

COVER STORY

March of centralism

The “one nation” vision requires the **suppression of alternative voices**, since the unity of the nation is now identified with the internal cohesion of the ruling party. BY **SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN**

IT IS A TALE OFTEN TOLD THAT POLITICS IN India became a caste-infested place in the 1990s. A sequel to that narrative asserts that everything changed for the better between 2014 and 2019. That, supposedly, was when people stopped voting their caste, and began to foreground issues of governance and development when they made their pick at the ballot box. It is a narrative of some convenience to the regime today, which it has avidly sought to promote.

A quarter century in India's life as a democracy, marked by hung parliaments and coalition governance, has also now gained the taint of being a time of disunity. Between 1989 and 2014, we are told, group identities proliferated, parties fissured and alliances splintered,

and the politics of the region gained an unhealthy measure of influence over the Centre. The politics of the whole had become an arithmetical sum of the quite distinct politics of the parts.

Since 2014, and particularly since the BJP won its second successive term in 2019, that multiplicity has been supplanted by a unitary vision. And there could be no better spokesman for this vision than Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In 2019, the Prime Minister in his customary Independence Day broadcast celebrated the new reality that every Indian could speak of “One Nation with One Constitution”. This was just 10 days since his government had in a dodgy parliamentary manoeuvre, revoked the special



ABOUT A MONTH after the BJP government revoked the special status granted to Jammu and Kashmir under the Constitution, CRPF personnel patrolling a deserted street in Srinagar, in September 2019.



status granted to Jammu and Kashmir under the Constitution. As a statement, it was also manifestly untrue, since the Constitution has various *non obstante* (or notwithstanding) clauses which permit exemptions to particular norms and standards, allowing for the vast diversities of a continental nation.

At various times during his prime ministership, Modi has spoken of "one nation" as an ideal embodied in the singularity of the identity card issued to all citizens, of its electricity grid, system of taxation, and electoral cycle. He has not yet succeeded in unifying the electoral cycle across the Lok Sabha and all State Assemblies. But the intent is clear, particularly since he invests much time and energy in campaigning and stakes his prestige on always winning.

THE CONGRESS TURNAROUND

Congress president Rahul Gandhi, in contrast, has in recent times awoken to the theme of India being a "Union of States", rather than a nation. The "nation" he has asserted, is a foreign concept, of European origin, and unsuited to India's variegated vastness. In these locutions, he may be reflecting some of modern India's most profound thinkers—Gandhi and Tagore among them. Also, his language closely mirrors the Indian Constitution, which begins with the affirmation that "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States", though in the eyes of the BJP, all this is superfluous. Rahul Gandhi has been targeted with aggressive trolling on these statements, as also, most else that he has said.

Yet, Rahul Gandhi's recent acknowledgment of India's complexity is curious, since it comes from the leader of a party that until not far back was committed to the unitary principle. It is also a measure of how politics in the country has changed over the last three decades.

Three parties could credibly claim to have a footprint across a substantial part of India's geography as the last decade of the last century dawned. In diminishing order of their strength in the 1989 Lok Sabha, these were the Congress, the Janata Dal and the BJP. Over time, one wore down to a pale shadow of its once mighty self, while another imploded in countless fragments. Only the BJP stayed viable, across sufficient States, to stitch together a majority by 2014, when disillusionment among the elites with the fragmentation of national politics reached a point of decision.

In previous tenures in power, the BJP was compelled to mothball its deepest ideological commitments. But in 2014, with fewer allies to hobble it, retaining the faith of the many who had flocked to its banner required the enforcement of its most extreme agenda points.

The "one nation" theme requires, in varying degrees, that the BJP should have the dominant voice, if not the only one. And once embarked upon "one nation, one voice" as active agenda, every other political voice should be silenced, either through organised trolling or through police action. At the ground level, this requires that a BJP-led State government should be at liberty to snatch Gujarat MLA Jignesh Mevani from his home and spirit him away across the width of the country to Assam. Likewise, environmental activist Disha Ravi should be picked up from Bengaluru and hustled over to Delhi to spend a weekend in prison. And AltNews co-founder and fact-checking journalist Mohammad Zubair should be arrested from Delhi and held indefinitely while investigations are carried out into facetious charges across a wide swathe of police jurisdictions.

At the same time, BJP operatives like Tejinder Pal Singh Bagga and grossly partisan TV anchors like Arnab Goswami and Rohit Ranjan should not be subject to any form of accountability for transgressions—substantial on the face of things—even if it involves ugly scuffles with the police force in opposition-ruled States.

A well-worn political science theory holds that electoral competition typically takes shape around historically determined social blocs. India's social fabric is a weave of castes which have traditionally been the building blocks of politics. For long years of Congress hegemony in Indian politics, the presumptive right of the upper castes to rule was taken for granted. Dalits and the religious minorities were willing to sign onto the Congress's hegemonic claims, and that enabled comfortable majorities for the party that rode its inheritance from India's freedom struggle for two decades until 1967.

1967, A WATERSHED YEAR

The scenario changed then. Major political assertion from agrarian communities that have since gained the appellation of "Other Backward Classes" or OBCs, seri-



NISSAR AHMAD



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ously dented the Congress's presumptive right to rule. The Congress fought back, first promising to banish poverty in its "Garibi Hatao" campaign, and then banishing freedom itself with the Emergency. Creative efforts by regional Congress leaders to engineer new caste coalitions—notably in Karnataka and Gujarat—were scuppered from within and without. The new fault line that emerged was between the majoritarian Hindu identity and the spectrum of religious minorities, comprising around 20 per cent of the total population.

