



Group study Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, flanked by Rashtriya Lok Dal Vice-President Jayant Chaudhary and the RLD's Tabassum Hasan, who won the Kairana parliamentary by-elections in Uttar Pradesh in May with the combined support of parties opposed to the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party RAJEEV BHATT

STATES OF MATTER

Learning a lesson

To counter polarising issues, the Opposition seeks a united front for 2019



SUKUMAR MURALIDHARAN

In a spirit of scholarly neutrality, the pioneering Indian sociologist MN Srinivas coined the term “vote bank” to describe how communities would vote under the guidance of a broker who interfaced with a patron from the region’s dominant political force to decide on the best price.

In the hands of the Hindutva right-wing, the “vote bank” was stigmatised as a sinister device by which the Congress, as the dominant party in the early years of independence, managed to corral India’s Muslim minority into electoral ghettos where it could claim their undivided loyalty. India’s Muslims, compelled to bear a disproportionate share of the moral burden for Partition, were grateful for the protection the Congress afforded, and willing to trade their right to equality under the Constitution for a guarantee of identity and security. In later years, this became the basis for the toxic Hindutva slogan that “minority appeasement” was eroding the Indian nationalist identity.

The UN’s Human Development Report provides an annual ranking that has never flattered India. The year 2004 was an exception: “cultural freedom” was the theme and India, for a change, earned lavish praise. Specifically mentioned were India’s policies of social inclusion, such as its wide-ranging programme of affirmative action, its multi-faith calendar of official holidays, its pluralistic legal system and three-language policy in education.

Paradoxically, in one survey after another, the American media research organisation Pew has identified India as a country where social hostilities based on religion are among the most severe. In its latest survey, India ranked the highest in the “social hostilities index” and in the “moderate” category in measures of government restrictions on religion.

This is a story of the complexity of the interactions between State and society in the In-

dian context — a question that BR Ambedkar posed with a special urgency in the early years of independence. Do the positive features of State and civil society reinforce each other? Or do the positives in one neutralise the negatives in the other? Or do the negatives mutually strengthen each other?

Social scientists Ashutosh Varshney and Paul Brass have examined this interaction from different perspectives, focusing especially on contexts of a rupture in the social fabric leading to large-scale violence.

In his 2004 work *Votes and Violence*, Yale academic Steven Wilkinson placed the incidence of collective violence within the context of political competition. Riots, he argued, were a way of building “a winning political coalition” by providing a sharp edge to issues of communal identity before elections.

In situations of competitive electoral democracy based on universal franchise, minorities usually enjoyed protection since it would be in the “government’s electoral interest”. Security for minorities would particularly be the outcome when competition at the hustings is intense enough to invest their votes with a strategic value.

This dynamic may have worked for the Muslim community since communal violence peaked in the early 1990s, as the Ayodhya movement reached its feverish climax. Their representation at a historic low in crucial state assemblies such as Uttar Pradesh, the Muslim minority since then managed, with strategic alliances, to regain lost ground, achieving in Uttar Pradesh in 2012 a level of representation almost proportionate to population.

Overt violence was replaced then by what political scientist Sudha Pai calls “everyday communalism”. This refers to an invasion of the civic space of mundane, everyday life by a

constant buzz about the Muslim minority’s alleged complicity in nefarious activities such as love *jihād*, and their purported disregard for the sanctity of the cow and symbols of national identity such as the *Vande Mataram* hymn.

These wedge issues have created new forms of polarisation. Neelanjan Sircar from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data (at the Ashoka University, Sonapat) has found that the BJP’s success rate in seats contested in Uttar Pradesh peaks in constituencies where the Muslim vote is 25-30 per cent. This is the threshold at which rhetoric on the need for “true nationalists” to unite against the alien Muslim presence gains maximum traction. Below this figure, the Muslim vote diminishes in strategic importance and, above that, it becomes strong enough to carry the seat.

The lessons are not lost on the practitioners of *realpolitik*. The BJP in 2014 won the Kairana Lok Sabha seat — a part of western Uttar Pradesh’s Shamli district with a Muslim population of about 30 per cent — with a solid vote share of over 50 per cent. In a by-election in May 2018, the

Opposition parties united behind a Muslim candidate of the rapidly dwindling Rashtriya Lok Dal.

Within a lower voter turnout, the BJP’s share fell to 47 per cent, a clear three points lower than the victorious candidate of the united Opposition.

The lessons are clear for the Opposition today: to present a united front everywhere possible and not risk a division of the “vote banks” of those disempowered by the BJP’s reign since 2014.

It is argued that riots were a way of building “a winning political coalition”