

A pathway to office with power

As Ambedkar warned, share in power at the Centre has eluded the marginalised



SANJAY HEGDE

This year, B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary coincides with India's first hero worship-based election. In earlier elections too, ruling parties won overwhelming majorities, but there has been no election so far in which the campaign has been so exclusively devoted to a leader's personality. Even during the 1971 election, the campaign was cleverly turned from Indira Gandhi to 'garibi hatao'. This election, though, is all about Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

On November 25, 1949, in his last speech in the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar warned us "to observe the caution which John Stuart Mill has given to all who are interested in the maintenance of democracy, namely, not 'to lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or to trust him with power which enable him to subvert their institutions'...

For in India, Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world... In politics, Bhakti... is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship."

This speech was delivered nearly two years after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Jawaharlal Nehru was Prime Minister but not yet in a position of unchallenged dominance. Sardar Patel was still alive. Yet, Ambedkar was present in his analysis of the Indian psyche. The history of India is often only a history of great men and women whose deeds were recorded. Everybody else seems to have merely existed, to lay their destinies at the feet of the leader of the day. In an earlier era, Ambedkar too may have met the same fate.

Separate electorates

Ambedkar had rarely been an electoral success. Intellectually, he was head and shoulders above most of his contemporaries, but politically he was seen as a leader of only the depressed classes. His demand for separate electorates had been conceded by British Prime Minister Ram-



"In 1995, when Mayawati was sworn in for the first time as U.P. Chief Minister, then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao hailed it as 'a miracle of democracy'". Ms. Mayawati with BSP founder Kanshi Ram in 1997. ■ THE HINDU ARCHIVES

say MacDonald, but had been wrested away by Gandhi's fast unto death and the resultant Poona Pact. Ambedkar never forgave Gandhi for the effective negation of a separate vote for Dalits, chosen by the Dalits themselves. The result was that Ambedkar's Scheduled Caste (SC) candidates won among a SC electorate, but lost in general elections.

In a 1946 letter, addressed to British Prime Minister Clement Attlee, Ambedkar wrote: "The Primary election is an election in which only the Scheduled Castes voters are entitled to vote for the Scheduled Castes candidates contesting a seat reserved for them, while in the Final election the Hindu voters are also entitled to vote for Scheduled Castes. The Hindu voters being overwhelming, they are able to elect that Scheduled Castes candidate who is their tool. This explains how the Congress Scheduled Castes candidates, who all were at the bottom in the Primary election, came to the top in the final election."

Thus, through most of his life, Ambedkar was unelectable on his own strength. He was elected to the Constituent Assembly on a seat from Bengal, arranged for him by Jogendra Nath Mandal, who later became Pakistan's first Law Minister. When that seat was lost to Pakistan because of Partition, Ambedkar was elected from Bombay with Congress support. In the 1951-52 parliamentary elections, he lost from Bombay. He lost another by-election for the Bhandara constituency. Meanwhile, he had been accommodated in the Rajya Sabha, but his desired success in

a direct election eluded him.

The electoral pattern set in Ambedkar's time persisted for a long time thereafter. Dalit participation in politics remained dependent on approval from the Congress. As Ambedkar wrote to A.V. Alexander in 1946, "Realising that there is no escape from giving the Untouchables some safeguards, the Congress wants to find out some way by which it can make them of no effect. It is in the system of joint electorates that the Congress sees an instrument of making the safeguards of no effect. That is why the Congress is insisting upon joint electorates. For joint electorates means giving the Untouchables office without power."

Tradition of inequality

Ambedkar's analysis was not far off the mark. Office without power was dangled before Dalits when, at a public address in June 1947, Gandhi said, "If I have my way, the President of the Indian Republic will be a chaste and brave Bhangî girl... If such a girl of my dreams becomes President, I shall be her servant and I shall not expect from the Government even my upkeep. I shall make Jawaharlal, Sardar Patel and Rajendra Babu her ministers and therefore her servants." However, this suggestion was turned down by the Congress.

The pattern of a Congress-dependant Dalit leader saw Jagjivan Ram as a Minister in every Central Cabinet till 1979. It also produced occasional Chief Ministers. However, these instances were few and far between, often subject to the condescension

and calculation of the Congress leadership. Office without power became the cage of the Dalit politician.

