



**The Journal of Asian
Studies**

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The Transformation of Ethnic Politics in India: The Decline of Congress and the Rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Hoshiarpur

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 26 March 2010

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The politics of ethnicity—caste, religion, and language—has been central to politics in twentieth-century India. However, as the dominant Indian National Congress declines in favor of a number of smaller parties, the manner in which ethnic identities are being invoked in the political arena is being transformed. The key aspect of this transformation is not, as it is usually understood, the replacement of a single multiethnic party with a collection of monoethnic parties. Many of the smaller parties are in themselves multiethnic, although the coalitions that they seek to build are usually narrower than those built by Congress. Rather, the key aspect is the change in the type of ethnic politics that dominates the political arena. Congress plays a coded ethnic card, invoking ethnic identities quietly in its selection of candidates but not openly in its identification of issues; targets certain ethnic groups without openly excluding others; builds differentiated ethnic coalitions across constituencies and states; and courts the support of these ethnic coalitions through the distribution of patronage but never through the rhetoric of identity.