

“Go Write on the Walls That You Are the Rulers of This Nation”: Dalit Mobilization and the BJP

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ABSTRACT

The electoral success of the BJP in 2014 was hailed as the triumph of development over identity. The party seemingly reached beyond their traditional constituency and appealed to Dalit voters through an aspirational campaign. This tallies with arguments that electoral logic determines that the BJP will pursue a path of moderation. The past two years, however, have seen a significant increase in Dalit assertion and mobilization in opposition to the BJP. This paper takes these two trends to raise to inter-related questions: firstly, it questions the extent to which the BJP has moderated its attitudes toward Dalit citizens and secondly, it asks whether Dalit politics has indeed moved from identity to development. The paper draws on a range of secondary sources to argue that BJP moderation is delimited and that critiques of Dalit identity politics obscure both the identitarian strategies of other parties and the materiality of identity-based mobilization.

Keywords: Dalit Movements; BJP; Politics; Hindutva; Caste; Identity Politics; Development

“Vayan a escribir en las paredes que ustedes son los que gobiernan esta nación”: La movilización Dalit y el BJP

RESUMEN

El éxito electoral del BJP en 2014 fue aclamado como el triunfo del desarrollo sobre la identidad. Aparentemente, el partido llegó más allá de su distrito electoral tradicional y atrajo a los votantes de Dalit a través de una campaña de aspiraciones. Esto coincide con los argumentos de que la lógica electoral determina que el BJP seguirá un camino de moderación. Los últimos dos años, sin embargo, han visto un aumento significativo en la afirmación y movilización de Dalit en oposición al BJP. Este documento toma estas dos tendencias para hacer preguntas interrelacionadas: primero cuestiona hasta qué punto el BJP ha moderado sus actitudes concernientes a los ciudadanos Dalit y segundo, pregunta si las políticas de Dalit han en realidad mutado de la identidad al desarrollo. El documento se basa en una serie de fuentes secundarias para argumentar que la moderación del BJP está delimitada y que las críticas a la política de identidad de Dalit ocultan las estrategias identitarias de otros partidos y la materialidad de la movilización basada en la identidad.

Palabras clave: movimientos Dalit; BJP; política; Hindutva; Casta; políticas de identidad; desarrollo

在墙上写下“你是一国之主”这句话： 达利特人的动员和印度人民党

摘要

印度人民党在2014年大选中获胜一事被称为“发展战胜身份认同”的胜利。该党似乎不仅获得了其传统的选民支持，还通过激昂的竞选吸引了达利特选民。这与选民逻辑决定人民党将采取温和做法的论点一致。然而过去两年间，达利特人民声称并动员反对人民党的情况显著增加。本文就这两种趋势提出了几个相互联系的问题：首先，本文提出疑问——人民党在多大程度上缓和了其对待达利特公民的态度？其次，达利特政治是否真正从身份认同过渡到了发展？通过使用一系

列二次文献，本文主张，人民党的缓和之策被划定了界限，同时针对达利特身份认同的政治批判模糊了两个概念，一个是其他党派的身份认同策略，另一个是基于身份认同的动员实质性。

关键词：达利特运动，印度人民党，政治，印度教民族主义，种姓制度，身份认同政治，发展

Introduction¹

On April 2, 2018, Dalits across India took to the streets in, sometimes violent, protests triggered by a Supreme Court order that threatened to dilute the provisions of protective legislation. Loosely coordinated around the call for a *Bharat Bandh* (India Blockade), Dalits blocked roads and railways, took to the streets, and placed their demands center-stage.² This widespread and passionate uprising may be puzzling to some observers. After all, the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) success in the 2014 elections, especially in Uttar Pradesh, was hailed as signaling the *end* of identity or ethnic politics. Dalits were said to have rejected the Dalit-led Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in favor of the promise of development, epitomized in the figure of Narendra Modi who rose from tea-seller to Prime Minister. As Irschick put it: “The BJP, which won only ten seats in [Uttar Pradesh in] 2009, got 71 out of 83 seats in 2014, entirely demolishing the Dalit and Backward Classes base of the BSP. What we are suggesting is that ... identity politics largely disappeared. Although ... Narendra Modi spoke in

somewhat communal terms, his main goal was to articulate a strong development program.”³ The increased acceptance of the BJP among Dalits was reinforced when three prominent Dalit leaders—Ramdas Athwale, Ram Vilas Paswan, and Udit Raj—joined the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). If this suggests that the BJP has finally shed its characterization as an upper-caste party and reached out to Dalits, subsequent developments indicate that this process remains uncertain and incomplete. Furthermore, we suggest that the framing of BJP as a political party of “development” and BSP as one of “identity” could be a hurried conflation. Identity may indeed be latent in the development claims and promises of the BJP.

