

India: Caste Stronger than Religion?

Research >
South Asia

Hindu-Muslim tension continues to structure the public arena in India, as the riots in Gujarat brought to the surface a year ago. But at least in the Hindi belt, the repertoire of caste appears to be just as powerful. While communal conflict remains salient, the crystallization of caste identities has redefined the political cleavages of North India. The emergence of caste-based politics has blurred religious divisions, evident in the recent success of political parties that cater to lower-caste voters. Political campaigning for the state elections in four provinces of the Hindi belt this year, vividly illustrates this competition between the two political identities: the religious and the caste-based.

By Christophe Jaffrelot

The politics of identity in India, especially in the Hindi belt, are dominated by ethno-religious conflict. Since 1984, the symbol of these tensions has been Ayodhya. In the sixteenth century, the Moghuls built a mosque in this Uttar Pradesh town, which Hindus regard as the birthplace of the god Ram, and named the structure Babri Masjid, after the first Moghul emperor Babur. Hindu nationalists put claims on the site in order to 'rebuild' a temple dedicated to Ram. This demand became the focus of every election campaign from the late 1980s to the middle of the 1990s, even after militants destroyed the mosque in 1992. This ethno-religious mobilization has exacerbated conflict between Hindus and Muslims.

Hindus vs. Muslims

Clashes were already commonplace during the colonial period. Ever since Muslims organized a movement in defence of the Caliphate in the 1920s, the Hindu majority has felt threatened from within by the presence of a pan-Islamic fifth column. Hindu nationalism builds and feeds on this largely irrational perception of vulnerability, which gained further ground in the 1980s and 1990s, when nourished by the Congress government's leniency towards instances of Islamic mobilization. The Shah Bano affair, conversions of some Untouchables to Islam, and even before that the spectre of the Iranian Revolution, rekindled feelings of vulnerability among sections of the Hindu community, emotions that the Hindu nationalist movement skilfully exploited. The ideology of Hindu nationalism, which equates national identity with Hindu culture, demands that religious minorities, Christians as well as Muslims, show public allegiance to the 'Hindian' identity – for instance



A symbol of caste conflict in India: in Tamil Nadu, the statues of Ambedkar, the first Pan Indian Untouchable leader, are 'caged' to protect them from vandalism.

by paying respect to Ram as a national hero – and that they keep their own religious observances private.

The resurgence of Hindu nationalism was also due to a wave of communal riots which polarized the electorate. With Hindus voting en masse for Hindu nationalist, their self-appointed 'defenders', the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP – Indian People's Party) moved from two seats out of 544 in the People's Assembly in 1984 to 178 seats in 1998. In that year the BJP formed the governing coalition and its leader, A.B. Vajpayee, became Prime Minister. Most of the parties in the coalition, however, did not share the BJP's Hindu nationalist agenda. The coalition contract thus barred the government from challenging the status quo in Ayodhya from the official side.

Following a string of electoral defeats from 1998 to 2002, which ousted the BJP from leadership in all of the main states it had controlled, this policy was increasingly disputed within the party. In Gujarat, BJP Chief Minister Narendra Modi used defeat at the polls to campaign for the party's return to its erstwhile militant stance. When the state experienced unprecedented

Hindu-Muslim riots in early 2002, these turned into anti-Muslim pogroms through the administration's acquiescence and even active participation. Two thousand Muslims were killed during instances of violence that were reminiscent of the ethnic cleansing of Partition half a century before. The ensuing mobilization of the Hindu electorate resulted in a landslide victory for the BJP in December 2002 and the resurgence of militant Hindu identity. Hostility to Islam henceforth fed on the anti-Jihadist discourse prevalent in the world after 11 September 2001.

The political assertion of caste

The political culture of caste has grown in tandem with the spread of Hindu nationalism. These two trajectories are less parallel than dialectical, as they reinforce one another. During the colonial period, and under Nehru's government after 1947, the emancipation of the lower castes was promoted through a system of positive discrimination that the British had devised. The Untouchables benefited from quotas in the assemblies, the civil service, and in education, which spawned a new elite, designated by a novel term. In place of administrative euphemisms such as 'Scheduled Castes' and Gandhi's condescending label 'Harijan', the Untouchables chose for themselves a name, for its shock value, expressing their militant social identity: 'Dalit' (the oppressed).

Independent India's first government also took interest in those categorized just above the Untouchables. Nehru, already in his first speech before the Constituent Assembly, named them the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBC), implying groups 'other' than the 'Scheduled Castes.' In 1953, the first Backward Classes Commission was appointed and assigned the task to identify these groups and to suggest measures that would improve their condition. Its report concluded that the one common denominator behind indicators of social backwardness was: membership of a lower caste. The Other Backward Classes were, in other words, merely a collection of castes. The government rejected the analysis, arguing that an official recognition of caste in this manner would only perpetuate an archaic social institution that was bound to disappear with the modernization of society.

The second Backward Classes Commission was appointed in 1978, owing to Congress' first electoral defeat. A lower-caste leader, B.P. Mandal, became its president. His report again retained caste as the relevant criterion for positive discrimination. It identified 3,743 castes that made up India's Other Backward Classes which, according to him, accounted for 52 per cent of the population. The report recommended reserving for them 27 per cent of civil service posts to promote their social and economic development.

