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Can a Caste Census Reverse the BJP's Advantage in Wooing Lower Castes?

By: Pankaj Kumar

A caste census may not transform the course of electoral politics. But bringing caste contradictions to the fore could give the social justice parties a strategy to woo lower castes that have drifted towards the BJP.

If the release of the caste survey report by the government of Bihar saw the social justice camp jubilant, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seemed to react with panic and desperation. The BJP's anxiety is somewhat puzzling as the party appeared to have cracked the code of social justice politics in recent times, successfully exploiting intra-subaltern conflicts and contradictions in its favour.

Why is the BJP uncomfortable with the caste census? Why are the social justice parties excited, given the ways in which BJP has turned the table against them in the recent past? What possibilities and challenges does the caste survey open up for both the BJP and the opposition?

Social justice and Hindutva

The scholarship on social justice and Hindutva politics has come full circle. From conceiving caste politics as a perfect and natural antidote to Hindutva politics, scholars now condemn it for breeding religious majoritarianism. Hindutva and lower-caste politics once locked horns. Not any longer. Unlike in the 1990s, Mandalisation and religious majoritarianism are not seen as antithetical to one another. Rather, they are now in cosy and comfortable coexistence. The naive view that caste politics would necessarily be anti-communal has been questioned (Mehta 2023).

What is most intriguing is that despite its core agenda of communalism and religious polarisation, the BJP has been able to win over a large section of the lower castes by exploiting the caste contradiction. The obsession with representation in social justice politics worked perfectly well for a new brand of Hindutva politics that was desperate to expand its social base (Gudavarthy 2021). The BJP has fashioned a totally different logic of caste-based identity politics that is in sync with its larger Hindutva politics.

Since 2014, political analysts have been trying to answer the following questions: Why has caste politics ceased to be a perfect antidote to Hindutva politics? And why are Dalits and lower castes voting for the BJP?

Culturalisation of caste

Many scholars trace the failure of social justice politics and the success of the BJP's strategy to a process called "culturalisation of caste" (Natrajan 2012). At the heart of the culturalisation thesis is the idea that caste is not only about hierarchy and discrimination. Rather, there is a strong cultural element to caste, which generates a deep sense of belonging and affinity amongst its members.

It is this cultural aspect of caste that Ambedkarite and anti-caste politicians have failed to appreciate. By only emphasising the hierarchical and discriminatory aspect of caste, anti-caste politics attempts to rob it of its more immediate sense of identity and belongingness.

That is why there are hardly any takers for the idea of the annihilation of caste since the inception of anti-caste politics. If the earlier project of annihilation of caste appeared utopian, with the culturalisation of caste, it is not even desirable. All castes want to preserve their caste identity and maximise power for their own group. Hindutva politics, which has always tried to treat caste as a way of life bereft of any discrimination and hierarchy, becomes appealing in such a context.

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In this view, the discriminatory aspect of the caste is reduced to a thing of the past. This blocks any possibility of a larger mobilisation around caste, as caste is no longer a problem that needs to be addressed or annihilated. Such a view of caste easily feeds into Hindutva politics.

What makes culturalisation seductive?

This immediately raises the question of why the culturalisation of caste is so appealing now. Are caste's hierarchical and discriminatory aspects things of the past?

In a recent lecture, [Ajay Gudavarthy](#) claimed that earlier scholars of Indian politics had failed to see the cultural aspect of caste. As a result, they believed that caste politics would be an automatic check on Hindutva politics. While Gudavarthy is right in pointing out the flawed assumptions of earlier scholars, contrary to him, I argue that earlier scholars of Indian politics were aware of the cultural aspect of caste. But there were concrete material conditions that prevented an appeal to the cultural side of caste at that time. Let me flag two such reasons here.

The first reason is the tremendous rise of jati-specific outfits such as the Nishad Party, Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP), Apna Dal, and Mahan Dal in Uttar Pradesh and the Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP) in Bihar. This upsurge has come at the expense of broader caste solidarities. While there is no doubt that caste politics in its electoral avatar has always been politically fragmented, the fragmentation was never as deep, dangerous, and pervasive as it is today. As long as Hindutva was not at the centre stage of things, such a fragmentation never posed a threat to democracy itself, which it now appears to be furnishing.

Earlier scholars assumed and hoped that the everyday experience of caste discrimination, along with the imperative of capturing state power, would stimulate the lower castes to unite, at least politically, if not socially. And at the heart of this assumption was an analytical distinction that scholars from M.N. Srinivas onwards have often made between the sociological reality of caste and its political reality (Srinivas 1962: 5).

To appreciate the heterogeneity of meanings that caste signifies in different domains, every textbook on caste starts with the idea that there are three categories through which the caste system can be understood: jati, varna, and government categories such as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Since caste looks very different in different domains, no single category is adequate to explain it in totality.

Consequently, while the category of jati was useful in understanding the everyday reality of caste (dining, marriage, and so on), it had hardly any analytical purchase when it comes to politics. In politics, it was the cluster of castes (SC/OBC), as opposed to jati, that became the most relevant category (Vaid 2014: 393–95). This is why Andre Beteille claimed that internal segmentation and differentiation become irrelevant in the Indian political context (2021: 75).