The Congress was unaware, through its years on the borderline between professions of secularism and electoral strategies that pandered to religious identity, that there was another party much more adept at playing the game. The BJP hijack of a strategy introduced by the Congress though was not free of friction. For a long while, significant OBC sections stayed out of its orbit, creating alliances of varying degrees of stability with religious minorities, Dalits and Adivasis.

From 2014, the BJP has managed to "flatten" all these

schisms with a fairly straightforward, even brazen, appeal to religious polarisation. The rhetoric may have been subdued from the top leadership but was loud in its articulation at the grassroots. In subsequent years, the leadership shed all restraint and embraced the language of religious polarisation as its ticket to victory. "One nation, one voice" has become an essential ingredient of the BJP's quest for dominance.

Federalism has never had easy acceptance as a concept, far less as practice, in Indian politics. The word "federal" occurs precisely twice in the Indian Constitution, in both contexts in reference to the apex judicial body created in colonial times. When this body was transformed into the Supreme Court at the time the Constitution came into force, the word seemingly lost all operative value.

The relationship between the whole and the parts had of course an administrative dimension laid down in the Constitution, in the division of powers inscribed into the Seventh Schedule. It also had a fiscal dimension in the statutory requirement for a Finance Commission that would determine the share of the Union and the States in taxation revenue. A cultural dimension was introduced by the reorganisation of States on linguistic lines, a multi-stage process that began in 1956.

In actual operational terms, the relationship of the Centre and the States followed different paradigms through various phases of politics. In the single-party State that India essentially was at the time of independence, the distribution of powers between Centre and



THE HINDU



RUPAK DE CHOWDHURI/REUTERS

A PROTEST AGAINST the arrest of 22-year-old climate activist Disha Ravi, in Kolkata in February 2021. Ravi was charged with sedition and picked up from Bengaluru and hustled to Delhi, in what has become a typical cross-State modus operandi.



States became an internal discussion of the Congress.

The “Congress system”, as the political scientist Rajni Kothari called it, was seen at one time to have sufficient internal flexibility and resilience to absorb all factional pressures and create a grand national synthesis. Despite this early optimism of the doyen of India’s political scientists, the system was not guaranteed to last, since every party develops serious internal rigidities over long years in the comfort zone of unchallenged power.

After the Congress lost power in a number of key States in 1967, retaining only a parlous grip at the centre, the polity moved, as political scientists Suhas Palshikar and Yogendra Yadav have theorised, into a new phase. Politics for the next few cycles was about “waves” at the national or State level either in favour of, or against the Congress.

RISE OF REGIONALISM

From 1989 onwards, politics settled into another distinct phase when outcomes at the national level were the result of very separate State-level results. This was a process driven by the emergence of regional parties through the 1970s and 1980s, and the consolidation of Left politics in

STATE POWER. At a press conference in Chennai on August 26, 1989: National Front leaders Jyoti Basu, V.P. Singh, N.T. Rama Rao, M. Karunanidhi, Devi Lal and Ramakrishna Hegde.



THE HINDU PHOTO ARCHIVES

IN AUGUST 1981, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi presiding over a meeting of the Planning Commission. With her are Finance Minister R. Venkataraman and Minister of Planning and Labour N.D. Tiwari. The Congress was relentlessly committed to centralisation, frequently using the power to dismiss State governments under Article 356.



THE HINDU ARCHIVES

INDIRA GANDHI with Karnataka Finance Minister S.R. Bommai and Governor A.N. Banerji at Bengaluru airport on October 14, 1984. The verdict in the 1994 Bommai case unequivocally upheld federalism.

Kerala and West Bengal. All through the second and third phase of the evolution of the Indian polity, the Congress proved relentlessly committed to centralisation, frequently using the power to dismiss State governments under Article 356.

In 1985, at a time when it enjoyed virtually untrammelled power with over 400 seats in the Lok Sabha, it chose to fortify itself through the Tenth Schedule, making defections from its ranks very difficult. Yet it proved profligate in destabilising State governments that failed to obey its writ, through meddlesome Governors and

Article 356. In 1994, the Supreme Court pronounced its judgment on a number of instances when the Union had invoked its emergency powers to dismiss State governments. Its verdict in the case of *S.R. Bommai vs Union of India* was unequivocal in upholding secularism and federalism as basic features of the Constitution. But it was not quite so categorical in how to define either of these principles, conceding indeed that “federalism” in the Indian context was a principle cloaked in ambiguity. The polity, as the Constitution intended, was “quasi federal”: it was a mix of “the federal and unitary elements, leaning more towards the latter”.

SUPPRESSION OF ALTERNATIVE VOICES

Since emerging in 2014 as the pole around which the polity revolves and underlining that status in 2019, the BJP has been on the quest of transforming federalism as principle and practice into an internal dialogue. It has grown in most parts of the country by wedging itself firmly into the deepest cultural fault lines in Indian society. This is integral to its ideology, not merely the kind of pragmatic tactical recourse that the Congress frequently adopted. The “one nation” vision requires the suppression of alternative voices, since the unity of the nation is now identified with the internal cohesion of the ruling party. The Tenth Schedule in the Constitution was authored by the Congress party when it stood at the apex of its powers, and yet was fearful of an erosion from within. It is now being bent to the convenience of another party that seeks a position of absolute hegemonic dominance, and knows no other pathway than coercing every other political strain into submission. □