

## Changing Nature of Pressure Group Politics in Contemporary India

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### Abstract

Pressure groups constitute an important arena of political participation between elections, connecting organised social interests with institutions of government and public policy. In India, their character has changed considerably with economic liberalisation, expansion of civil society, proliferation of mass and digital media, judicialisation of politics and the emergence of network-based social movements. This paper examines the changing nature of pressure group politics in contemporary India and asks whether these changes have widened democratic participation or produced new inequalities in political influence. The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design based entirely on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed scholarship, government documents, legislation, judicial decisions and institutional publications. It argues that Indian pressure politics has moved from a predominantly organisation-based model centred on trade unions, business associations, professional bodies and agrarian organisations towards a more complex system combining formal lobbying, issue-based coalitions, protest mobilisation, strategic litigation, expert advocacy and digital campaigning. Business associations have acquired greater technical and policy capacity, while farmers' organisations and civil-society networks have demonstrated that sustained collective action can still alter policy outcomes. At the same time, differences in financial resources, organisational capacity, media access and regulatory conditions produce unequal opportunities for influence. The paper concludes that pressure groups remain indispensable to democratic interest articulation in India, but greater transparency in lobbying, political finance and consultation is necessary to prevent participatory politics from becoming disproportionately shaped by resource-rich interests.

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### Introduction

Pressure groups occupy an intermediate space between citizens and the formal institutions of government. Unlike political parties, they do not ordinarily seek to form governments or assume political office; instead, they attempt to influence the making, modification or implementation of public policy. Their political importance lies precisely in this position outside the formal electoral contest. Elections allow citizens to select representatives periodically, whereas pressure groups provide more continuous channels through which economic interests, occupational communities, social identities and public causes can seek political attention.

Indian politics has always contained a wide variety of such organisations. Business chambers, trade unions, farmers' associations, professional organisations, caste and community associations, student bodies and social movements have attempted to influence governments at different periods. Kochanek's classic analysis of business and politics demonstrated that organised economic interests developed distinctive mechanisms of access to the Indian state, while Rudolph and Rudolph (1987) treated organised "demand groups" as an important element in the political economy of post-independence India. The relevance of these earlier approaches has not disappeared. What has changed is the institutional, economic and technological setting in which organised interests now operate.

Several transformations are especially important. Economic reforms since 1991 greatly increased the importance of regulatory, industrial, fiscal and sector-specific policymaking. Such policies frequently require technical knowledge and continuing interaction between government agencies, industries and specialised associations. Recent research on India's medical-device sector, for example, finds that industry associations act not merely as advocates but as intermediaries capable of supplying information, coordinating stakeholders and influencing regulatory and industrial policy (Kale & Papaioannou, 2026).

At the same time, political participation outside established organisations has expanded. Social movements increasingly form coalitions across occupational and organisational boundaries; advocacy groups turn to courts and regulatory agencies; campaigns are organised through television and digital platforms; and individual citizens can participate in consultations without formally joining an organisation. The Government of India's MyGov platform illustrates the institutional side of this transformation. Established in 2014 for citizen engagement and policy consultation, it reported 64.60 million registered users as of 1 September 2026. Digital participation, however, cannot automatically be equated with political influence: visibility, access to decision-makers and organisational resources remain unequally distributed.

This produces the central research problem of the present study. Conventional descriptions of Indian pressure groups generally classify them into familiar categories—business, labour, agriculture, professional, caste, religious and issue-oriented organisations. Such classifications remain useful, but they do not fully explain how pressure politics itself has changed. Contemporary influence increasingly occurs through combinations of expert consultation, media campaigns, electoral finance, coalition-building, litigation, online mobilisation and public protest. The distinction between an institutional "insider" group and an oppositional "outsider" movement is therefore less rigid than before.

The study has four related objectives: to examine the transformation in the organisational forms and strategies of pressure groups in contemporary India; to assess how economic liberalisation, digital communication and judicial politics have altered channels of influence; to compare the political capacities of business, agrarian and civil-society actors; and to evaluate the democratic implications of unequal resources and the limited transparency surrounding lobbying. Correspondingly, it asks four questions. How has Indian pressure-group politics changed from its earlier organisational pattern? Which contemporary strategies have become particularly important in influencing policy? Why do some groups secure greater access and influence than others? Finally, do emerging forms of pressure politics deepen democratic participation or reproduce inequalities of political power?