Only after Congress had been ousted for the second time, the new Prime Minister V.P. Singh decided to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission Report in 1990. In reaction, the upper castes, especially students, launched violent protests against the sudden diminution of their job opportunities and the outright challenge to the socio-political order they dominated. V.P. Singh's decision and subsequent developments sparked a counter-mobilization, in which the OBC for the first time joined forces to defend their quotas against upper-caste agitation.

In this context of social polarization, the Dalits, previously reluctant to bear the brunt of the backlash against positive discrimination, made an alliance with the OBC. New political parties emerged and formed alliances, such as the Samajwadi Janata Party (Socialist People's Party), claiming to represent the interests of all lower castes, and the Bahujan Samaj Party, whose leader, Kanshi Ram, is a Dalit. All these new political groups fielded scores of lower-caste candidates, in acknowledgement of the fact that the OBC – constituting the relative majority all over India – voted for their own candidates rather than upper-caste notables. As a result, the proportion of OBC elected representatives in northern India climbed from 11 per cent in 1984 to 25 per cent in 1996; that of upper-caste elected officials dropped from 47 to 35 per cent. It was during these years that lower-caste parties seized power in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh; two states where they still reign today.

The involvement of the BJP in the Ayodhya affair is in large part explained by the rising power of the lower castes. The BJP perceived the crystallization of a caste-based movement as a threat to an undivided Hindu community and sought to avert this threat by dissolving this identity within a broader movement stamped with the seal of Hinduism. While the party aimed at attracting lower-caste voters by co-opting lower-caste leaders, its success was rather limited and it continues to appeal disproportionately to upper-caste voters. Interestingly, the BJP stood up to protect the upper castes against low-caste mobilizations while the low-caste parties were gaining momentum. Co-opted lower-caste leaders can deliver smaller numbers of supporters, but, as was evident in the 2001 break away of Kalyan Singh, an OBC leader from Uttar Pradesh, the BJP cannot fully rely on the mechanisms of co-option.

The key election issue: reservations or Ayodhya?

The conflict between these two political identities – the caste-based and Hindu nationalist – will dominate the election year that begins this fall. In December 2003 four states of the Indian Union: Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Delhi, will go to the polls. Less than twelve months later the country will hold its fourteenth

general election. In this contest, a shift in the Congress Party towards the repertoire of caste will be a new variable. Congress, which already governs over half the states, is far from exclusively championing the cause of the lower castes. While its Chief Minister in Madhya Pradesh, Digvijay Singh, is campaigning for the OBC quota in the state's civil service to be increased from 14 to 27 per cent, the Chief Minister in Rajasthan, Ashok Gehlot, is promising a quota in the state's administration for the poor from the *upper* castes. The Congress has introduced the theme of caste – any caste – into its discourse to counter the appeal of Hindutva.

The BJP is in a fix. Extremist components of the Hindu nationalist movement, including the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), pressure the party to return to its strategy of ethno-religious mobilization. In Rajasthan and in Madhya Pradesh, the two most important states going to the poll, VHP leaders have, once again, identified Muslim shrines built atop Hindu temples; state governments, however, have prevented their campaigning.¹ Consequently, the VHP resuscitated the Ayodhya issue following a report by the Archaeological Survey of India, which stated new excavations to prove the prior existence of a Hindu temple at Babri Masjid. Nevertheless, the BJP's central leadership, including Prime Minister Vajpayee, remain reluctant to re-launch the Ayodhya affair for fear of alienating its coalition partners. In September, these partners refused to pass a parliamentary bill on the banning of cow slaughter, yet another Hindu nationalist rally cause. Not only has it been impossible for the BJP to return to its strategy of ethno-religious mobilization, the party has had to accept Congress initiatives such as debate on reservations for the upper castes.

Caste issues may blur Hindutva sentiment, unless BJP propaganda against the Jihadist threat can successfully be instrumentalized. In August, when four bomb attacks killed 52 innocents in Bombay, Vice-Prime Minister L.K. Advani immediately accused Pakistan-based Islamist groups. Many Hindus follow Advani's reading, even though the police found the guilty men to be Indian Muslims anxious to avenge the Gujarat pogrom. In 1999, the BJP thanked its victory in the general elections to the resurgence of patriotic feelings during the Kargil war. It may yet repeat this achievement if it successfully projects itself as the protector of Hindus in a war-like situation against Jihadists and fifth columnists. <

Dr Christophe Jaffrelot is director of the Centre for International Studies and Research and teaches South Asian politics at Sciences-Po, both in Paris. His most recent book was published this year: *India's Silent Revolution. The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India (2003)*.
jaffrelot@ceri-sciences-po.org

Note >

1 In Rajasthan, the VHP concocted that the Muslim shrine of Ajmer is built on a Hindu temple; in Madhya Pradesh it identified a similar site in Dhar district. In response, government took measures to prevent VHP leaders (such as Praveen Togadia, whose discourse spreads venom wherever he goes) from campaigning in their states by Chief Ministers Gehlot and Singh.

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