

Turning national icons into caste leaders

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 27 May 2015 01:06

By Sidharth Mishra



In older times in suburban India, the homes which had school going children, ubiquitously adorned a symbolical chart of famous national leaders. This would hang alongside another chart, which told us succinctly about our national bird, national animal, national game and so on. It was taken for granted, courtesy these charts, that children would know who the first president of India was and who was the inaugural chief of army staff. The television was still to arrive and these leaders were recalled with certain respect and dignity attached to their name. Today's notebook doesn't purport to discuss the ill-effects of television on school-going children. There is no immediate need for it; television hasn't got better or worse during the past week to invite a discussion. It's the increasing evolution of historical and national icons as caste leaders which worries your reporter today.

The most recent has been Prime Minister Narendra Modi encouraging an attempt at canonization of Hindi poet Ramdhari Singh Dinkar as leader of the Bhumihar community, whose support would be pivotal to electoral gains proposed to be made by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the upcoming assembly elections in Bihar.

Dinkar was a great poet and when Jaya Prakash Narayan, at a historic rally in New Delhi at Ramlia Grounds in 1975, recited the famous lines from Dinkar's 1956 poem, "Singhasan Khali Karo Ki Janata Aaati Hain (Vacate the throne for the people are coming)", he did not do so to attract Bhumihars to his movement. Dinkar was called Rashtra Kavi, the national poet, given the tenor and theme of his poetry, which evoked profound nationalist sentiments. To have the national poet presented as a caste-icon would be extremely unpalatable to the lovers of Dinkar's poetry, so much so that some might hate the BJP for taking such liberties.

This is not the only instance of the BJP going overboard with its deconstructing of national icons as caste leaders. Bihar BJP leader Sushil Kumar Modi recently celebrated the 2320th birth anniversary of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka under the aegis of a group promoting the interests of Kushwaha caste. As historian Nayanjot Lahiri said in a recent article, "We don't know, for instance, when exactly Ashoka was born - neither the particular day, month or year. Very few ancient writers share our modern obsession with recording such events with calendrical exactness, and certainly, Ashoka's scribes cannot be counted in this category. Similarly, we don't know when he married or, for that matter, how many times. We certainly don't know which caste he belonged to but considering that he lived for large parts of his life in royal surroundings, we imagine that he would have enjoyed a pretty cushy life, which was neither

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economically nor socially deprived as are the lives of many backward castes in Bihar.”

Ashoka commands a place of pride in our national identity. Our national emblem – the Lion Capital – is inspired by the pillar he built at Sarnath. It's said that guided by his wife Vidisha Devi, he built the famous stambh (pillar) to identify the site where Buddha delivered his first sermon and Buddhism was founded. In his quest for enlightenment, Ashoka tried to rise above sectarian thought and for him deep seated associations with caste identity must have been odious. But a Sushil Kumar Modi would have the populous Kushwaha community believe that he belonged just to them and not to the nation at large.

Bhumihar and Kushwahas together with Sushil Modi's backward Vaishya community have the potential to propel the BJP to power in Bihar. Whether the deconstruction and co-option of national icons as caste figures could serve as an electoral catalyst is very doubtful. This deconstruction also runs contrary to the ideology of 'inclusive' cultural nationalism professed to be pursued by the BJP.

The definition of Cultural Nationalism, as enumerated by the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) mentions, "The term Hindu in the conviction as well as in the constitution of the RSS is a cultural and civilizational concept and not a political or religious dogma. The term as a cultural concept will include and did always include all including Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Muslims, Christians and Parsis. The cultural nationality of India, in the conviction of the RSS, is Hindu and it was inclusive of all who are born and who have adopted Bharat as their Motherland, including Muslims, Christians and Parsis. The answering association submit that it is not just a matter of RSS conviction, but a fact borne out by history that the Muslims, Christians and Parsis too are Hindus by culture although as religions they are not so."

This statement was made by RSS General Secretary in his submission before the Tribunal constituted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967 to hear the case on the RSS. Spurring development and ending jungle raj have been the platforms on which the BJP has fought last two elections in Bihar. This time around it's going hammer and tongs against its erstwhile ally Nitish Kumar for having joined hands with the symbol of jungle raj, Lalu Prasad Yadav. However, in matching the might of the caste combinations built by the coming together of Kumar and Yadav, the BJP leadership is trying to create a counter through its own combination. This would be counterproductive electorally in the short term and ideologically in long-term.

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