Mass Dalit mobilization in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat suggests that the obituaries for Dalit assertion and politics were premature. This paper offers an analysis of Dalit politics under the BJP Government since 2014. It is important to emphasize from the outset that Dalits are not a homogenous category as they encompass a variety of identities, politics, and demands. It is

increased Ambedkarization among the Scheduled Castes that could generate consciousness and lend coherence to the national Dalit category. However, Ambedkarization varies across regions and states, and such politicization of “untouchable castes” too is an ongoing process. It is, thus, important to note regional variations in India that inform various localized political repertoires even though this paper focuses on national-level developments. This paper sets out to address two inter-related questions. The first builds on Mitra’s⁴ analysis of the BJP in office. He suggests that the party has undergone a process of “ambivalent moderation,” reaching out to new constituencies and issues even as they retain commitment to the *Hindutva* project. In this paper, we explore the extent to which the BJP has moderated its stance toward Dalits. Secondly, we ask whether Dalit politics can be said to have undergone a shift from identity to development and more material, “mainstream” concerns. While it is impossible to capture this diversity in one short paper, we focus in on a number of key issues and debates that speak to the interplay between the BJP, caste, and Dalit mobilization since the 2014 elections. We begin, though, with a brief overview of how the BJP has been perceived and the process of transformation it has undertaken to reach out to a wider constituency.

The Mandalization of the BJP

The BJP was formed in 1980 out of the remnants of the Jana Sangh. It is an avowedly Hindu nation-

alist organization and “has no doubt about Hindu identity and culture being the mainstay of the Indian nation and of Indian society.”⁵ It is the most prominent member of the “Sangh Parivar” and closely associated with the Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh (RSS) (National Volunteer Association). The Sangh Parivar (Family of Organizations) refers to the densely inter-networked groups of institutions committed to Hindu nationalism. In the words of the ideological inspiration behind Hindu nationalism, a Hindu is the one who “regards this land ... from the Indus to the Seas as his fatherland as well as his Holy land.”⁶ Crucially for our purposes, this definition does two things. Firstly, it includes other religious groups that emerged on the Indian subcontinent: Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists. Religious groups that arose, in part, as critiques of the Hindu caste order, thus, are encompassed in the broader pantheon of Hindu nationalism. Secondly, the definition glosses over and eludes the deep divisions of caste, language, and ethnicity.

Despite this attempt to create a united Hindu identity in opposition to religions that do not view India as their holyland, the BJP has long been regarded as a party of the Hindi-speaking upper-castes. Jaffrelot argues that this stems from the close association between *Hindutva* ideology and a Brahminical view of caste as harmonious and interdependent.⁷ The upper-caste character of the party was to the fore in 1990, when the RSS mouthpiece—*The Organiser*—condemned the V.P. Singh Government for endorsing the Mandal Commission recommendations that

reservations of government jobs and university places should be extended to the “Other Backward Castes.”⁸ Jaffrelot notes how the RSS sought to delegitimize reservations by campaigning against untouchability and providing welfare and tuition to Dalits. The aim here, he argues, was “to divert the Dalits, who are naturally appreciative of charitable work, away from egalitarian ideologies and to assimilate them into a ‘Hindu nation.’”⁹ In its early years, the BJP also sought to combat the issue of Mandal (extension of democratic rights and privileges to lower castes) with mobilization around Mandir (attempts to replace a mosque in Ayodhya with a temple). This communal mobilization “tried to subsume all castes, including the Dalits, into one vast Hindu vote-bank.”¹⁰

As Basu notes, elections fought on an overtly communal platform “revealed a lack of popular support for Hindutva.”¹¹ In response to electoral setbacks, the BJP sought to affirm its “secular” credentials¹² both in its manifesto and in alliances with political parties of the lower castes. Jaffrelot refers to this latter process as “indirect mandalisation,” but in the late 1990s, he argues that the BJP adopted “a more direct brand of mandalisation, inducting a growing number of lower-caste cadres in the party executive committees.”¹³ Opinion is largely divided over the autonomy of lower-caste BJP leaders, the incorporation of these leaders is clearly a response to lower-caste assertion and political engagement, and raises questions about the moderating effects of participation in electoral pol-

itics.¹⁴ While Basu notes how this process prompted an intra-party backlash which resulted in the RSS increasing “its control over the party,” it is telling that these internal conflicts have not reversed the mandalization of the BJP.¹⁵ While communal polarization has remained central to BJP campaigns,¹⁶ it has gone alongside the incorporation and elevation of lower-caste figures in the party. Indeed, the mandalization of the BJP was seemingly completed in 2014 when it won an electoral majority with a Backward Caste (but not lower) Prime Ministerial Candidate and a sizeable number of Dalit votes.¹⁷ As Ramaseshan observed, Modi’s caste background was placed front and center of the campaign to woo OBC votes.¹⁸ Does this mean that the BJP has succeeded in replacing “*Hindutva* with *vikasvad* (development)?”¹⁹ We will explore this later, but suffice to say that voting in elections is heavily influenced by local concerns of identity, ideology and patronage, anti-incumbency, welfare promises, and the past experience of pledge-fulfillments. While the BJP may continue to emphasize development, latent in its appeal is the reassured confidence of the upper castes in its ideological commitment toward nationalist Hinduism.

