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 Hindu belt, the repertoire of caste appeals appears to be just as powerful. While communal conflict has witnessed the new 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 Hindu belt this year, vividly illustrates this competition between the two political identities: the religious and the caste-based.

By Christoph Jaffrelot

The politics of identity in India, especially in the Hindu belt, are dominated by ethno-religious conflict. Since 1974, 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 1571 to the Babri temple dedicated to Ram. This demand became the focus of every election campaign from the late 1960s to the middle of the 1990s. After militant forces 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 defense of the Caliphate in the 1920s, the Hindu majority has felt threatened from within by the presence of a pan-Islamic force in Uttar Pradesh. Hindu demands build and feeds on this largely irrational perception of vulnerability, which gained further ground in the 1980s and 1990s, when bitterness over the Congress government’s leniency towards instances of Islamic mobilization. The Shah Bano affair, conversions of some Ustouchehs to Islam, and even before that the specter of the Iran Revolution, rekindled feelings of vulnerability among large sections of the Hindu community, emotions that the Hindu nationalist movement skillfully exploited. The ideology of Hindu nationalism, which equates national identity with Hindu identity, is a particularly effective weapon that religious minorities, Christians as well as Muslims, show public allegiance to the ‘Hindus’ identity – for instance 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 reinforced the government from the outside.

The political culture of caste has grown in tandem with the spread of Hindu nationalism. These two trajectories interact so intensively that it is difficult to separate them completely. The two groups reinforce one another. During the colonial period, and under Nehru’s government after 1947, the emancipation of Muslims from the 1947 partition was a systematic process. The ‘Ustouchables’ benefited from quotas in the public sector, and as such occupied an important place in the society, which spawned a new elite, designated by a novel term in place of administrative euphemisms such as ‘Scheduled Castes’ or Gandhi’s condescending label ‘Harijan’. The Untouchables chose for themselves a name, for its shock value, expressing their militant social identity: Dalit (the oppressed).

Independence India’s first government also took interest in those categorized just above the Ustouchables. Nehru, already in his first speech before the Constituent Assembly, named them the ‘Other Backward Classes’ (OBC). The involvement of the BJP in the Ayodhya affair is in large part explained by the rise of the political 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 into a broader movement stamped with the seal of Hinduism. While the party aimed at attracting low-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 2002 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 Uttar Pradesh, will go to the polls. Less than twelve months later the country will hold its fourteenth general election. In this context, a shift in the Congress Party towards the representation of religious minorities would be unmanageable. Congress, which already governs over half the states, is far from exclusively championing the cause of the lower-caste voters. In September, Dr. Manmohan Singh, 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 plans to use the issue 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 September, the two most important states going to the polls, VHP leaders have, once again, identified Muslim terrorism as the key issue. The new political parties benefited from quotas in the lower castes. In 1998, 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 into a broader movement stamped with the seal of Hinduism. While the party aimed at attracting low-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 2002 break away of Kalyan Singh, an OBC leader from Uttar Pradesh, the BJP cannot fully rely on the mechanisms of co-option.

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