

India: Majoritarian Politics and the Plight of Dalits

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Reservations for Dalits have been instrumental in correcting historical wrongs but ever since BJP's ascent to power, it has tried to dilute the provisions.

Despite the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) claims of '*Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas*' (development for all), the plight of the weaker sections of society is worsening by the day.

While Muslims are regarded as the primary target of majoritarian politics, an equally major aspect of this politics is to subjugate Dalits as well. We are witnessing a paradoxical phenomenon where, on one hand, the social and economic conditions of Dalits has worsened, while the BJP's electoral reach within the community has increased. There is also a rising impact of the fountainhead of majoritarian politics, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) with its goal of co-opting Dalits into the Hindu nationalist discourse.

The term 'Dalit' was coined by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, a major reformer, who took giant leaps for education and other rights of the oppressed communities within the Hindu fold in the mid 19th century. Interestingly, a large section of these communities had also converted [to Islam](#) earlier due to the oppression of the caste system, as pointed out by Swami Vivekananda in his lecture titled "The future of India".

The struggles for social equality and economic justice were taken a few notches up by the relentless struggles of B.R. Ambedkar through movements like *Chavdar Talab* (access to public drinking water), Kalaram Temple (right to entry to temples) and formation of the Independent Labor Party (1935) among others. The efforts culminated in the provision for affirmative action for Dalits through reservations in education, jobs and the electoral arena. While this did have some impact on Dalit lives, the changes were small and progress at a snail's pace.

Their conditions have dramatically worsened during the last few decades. Various economic, social and political indices illustrate this downslide. As per the data of National Coalition for Strengthening SCs and STs, "The report revealed that atrocities or crimes against Scheduled Castes (SCs) [have increased](#) by 1.2% in 2021 with Uttar Pradesh reporting the highest number of cases of atrocities against SCs accounting for 25.82% followed by Rajasthan with 14.7% and Madhya Pradesh with 14.1% during 2021."

The BJP, guided by the agenda of Hindutva, has been raising identity issues to polarise the community and bypass the central issues facing the marginalised. While cow vigilantism targeted the Muslim community and led to lynchings becoming a common phenomenon, these lynchings also targeted Dalits who faced the wrath of instigated mobs. While such violence disproportionately affects Muslims, a substantial number of Dalits have also been lynched. The horrific incident of Una shows just the tip of what [has been](#) happening.

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ascent to power, it has tried to dilute the same by introducing reservations on economic grounds. According to sociologist Sukhdev Thorat, [only 5% of](#) the working Dalits population benefits from reservation. On top of this, reservation for non-Dalit communities based on vague economic criteria will further dilute their entitlements. The introduction of 'creamy layer' and clubbing of individual incomes in households will further deprive a section from [the provisions](#) of reservations. In 2018, the University Grants Commission (UGC) [issued a circular with 700 vacancies across colleges](#), with only 2.5% of them reserved for applicants from the Dalit community and none from the Scheduled Tribes (ST). Such moves are bound to worsen the economic plight of this community.

The RSS's plans

It is clear that, at every step, the BJP has been trying to undermine the rights and provisions for the Dalit community. To understand this, let us take a brief look into the history of its parent organisation, the RSS, and the circumstances in which it was formed. As the process of social reform picked up in India during colonial period, Phule's efforts for promoting education among Dalits followed by Ambedkar's remarkable initiatives for social equality led to greater awareness among the Dalit community which led to the 'Non Brahmin movement' in the Maharashtra's Vidarbha in the 1920s. The upper caste was upset due to such changes and was one of the contributing factors in the establishment of the RSS. Its agenda of Hindu Rashtra, on one hand, talked of Muslims and Christians as 'foreigners' and on the other, it harped on the golden period when the laws of *Manu Smriti* ruled the roost and Dalits were treated as slaves with full contempt.

The upper caste communities were opposed to any movements towards equality in society. When the Indian Constitution was formed, RSS and its support base opposed the provisions of reservations.