The BJP and Dalits

The main plank of the BJP’s 2014 election was the promise of “development” and in the first budget of the NDA, there was an increase in expenditure dedicated to Scheduled Castes from the previous year. Outlay

dipped significantly in the following two years before recovering somewhat in 2017. Crucially, in none of the years did expenditure meet the minimum quantitative norm laid out in the Special Component Plan (Krishnan, email communication).²⁰ The performance of the BJP government is not much different from that of other governments in this regard. Another concrete promise in the BJP manifesto was to fast-track the elimination of manual scavenging—the degrading practice of manually cleaning human excreta from sewers, toilets, and drains. There has also been a move to bring more Dalit leaders into the NDA if not the BJP. This is a significant move, since what marginalized groups often demand from political parties is greater representation.²¹

Kanshi Ram—the founder of the BSP famously described Dalit politicians in established parties as “chamchas” or stooges. More recently, Uma Bharti, the firebrand OBC leader of the BJP, argued that “BJP OBC candidates have an upper-caste mentality.”²² Given this, and the party’s initial opposition to reservations, it is important to ask whether the changing face of the BJP is anything more than tokenism. In other words, does the party manifesto reflect a commitment to the lower castes, especially Dalits, or are they simply standing a more diverse array of candidates in order to *seem* more inclusive? Gaining more leaders from the lower castes has helped the party to shed its upper-caste image, but “till now, Dalits have not been given any crucial role under the BJP and RSS leadership.”²³ The BJP may have gained more leaders from among

OBCs and Dalits, but power continues to elude them after the formation of the government.

Despite emphasis on Modi’s OBC background, the upper castes again rule the roost in his cabinet, including Brahmins, Rajputs, Kayasthas, Vaishyas and dominant or “forward” communities like Lingayats, Vokkaligas and Marathas, who account for 20 of the 46 ministerial berths. OBCs have 13 representatives, tribals six and dalits three. Among the 24 Cabinet members (including Modi), 12 are upper upper caste, five OBC, two dalit and one a tribal. With just three is the entire council, they (Dalits) have a mere 7% of berths, compared to a share of about 15–16% in the country’s population.²⁴

Similarly, the return of BJP to power in Uttar Pradesh assembly meant little for OBC and more particularly Dalits. In UP, the number of upper caste MLAs grew to “44.3%, 12 percentage points more than in 2012, and the highest share in UP Assemblies since 1980.”²⁵ In other words, for all the critiques of identity-politics, the induction of Dalit leaders of the present into the NDA appears like an extension of such politics in which Dalit figures are afforded recognition on the basis of *who* they are rather than what they stand for. This is further seen in the BJP’s increased recognition of “Dalit” heroes and icons. Narayan argues that the BJP’s success in 2014 was the result of a long-term strategy aimed at winning over Dalits.²⁶

Narayan contends that the BJP adopted a dual strategy; on one hand “accommodating leaders” as mentioned above, and on the other, “appropriating cultural symbols and folk icons popular in Dalit oral traditions and ... imbuing them with a saffron tinge.”²⁷ Such strategies play on the desire by Dalits to gain recognition and acceptance. Crucially, these local heroes are woven into communalized narratives that blame Muslims for the deprivations faced by Dalits and “reinterpret the Dalit past as a Hindu past.”²⁸ The celebration and re-interpretation of particular caste figures is closely linked to status concerns and fractures the fragile unity of Dalit politics.²⁹ Simultaneously, however, the BJP’s symbolic recognition of Dalit assertion pivots on Ambedkar, who is clearly a unifying figure for Dalit groups. While he was a figure of hate for the RSS in the post-Independence period, both for his championing of the Hindu Code Bill and for his promise to convert out of Hinduism, the mouthpiece of the group, *The Organiser* signaled a change in tune in April 2016 when its front cover proclaimed Ambedkar to be the “great unifier.”³⁰ Modi has praised Ambedkar as a global figure on a par with Martin Luther King, and the BJP have invested in memorials to Ambedkar in Delhi, London, and Mumbai.³¹ The Government also re-printed Ambedkar’s writings and speeches.

Can we conclude from all of these that the BJP has undergone not only a process of Mandalization, but of Dalitization too? The celebration of the first law minister of India and the man who oversaw the writing of the Constitution

should not be seen through the prism of caste, but unfortunately Ambedkar has tended to be pigeonholed as a Dalit rather than national leader, and political parties have used his image to woo Dalit voters.³² It is also true that the BJP have not always been receptive to the idea of Ambedkar as a national icon. For example, BJP politician Arun Shourie’s critique—*Worshipping False Gods*—is perhaps the best-known polemic against Ambedkar.³³ The PM paying homage to Ambedkar and acknowledging his contribution does not necessarily mean that Ambedkar has finally received full recognition. Recognition without new gains, as Gamson reminds us, constitutes co-option.³⁴ Let us take a look at the BJP’s other actions, statements, and policies to assess where it stands.

