

'Gandhi is the thesis, Jinnah is the anti-thesis and Modi is the synthesis': Challenges of the Dalit movement in Gujarat

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Abstract: *Gujarat has been in the popular imagination for more than two decades, mostly for the wrong reasons. This article contextualises the current day developments emerging in and out of Gujarat; it traces each one of them to the times of the 19th century social reformers through the period of Indian independence and its culmination into the crystallisation of Hindutva ideology in present day India. On the other hand, it touches upon the historical presence of the Republican Party in Gujarat, the organic bond between the urban textile workers and landless laborers of rural Gujarat and how those aspects are significant in understanding revolution and counter-revolution strategies in the Gujarati politico-social realm. It talks about the possibilities of solidarity between various marginalised caste groups in Gujarat and the role of upper caste 'national' parties in rupturing those solidarities to keep social and political control. Further, the article offers a number of solutions for the Dalit-Bahujans to break out of these cycles of oppression by learning from the history of their respective societies and by focussing on the bare essentials such as health and education.*



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Jai Bhim! Today, accidentally, Madhav Singh Solanki, the former chief minister of Gujarat passed away. He was the person, who was, we can say, responsible, for a violent anti-reservation movement in Gujarat. He was the chief minister who was responsible for the crystallization of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe and Other Backward Classes categories because Madhav Singh encouraged OBC quota from 17 to 27 percent and that was the reason behind the biggest anti-reservation movement in the history of Gujarat. I remember him because the arrival of Madhav Singh Solanki opened the entire Pandora box of caste confrontations in Gujarat and upper caste hegemony was threatened. Later, the upper castes launched the Bharatiya Janata Party in Gujarat. That was the beginning of the laboratory of fascism in Gujarat. People are always asking a big question: why did it happen in the land of Mahatma Gandhi? But they forget it is also the land of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Babasaheb has written 'Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah'. I would like to write 'Gandhi, Jinnah and Modi'. Gandhi is the thesis, Jinnah is the anti-thesis and Modi is the synthesis. Modi is the person between these two. We must remember that ideologically Gujarat society, a so-called civil society, has been polarized since 1947. Narendra Modi is living in the time frame of 1947; all his rhetoric, all postures, all speeches are getting inspiration from the past, that is 1947.

I want to point out another difference in the aspect of reformation. Jotiba Phule and Narmad¹ of Gujarat were both social reformers and their time period was the same. Narmad was born in 1833, died in 1866, and Jotiba was born in 1827; so, both were contemporaries. Both advocated and stood for widow re-marriage. But Narmad was not anti-caste unlike Mahatma Jotiba Phule. So, there is a difference between the pattern and process of reformation in Maharashtra and Gujarat. The reformers of Gujarat are reformers but they were never anti-caste and that legacy continued to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and all Gandhian reformers. They talk about reformation but they never try to break the caste system. That legacy is subverted, perverted and mutated to Narendra Damodardas Modi into Hindutva ideology. Hindutva means perpetuation of the caste system.

Gujarat has the history of Hindutva ideology since the days of Narmad and this upper caste hegemonistic *samrasta* culture was challenged with the arrival of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in Gujarat in Ahmedabad city. Dalits gathered around under the flag of Republican Party and that was the period of the beginning of the militant Dalit movement under the leadership of RPI (Republican Party of India).

Textile workers of Ahmedabad city in 1962 gheraoed the Gujarat Assembly, which was in Ahmedabad at that time; the present civil hospital was the Assembly of Gujarat then. You see, the Dalit textile workers of Ahmedabad were fighting for the landless workers of rural Gujarat. That was caste solidarity and class solidarity. That phase of the Republican Party, that land grabbing

¹ Narmadshankar Labhshankar Dave was a 19th century Gujarati-language poet, playwright and essayist. He is most often associated with the rise of modern Gujarati literature.

movement, was a historical moment. Thousands of RPI workers were arrested and the central jail of Ahmedabad city and every other jail were filled with those arrested workers of RPI that they started in the manual titled RPI. That was a unique moment that the jail administration decided to start an expenditure head titled RPI. That was the time when more than six corporators were elected under the banner of RPI. That was a time when the Indian National Congress was a big party. To speak in textile mills against the Majur-Mahajan (Mazoor-Mahajan Sabha) of congress was a thing of courage. At that time RPI workers fought against Majur-Mahajan and Congress and they elected 9 corporators; even today BSP cannot do that in Ahmedabad city.

