

India: Maharashtra VBA is an electoralist 'Alliance of the Excluded.'

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When the two national parties are trying to reduce the 2019 elections to secularism vs nationalism, the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi is adopting a 'secularism plus' approach in politics.

The Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi's (VBA) decision to contest the Lok Sabha elections without an alliance with the Congress attracted a lot of media attention. Both print and online media were flooded with articles aimed at Prakash Ambedkar, [pleading him to see](#) the 'larger picture' and to not divide 'secular votes.'

However, reducing the debate around the VBA to the question of 'division of secular votes' is utterly reductionist and myopic, completely ignoring the alternative political imagination that is inherent to the party.

Though the VBA is popularly understood as a product of Dalit-plus politics, the first step towards its creation was taken not by Dalits, but by the Dhangars, a pastoral community in Maharashtra. The Dhangars, who were wooed by the BJP in 2014 with the promise of including them in the 'Scheduled Tribe' list, felt betrayed as this promise remained unfulfilled, even as the 2019 general elections were approaching.

Already exasperated by the politics of the Congress-NCP, the Dhangars saw in Prakash Ambedkar a leader who could fulfil their political aspirations as well as their dream to see their community become socio-economically empowered.

After the Bhima Koregaon violence against Dalits on January 1, 2018, Ambedkar's political stock began to rise. [He was seen](#) as the only Dalit leader in the state who took an uncompromising stance against right-wing communal forces responsible for attacks on Dalits. This made him a somewhat undisputed leader of Maharashtra's Dalits in the state's otherwise fragmented Dalit politics.

With the almost 12% Dalit vote in the state gravitating towards Ambedkar, the Dhangars, accounting for almost 9% of Maharashtra's voters, took the lead in creating the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi – an alliance of the excluded, the marginalised and the deprived sections of society.

Prakash Ambedkar is no stranger to 'Bahujan' politics. Bahujan politics recognises that an overwhelming majority of people are adversely affected by the caste system and that a successful 'anti-caste' politics can emerge only when Dalits form an alliance with the other oppressed communities.

The 'Akola pattern' and 'Bahujan consciousness'

In Maharashtra, where most Dalit leaders survive only by repeatedly playing the card of victimhood, Ambedkar embraced the concept of Bahujan politics, forming the Bharip Bahujan Mahasangh

(BBM). He had already proved his social engineering skills in the 1993 'Kinwat' assembly by-elections when he successfully mobilised the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and other backward classes (OBCs) to ensure the victory of a tribal candidate against the Congress one.

The 'Akola pattern' emerged from the Kinwat experiment. This is a political model where representation was given to members belonging to different marginalised social groups on a rotational basis. Through this, Ambedkar managed to create a 'stake' of smaller Bahujan groups in the political process.

However, despite several attempts to recreate the success of the 'Akola pattern' in other parts of the state, Ambedkar was unable to do so. The divisive tendency of the caste system was proving to be an insurmountable barrier. For the marginalised groups to politically identify themselves as 'Bahujan' and to overcome the divisions of caste, an 'alternative cultural consciousness' needed to be created. For this purpose, the use of historical symbols such as the Bhima-Koregaon pillar was a key element.

Historical records show that not only Mahar-Dalit, but soldiers belonging to other Shudra-OBC groups also fought as a part of the British Regiment against the Peshwa army in the Bhima-Koregaon battle of 1818. Ambedkar made an effort to trace the lineages of the Shudra-OBC soldiers who had fought in the 1818 war and made sure that their descendants attended the Bhima-Koregaon procession. This was an attempt to build a 'Bahujan consciousness' amongst the OBC communities.

The Muslim vote

In 2014, BJP had shown that a political majority could be achieved by completely sidelining the Muslims of India. Thereafter, Congress too began to openly adopt a 'soft-Hindutva' approach. [With Rahul Gandhi making many temple runs](#) and declaring himself to be a proud 'Shivbhakt', the Congress was trying hard to prove its Hindu credentials. Though Congress expected the Muslims to vote for the party 'loyally', the space for Muslim related-issues on the party's platform seemed to be shrinking. The Indian Muslim was slowly becoming politically invisible, and the blame was not the BJP's alone.

In Maharashtra, VBA seems to have made the Muslim vote politically valuable again. Ambedkar has built an alliance with Asaduddin Owaisi's party, the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (AIMIM). By leading a rally in Akola demanding the implementation of the Sachar Committee, he put the spotlight on Muslim issues.