Such symbolic recognition is accompanied with occasional efforts from the RSS to “challenge” caste barriers, emphasizing sympathy across castes and more particularly toward Dalits.³⁵ While the RSS is close to the religious sentiments of caste Hindus, it is also attempting to distinguish between caste sentiments and Hindu sentiments, constructing the latter as a nationalist sentiment. Increasingly, “Hindutva is only marginally interested in the forms of worship and almost not at all in metaphysical concerns as the religious justification of the caste hierarchy; it is interested in the strength and unity of Hindus.”³⁶ Of note, is therefore the new-found and trenchant defense of reservations by the Prime Minister—though RSS spokesmen have called for revision of reservation policy as recently as Jan-

uary 2017.³⁷ The perception is that the reservation policy is only fully accepted by the Mandalized sections of the party. What though of the commitment to end manual scavenging? Despite including this in the manifesto, “Modi’s vision”³⁸ is devoid of any reference to social justice, and the death of seven manual scavengers in seven days in the first two days of 2018 prompted no outcry from the Government.³⁹ In 2009, Modi told such workers that: “A priest cleans a temple every day before prayers, you also clean the city like a temple. You and the temple priest work alike.”⁴⁰ Although much has changed for Modi since 2014, the failure of the Gujarat model to address manual scavenging allied to such assertions invites skepticism surrounding the Government’s commitment.⁴¹

The track record of the BJP in meeting development-related promises has also come under scrutiny. In 2018, Mohammad found that: “Government departments and central public sector undertakings (PSUs) have procured just 0.37% of their requirement of goods and services from Scheduled caste (SC) and Scheduled tribe (ST) suppliers as at the end of March 2017, against the stipulated annual quota of 4%.”⁴² The BJP model of “development,” thus, appears to be caste-blind. The dramatic implementation of demonetization illustrates this trend. Guerin et al. note how Dalits were disproportionately numbered among borrowers rather than lenders and experienced severe hardships as cash flows were interrupted.⁴³ As they conclude: “Demonetisation of November 2016 was supposed to contribute to the formalisation of the Indian econo-

my, which in turn was expected to benefit the poor. However, as no extra effort was put into formal social protection, the policy mostly caused a rise in the informal economy, especially—but not only—informal debt. Indeed, historical forms of inequality in Indian society have probably been reinforced.”

Finally, consider the following: The Ambedkar Foundation, which is the Government of India body responsible for publishing Ambedkar’s writings and speeches in Hindi produced a “Collected Works” edition that omitted several key works including *Annihilation of Caste* and *Riddles in Hinduism*.⁴⁴ The suggestion is that Ambedkar is being appropriated and rendered acceptable for a Hindu audience. This raises question marks over the extent to which electoral participation has diluted the BJP agenda and, as Ganguly notes, “indicates that the BJP has hardly abandoned its agenda of cultural nationalism.”⁴⁵ BJP–Dalit relations, thus, continue to be uncertain, riddled with contradictions, and subject to changes of direction. In what follows, we unpack some of these contradictions by reference to a number of controversies and policy debates that have arisen during the tenure of the current Government.

Dalits and the Beef Ban

The sacral purity of cows and the extreme impurity of the untouchables as beef eaters, continue to co-constitute the hierarchical whole of caste in the imaginaries of caste Hindus, particularly in north India. While the BJP increasingly em-

phasizes the scientific aspects of cow protection, the popular caste Hindu sentiment on cows and their sacrality are largely religious. Does this point to a disjunction between the popular caste sentiment on the sacrality of cow and the way BJP understands it? As Basu notes, the imposition of bans (sometimes partial) on cow slaughter and the sale of beef has been central to the BJP policy in states where it has assumed power since the early 1990s.⁴⁶ This is, Basu argues, one of the issues on which the BJP has “collaborated closely with the RSS and the VHP in pursuing Hindu nationalist goals.”⁴⁷ Such bans have denied Dalits and Muslims access to affordable meat and income from leather-related work and have also resulted in violence against those suspected of killing cows. Given the prominence of this issue for BJP state governments, it should come as no surprise that the NDA sought to implement these policies more widely. In the section of the BJP 2014 Election manifesto devoted to “cultural heritage,” the party promised that:

In view of the contribution of cow and its progeny to agriculture, socio-economic and cultural life of our country, the Department of Animal Husbandry will be suitably strengthened and empowered for the protection and promotion of cow and its progeny.⁴⁸