The paper approaches these questions through a pluralist framework qualified by insights from theories of collective action and unequal political resources. A purely pluralist interpretation would regard competition among organised groups as a mechanism for distributing power and communicating demands. Yet the capacity to organise is itself uneven. Olson's logic of collective action suggests that concentrated interests can sometimes organise more effectively than diffuse publics. In the Indian setting, this means that the existence of multiple competing organisations should not be taken as proof that influence is equally distributed. The central argument developed here is that contemporary India has experienced a diversification rather than a simple democratisation of pressure politics: the number of actors, strategies and arenas has increased, but access and effectiveness remain strongly conditioned by resources, institutional proximity and regulatory power.

### Literature Review

The literature on organised interests in India has evolved from studies of formal associations to broader analyses of social movements, lobbying, civil society and policy networks. Early scholarship concentrated heavily on business associations, trade unions, caste organisations and agrarian groups. Kochanek's *Business and Politics in India* examined how business organisations acquired political access and attempted to affect governmental decisions. Rudolph and Rudolph (1987), meanwhile, placed organised demands within the wider political economy of the Indian state. Both approaches were important because they demonstrated that policymaking cannot be understood only through legislatures, parties and elections.

Later research placed greater emphasis on institutions and strategic choice. Yadav (2008), comparing India and China, argued that the design of legislative institutions influences whom business groups lobby, at which stage of policymaking they intervene and what strategies they employ. Her subsequent comparative work linked the institutional structure of lobbying to relationships among political parties, business interests and corruption (Yadav, 2011). This literature shifts attention from the mere existence of interest groups to the institutional incentives governing their behaviour.

A second body of scholarship broadened the analysis beyond organised lobbying. Shah (2004) treated social movements as forms of collective political action seeking social or political change and surveyed peasant, tribal, Dalit, backward-caste, women's, labour, student, human-rights and environmental movements. This perspective is particularly significant for India because many politically consequential demands have historically developed outside permanent lobbying organisations. Pressure politics therefore overlaps with, but cannot be reduced to, formal interest-group politics.

The relationship between civil society and the state further complicates the conventional insider–outsider distinction. Bornstein and Sharma (2016) show how Indian NGOs and social movements interact with government through combinations of legal reasoning, technical knowledge and moral claims. Their idea of “technomoral” politics is especially useful because it explains why contemporary advocacy often involves producing reports, invoking rights, participating in administrative procedures and using litigation alongside public mobilisation. Civil society is neither permanently opposed to the state nor simply incorporated into it; cooperation and confrontation may coexist.

Studies of Indian lobbying highlight another transformation. Shreyaskar, Pandey and Pathak argue that lobbying is already practised by politico-economic actors in India even though much of it remains discreet and inadequately institutionalised. Their work emphasises transparency and regulation as central issues in assessing interest-group influence. More recently, Barathi and Renganathan (2026) observe that India still lacks a comprehensive statutory lobbying framework comparable with formal disclosure systems found in some other democracies. They argue for clearer disclosure, oversight and conflict-of-interest mechanisms.

Recent sectoral research also challenges an exclusively negative understanding of lobbying. Kale and Papaioannou (2026), studying the medical-device industry, show that associations may provide governments with specialised knowledge, reduce information gaps, coordinate industry participants and contribute to regulatory development. At the same time, their analysis acknowledges competing agendas and the possibility that associations may pursue narrow interests. Pressure groups can therefore perform both informational and distributional functions: they may improve the quality of specialised policymaking while simultaneously attempting to secure advantages for their members.

Agrarian mobilisation provides a contrasting literature on outsider pressure. Fadaee (2022) demonstrates the importance of alliance-building in farmers' mobilisation, while Singh and Bhogal (2021), Krishnamurthy (2021), and Singh and Shergill (2021) examine the conflict surrounding the three farm laws enacted in 2020. The subsequent repeal of those laws made the episode an unusually visible demonstration of sustained collective pressure affecting a major national policy. Parliament formally repealed the three enactments through the Farm Laws Repeal Act, 2021.