It was only through reservations in government jobs that Dalits gained any long-term access to power. The grievances of employees in north India began to be voiced by an association called the Backward and Minority Communities Employee Federation (BAMCEF). Its leader was a Punjabi Dalit who had read Ambedkar's works. He had also seen the gradual withering away in Maharashtra of the Ambedkarite movement and its radical successors, the Dalit Panthers.

In 1984, BAMCEF leader Kanshi Ram created a Dalit-dominated party that few gave a serious chance of being independently elected. Yet, in less than a decade, the Bahujan Samaj Party was able to bargain for power on its own electoral strength. In 1995, when Kanshi Ram's protégé, Mayawati, was sworn in for the first time as Chief Minister of U.P., then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao hailed it as "a miracle of democracy". Ms. Mayawati has now established herself as an effective administrator, not significantly worse than her peers. She is being touted as a possible Prime Minister now – if luck goes her way. One cannot deny, however, that such a miracle of democracy is a far-fetched scenario. Yet, it is still a possibility not beyond the realm of contemplation.

Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation could not ensure equal participation of the blacks in the U.S. Nearly a century later, it took the civil rights movement and the nomination of Thurgood Marshall to the U.S. Supreme Court to reassure blacks that their voices would be heard. Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential election finally set the seal on an equal shot at power.

Indian society has had a much longer tradition of inequality than the U.S. Indian democrats must acknowledge that for far too long, an effective share in power at the Centre has eluded the marginalised. Office without power must soon give way to genuine empowerment of the hitherto powerless. It may be in this election, it may be in the next, but Ambedkar's struggle to educate, organise and agitate against inequality will go on.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Defending Julian Assange is the need of the hour

His indictment poses a threat to all journalists



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

Last week, the British police entered the Ecuadorian embassy in London and arrested WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange after Ecuador withdrew his asylum. While some are arguing for his release, others are defending his arrest. Still others are asking, is Mr. Assange a journalist and WikiLeaks a news organisation?

Whistleblower and former Central Intelligence Agency contractor Edward Snowden said that the charges pressed by the U.S. against Mr. Assange are incredibly weak. He tweeted that the arrest is "a dark moment for press freedom". One of the leading thinkers of the world, Noam Chomsky, said "the Assange arrest is scandalous in several respects". He argued that WikiLeaks was "producing things that people ought to know about those in power".

Many questions

Why should Indians worry about the arrest of an activist by the Western powers? Isn't the general election a bigger media issue than the arrest of a person who irresponsibly leaked unredacted documents in the public sphere? And are the sexual assault charges against Mr. Assange less significant than the issues that link nation states with the Official Secrets Act? Jess Phillips, a Labour MP, argued that Mr. Assange's case made it clear that women's rights are still secondary to political games. She wrote in *The Guardian*: "The truth, if you wish to see it in the case of Assange, is that the first and most pressing case he should answer is the one where he has delayed and therefore denied possible justice to two Swedish women. The U.K. government should support his extradition to Sweden before they even begin to consider any pressure from the U.S."

It is important to remember that former U.S. Army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning was jailed in March for refusing to testi-

fy to a grand jury investigating WikiLeaks. Ms. Manning said she refused to testify because she objects to the secrecy of the grand jury process, and already revealed everything she knows at her court martial. I think there are valuable lessons to pick up from her stand. The larger question here is what the role of WikiLeaks has been in the last decade and a half. The answer is that it opened up the space for holding people in power accountable. As an editorial in *The Observer* points out, WikiLeaks has "been invaluable in allowing whistleblowers to safely publish documents that the authorities would rather have kept hushed up, from the truth about the commodity trader Trafifigra's devastating dumping of chemical waste in Ivory Coast to videos of U.S. helicopter attacks on Iraqi civilians. It is, or certainly was in its early days, an important tool in cutting down to size those in power who would abuse their power."