While the BJP increasingly emphasizes scientific reasons, compassion, and constitutional modes for cow protection, encapsulated here is the BJP’s

exclusion of Muslim citizens and its ambivalent relationship toward Dalits. The communalization of politics has long been viewed as a means of securing Dalit support.⁴⁹ Dalits are not wooed unconditionally, however, but are to be welcomed into the party on condition that they abandon beef-eating and leather work. Such concerns are, of course, deeply political as seen in the contrasting BJP electoral campaigns in Uttar Pradesh—where Amit Shah declared that *all* slaughterhouses would be shut—and the North-East—where voters were informed that no beef bans would be imposed.⁵⁰ If this variation demonstrates the BJP’s attempts to grow beyond its heartlands, the repeated emphasis on cow protection testifies to its regional powerbase. Natrajan and Jacob highlight substantial regional differences in meat (including beef) eating, which map onto the traditional strongholds of the party.⁵¹ They note how caste and income help explain incidence of vegetarianism.⁵² Arun,⁵³ Waghmore,⁵⁴ and Natrajan⁵⁵ observe that not only is beef a cheap source of protein, it has become a key part of the identity of assertive Dalit groups. It is partly for this reason that Dalit leaders have periodically insisted that they are “not Hindu.”⁵⁶

Cow protection as a strategy for unifying Hindus, therefore, is deeply flawed. In January 2018, the overly politicized conflation between beef-eating and communalism was made transparent in Telangana when a vigilante mob disrupted a Dalit feast reportedly asking: “Are you Muslims to eat cow meat?”⁵⁷ If the BJP views cow protec-

tion as part of a communal agenda, the discourse around the mother cow has stirred up passions that have been hard to contain and have adversely affected Dalits as well as Muslims. In July 2016, thus, in the village of Una in Gujarat, four Dalit men who were skinning the carcass of a dead cow were set upon by self-proclaimed *gau-rakshaks* (cow protectors) who publicly thrashed the men and circulated videos online.⁵⁸ One of the more prominent immediate responses came from a BJP legislator who opined that the Dalits had been “taught an appropriate lesson.”⁵⁹ Desai and Roy note how the BJP in Gujarat sought to shift the divisions over caste to religion by uniting “upper-castes, Dalits and Advaitis against Muslims.”⁶⁰ Una fractured that alliance, as Giri argues, and led to a “militant refusal by Dalits to carry out the so-called traditional occupation of skinning and lifting dead animals.⁶¹ This meant the focus of the Una uprising was not really on the ‘material basis of caste’ or on demanding land, but on exposing the casteist basis of society as a whole.” While BJP and RSS may emphasize sympathy and consideration toward marginal castes, ideas such as those of cow protection construct practical challenges for the project of Hindu consolidation. Furthermore, BJP’s coming to power also leads to increased violence against Dalits as the anti-Dalit sentiments seem to find ideological backing from state.

Dalit assertion has not been confined to Gujarat or cow sacrality therefore. In Uttar Pradesh, the trigger was not cow protection, but had a similar genesis in the over-bearing actions of

Other Backward Castes emboldened and given license by the election of a party, they saw as their own. In Uttar Pradesh, disputes over a sign-board unashamedly celebrating Chamars and a procession around Ambedkar’s birthday brought a local movement, focused on fighting atrocities and providing tuition, to prominence. Chandrasekhar, the leader of the Bhim Army (Bhim by reference to Bhimrao Ambedkar), explicitly flagged up his disillusionment with BJP strategies, and the partial nature of BJP moderation, in noting: “Whenever there was a Muslim–Dalit clash, the ABVP [*Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad*—All India Student Council, the BJP student wing] was always there. But when it came to violence by upper-caste Hindus, the ABVP was nowhere to be seen.”⁶² While rooted in local concerns, the activists were tied into broader networks and debates and cited concerns over the atrocities in Gujarat and elsewhere, testifying to the growth and spread of a virtual Dalit counter-public or network.⁶³ In their study of voters in Gujarat, Desai and Roy found “no clear evidence of a resistant subaltern consciousness” and noted how Dalits remained ambivalent toward the BJP—cautiously buying into narratives around security and development despite anger over persistent discrimination.⁶⁴ Rather than Dalit politicians, we would argue that the actions of caste-Hindus in Una and elsewhere, and the tacit condoning of caste violence by those in power, have fractured the prevailing narrative by placing caste concerns front and center of Dalit politics.

Contested Pasts, Contentious Presents

The ever-present tensions between the different constituencies that the BJP seeks to weave together as “Hindu” were further deepened and foregrounded in January 2018 during Dalit commemorations at Bhima Koregaon. The events capture how the politics of the BJP have changed caste dynamics and relations in key ways. As Kumbhojkar notes, the obelisk standing at Koregaon is an odd artifact to create a furore.⁶⁵ Erected in the 1800s, it marks the site of a fierce battle between high-caste Peshwa forces and an outnumbered British East India Company battalion. Significantly, the British forces included a number of Mahars in its ranks. The memorial has, thus, become central to the Dalit calendar. Indeed,

among the neo-Buddhists in western India, the pilgrimage to the Koregaon memorial emerged as one of the invented cultural practices and thousands of them throng to the memorial every New Year day to commemorate the valour of the Mahars who helped to overthrow the unjust high-caste rule of the Peshwa. They also commemorate Ambedkar’s visit to the place on 1 January 1927.⁶⁶