Digital communication introduces still another dimension. Ashwini, Vishwanatha and Puneeth (2025) analyse social media as a space of dissent, emphasising its capacity to amplify resistance, circulate alternative narratives and connect participants. Digital platforms lower some costs of communication and mobilisation, but the resulting politics may be volatile, fragmented and shaped by platform visibility.

Taken together, the literature reveals an important gap. Studies of business lobbying, social movements, NGOs, digital activism and agrarian mobilisation are often conducted separately. Less attention is given to how these processes collectively transform the very meaning of pressure-group politics. The present paper addresses that gap by analysing pressure politics as a hybrid field in which formal associations, movements, digital networks, courts, policy expertise and public campaigns increasingly intersect.

### Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research design. It is entirely based on secondary material and does not claim to present original survey, interview or fieldwork data. The geographical focus is India, while the principal analytical period is the post-liberalisation era, with greater attention to developments from the 2010s to 2026.

Sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, legislation, Supreme Court decisions, official Government of India publications and institutional platforms. Particular attention is given to literature on organised business, farmers' mobilisation, NGOs, lobbying, digital activism and political transparency. The analysis uses selected contemporary cases not as

statistically representative samples but as analytically useful illustrations of changing methods of influence.

The theoretical framework combines pluralism with a resource-sensitive approach to collective action. Four dimensions are used to assess transformation: organisational form, method of influence, arena of intervention and distribution of political resources. Organisational form refers to movement from stable membership organisations towards coalitions and digital networks. Method includes lobbying, consultation, protest, litigation, communication and expertise. Arena refers to ministries, regulatory bodies, courts, media and digital platforms. Resource distribution considers money, organisational capacity, specialist information, networks and public legitimacy.

The principal limitation is that political influence is intrinsically difficult to measure. Policy outcomes rarely result from pressure by a single organisation, and informal lobbying is especially difficult to observe where disclosure is limited. Accordingly, the analysis distinguishes documented outcomes from interpretation and does not infer causal influence merely from meetings, campaigns or political proximity.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

#### **From Organised Interest Representation to Hybrid Pressure Politics**

The first major change concerns organisational form. Traditional pressure-group analysis assumed relatively stable organisations representing relatively identifiable constituencies: industrialists, workers, farmers, professionals or specific social communities. These organisations generally possessed offices, leaders, recognised membership and continuing relationships with political parties or government agencies.

Such organisations remain important. FICCI, ASSOCHAM and CII continue to represent major parts of organised business, while unions, professional associations and farmers' organisations continue to articulate sectoral demands. Contemporary pressure politics, however, increasingly operates through temporary alliances and overlapping networks. A campaign may involve registered associations, informal collectives, technical experts, lawyers, activists, social-media participants and sympathetic political actors without creating a single permanent organisation.

The result is a shift from organisational membership towards issue-based mobilisation. Individuals can participate in a campaign without maintaining long-term affiliation. A farmer may mobilise through a union, a regional network and a temporary national coalition simultaneously. Environmental advocacy may connect local communities, scientists, lawyers and public-interest organisations. Professional bodies may alternate between technical consultation and public mobilisation depending upon the policy issue.

This does not mean that organisations are disappearing. Rather, the organisational ecology has become more fluid. Permanent organisations increasingly operate within broader networks, while loosely structured movements often depend on established organisations for resources, negotiation capacity and continuity. Contemporary pressure politics should therefore be understood less as competition among isolated groups and more as interaction among networks of actors possessing different forms of political capital.

### **Economic Liberalisation, Expertise and Business Influence**

Economic liberalisation significantly altered the relationship between organised business and government. In a more complex regulatory economy, decisions concerning taxation, digital markets, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, infrastructure, manufacturing standards, environmental regulation and international trade require specialised information. Industry associations can supply precisely this type of expertise.

This informational role gives business groups an important advantage. Access no longer depends solely on personal relationships with politicians. It may also arise from the capacity to prepare detailed policy submissions, participate in consultations, commission research, convene conferences and maintain specialised teams capable of communicating continuously with ministries and regulators.