By aligning with the AIMIM, Ambedkar seems to have recognised that though lower castes and Muslims are both socio-economically backward, some problems and instances of discrimination are specifically faced by Muslims alone. By doing so, Ambedkar seems to have addressed another complaint against traditional Bahujan politics - that under the label of Dalit-Muslim unity, Muslims were earlier expected to vote for Dalit political leaders, no questions asked. But now, a grassroots Muslim political leadership is being encouraged to emerge.

Division within OBCs

The politics of representation in India has broadly been steered by Kanshiram's slogan: "*Jiski jitni sankhyaa bhaari, uski utni bhaagidaari*". It was a plea for proportionate representation for Bahujans who comprise around 85% of India's population. However, Bahujan politics was hijacked by numerically dominant caste groups within the Bahujan fold - the domination of BSP by SC Jatavs and the iron grip of Yadavs over the Samajwadi Party are two prominent examples. This excessive identification of Yadavs and Jatavs with the Samajwadi Party and the BSP respectively, alienated other non-Jatav, non-Yadav Bahujan castes, a substantial chunk of which then shifted towards the

BJP.

In Maharashtra, the Congress party and Sharad Pawar's NCP are seen as Maratha-dominated parties. Eventually, the OBCs shifted to BJP-Shiv Sena in significant numbers. That's why prominent OBC leaders, such as Chhagan Bhujbal and Gopinath Munde, emerged from within BJP-Shiv Sena and not from 'secular' political parties.

A clear distinction had developed between 'empowered OBCs' and 'lower OBCs'. The smaller OBCs complain that the benefits of affirmative action have been disproportionately cornered by the larger OBCs and that there needs to be a division within the OBC quota between 'empowered OBC castes' and 'lower OBC castes'.

This argument is not entirely wrong. The [BJP has already announced](#) a 'Commission for OBC sub-categorisation'. However, sub-categorisation of quotas will sow the seeds of division within OBCs and will definitely prove to be the death-knell of Bahujan politics. Sensing this ploy to dismantle Bahujan politics, Ambedkar is attempting a new model of representative politics.

More than 90% of the 37 candidates declared (as of March 26, 2019) by the VBA are non-Mahar, which is the numerically dominant SC group within Maharashtra. With a solid base of Dalit, Muslim and Dhanger voters already by his side, Ambedkar is giving tickets to a substantial number of candidates belonging to smaller OBC groups, thought to be politically insignificant up until now.

This way, he is trying to show that Bahujan politics is not a fiefdom of Mahars, Jatavs or Yadavs alone. At every rally, Ambedkar issues strong appeals directed at his Mahar/Neo-Buddhist core support group, to ensure that they will vote for the VBA candidate even if they are Non-Mahar or Non-Neo-Buddhist. Ambedkar's political message to smaller OBC groups is: *"Na bhi ho aapki sankhya bhaari, phir bhi milegi bhaagidaari* (Even if you aren't a numerically significant group, you will still get representation)."

Including de-notified and nomadic tribes

Identified by the British as 'Criminal Tribes' due to their revolts against the British authority, ostracised by casteist Hindu society and condemned to a life of perpetual displacement, de-notified and nomadic tribes have remained on the margins of Maharashtra's politics. This group of 40+ nomadic tribes has never been able to enjoy the full experience of citizenship. Some tribes such as 'Pardhis' are considered to be 'born criminals' by both society and the state.

It is quite common for the police to gather and harass the Pardhis who happen to live near the scene of a crime, as the police 'assume' them to be the criminals. The state seems more interested to enlist Pardhis in police FIRs than to include them in voters' lists. Since many nomadic tribes are constantly migrating, without any permanent residence address, their registration as voters is very low. VBA has been trying to bring such excluded social groups onto the political stage, getting them included in voter lists. It has given 3-4 Lok Sabha tickets to nomadic tribe candidates.

Similarly, VBA has made a transgender citizen, Disha Pinky Shaikh, its official spokesperson. Shaikh appears on news debates and speaks at every VBA rally. Though the transgender vote is politically insignificant, VBA seems to be attempting a long-term social transformation.

VBA's political stance and its social support base prove its secular credentials beyond doubt. In fact, when the two national political parties are trying to reduce the 2019 elections to secularism vs nationalism, the VBA is trying to incorporate both secularism and social justice, thus adopting a 'secularism plus' approach in politics.

In the coming days, we will be able to see whether the VBA is able to break the glass ceiling of Indian politics and let leaders from marginalised groups walk the hallowed halls of parliament. Not only the political acumen of the VBA but also the inclusivity of Indian democracy will be put to test this election season.

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