While the disruption to traffic caused by the celebrations was seen as an annoyance, Kumbhojkar’s piece, written in 2012 describes an out-of-the-way invented tradition⁶⁷ celebrating the

valor and bravery of Mahars. There is no indication, in that paper, of the controversy that it sparked in 2018 when those paying homage at the site were attacked by members of right-wing Hindu groups supported by local dominant castes. The violence unleashed in the village generated a wave of protests that brought Mumbai to a standstill.⁶⁸ Two key differences marked the event in 2018. Firstly, the numbers attending the memorial were exponentially larger than usual as this year marked the bicentenary of the battle and numerous organizations sought to mark the occasion in style. The second key difference, as Ingole sardonically notes, is that “91 years after Babasaheb Ambedkar declared it a symbol of Mahar valour and 73 years after independence from the British, Hindu nationalists have realised that the obelisk is in fact a symbol of British conquest. And that, celebrating ‘anything’ to do with it is an anti-national act.”⁶⁹

That said, the attacks must be contextualized against a discourse of caste-Kshatriyahood, and its masculine undertone. Such discourses are not only inward-looking, they are key to the hierarchical nature of caste. The supposedly warrior castes such as the Rajputs claim valorous pasts to aggressively engineer caste. In Maharashtra, vehicles of the Marathas regularly carry the symbol of Raje (king), often written in saffron with a sword, to go with pejorative commands like *Bagtos Kai Mujara Kar* (Salute! What are you looking at), and slogans like *Jai Shiva-ji Jai Bhavani*.⁷⁰ The Dalits’ claim of the victory against the Peshwas in Bhima

Koregaon challenges this caste-based and myth-infused discourse of warriorhood. That this claim was not entirely based on myth complicates the contemporary telling of a linear Hindu history of patriotism and nationalism. For here, the martial past is invoked not as fighting in service of others or as a matter of caste pride, but as an anti-caste war that became possible only during colonial rule and generated newer possibilities of citizenship and nationhood. Such a narrative undermines the ideas of Hindu-Kshatriyahood and Hindu nationalism, meaning that an attack on the Dalit-celebration may have been impending.

If the beef-ban began to problematize the category of “Hindus” that are the subject of Hindutva politics, the repeated tendency of BJP affiliates to “speak for the nation” further fragments the constituency that they claim to represent. While Dalit groups marked and celebrated the courage and valor of Mahar soldiers in the battle, members of Hindu-right groups mobilized to attack the event.⁷¹ Some sympathetic commentators have critiqued the Dalit focus on a “mythical past” in that no Dalit consciousness existed at that time,⁷² but the violence against the event generated an upsurge that has contested the charge of anti-nationalism and “exposed the hypocrisy of the homogeneous Hindu narrative.”⁷³ In doing so, Dalit movements have challenged dominant historical accounts from which they are excluded, and highlighted the superficial nature of their political inclusion. Indeed, following the protests that affected all of Ma-

harashtra, several young Dalit workers and protestors were arrested by the police across Maharashtra. It is the actions of authorities here, and elsewhere, in other words, that have served to politicize Dalit identity. Dalits embracing a Hinduized past have been embraced, as seen above, but those seeking to reclaim a history of agency and activism of their own have been cast as seditious subjects to be controlled and subdued.

Silencing Students and Campus Revolts

Sedition charges also feature prominently in sustained campaigns against student activism and politics which have generated contentious debates around freedom of speech and “anti-nationalism.” Since the BJP assumed office, its emboldened student wing, the ABVP has taken issue with, and sought to contest, student dissent. In 2015, the Ambedkar–Periyar Study Circle at IIT Madras was banned by the administration following intervention from the Ministry of Human Resources. The Ministry was acting on an anonymous letter accusing the group of polarizing students and creating hatred against Narendra Modi, and the University hierarchy implemented the ban without discussing the matter with the students in question.⁷⁴ A number of study circles sprang up around the country in solidarity and protest and the ban was eventually revoked, but a template of Government intervention and University compliance was established.

A similar pattern was witnessed in the University of Hyderabad, where ABVP students took issue with the Ambedkar Student Association’s decision to screen a documentary on communal violence. Following altercations and vitriolic online exchanges, an ABVP student was forced to apologize, but BJP Ministers intervened at this point accusing the Ambedkar Association of being “casteist, extremist and anti-national.”⁷⁵ Responding to this pressure, Hyderabad Vice-Chancellor Appa Rao suspended five student leaders of the ASA without due process and in flagrant breach of an earlier ruling that had cleared them.⁷⁶ Locked out of their rooms, denied the dream of an education and faced by the prospect of disciplinary action, one of the five leaders committed suicide. As an Open Letter by academics across the globe put it:

