total of 38%. However, in education, it is only a total of 20%.

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