Kale and Papaioannou's 2026 research illustrates this transformation in the medical-device sector. They find that industry associations have played an important role in shaping industrial and regulatory policy, promoting entrepreneurship and bridging knowledge gaps between government and firms. They also note that FICCI, ASSOCHAM and CII continue to operate as influential umbrella organisations.

This represents a movement from conventional "pressure" towards policy intermediation. Governments may actively require information from organisations that they regulate. The association consequently becomes both an interested participant and a source of expertise. This relationship can improve policymaking where state agencies lack sector-specific knowledge, but it raises a classic problem of asymmetric access. Groups able to employ economists, lawyers, regulatory specialists and public-policy professionals can communicate with the state in forms compatible with administrative decision-making. Poorly organised groups may possess legitimate demands yet lack comparable technical capacity.

The absence of a comprehensive disclosure-based lobbying framework becomes significant in this context. Barathi and Renganathan (2026) argue that India has no dedicated comprehensive lobbying statute and advocate formal rules concerning disclosure, conflicts of interest and oversight. Shreyaskar et al. similarly emphasise the relatively opaque character of lobbying in India. Transparency is therefore not merely an anti-corruption issue; it is also necessary for assessing whose knowledge and preferences enter the policy process.

### **Farmers' Mobilisation and the Continuing Power of Collective Protest**

The increasing sophistication of insider lobbying does not imply the disappearance of mass mobilisation. The farmers' movement against the three agricultural laws of 2020 demonstrates the continuing capacity of collective protest to exert political pressure.

The episode is significant for several reasons. First, mobilisation was not controlled by a single national organisation. Multiple unions and associations cooperated despite regional and organisational differences. Second, negotiation and protest occurred simultaneously. Farmers' representatives engaged with governmental institutions while maintaining public demonstrations. Third, the movement developed an extensive communication infrastructure involving traditional media, digital communication, public meetings and networks of supporters.

Agrarian mobilisation in India has historically varied strongly across regions, commodities and class structures. The 2020–21 movement nevertheless showed that decentralised organisations could construct a larger political coalition around a relatively concentrated set of policy demands. Scholarship on the episode highlights disagreement over agricultural markets, minimum support prices and the distributional consequences of reform rather than reducing the dispute to simple resistance to economic change (Krishnamurthy, 2021; Singh & Bhogal, 2021).

Its policy outcome was unusually clear. Parliament enacted the Farm Laws Repeal Act, 2021, repealing the three central laws. It would nevertheless be analytically simplistic to claim that street protest alone “caused” repeal. Electoral considerations, federal politics, negotiation, implementation difficulties and the duration of the dispute also formed part of the political context. The case is better understood as evidence that sustained, broad and strategically coordinated pressure can raise the political cost of maintaining contested policy.

The movement also exposes a paradox of contemporary pressure politics. Digital media and network structures can broaden participation, but durable policy influence still often requires organisational infrastructure. Negotiation needs recognised representatives; protest sites require coordination; legal and policy arguments require expertise; and long campaigns require resources. Networked mobilisation has therefore supplemented rather than eliminated formal organisation.

### Digitalisation and the New Politics of Visibility

A second striking transformation is the growing importance of communication itself as an instrument of pressure. Earlier organisations relied heavily on petitions, delegations, strikes, meetings and print media. Today, campaigns operate within a continuous media environment in which political visibility can be produced rapidly through hashtags, videos, messaging platforms, online petitions and coordinated circulation of information.

Ashwini et al. (2025) describe social media as an important platform for contemporary resistance in India, particularly because it enables the amplification of dissenting voices and the formation of wider solidarities. Digital communication lowers the organisational cost of reaching large numbers of people and allows movements to bypass some traditional media gatekeepers.

Yet digitalisation changes more than mobilisation. It modifies the target of pressure. Groups do not simply communicate demands privately to the state; they attempt to construct a public audience around those demands. Governments, parties and public officials may consequently face reputational pressure even before formal negotiations occur. Political influence increasingly involves framing an issue, generating attention and establishing whose interpretation becomes dominant.