Unable to bear the despair of having his one chance at a future snatched from him, of his value being reduced, in his own eloquent parting words, to nothing but “a vote” and “an immediate identity,” he took his own life. As scholars we know that individual actions are never just that. This suicide is not an individual act. It is the failure of higher educational institutions in democratic India to meet their most basic obligation: to foster the intellectual and personal growth of India’s most vulnerable young people.⁷⁷

Similar attacks on student activists and labeling of groups as anti-na-

tional have disrupted India’s premiere Universities. Student leaders from Jawaharlal Nehru University have been arrested and harassed for articulating dissent. In line with the above, passions have been inflamed by political interference. Meenakshi Lekhi, the BJP MP from Delhi, for example, demanded that JNU students should take an oath to “protect the country’s pride and nationality.”⁷⁸ Against this jaundiced view of external agitators, Martelli and Parkar conclude strongly, “JNU’s critical discourse (radical or not) is firmly compatible with a liberal and secular India which should revel in the diverse voices on university campuses.”⁷⁹ In a strongly worded editorial in March 2018, *Economic and Political Weekly* condemned the attack on public universities and insisted that “if questioning government action is ‘anti-nationalism,’ universities must wear this as a badge of honour.”⁸⁰ The point being made here is that such institutions should be sites of critique and inquiry. While Mitra argued that the BJP had “not unleashed a full-scale cultural war in sensitive areas ... like education,”⁸¹ there has since been a tendency to appoint supporters into senior University positions.⁸²

The upshot of such partisan interventions was that Rohith Vemula was not only driven to take his own life but was not afforded dignity in death either. Rohith, who poignantly observed that his birth into a low caste “was a fatal accident,”⁸³ was denied recognition even in death when the one-member judicial commission set up by Union Minister of Human Resource Development Smriti Irani, disregarded exist-

ing evidence to rule that he was “not a Dalit.”⁸⁴ Rohith was born to parents of different castes and yet, having been brought up by his Dalit mother in a Dalit colony, there was no controversy about his status until it was stirred up by BJP politicians.⁸⁵ The result of this muddying of the waters, however, was to enable police to ignore the cases filed against University authorities under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Prevention of Atrocities Act.⁸⁶ It is to debates and controversies around this Act that we now turn.

Bharat Bandh: Defending Dalit Safeguards

In March 2018, a Supreme Court order condemned “misuse” of the Prevention of Atrocities Act for purposes of blackmail and sought to amend the provisions of the legislation. The order insisted that public servants should only be arrested under the Act with the approval of the appointing authority and that other arrests must be approved by a senior superintendent of police.⁸⁷ The Court produced no evidence to support its assertions about misuse, neglected numerous studies highlighting the problems Dalits have in getting cases registered and the shockingly low conviction rates, and proposed to vest discretionary power in the hands of senior bureaucrats and police officers who are, thereby, elevated into the position of judges. That such discretionary power might be abused and would often lie in the hands of those benefitting from caste privilege did not appear to trouble the justices.

Infuriated by this effort to dilute the Act, Dalit Government Ministers demanded a judicial review of the order⁸⁸ and Dalit groups across the country mobilized in protest for a *Bharat Bandh* (India Blockade) that witnessed marches, rallies, road and rail blockades across much of the country.⁸⁹ While the BJP Government responded to the protests by announcing that it would review the decision, Dalit politicians and groups saw the Government as at least enabling such judgments to arise. Indeed, BJP ally, Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party chief Om Prakash Rajbhar supported the ruling, “arguing that ‘innocent people’ were harassed.”⁹⁰ Kulkarni, the former aide to Atal Bihari Vajpayee but no longer in a political post, felt better able to articulate support for the court order observing that: “The merit of the ruling is self-evident to all unprejudiced and justice-loving observers.”⁹¹ He testifies to the wisdom of the proposed amendment by observing that Maratha rallies have demanded that the Act be scrapped, that 75% of cases result in acquittals or withdrawals and that “I have personally known several cases of the misuse of the Act.”⁹² He notes that in the cases of misuse that he encountered the accused were finally acquitted by the courts, but fails to note that the Act calls for fast-track courts, that Dalits struggle to get cases properly registered and often face counter-cases, and that the proposed amendments allow individuals to rule on arrests. Kulkarni bemoans the BJP’s embrace of expediency (Dalit votes) over principles in this case, adding weight to Dalit concerns and highlighting limits to the BJP’s process of political moderation.