Pertinent to India

In the case of India, this newspaper was part of the series of stories that were mined from the information generated by WikiLeaks in 2011. *The Hindu* became the first Indian newspaper to offer readers a broad spectrum of articles and reports based on a first selection from 5,100 India cables, aggregating six million words, made available to it by WikiLeaks. In an interview with Mr. Assange, then Editor-in-Chief of *The Hindu*, N. Ram, posed the following question, which revealed the political environment in India: "The cables we have worked on so far expose the venal and sordid underbelly of India, which is corrupt, non-transparent, and vulnerable to manipulation by the big powers, in particular the United States. But first on the issue of corruption: you have cash-for-votes as 'a way of political life' in South Indian elections, you have cash-for-votes in a parliamentary confidence vote in 2008, you have sops and cash for chemicals – the manoeuvres of Dow Chemical Company, heir to Union Carbide's Bhopal liabilities, to get its plants cleared. And you have the contradictory and, in fact, to some extent corrupt responses from powerful politicians on this issue too. What does this say about corruption?"

It is in this context that we have to understand that the U.S.'s indictment of Mr. Assange poses a threat to all journalists and potentially undermines press freedom.

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SINGLE FILE

Politics and the military

Mixing the two arenas, as is common now, does not bode well for Indian democracy

MOHAMMED AYOOB



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In a letter dated April 11, more than 150 senior military veterans, including several former service chiefs, wrote a letter to the President expressing their anguish over the 'politicisation' of the military. They requested him "to take all necessary steps to urgently direct all political parties that they must forthwith desist from using the military, military uniforms or symbols, and any actions by military formations or personnel, for political purposes or to further their political agendas". Furthermore, they castigated political leaders for taking credit for military operations such as cross-border strikes, terming it a "totally unacceptable practice". The senior veterans singled out Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's statement calling the military "Modi ki sena" for special condemnation.

Using military achievements for electoral gains is dangerous. Even then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi desisted from going down this route after the 1971 war. She did not take excessive credit for that victory despite the fact that her and her advisers' astute political and diplomatic strategies contributed profoundly in creating an international environment that made the victory possible.

The current political atmosphere is already vitiated by the use of communally polarising tactics, including the juxtaposition by Mr. Adityanath of 'Ali' with 'Bajrang Bali'. Exploiting India's military, so far a remarkably politically neutral force, for partisan ends adds to the already morally degraded political environment in which the elections are taking place.

The use of the armed forces as a political tool is just one side of the coin. Even more dangerous is the fact that it sends the signal to the top brass that there is nothing wrong in intermixing politics with the military. The eventual lesson they will learn is that they can interfere in the political process with impunity since the civilian leadership has already legitimised the military's use in the political realm. In recent years, many senior serving officers have commented on important domestic and international issues, such as immigration and India-Pakistan relations, that until recently had been off limits for the military brass. This is an unprecedented development that needs to be reversed in order to preserve civilian supremacy over the armed forces and keep the political and military arenas distinct.

These two trends – the use of the military for short-term political gains and the propensity of serving officers to make politically charged statements – augment each other. This nexus does not bode well for Indian democracy.