The state itself has responded by institutionalising forms of online engagement. MyGov explicitly describes itself as the Government of India’s citizen-engagement platform and works with ministries in policy formulation and public consultation. Its reported 64.60 million registered users by 1 September 2026 indicate the scale at which technologically mediated interaction is now possible.

However, consultation and pressure politics should not be treated as identical. A government consultation provides an opportunity to submit preferences, but whether those preferences change

policy is a separate empirical question. Similarly, social-media reach does not guarantee access to decision-makers. Digital politics may broaden expression while leaving inequalities of influence largely intact. Algorithmic visibility, unequal internet literacy, language, organisational resources and the ability to convert online attention into institutional engagement all affect outcomes.

The contemporary pressure group is therefore increasingly a communication organisation. Even traditional bodies require websites, policy briefs, rapid media responses and social-media strategies. Public legitimacy has become a political resource alongside membership and finance.

### Courts, Rights Advocacy and the Judicialisation of Pressure Politics

Pressure groups have also increasingly used legal institutions to challenge policy, seek information and alter administrative practice. Public-interest litigation and rights-based advocacy provide routes through which organisations can raise issues that may receive inadequate attention within conventional party competition.

Bornstein and Sharma's concept of technomoral politics captures this mixture of law, expertise and moral argument. Contemporary NGOs frequently frame demands simultaneously in constitutional, administrative, technical and ethical language. Such strategies differ significantly from the classic image of a pressure group lobbying a minister or threatening a strike.

The electoral-bonds litigation provides an important recent illustration. In *Association for Democratic Reforms v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court held on 15 February 2024 that the Electoral Bond Scheme's non-disclosure arrangements violated citizens' right to information under Article 19(1)(a); the Court also held the removal of limits on corporate political contributions to be arbitrary under Article 14. Subsequent orders required disclosure of bond-related information.

The significance for pressure-group politics lies not in treating the Court itself as a pressure group, but in recognising litigation as a method through which organised civil-society actors can contest institutional rules. The target of political influence is no longer confined to the executive and legislature. Courts, regulatory agencies and transparency institutions have become additional arenas in which organised interests pursue claims.

This transformation also complicates democratic accountability. Litigation can provide access where majoritarian politics fails to address minority or public-interest concerns, but courts are not substitutes for participatory policymaking. Legal mobilisation often requires specialist knowledge and financial capacity. Consequently, judicialisation creates additional channels of influence while potentially reproducing inequalities of access.

### Regulation, Civil Society and Unequal Political Resources

The contemporary relationship between pressure groups and the state contains both inclusion and regulation. Civil-society organisations may be invited into consultations, implementation programmes and advisory processes while simultaneously being subject to financial, legal and administrative regulation. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, 2010, for instance, regulates the acceptance and utilisation of foreign contributions by associations and individuals, illustrating the institutional framework within which a segment of Indian civil society operates.

This dual relationship is important because pressure groups do not function in an institutional vacuum. Their capacity depends partly on rules governing registration, financing, protest, access to information, political contributions and public consultation. The state therefore shapes not only the policies that groups attempt to influence but also the environment in which interest articulation occurs.

The major democratic issue is unequal capacity. A pluralist system assumes that competing interests can organise and present their claims. In practice, organisation requires resources. A national business association may possess professional staff, research units, lawyers and direct access to officials. A marginalised occupational or local community may depend on voluntary mobilisation and sporadic media attention. Large organisations can maintain pressure over long regulatory processes; loosely organised citizens may mobilise only when an issue becomes acute.

Financial influence makes the problem particularly sensitive. The Supreme Court's 2024 electoral-bonds judgment directly addressed the democratic importance of information about political finance and struck down arrangements that protected donor anonymity. Although political donations and lobbying are conceptually distinct, both raise a related democratic question: citizens need reasonable transparency regarding the interests seeking to influence political decisions.

For this reason, contemporary pressure-group politics cannot be assessed simply by asking whether groups are active. The relevant question is whether the institutional system enables diverse groups to participate on reasonably transparent terms. A large number of groups may coexist with severe inequality of influence.

