

Opinion – How Formidable is the Rightward Shift in India?

Written by Ajay Gudavarthy

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AJAY GUDAVARTHY, APR 17 2021

How formidable is the transition to the Right in Indian politics? Is the pre-eminence of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India here to stay and will the Indian National Congress (INC or the Congress), leaning Centre or Centre-left, not revive and as some say might die a slow death?

The anti-colonial movement (from the 1920s to 1940s) was inclusive and attempted 'gradual revolution' that roughly meant an incremental social change in caste, economic inequalities, gendered practices and regional inequalities without radical transformation in any of the structures. One could read it as either too minimalist or conservative or as the best path India could have followed, given the diversity and being an underdeveloped nation. The nature of change initiated under the vision of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru made it possible to have a functional democracy, political freedoms, constitutional morality and universal adult franchise, with social democratic citizenship that was welfarist and inclusive. The nature of polity designed did not threaten the hold of the caste Hindu elites while allowing for slow and minimal change at the bottom of caste and class structure. Caste structure in India, akin to racism, is a rigid structure based on purity and pollution. It became the source of both misrecognition and mal distribution of resources, including basic access to water, land, and education among others. In fact, it was the tremendous social and economic gap that allowed for the hegemony of centrist politics. It was a caste Hindu liberalism and classist constitutionalism.

Five decades later, India was changed by the 1990s, with neoliberal reforms for faster growth and Other Backward Caste (OBC) reservations representing new aspirational social groups. Reservations in India is followed as a system of affirmative action where quotas are allotted, to certain groups considered as disadvantaged, in the educational sector and government jobs proportionate to the percentage in the population. Congress felt it could manage the new dynamics through faster growth and a more inclusive social process. It also kept welfarism, alongside neoliberalism. In fact, India witnessed more welfare but also greater inequalities. The new imagination also led to an exponential rise in subaltern (includes the OBCs, sections of the urban poor, landless agrarian labours, Dalits[1] and some sections of the Muslims) aspirations, wider spread of democratic imagination and greater assertion that possibly began to threaten the caste Hindus for the first time. It was visible in the changing equation and loosening caste hierarchies but great economic insecurity.

It was at this point that both the caste Hindus and subaltern groups moved away from the Congress. The elites felt the threat of growing subaltern castes and their assertion for a greater share in resources and it looked like the Congress and its social democratic vision will lead to further erosion of the hold of caste Hindus. Ironically, the subaltern castes felt short-changed by the Congress. The change was insufficient to meet the aspirations that the social democratic discourse of the Congress nurtured.

By the turn of the century, India needed a new vision that could again pull the elites together with the subaltern aspirations and this is where the Hindutva politics began to fill the space by assuring the caste Hindu elites the restoration of their 'lost' glory through 'Hinduisation' of the society. Elites perceived their interests in making India more Hindu. The subaltern castes were addressed through more representation, mobility in being included as Hindus, mobilising the latent anger through anti-elitist discourse and local cultural idiom and extra-institutional street

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mobilisation. Social elites felt safer in abandoning the transformative Constitutional vision, while the subaltern castes took succour in cultivated incivility and wanton breaking up of institutions that were always seen as havens of caste Hindu privileges.

The commonality of Hindu identity assured the caste Hindus, despite the shift of political leadership in the BJP to 'Shudra' (lower) castes, including Prime Minister Modi claiming to be a *pichada* (backward). Progressively, the BJP could be more inclusive in its leadership and political representation yet keeping a core Hindu identity that was essentially caste Hindu in its social character. Today, BJP's leaders can claim to be *Pichada*, without creating anxiety among the rest. They can afford to do much less in terms of 'social justice' but claim more aggressive rhetoric in favour of the subaltern castes, while the Congress might be more welfarist but cannot claim out of the fear of offending the rest. From Centrism, Congress has landed in No-ism. It is neither able to be more radical in shifting the power balance to the subaltern castes out of fear of being abandoned by the dominant elites, who might be a numerical minority but continue to be powerful in social and economic terms, nor is it able to convince the elites that its social democratic vision of the past is not so radical and the changes it proposes will remain to be minimalist as they were in the past. Paradoxically, the subaltern groups certainly see the changes Congress brought about as being minimalist and patronising and therefore began to perceive those changes more as 'adding insult to injury'.

Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party–Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh combine (both organisations are part of a larger conglomeration that often work together) began to propagate illegitimacy of the Congress kind of 'appeasement'. The misnomer of appeasement is a clear case where Muslims and other minorities received limited tangible benefits, yet in popular perception, it was seen as a major tilt of balance in favour of Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis (a collective term for the tribes of India, who are also considered as indigenous communities) that constituted the traditional social base of the Congress. BJP began with the support of the anxious caste Hindus and progressively included the already disgruntled subaltern castes, also by othering the Muslims. BJP devised the technique of allowing Dalits and OBCs to remain caste entities for the purpose of representation but become Hindus for the purpose of recognition.

The claim to a common Hindu identity allowed the BJP to offer more representation to subaltern castes, claim caste identities more openly, yet argue they are above 'jaat paat' (caste and community) and perpetrate violence against the Dalits and also promulgate a policy such as the Economically Weaker Section (EWS). EWS introduced affirmative action for the economically weak among the upper castes. These strategies at cross-purposes are changing the terms of inclusion. They are managing to create new aspirations and also keep those aspirations in waiting, and in abeyance. This game of the BJP-RSS combine will continue till a point a new imagination can break the impasse in a way that can bring radical change that may need the caste Hindus to be convinced of sharing power and resources and restore their faith in liberalism and its constitutional vision.

India's Congress is today at this juncture where they are unable to find an Archimedean point. The problem with Congress at large is that it is stuck within its rank and profile. The recent protest by the G23, a group of senior rebel leaders within the Congress that is essentially constituted by caste Hindus and is questioning the Gandhi family, is a symptom of the anxiety of caste Hindu leadership within the Congress. While the Congress has barely made any major shift in its leadership to include more Dalits and those from backward castes. In this sense, the journey of the Congress and the future of India are tied together.

Note

[1] Dalits were previously considered untouchables and now are the scheduled caste

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