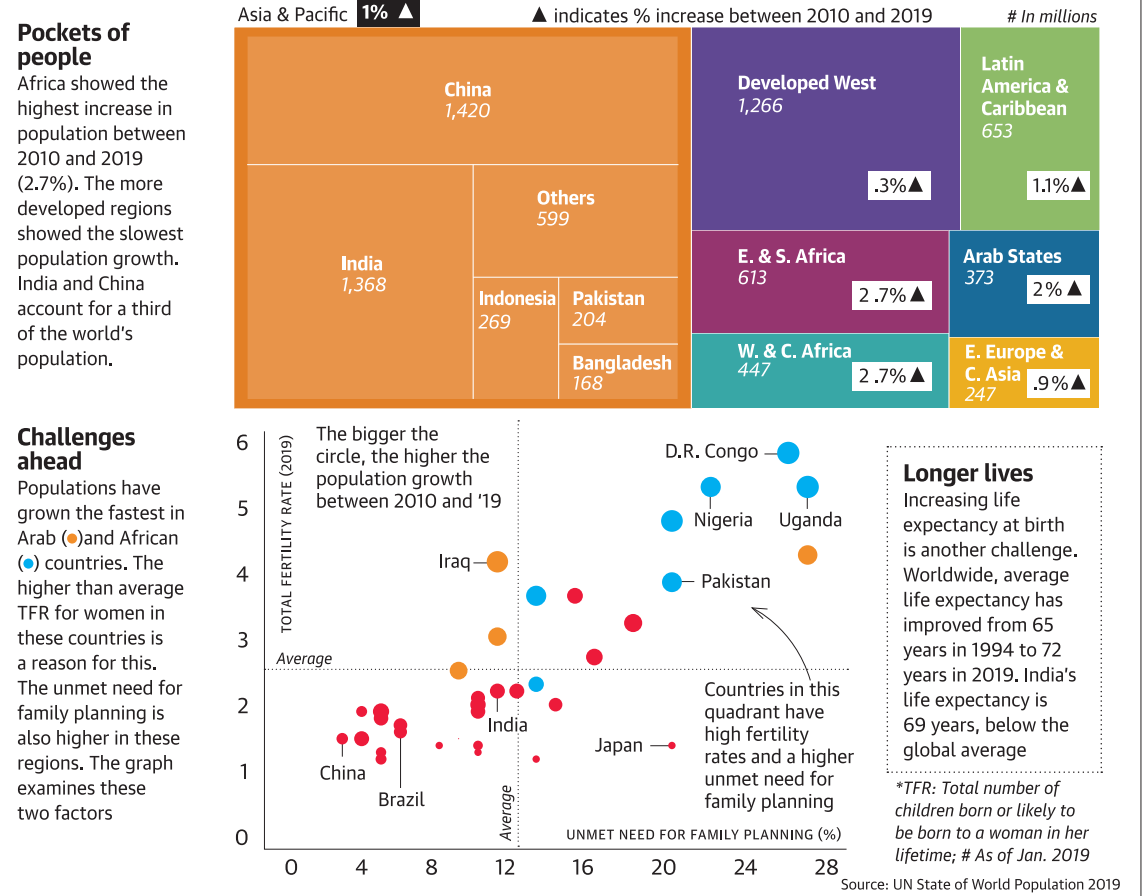
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DATA POINT

Population multiplication

Between 2010 and 2019, India's population rose by 1.2% and reached 1.36 billion. The global increase in population in the same period was 1.1%, according to UN estimates. In line with other countries, India's Total Fertility Rate* (TFR) has been on the decline. By Varun B. Krishnan



FROM THE HINDU ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 15, 1969

Earth tremors in many Andhra towns

An earthquake of moderate to light intensity shook many towns over a wide area of peninsular India including Cuttack and Vijayawada in the east, Bombay in the west and Nagpur in the north between 8-55 p.m. and 9 p.m. yesterday (April 13). The tremors were also felt in Madras City and Bangalore and Calicut. Except for the damage to a temple at Dharmashala, 30 km. from Bhadrachalam and the occurrence of minor cracks in old buildings in some places, no serious damage to property has been caused. There has also been no loss of life although some people are reported to have suffered minor injuries by falling off chairs or cots. The epicentre of yesterday's earth tremors, which brought panic-stricken people into the streets and caused failure of power supply in many places in Andhra Pradesh, was located at Latitude 17.5 degrees North and Longitude 80.5 degrees East, about 120 kilometres north of Vijayawada, according to the Central Observatory in Poona.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 15, 1919.

Dairying in Madras. A Government Order.

The Local Government have generally approved the following proposals of the Director of Agriculture recommending Mr. A. Carruth's Scheme for the improvement of dairy business in the Madras City. The following is the definite scheme which has been worked out by Mr. Carruth: a) Ayrshirebulls of a good milking strain to be purchased by Government. b) These bulls to be kept at suitable centres in Madras town for the service of the milch cattle of professional milkmen. c) An upper subordinate of this department to be stationed in Madras to look after the bulls and to get into touch with the milkmen. d) In return for the charging of a specially low service fee, the Government to have the option of purchasing the calves at a fixed price. e) These calves to be used to stock a Government dairy farm not too far from Madras where cross-breeding would be carried on with a view to the production of a stable dairy breed. f) Attempts to be made to start a co-operative society among the Madras milkmen, both for credit purposes, and to encourage them to go in for systematic breeding, co-operative purchase of cattle food, and possibly co-operative sale of milk.

POLL CALL

Swing

A swing shows the extent of change in voter support from one election to another. This is expressed as a positive or negative percentage. It is particularly useful for analysing change in voter support over time. A swing can be calculated for the entire electorate or for a given constituency or demographic. For instance, in the 2014 election, there was a pro-BJP swing among the middle classes in particular.

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