



Draw the lines In his writings from 1955, BR Ambedkar spoke of how every state in India would be the likely arena of one or the other dominant caste PT/MANVENDER VASHIST

STATES OF MATTER

Caste in a mould

Policy issues will be thin camouflage for the contest of identities in elections



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Incipient friction between castes was one of the themes that the pioneering Indian sociologist MN Srinivas wrote about. It was the year after India's independence and, as Srinivas recorded it in a 1959 essay published in the *American Anthropologist*, "Untouchable leaders" were going around various areas of Mysore state, demanding the effacement of "symbols of Untouchability".

In a village near Srinivas's location, the "Untouchables" acted on these exhortations, abandoning the services regarded as their lot. The land-owning classes, Srinivas recorded, "became annoyed at this and beat up the Untouchables and set fire to their huts".

Aside from the references to "Untouchables", which would today be inappropriate, these lines could be a description of events in current times. Near the taluka town of Una in Gujarat in 2016, a Dalit family engaged in a task assigned by tradition — skinning a dead cow — was flogged by upper-caste elements enraged at the perceived disregard of bovine dignity. This triggered a shunning of tasks assigned by an ascriptive caste system, and two years later, a conversion of Dalits to Buddhism in a conscious invocation of BR Ambedkar's final act of cultural rebellion before his death.

One person was killed in the first week of May 2017, and several Dalit houses were torched in two villages of Saharanpur district in Uttar Pradesh. Tensions began when Dalit activists were restrained mid-April — on Ambedkar's birth anniversary — from installing a statue of their contemporary icon within the premises of a Ravidas temple. The conflation of icons from different eras was part of an assertion of common political purpose, at a time when the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had gone down to catastrophic defeat in elections to the state legislature.

Resistance came from the local Rajput community, which had backed the electoral tri-

umph of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and gained an additional bonus in one of their own, Yogi Adityanath alias Ajay Singh Bisht, becoming chief minister.

The dispute left a residue of ill-will, which boiled over just weeks later when local Rajputs took out a procession to celebrate the anniversary of Rana Pratap of Mewar, a 16th-century king recruited as a contemporary political symbol. Sensibilities still raw from being baulked on the Ambedkar anniversary, a Dalit village headman insisted on enforcing the law forbidding noisy public demonstrations.

A violent retribution followed. A reporter for *The Caravan*, who visited the site of the violence soon afterwards, found a village with a substantial numerical preponderance of Rajputs. Referred to as Jatavs in the polite discourse, the Dalits in the area insisted on their traditional, occupation-based title of Chamar. Though portrayed as a clash of equals, the Chamar quarters in the village bore all the scars of the violence.

Srinivas's field studies led him to the concept of the "dominant caste". As elaborated in his 1955 essay "Social Structure of a Mysore Village", a dominant caste was one that enjoyed a numerical advantage, while also wielding "preponderant economic and political power". Though transformed in some measure, the relationship of power had successfully been adapted into the milieu of politics through universal franchise.

The "vote bank" was one of the mechanisms through which this transformation was effected. Elections, Srinivas argued, gave "fresh opportunities for the crystallisation of parties around patrons", each of whom controlled a "vote bank" that he could "place at the dis-

posal of a provincial or national party for a consideration which is not mentioned but implied".

From a less-detached and more participatory perspective, Ambedkar, in 1955, described the phenomenon rather differently. Writing in the context of the debate over the linguistic reorganisation of the Indian map, he spoke of how every state would likely also be the arena of one or the other dominant caste. Even if not numerically preponderant, this caste could leverage its social, economic and ritual status and constitute itself into a "communal majority", all too likely to "run away with the title deeds given to a political majority to rule".

Dalits may have, through strategic alliances, shaken off what Ambedkar saw as fetters upon electoral freedom. Yet, these alliances have dissolved as the exercise of power has proved a weak cement, in an absence of consensus over policy.

Political scientists Yogendra Yadav and Suhas Palshikar have argued that for all the florid rhetoric on display, electoral competition since the turn of the century has witnessed a narrowing of ideological positions. Pursuit of power is propelled by identity assertions that play on existing social cleavages, seeking the consolidation of certain constituencies by emphasising a shared difference with others. In electoral contests to come, policy issues are likely to be ever-thinner camouflage for the contest of identities.

Perhaps it is the inevitable outcome of the triumph of the market, but a narrowing of the space for democratic consensus seems a given in the current trajectory of Indian politics.

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