

RE-ESTABLISHING OWNERSHIP OF THE MANDAL SPACE

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Elections, Election Commission and the Electoral Reforms in India Incl. Political Parties

The Modi era has resulted in the primary political legatees of Mandal politics in the Hindi heartland, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) facing a deep political crisis. For roughly two decades after the fall of the Babri Masjid, their brand of backward caste politics had played a decisive role in relegating the Hindutva of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to the margins in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, respectively. However, since 2014, these parties have been repeatedly trounced in the face of the Hindutva juggernaut, with the sole exception of the Bihar result in 2015.

This political trajectory is often cited to claim that political competition in U.P. and Bihar has irretrievably moved beyond the Mandal paradigm of backward caste assertion. A cursory look at the electoral mobilisation underway in U.P. suggests the facile nature of such a reading. The centrality of the backward castes in these elections shows that the hegemony of Hindutva has not necessarily meant that Mandal politics is on its last legs. Indeed, Hindutva has become hegemonic by capturing the Mandal space, through becoming the primary vehicle of assertion of those backward castes left out by the established Mandal parties.

In many ways, parties such as the SP and the RJD have been the victims of a deepening, rather than a waning, of Mandal politics. As political consciousness has seeped into an array of less numerous and scattered backward castes (often termed the Most Backward Castes), these castes have acquired the confidence to become their own political players. With established Mandal parties increasingly in the grip of the dominant Yadavs, these backward castes have either floated their own small parties or hitched their wagon to the BJP or its allies.

Why has it been so easy for the BJP to co-opt the Mandal space and marginalise Mandal parties? And can Mandal parties ever provide an effective ideological counter to the BJP?

The answer to the first question has been chronicled adequately in the past few years. The Mandal movement was subject to a series of splits in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the dominant Yadav caste eventually managed to emerge at the helm of the strongest Mandal parties — the SP and the RJD. They have only deepened their stranglehold since.

Along with this sociological narrowing came an ideological degeneration. As Gilles Verniers has documented (<https://bit.ly/3GbHQEA>), the SP has steadily shed its progressive and socialist moorings, and embraced social conservatism, hobnobbed with big industrialists, and outsourced its organisational machinery to local elites from dominant castes. Meanwhile, as the SP was hollowing itself out from within, the BJP was evolving itself to integrate the aspirational urge of Mandal politics within its Hindutva project. When the frontal Hindutva assault came on the Mandal space, the SP had little defences.

In other words, Hindutva managed to neutralise the established Mandal forces by exploiting the contradictions within the movement. For the Mandal forces to stay relevant, they must return the favour. There are certainly enough contradictions in the Hindutva process of co-option of backward castes. We can discuss two such contradictions that can provide both the bases for attack on Hindutva as well as the sources for renewal of the Mandal movement.

One, while Hindutva is adept at furnishing symbolic resources to these castes, it can be an ambiguous ally in terms of helping them with their struggle for material resources. As Badri Narayan has demonstrated (<https://bit.ly/3q1w5up>), Hindutva has woven a tapestry of myths tailored to each backward caste. These sagas of grit and glory — often against mythic ‘Islamic aggressors’ — are designed to bolster the social esteem and sense of dignity of individual backward castes. For example, the Rajbhar caste is sought to be mobilised by recounting the valour of Raja Suheldev in rebuffing a ‘Muslim’ advance in the 12th century, as the Prime Minister reminded his audience in Varanasi.

Yet, when the Rajbhar caste asks the BJP about its promise of implementing subcategorisation in reservation, it is met with vague pledges and bureaucratic stonewalling. After all, Hindutva is an assimilationist project, wary not just of unleashing the forces of competitive caste assertion for material resources, but also of any excessive emphasis on distinctive micro identities.

This contradiction has already been pounced upon by Mandal parties, which have attempted to make caste census and the expansion of the reservation umbrella the next frontier of Mandal politics. The Mandal parties need to reposition themselves as the most effective vehicle for the common struggle of backward castes for material advancement, though the route is through agitations not petitions.

Two, the Hindutva movement has not quite lost its upper caste bearings. The leadership of the Sangh Parivar continues to be overly weighted towards upper castes. In U.P., the Yadavs have been replaced in large part by the emboldened Thakurs as the current source of resentment among backward castes. Hindutva can only paper over these resentments, not eliminate them. That the predilections of upper castes continue to inform government policy can be gauged by the central government’s willingness to breach the 50% reservation cap only to accommodate the ‘economically backward’ upper castes.

The Mandal parties can exploit this contradiction by rediscovering the original ideological campaign against upper caste domination. SP leader Akhilesh Yadav has shown signs of this reorientation, promising a ‘revolution of backward castes’ in 2022, and stating that only the ideologies of Lohia and Ambedkar can fulfil the dream of India and “our ancestors”.

Again, ideological renewal is a long-term project, and takes more than election speeches. It involves cultivating symbolic resources which can underpin solidarity and a shared consciousness among backward communities. It also requires a cadre-based organisation, led by backward castes, that can take the party’s ideological messaging to the ground. At present, the SP, with a party machinery singularly geared for fighting elections and acquiring power, is ill-suited to carry forward these ideological endeavours.

The above discussion can be concretised by contrasting the ease with which Hindutva has overwhelmed Mandal parties with its repeated failures to penetrate the deep South. So, what do the parties of Tamil Nadu and Kerala claiming similar lineages of social justice and redistribution possess that make their constituents more immune to Hindutva?

Granted, the parties of Tamil Nadu and Kerala have two inherent advantages when resisting Hindutva. One, the politics of sub-nationalism, which is a powerful identity-based counter to the politics of Hindu nationalism. Two, the largely bipolar nature of political competition that encourages broad-based coalitions, and thus prevents capture of social justice politics by a single dominant community.

Still, North Indian Mandal parties can learn important lessons from the success of the southern parties in rebuffing Hindutva.

The first lesson is that Hindutva loves an ideological vacuum. The southern parties such as the Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu and the Left/Congress in Kerala have clung onto their progressive heritage, the emancipatory texture of politics that has provided a distinct ideological counterpoint to Hindutva. Progressive politics, even in the Hindi heartland, is not necessarily a losing proposition. For instance, the RJD suffered in the last election from its poor appeal with the increasingly important constituency of women voters (who favoured the National Democratic Alliance coalition to the RJD coalition by a huge 10% margin). Moreover, progressive politics also provides the necessary glue of symbolic resources that can fuse together an unwieldy social coalition.

The second lesson is the importance of functioning political organisations in weathering the assault of Hindutva. The cadre-based political organisations of the South are better suited to compete with the organisational behemoth of the Sangh Parivar, rather than an amorphous, patronage-based organisations of Mandal parties which wake up only during elections.

The upcoming election in Uttar Pradesh will not be a straight contest between Mandal and Kamandal, but between a Mandal party and a party claiming both the Mandal and Kamandal space. The first step for the SP, therefore, should be to re-establish sole ownership of the Mandal space. Given the time left for the elections, it does seem like a tall order.

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