

The Wages of Nationalism, And The Imperatives of Power

The Needle's Eye



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Most of us ordinary mortals allow our buttons to be pressed by the cleverer people around us. Look first at the trajectory of the crisis engulfing the Jawaharlal Nehru University, which stands in the dock as a den of anti-nationalism, Leftist and reactionary belief, sex, drugs, liquor and all that is morally and politically reprehensible. Look also at the chaos and violence exploding in the state of Haryana over the issue of counting the influential and powerful Jat community among the Other Backward Classes. Go a little further back to the January suicide of Dalit student Rohith Vemula in Hyderabad University.

If you connect these dots the line leads inexorably to political power, elections, and the desire to frame the political discourse in the flammable brackets of caste and patriotism.

To be clear, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party is not pioneering new technologies of political control. In March 2014, two months before Prime Minister Narendra Modi was swept to power, the previous Congress government pressed both the caste and patriotism buttons. It charged 10 Kashmiri students at the Swami Vivekanand Subharti University in Meerut of sedition for shouting pro-Pakistan slogans during an India-Pakistan cricket match. The same month, just before the 2014 general election dates were announced, the central government announced that Jats would be included in OBC quotas. That blatantly and recklessly populist step was struck down by the Supreme Court a year later, but the Jats had smelled blood, and quite a bit of it has been

spilled since the latest Jat quota unrest exploded earlier this month.

Caste politics is a tinderbox, and like religion, it can play a useful role in mobilising and manipulating mass anger to swing votes.

Nationalism is another hot-button topic. Vemula's suicide, which was nudged from nightly TV shriek shows by JNU and the Jats, melded caste and nationalism. In JNU, the nation's premier centrally-funded university, the ferocity of the nationalist assault has unleashed a tidal wave of global protest. Whether it is JNU Students Union President Kanhaiya Kumar's arrest on sedition charges, the pursuit, siege and arrest of two other students, the bra-

IS IT A REAL THREAT?



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zen brutality of partisan lawyers, or the gleeful and unchecked crudeness and fury of BJP lawmakers, you have got to ask – to what end?

There are a few straws in the wind. First the fast-approaching assembly elections in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry. In Assam, the BJP has the best chance of wresting power from the Congress, which has ruled the north-eastern state for 15 years, if it finds the right alliance partner

and parlays religion and nationalism dexterously. Both in Assam and in West Bengal – where the BJP has less hope of toppling the incumbent Trinamool Congress government led by Mamata Banerjee, the BJP will trumpet the issue of illegal immigration by Bangladeshi Muslims.

Second, as the BJP is discovering, betting too heavily on caste caused it to lose badly in Bihar, and betting too heavily on religion has led to polarisation in Uttar Pradesh, which goes to the polls a year from now. Stirring the communal pot in UP's Muzaffarnagar region and concocting the 'ghar wapsi' and 'love jihad' bogeys helped the BJP win as many as 71 of UP's 80 parliamentary seats in 2014's shock results. In three key by-elections to the UP state assembly earlier this month, the BJP discovered that polarisation has its limits, too. All three seats, held by UP's ruling Samajwadi Party, fell vacant when their holders died. The BJP snatched Muzaffarnagar, but the Congress, long considered a spent force, won the Muslim-dominated constituency of Deoband, home to the Darul Uloom seminary. Worse still, the SP retained Bikanpur, just 25 km from Ayodhya where the BJP is going strong on building a temple to Lord Rama. The BJP came in a weak third in Bikanpur, a paltry 76 votes ahead of the upstart Muslim party Majlis-e-Ittehad ul Muslimeen.

The caste factor in Uttar Pradesh is not going to be easy either. The Samajwadi Party could well be uprooted next year, but by the Bahujan Samaj Party led by former chief

minister Mayawati, who is India's most prominent Dalit leader. As if to underline this, parliament's upper house, on the first day of the Budget session on Wednesday, was stymied by a full-throated fight between Mayawati and education minister Smriti Irani, who now has two rebellious universities on her hands.

So neither religion nor caste are proving to be sure-fire winners. Ergo, nationalism.

Nationalism cuts across caste, creed, language and religion. Every patriotic Indian feels strongly about the security of the nation. Never mind that Article 19(2) of the Constitution deliberately excludes the word 'sedition' from reasonable

restrictions that the State can place on freedom of speech.

Note that some of India's most repressive laws, even if modified after independence, were put in place by British colonial rulers in the immediate years after the 1857 mutiny (or the first war of independence, depending on your political stripe). Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code, under which recent governments have merrily slapped sedition charges, dates back to 1870.

During the Constituent Assembly debates, many senior Indian politicians spoke out strongly against perpetuating the British law of sedition, which was used against leaders of the freedom movement like

Mahatma Gandhi. In a debate on December 2, 1948, M.

Ananthasayanam Ayyangar stressed the importance of Article 13(2) which confers fundamental rights of speech and expression:

"The word 'sedition' has become obnoxious in the previous regime. We had therefore approved of the amendment that the word 'sedition' ought to be removed, except in cases where the entire state itself is sought to be overthrown or undermined by force or otherwise, leading to public disorder; but any attack on the government itself ought not to be made an offence under the law," Ayyangar said.

Is our State in danger of being overthrown by a few slogan-shouting students? Last Sunday the prime minister, speaking in the (non-BJP ruled) state of Odisha to a crowd of farm workers, talked of conspiracies. Talking of coating urea with neem (azadirachta indica) so it wouldn't be stolen and used only as fertiliser, Modi suddenly veered off at a tangent.

"Brothers and sisters, morning and night there is a storm around me... people can't digest that Modi is prime minister," he said to cheers. "Earlier, NGOs (non-governmental organisations) used to get funds from abroad. I told them, show us your accounts. They all got together and chanted 'kill Modi, kill Modi'.... Morning and night they conspire: how to finish Modi, how to remove the Modi government, how to insult Modi," he said, adding that he had been elected to change the nation and he would not be deterred by challenges. Let us hope not.



ANIRBAN