The evidence considered in this paper therefore supports a qualified pluralist interpretation. Indian democracy contains multiple centres of interest articulation, and policy is not produced solely through parties and bureaucracy. Farmers' movements, businesses, professional associations, NGOs, digital networks and litigation-oriented organisations can all affect political agendas. Yet influence is neither automatic nor evenly distributed. Organisational resources, technical expertise, political connections, media visibility and institutional recognition strongly affect whose demands receive sustained consideration.

### Major Findings

The analysis yields several principal findings. First, the character of Indian pressure politics has shifted from predominantly stable, membership-based organisations towards a hybrid system in which formal associations coexist with temporary coalitions, social movements, advocacy networks and digitally connected publics.

Second, methods of influence have diversified. Direct lobbying, petitions and protest remain important, but groups increasingly use policy expertise, regulatory consultation, strategic litigation, public communication and digital mobilisation. Pressure politics is consequently distributed across a wider range of political arenas.

Third, economic liberalisation has strengthened the policy relevance of organised business, especially where complex regulation requires specialised knowledge. Industry associations may perform valuable informational and coordinating functions, but their superior resources can also generate unequal access.

Fourth, the farmers' mobilisation of 2020–21 demonstrates that sustained collective action remains politically consequential. The subsequent legislative repeal of the farm laws shows that outsider mobilisation can influence major policy outcomes, although causation must be understood within the wider electoral and institutional context.

Fifth, digital technologies have lowered barriers to communication and widened opportunities for citizen participation but have not abolished organisational inequality. Online visibility becomes politically effective when it can be connected to institutional access, negotiation, expertise and sustained mobilisation.

Finally, the regulatory environment remains uneven. Formal rules govern political finance, foreign contributions and many forms of association, but lobbying itself lacks a comprehensive disclosure framework. Transparency therefore emerges as one of the central unresolved problems of contemporary Indian pressure politics.

## Conclusion

Pressure-group politics in contemporary India has neither declined nor simply expanded. It has changed its organisational form, methods and arenas of operation. The older architecture of business chambers, unions, professional bodies and agrarian organisations survives, but it is now embedded within a more complicated political environment involving policy networks, digital communication, civil-society advocacy, courts, regulatory institutions and temporary issue-based coalitions.

The study's first question concerned the nature of this transformation. The evidence suggests movement from relatively bounded organisational politics towards hybrid and networked interest articulation. The second question concerned changing strategies. Contemporary groups combine traditional lobbying and protest with expertise, communication, consultation and litigation. The third asked why political influence varies. The major explanation lies in unequal organisational resources, institutional access, specialist knowledge, public legitimacy and financial capacity. The fourth concerned democratic consequences. New channels have undoubtedly increased opportunities for participation, but participation itself should not be confused with equal influence.

Two contrasting tendencies are therefore visible. On one side, contemporary pressure politics has become more open in form. Farmers' alliances, civil-society organisations, digital campaigns and citizen platforms broaden the range of voices entering public debate. On the other, resource-rich actors retain considerable advantages because modern policymaking increasingly rewards continuous access, specialist information and professional advocacy.

The democratic task is not to eliminate pressure groups. Organised interests are inevitable in a diverse society and can contribute information, representation, accountability and policy feedback. The more appropriate objective is to create institutional conditions under which influence becomes visible and contestable. India would benefit from clearer lobbying-disclosure rules, transparent records of significant stakeholder consultations, effective political-finance disclosure, accessible public-consultation mechanisms and safeguards against conflicts of interest. Such reforms should apply proportionately so that transparency requirements do not themselves create excessive burdens for small organisations and citizen groups.

The study is limited by its reliance on secondary evidence and by the difficulty of measuring informal political influence. Future research could therefore compare specific policy sectors, trace meetings and submissions during policy formation, examine state-level variations and study how online mobilisation is translated—or fails to translate—into institutional outcomes.

The changing nature of pressure-group politics ultimately reflects the changing nature of Indian democracy itself. Political influence increasingly occurs across boundaries separating state and society, formal and informal politics, expertise and protest, and physical and digital mobilisation. Whether this evolution strengthens democratic representation will depend less on the sheer number of groups than on the fairness, transparency and accessibility of the institutions through which their competing demands are heard.

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