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For long, scholars of Indian politics took this analytical distinction and its political implications seriously. However, the recent mushrooming of jati-specific outfits appears to obliterate the distinction between the sociological and the political reality of caste. The category of jati has become important not only to understand the pattern of social intercourse but also to explain political behaviour. Caste, which appeared to work differently in different domains earlier, now looks identical in different domains.

To put it bluntly, different jatis are not only marrying within their own community but also becoming increasingly loyal to the interests of their own jati, not to the larger solidarities invoked by terms such as Dalit and Bahujan.

When earlier scholars thought of caste and politics, they took the possibilities of solidarities as their reference point. They assumed and hoped that collective suffering would result in collective solidarities. They were not totally wrong. Even though different castes remained socially fragmented, they entered into political solidarities for the purposes of capturing power and fighting against the dominance of caste elites.

However, a transformation in the sociology of conflict in the post-Mandal period has diminished the possibilities of forging solidarities in the name of caste.

Consequently, once the Backward versus Forward contradiction is transformed into a contradiction amongst and within the Backward, it paves the way for mobilising and targeting specific jatis. It is to the BJP's credit that it has somehow (despite its emphasis on communal polarisation) been able to target specific jatis and communicate the cultural idea of caste to the electorate. As a result, while caste has not lost its political currency, the caste contradiction in terms of Backward versus Forward has certainly lost its centrality.

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The second reason for the neglect of the cultural dimension of caste is that while earlier scholars hoped that the politicisation of caste would facilitate and cement larger solidarities, they failed to foresee the possibility that it could lead to fragmentation. They were not unaware of the structural limits of the graded nature of hierarchy and its implications for cementing unity. Yet, they hoped that given the everyday experience of caste and the incentive of electoral democracy, it would be possible to overcome fragmentation. In this context, while the social justice parties had to undertake the difficult task of undermining and overcoming the systemic element of caste (graded hierarchy), the BJP had to simply exploit the fragmentation by anchoring their unity around a larger Hindu identity.

This does not mean that the task before the BJP was an easy one. For a long time, it was largely seen as the party of upper-caste Hindus. The BJP took two-and-a-half decades for it to decode caste politics. The three factors that put the BJP in an advantageous position were a shift in social contradiction, its ability to win over hitherto underrepresented smaller caste groups through nominal representation, and the transformation of the electoral context in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar into a bi-polar one. Disillusioned and frustrated with the social justice parties for their apparent failure in ensuring representation and material well-being, the lower castes began drifting towards the BJP.

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The primary reason for the BJP's mastery of social justice politics is its ability to take two commonsensical aspects of caste seriously. One, that it is jati (not the larger categories of Bahujan or Backward) that is the most immediate and effective unit of identification for a majority of castes. And, two, that a graded hierarchy provides political opportunities for exploiting inter-jati rivalries and resentments. Both these factors would not have worked in the BJP's favour had the party not transformed itself and taken the issue of representation seriously. A mix of caste polarisation alongside sustained communal polarisation has made the BJP formidable.

Structural limits

Has the culturalisation of caste closed off the possibility of an anti-caste politics that is also anti-communal? The answer is no.

The issue of the caste census provides us with a very important lens to see the structural limits of the BJP's caste politics. The BJP's anxiety over something that is not an emotive and popular issue on the ground reveals its political precarity on caste. While the token representation of various smaller caste groups has been instrumental in the BJP's success, it is very unlikely that the substantive socio-economic aspirations of these disparate castes can be met within the Hindutva framework.

The very survival of the BJP depends on displacing the material contradiction of caste with a larger overarching narrative of Hinduness, nationalism, and development. The issue of a caste census tends to upset this strategy. Any social justice politics that moves beyond the stage of nominal representation and grounds its politics in material advancement is going to make the BJP vulnerable.

Challenge for opposition

It would be naive and incorrect to claim that a caste census would make the BJP's social engineering implode. Any such possibility requires that religious polarisation be displaced by caste contradiction.

Through constant propaganda, the BJP has been able to turn the weaker sections of the lower castes against their more privileged sections. Until the social justice parties win this ideological war, and also give underrepresented social groups their due, they are not going to reap the benefits of a caste census. Much would depend on how the smaller caste groups respond to evidence of their own destitution.

The biggest challenge before the social justice parties is to bring the material aspect of the contradiction to the fore and offer a social narrative that can appeal to the aspirations of disparate castes. Overcoming the ongoing fragmentation of the lower castes is a daunting task that they will have to undertake. But for that, they cannot rely on the earlier fault lines of Backward versus Forward. They will have to re-imagine their politics in the light of newer fault lines.

A caste census may not going to transform the course of electoral politics. But it offers some hope to the social justice parties. Bringing caste contradictions to the fore would give the social justice parties some space for manoeuvre and enable them to compete in wooing the other lower castes. It is the prospect of such a decentering that makes the BJP anxious.

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