STATES OF MATTER

Exclusion at our peril

Electoral strategies that sharpen existing schisms and alienate minorities may be fetching rich dividends at the ballot box, but there's a high price to pay

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Shadow of fear Policemen on guard at Kawal village in Uttar Pradesh's Muzaffarnagar district after the region was wracked by communal riots in 2013 AFP

As India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh (UP) carries great electoral heft. A strong showing in UP has been a key element of the BJP's formula for success at the national level. This was underlined in 2014, when for the first time it won a majority on its own in the Lok Sabha, built on an unprecedented sweep of 71 of 80 seats in UP.

The BJP's electoral strategy in UP was built on what is called the 60:40 calculation. With Muslims being roughly 19 per cent of the electorate in UP and two well-organised caste groupings — the Yadavs and Jatavs — making up another 20 per cent or so, the BJP's strategy was evident in the social background of its candidates.

The Muslim faith, as always, was stigmatised in campaign rhetoric as an undue alien influence in India's national culture. The Yadav and Jatav communities, likewise, were held culpable for proximate misdemeanours, such as isolating other social actors through the 15 years when their main political vehicles — the Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party — were dominant in the state.

The BJP saw a potentially winning game in excluding these groups from its slate of candidates and running a ground game rallying all others to its platform. Its sweeping triumph in 2014 was built on just under 40 per cent share in the popular vote, almost entirely drawn from the 60 per cent of the electorate that it appealed directly to. The 2017 election to the UP Assembly brought it still more abundant reward.

This electoral strategy would be unexceptionable if the exclusions did not become integral to governance. That, however, is exactly the scenario unfolding in UP. The state's Muslims have been targeted with a menacing pattern of retribution for imagined crimes, and Jatavs have suffered episodic outbreaks of collective violence.

Systemic flaws in the Westminster model are sharply aggravated by a social context riven by cleavages. The potential rewards being high, parties of little scruple see an incentive in electoral strategies that sharpen existing schisms.

The Constituent Assembly debates did not witness any serious alternatives posed to the Westminster system and, as chair of the drafting committee, BR Ambedkar may have gone along with the consensus. In writings and speeches outside the Constituent Assembly, though, he warned of many dangers.

In 1945, in a famous polemic against Gandhi and the Congress, he rebuffed the slur that the "untouchable" constituency he championed was opposed to freedom. Far from it, he said, the untouchables insisted not just on securing freedom, but in making free India "safe for democracy". And "India would not be safe for democracy" unless "provisions were made in the constitution to cut the fangs of the Hindu Communal Majority".

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"Hindu Communal Majority" was used in a figurative rather than literal sense. It was about a minority acquiring majoritarian power through a confluence of social, cultural and economic capital, and reinforcing this power through an electoral process dressed up in the legitimacy of a broad franchise.

When India's freedom seemed imminent, Ambedkar proposed a model of democracy that did not bow towards Westminster, or place undue hope on the formal freedom of universal franchise. As India's Constitution was drafted he proposed wide-ranging safeguards for minorities, including — most implausibly by today's standards — a non-parliamentary executive, with a life independent of the elected legislature.

Elections to the legislature would be governed by rules ensuring representation for every social group. The political executive would be appointed by the legislature but would have a fixed term. Minority groups would be empowered to choose their representatives in the executive without the intercession of the majority.

The majority would be obliged to seek the concurrence of minority groups in choosing its representatives.

In later years, this system of proportional representation and the minority right of veto, came to acquire a name.

Seeking the conditions under which democratic stability could be achieved in highly fragmented societies, the Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart proposed that "consociational" power-sharing was key, with "elite culture" being a determinant of success.

What Lijphart called "consociational" power-sharing could emerge in contexts in which elites are committed to "accommodate the divergent interests and demands" of various subcultures. This required the transcendence of "cleavages" and a "common effort" involving the "elites of rival subcultures".

Perhaps the greatest weakness of Indian political practice today is the reward offered for the politics of exclusion. If at all an elite consensus emerges from upcoming electoral contests, the task of addressing this perverse incentive should be at the top of its agenda. Failure to address this issue may well mean an indefinite future of bitter division.

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