



STATES OF MATTER

The caste ticket

Knitting together India's many political subcultures, represented as castes, is key to democratic success



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Caste is the unspeakable reality that also happens to be the great unavoidable in the Indian electoral scene. Early in his campaign, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for the ostracism of everybody who talked caste. The government existed to serve all, “irrespective of caste, creed and other factors”, he pronounced while laying the foundation stone for a memorial at the birthplace of Ravidas, medieval poet-saint and icon of Dalit identity. Guru Ravidas had worked for a social order free of “discrimination on the basis of caste”, Modi said, and that had been precisely what his government had been working towards under the slogan of “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas”. A few weeks into the campaign, Modi was not quite so scrupulous about narrow invocations of identity.

No castes were mentioned, only numerical aggregations: As when he derided Opposition leader Rahul Gandhi for choosing to contest from a seat where the “minority is in the majority”, since he had no credentials to recommend himself to the majority.

Modi's political fraternity has battened on the assertion that India will achieve its true glory only when the distinctive culture of the majority achieves true efflorescence. What they are unwilling to concede is that the majority is constructed by both the coercion of unwilling groups and the co-optation of others with a promise of political power.

Anthropologist Balmurli Natrajan has spoken of the paradox of “caste without casteism” that is a feature of the Indian social landscape. When mentioned in public discourse, casteism is as with Modi's Varanasi speech, seen through the narrow legal lens of discrimination. To grasp its full purport, though, casteism has to be seen as a set of “monopolisation strategies”, which could bring into focus its “gainful effects and social functions” — that is, “who gains from casteism and how?”

Writing on the issue in 1955, before the lin-

guistic reorganisation of the political map gained official blessings and legitimacy, BR Ambedkar warned of the dangers of each state becoming the playground of a communal majority. This was the political equivalent of the sociologist MN Srinivas's academic theorisation, drawn from extensive fieldwork in his native Mysore, of a “dominant caste” in every village, which could create cross-territorial alliances to consolidate an electoral majority across the state. Ambedkar distinguished between a “political” and a “communal” majority, the latter a creation not of politics but the ascriptive circumstances of birth. It would be unchangeable by this very circumstance, while a “political majority is changeable in its class composition”.

This may have been an overreading of the power exerted by any single caste grouping that lacked a numerical majority but had the economic and social power to make other groups fall in line. Caste coalitions have been the rule in electoral mobilisation and dominant formations have varied in terms of internal cohesion and durability.

Caste has a juridical identity only as “class”. The special measures sanctioned for certain “classes” were transformed through a constitutional schedule, into a system of affirmative action for identified castes and tribes. Today, by decreeing that citizens who suffer economic deprivation would gain special attention in terms of public employment, the Modi government has begun what could be an end-run around the juridical construct of caste.

Electoral strategies, though, remain firmly premised upon creating caste coalitions to ensure pluralities — though rarely outright majorities — in particular constituencies. A party purporting to represent the Nishad caste of eastern Uttar Pradesh recently caused a flutter by walking out of its alliance with the BJP and

teaming up with the SP. It promises a consolidation of Muslim votes in the state. The friendship was altogether denied what it saw as seats to contest, the Nishad and re-entered the embrace.

Elections are being fought on different terms, with caste as a political sub-group. Governing coalitions emerge out of these elections to display some elements of unity — that is, government is representing distinct subgroups but stable democracy. Arend Lijphart, theorist of consociationalism, are typically run by elite groups who share a common interest in “cohesion and stability”.

An important caveat would be that governing coalitions are merely because of material benefits shared from power. A feature of the absence of culture within a group. As the stakes for the election shift, now entrepreneurs

levels, because parties are personalised and political office is high returns.

Consociational forms of governance have a chance of success if political parties are successful in organising themselves as organisations of political subcultures. In the long run, tribalism and political exclusion would be the outcomes.

An important caveat would be the tendency for governing coalitions to be exclusive