

## For Dalits, a new chapter

The flare-up in Bhima-Koregaon in Pune last week has its immediate roots in an incident that took place on December 29 last year. The noticeboard with the mention of a Dalit farmer, Govind Ganapat Mahar (Gaikwad), went missing at the memorial of Sambhaji Maharaj, the son of Chhatrapati Shivaji, at Vadhu Budruk, Pune. Gaikwad had conducted Sambhaji's last rites in defiance of a Mughal diktat. This attempt to erase Gaikwad's important contribution has been a contentious issue between the Dalits and the Marathas.

But these fissures have also widened with Maharashtra seeing the decade's worst drought, and with youth unemployment and distress migration on the rise and disillusioned young men being radicalised. The misery has not even spared the once-prosperous regions — hundreds of small *morchas* and protests were held by Maratha youth across the State in 2016. The Marathas were demanding reservations in jobs, but a key demand was also to modify the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, which, many of them claim, has been "misused". This sparked off tensions between the two communities in rural areas.

With these agitations, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Maharashtra begins 2018 on an ominous note. The violence has raised a question mark on not only the BJP's political acumen, but also its administrative astuteness in handling a crisis, which has been a result of its own false promises and assurances. Worse, the image of the police took a beating when protesters vandalising property were given kid-glove treatment. This is in stark contrast to how the Mumbai police dealt with protesters following the Khairlanji massacre in 2006. Seeing the chaos and the administration's indecisiveness on January 3, the Maharashtra Federation of Retail Traders Association called the government's crisis management strategy the "worst ever" in history. What is unfolding in Maharashtra is similar to the polarisation that we have been seeing in Haryana and Gujarat. While that has helped the BJP consolidate the Brahmin, upper caste, and the Other Backward Classes voters, unlike the trends in Haryana and Gujarat — where the Jats and Patidars are gaining prominence — the protests in Maharashtra have taken a different turn. In what could be a cause of concern for the BJP, this movement has only consolidated various Dalit factions in the Ambedkarite movement. The Dalit community, which was until now besieged by intra-movement conflicts, is seeing a new chapter. By naming and shaming the perpetrators of the Bhima-Koregaon violence, where there are possible links to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the BJP, Prakash Ambedkar, grandson of B.R. Ambedkar, has assumed centre stage in Dalit politics. At least for now it seems.

Meanwhile, the contradictions between the Dalits and the Marathas have also been shrinking. As one placard at the Mumbai protests read: "*Buddha Maratha Ek Hai, Bidhe Ekbote Fake Hai*" (Buddha and Maratha are one, Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote are fake). This mobilisation against a common foe could only strengthen, and could pose a challenge to the BJP in 2019.

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