In this light, the *Bharat Bandh* was most visible and saw most violent incidents in the BJP- controlled states. There were deaths of Dalit protestors, not surprisingly in Madhya Pradesh caste-Hindu civilians too fired at Dalit protestors along with police.⁹³ Interviews with participants highlighted that the anger on show reflected a host of different issues from explicit prejudice in the classroom to refusals to countenance Dalits as equals.⁹⁴ Just days before the Bandh, a groom to be in Uttar Pradesh approached the High Court to secure permission to ride a horse in a marriage procession through the town. Local police and Magistrates had repeatedly refused to endorse such action and suggested that he take routes that by-passed locally dominant Thakur homes. Facing Thakur anger and having had water supplies to their homes cut off, other Dalit villagers called for compromise noting that: “The Thakurs will not only punish them, they will punish us all. For them, we all are one.”⁹⁵ The prevalence of collective punishments against Dalits, perceived to be growing too big for their boots, makes a mockery of claims of “reverse-casteism” and reminds us that caste also rests on control of resources.⁹⁶ Without an appreciation of the material and the cultural, it is easy to dismiss the “empty symbolism” of Dalit identity politics, neglecting the fact that there is, as Rao puts it, “no easy distinction between the symbolic and the real in Dalit politics.”⁹⁷

Conclusion

As the reverberations from the *Bharath Bandh* continue to be felt around the nation, it is abundantly clear that a Government which assumed office on the promise of development has overseen an unprecedented wave of Dalit activism. Plastered to the wall in Bhim Army leader Chandrasekhar’s house is a slogan attributed to Ambedkar that reads: “Go write on the walls that you are the rulers of this nation.”⁹⁸ Tempting though it may be to read nationwide protests or the resounding victory of Jignesh Mevani in Gujarat as proof that the writing is on the wall, it is important to place such mobilization in context. If the assertive mobilization of the past few years has showcased Dalit assertion and refusal to accept indignities or political neglect, it has also revealed the continuing salience of caste prejudice⁹⁹ and power.¹⁰⁰ The BJP accommodation of Dalits in this light is akin to the “Hindu politeness” that Waghmore views as a hallmark of caste expression in contemporary India.¹⁰¹ The party embraces Dalits in rhetoric and theory,¹⁰² while maintaining a studious silence in the face of caste violence, and offering a critique of the violent “identity politics” of those articulating dissent. While the moderation of the BJP, in Mitra’s terms, remains decidedly ambivalent toward Dalits, increased violence against Dalits points to the popular upsurge of incivility backed by the “democratic” state.¹⁰³ The “fear” among the margins more particularly Dalits of losing constitutional safeguards and increasing vi-

olence has even resulted in Dalit leaders aligned with the BJP speaking against their party (Athawale, for example, spoke against the beef ban and arrests following Bhima Koregaon).

What though of the second question posed in the paper? Has Dalit politics moved beyond identity? Some astute commentators have discerned a sea-change in Dalit politics. Writing on the Gujarat elections in 2017, for example, Nigam argues: Mevani's "interest in the land question has been quite unique insofar as contemporary Dalit politics is concerned, for it is based on the recognition that while questions of identity and self-respect are important they cannot be ensured while remaining in the prison-house of what has come to be called 'identity' politics."¹⁰⁴ While not wishing to diminish the significance of Jignesh Mevani in Gujarat, we fear that some commentators have been swayed by their antipathy toward the BJP in their celebration of new directions in Dalit politics. It is important to note that numerous Dalit movements in the recent past have similarly raised demands for land and sought to create broad alliances.¹⁰⁵ That such formulations are hailed as a "new politics" should give us pause for thought. The differences in Mevani's politics, we contend, lie more in terms of context, location, and coverage rather than content or form. More analysis, we argue, should be afforded to why Dalit leaders are still raising calls for land, livelihood, dignity, and freedom from violence in 2018. Such an analysis requires us to cast a light on the hidden privileges of caste and operations of mainstream

politics. The scorn reserved for Dalit "identity politics" obscures the fact that social policy and mainstream parties have neglected and obscured the structuring effects of caste on the economy and on people's life chances.¹⁰⁶

It also glosses over the identitarian strategies of parties in power. With reference to the BJP, for example, Vajpeyi notes how "introducing 'Yoga Day' and 'Guru Day' to the official national calendar, funding three new Sanskrit universities, and implementing Sanskrit language teaching at the IITs should all be seen as parts of BJP's strategy to normalize majoritarian religious culture in civil and secular institutions."¹⁰⁷ Set against this, the notion that statues of Dalit leaders, protests around the Atrocities Act, or the defense of reservations "perpetuate caste" merely reinforces what Mosse terms the "invisibilisation of caste privilege."¹⁰⁸ The BJP rhetoric of development has proved to be hollow for Dalits, but the interplay between the party in government and Dalits across the country has made two issues quite clear: firstly, that the socio-political moderation of the BJP has limits, and secondly, that Dalit "identity politics" is as much, if not more, a response to socio-economic issues and caste symbolism practiced by others as it is a failure of political imagination. On the basis of the foregoing, it would seem that two conclusions appear clear: that Dalits will continue to hold politicians to account, and that the path to caste equity lies through sustained Dalit mobilization and will not arrive as the gift of political parties.

Notes

- 1 Acknowledgments: We are grateful to Neil De Votta for encouraging us to write this piece and to the anonymous referees at the journal for compelling us to strengthen and think through our argument. Versions and aspects of the paper were presented as an Ambedkar Lecture in Edinburgh and at the BASAS annual conference in 2018. We are indebted to participants for questions and comments on the paper.
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