

Hopes and Illusions

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Come election season, real and imaginary alliances are the staple of political pastime. Cinema heroes are routinely rumoured to be ready to jump in, a doubtful consummation that their cold feet in the end saves society from. Communities deprived of power come together to ask themselves for the umpteenth time what could be the answer to the arithmetic conundrum: their votes are the most numerous but their place in the mansions of power is the least numerous. The conundrum is too often sought to be answered arithmetically: if these communities come together and set up their own candidates and vote for them, they can rule the country. That quite intelligent people find satisfaction in this apolitical calculus is depressing.

It is true that a few communities are dominating decision-making processes in the polity. Reddys and Kammas are being bracketed as the two communities enjoying all the power, but the grouse of Brahmins and Vaishyas that they too are excluded is ridiculous. They find it convenient to pretend ignorance of the fact that as many matters are decided in the Secretariat and the portals of business as in the Cabinet. The bureaucracy continues to be brahmin dominated, as also all the elite educational institutions, a considerable section of the media and the high-growth private corporate sector. It is true that there is no absolute monopoly in any of these areas as in the past, but that is not the same thing as powerlessness. Similarly, while business may no longer be the complete monopoly of the Vaishyas, their presence can hardly be said to be negligible in that important fount of power.

The grievance of the SC, ST and BC communities and the religious minorities in this matter is genuine. However, it is not going to be answered by adding up numbers and counting the seats they could fetch if the numbers did add up. There are two and probably three 'ifs' here. The communities, as communities, should come together; they should overwhelmingly vote for their own; and those who are thus elected should serve them rather than the privileged classes. The fact that these communities are placed in one big

bracket by the ideology of chaturvarna does not guarantee any of these consequences. It requires hard work to create a sense of one-ness and political commitment to that identity. It first of all requires overcoming the very real gap between BCs and dalits, and the Muslims and all the rest. Such work cannot start one year before elections and end on the day the votes are counted, to resurface again come the next election.

Since hope of easy solutions will not die easily, the 'Mayawati formula' seems to have caught the imagination of the politically lazy among the dalit leaders. It is astonishing that the notion of 'sarva jana samaj' is believed to be a novelty. In divided societies, any notion of 'all' is presumptively ideological. It serves to hide the fissures in society. In fact Jyotiba Phule's concept of Bahujan sets off the ideological character of Sarvajan. It is sad that popular dalit leaders need to be taught such elementary lessons in political philosophy.

But then poverty of philosophy has always been the bane of would-be radical movements, and an acute sense of this weakness has always been the strength of ruling classes. In Uttar Pradesh, at least, there was an excuse for Mayawati's illusion that she is leading the Misras and the Pandeys, namely that she has a genuine base among the dalits. She will nevertheless discover one day that while she thinks she is using them, it is they in fact who will be using her. That dalit and BC leaders of Andhra Pradesh whose mass base is just about good enough for a panchayat sarpanch's post find it possible to reason likewise, however, is not excusable naivete but sad proof of the human capacity for self-deception.

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