Due to the implementation of reservations and the opening up of jobs in the public sector in large numbers, Dalits started coming up in the social space. In the 1980s, the Dalit community's journey towards equality was opposed and anti-Dalit violence took place in Ahmedabad. With the implementation of the Mandal Commission's report in 1990, the Rath Yatra got a tremendous boost, leading, in due course, to the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992. Through all this, the path for electoral domination opened up for the BJP in a big way.

At the same time, the BJP's majoritarian politics wanted to ensure that the Dalit community, while kept in subjugating positions, were also wooed at a social, political and economic level. The RSS floated '*Samajik Samrasta Manch*' (Social Harmony Forum), to work among the Dalits. This organisation gave the message of 'Hindu unity' while retaining the caste hierarchy. In contrast to Ambedkar's 'caste annihilation', it worked among the Dalits promoting harmony among different castes. Through social engineering and co-option, it won over a chunk of the community. To woo Dalits, it also began putting up Dalit icons [like Suhel Dev](#) in Uttar Pradesh (UP), giving these icons an anti Muslim tilt. This was like killing two birds with one stone. The BJP's efforts to appease Dalits by eating in Dalit households won over a section of the community through the process well known as 'sanskritization'.

Through the vast network of its *swayamsevak*s (cadre), it built an electoral base among the Dalit community. Prior to elections, this 'RSS combine' also picks up campaigns, which present Dalits as Hindus and projects other parties as appeasers of Muslims. This was witnessed in UP elections where house to house propaganda among Dalits was that BJP is the only party not appeasing Muslims and is the upholder of Hindu interests. Through this strategy it was successful at electoral level in winning a chunk of Scheduled Caste (SC) reserved seats. In the 2014 general elections it could win 44 of the 84 seats in UP, with these strategies in operation.

The Dalit Muslim question

Another debate gaining prominence is whether Dalits who have converted to Islam should be considered for reservations or not. 'Dalit Muslims' as such have to face double wrath. As Muslims they face the brunt of communal violence and as Dalits they are not able to get the benefit of reservations. The argument of many Dalit writers and intellectuals is that since Islam does not have a caste system and believes in equality of all, why should reservation be extended to [them](#). They also point out that the Quran has no such sanction for caste hierarchy. [Dilip Mandal](#) and Suraj Yengde, [both](#) prominent Dalit intellectuals, are opposing the reservation for Dalits; who are Muslims.

They roughly argue that Islam, according to its holy scriptures, does not have caste hierarchy so Dalit Muslims should not be considered for reservations. The flaw in their argument is that societies don't run by reading scriptures. Communities adapt to the prevalent social systems, and the community's elites ensure the subordinate position of the downtrodden on one pretext or another.

Caste is an overarching reality of South Asian communities; Muslims are no exception to that. One recalls that even when the efforts for modern education for Muslims were initiated, the lower caste Muslims were not considered for such a provision on the ground that their low caste occupation does not require any modern education.

Dalit Muslims are as much Dalit as others are, depriving them of this minimum affirmative action will be an injustice to a large section of this population. The problem is, if there are more claimants for the cake, its size has to be increased. The reservation on economic grounds is reducing the provisions of SC reservations severely, that's where the problem lies. Some intellectuals also argue that reservation for Dalit Muslims will also affect the electoral reservations for Muslims and will increase their electoral provisions. As far as electoral reservation for Muslims is concerned, the representation of Muslims in the electoral arena has already dropped to dismal levels, far less than their representation in the population. This in no way should come into consideration while extending reservation to Dalit Muslims.

Ram Puniyani is president, Centre of Study of Society and Secularism and has written several books including *Communal Politics: Facts Versus Myths* (Sage, 2003), *Deconstructing Terrorist Violence* (Sage 2015), *Indian Nationalism versus Hindu Nationalism* (Pharos 2014) and *Caste and Communalism* (Olive 2013).

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