

Caste Iron Chains: Why We Struggle To Break Free

Four years ago I wrote in my first Needle's Eye column that predictions that caste and religion would not dominate the 2014 elections were all hogwash. If you still believe that four years of this government have whipped up a centripetal force of development and transformation, you need to notify the I&B Ministry that you are being misled by fake news. Caste and religion are permanently tattooed into our skins.

Karnataka goes to the polls on May 12, which was coincidentally the date in 2014 when the final round of Lok Sabha voting took place. Will the Congress party be reduced to a sorry rump in two states and one union territory if the Bharatiya Janata Party hoists its flag atop Bangalore's Vidhana Soudha? It hardly matters any longer: when we talk about hard or soft Hindutva, the BJP and the Congress look like two sides of the same coin. Although the Narendra Modi government has been pouring investment into Karnataka ahead of the election, in the end victory will be decided by which politician presses the right buttons among the Lingayats (whether or not they get away with their push to be recognized as a religious minority), the Vokkaligas, and the Kurubas (the small but influential shepherd community that chief minister Siddaramaiah belongs to).

Karnataka is a hot-bed of caste and religion. For instance, there are 199 castes and communities on the Other Backward Classes (OBC) list in Karnataka. But this is only a microcosm of the nation: the government said on Tuesday that a total of 120 castes and communities had been added to the national OBC list over the past three years; I counted a total of 2,509.

As with caste, so with religion: when we use the word 'appeasement', the real question is which caste or religion every party is appeasing. In a moment of candour, Sonia Gandhi sounded querulous at the India Today Conclave last month when she was pressed about the Congress's 'soft' Hindutva. "The BJP has managed to convince, to persuade people that the Congress party is a Muslim party ... in my party the great majority is Hindu ... yes, there are Muslims. But I fail to understand this branding us as a Muslim party," she said, adding that temple-hopping had been a long-time tradition in the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty.

Elections are merely episodic, loose threads in the larger social tapestry that untidily adorns the Indian skyline. As the next general election draws ever closer, the Modi government is spending more and more time mending the holes in this tapestry, and occasionally trying to add its own tassels.

Look for example at the tangled web we have woven in regard to reservations for scheduled castes and tribes and OBCs. The government has yet to release the caste data from the Socio Economic and Caste Census of 2011; on Wednesday Minister of

The Needle's Eye



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THERE'S NO REPLACING CASTE



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State for Social Justice Ramdas Athawale, whose Republican Party is a BJP ally, demanded that the data be made public to enable a re-examination of reservations.

No government would have the resolve to abolish reservations. Instead, there is a constant tinkering with the bells and whistles. Last year the Modi cabinet raised the income limit for the Creamy Layer cut-off

to ₹8 lakhs annually from ₹6 lakhs. Other layers are being added. On October 2, 2017, the government set up the Justice G. Rohini Commission to study the 'sub-categorisation' of OBCs "to achieve greater social justice and inclusion for all... Sub-categorisation of the OBCs will ensure that the more backward among the OBC communities can also access the benefits of reservation for educational institutions and government jobs."

Have reservations made sure the right people get the right jobs? Look no further than a May 9, 2017 circular from the Railways Ministry that would make Catch-22 hero Captain Yossarian proud. Clearly unable to fill its reserved quotas, the railways lay down rules for regularisation of promotions "by selection of SC/ST candidates through the 'scheme of best among the failed candidates'..."

The Supreme Court's March 20 ruling setting down tougher rules for arrest under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) (PoA) Act triggered violent protests. Home Minister Rajnath Singh condoled the deaths of rioters in clashes with the police, but did not condemn the damage to public and private property the riots caused. Willy-nilly, the Modi government now has to contend with a new battlefield in addition to Ayodhya, Aadhaar, bad banks and bad loans. The home minister told the Lok Sabha: "I wish to assure you that our government is fully committed to the welfare of SC/ST... I also wish to inform that there have been widespread rumours regarding the issue of reservation which are false and baseless."

I looked through official data to see how the PoA Act fares in our courts and at the hands of our police.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), there were a total of 40,801 crimes/atrocities against Scheduled Castes in 2016. More than a quarter of them were in Uttar Pradesh, followed by Bihar and Rajasthan. Charge-sheets were submitted in 31,042 cases. Police disposed of 39,590 cases (this included older pending cases). The charge-sheeting rate was 78.3%.

How did the courts fare in cases involving crimes or atrocities against Scheduled Castes? There were a total of 144,979 cases pending during 2016 (including older ones). Trials were completed in 14,615 cases; of these, 10,862 were acquitted or discharged, and the conviction rate was 25.7%. The pendency rate was a staggering 89.6%. At the end of 2016, a total of 129,831 cases were pending, up from 113,937 at the beginning of the year.

Let's look at the arrest and acquittal rate for individuals in 2016. A total of 76,998 people were arrested in 2016 on charges of violence against Scheduled Castes; 65,863 of them were charge-sheeted. Of these, 7,001 people were convicted, and 21,087 acquitted.

Indeed a witch's brew - which was the title of my first column in this newspaper.



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