That was a glorious historical past of Bahujan under the blue flag. They aligned with the communist, socialist leaders like Indulal Yagnik and Dinkar Mehta, latter was a CPM person. It was the first time that RPI aligned with the communists and socialists. That was a unique period. After that in the Navnirman student movement, the scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and even OBCs did not participate. It was a movement of upper castes. It is said that after that KHAM theory—wherein K stand for Kshatriya, H for Harijan, A for Adivasi and M for Muslim—was used; it was the social engineering used by the Congress party and it brought them to power with more than 159 seats in the Gujarat Legislative Assembly under the leadership of Madhav Singh Solanki. But that wasn't just KHAM theory, that was actually the beginning of Dalit assertion and Bahujan unity.

No doubt that Congress manipulated Bahujan unity for their gains but it was also the beginning of the Dalit-Bahujan movement. And when the anti-reservation movement of 1985 started after five years, there was a big rally of more than 4 lakh people in Gandhinagar, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and OBCs, all united. It included tribals from all remote regions of Gujarat who came to Gandhinagar with their bows and arrows and spears and all their traditional weapons. I participated in that rally and I still remember that in the history of Gujarat that had not happened—this kind of a massive rally. This could have been a turning point in the history of Gujarat but this didn't happen. Because from that point onwards the RSS and the BJP started polarizing the society, started communal riots, started attacking minorities. That divided and polarized the Gujarati society and paved the way for the 1995 victory of the BJP under the leadership of Kesubhai Patel. But before that one thing happened in particular – the hated man Chimanbhai Patel – who was ousted in 1975 during Navnirman movement came back and made Janata Dal and he aligned with the BJP and that alliance defeated the INC. After three years the same Chimanbhai joined Congress and INC made him the chief minister. Thus, the pseudo-secular politics of the Congress destroyed the real unity of the Bahujan and paved the way for the fascist party like the BJP in Gujarat.

Dalits suffered in 1981—7 Dalits were killed, more than 12 Dalits were shot dead by the police in open encounters, in more than 20 villages Dalits were socially and economically boycotted—it was a bloodbath. Dalits retaliated with all their might and power. If you say what is the character of Dalits in Gujarat, I would say they are like those ants who carry fifty times their weight. Dalits

in Gujarat constitute only 7% of the population of the state. Even though they are 7 percent, whenever there is a crisis and there is a call for retaliation they would come out. Thus, I say they are like those ants who carry fifty times their own weight. But that is a burden and it bleeds them economically, socially and nobody can understand the plight of the poor among Dalits who are serving in factories, textiles mills and who are landless laborers in the villages. Nobody knows about their plight.

With the above background we can see the 2015 quota agitation. The entire 2015 quota agitation was designed, conceived, planned, aided and abetted by the RSS. Mr. Hardik Patel and his gang—the mass leaders—they are the disciples of Praveen Togadia; they are staunch Hindutvawadis. They led that anti-quota agitation with the slogan: *Humein nahin toh kisi ko nahin* (If we are not given, nobody should be given). Now they have changed their strategy. They do not confront SC, ST, OBC directly anymore. Now they say we want reservation, we are not against anybody! But the hidden agenda was to eliminate the reservation system.

At that time Anandi Ben Patel was the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Hardik Patel used to call Anandi Ben his aunt; he'd say: I am her nephew. That nephew-aunt or Patel-Patel relationship gives the real stand to the quota agitation; it was a saffron movement. That movement is responsible for the later 10% quota for the 'poor Savarnas'. Then just after a year *gau-rakshak*² goons in Una shattered, tormented, humiliated and beat up Dalit youths. The *gau-rakshaks* were also Hindutvawaadis, also disciples of Praveen Togadia. So, 2015 anti-quota agitation leaders and 2016 Una tormentors were both part of the same gang: one gang fought for the quota and the other gang tormented Dalits. That was the agitation which started polarizing Bahujan unity in Gujarat. SC, ST and OBC in Gujarat had begun to unite against the upper caste domination, against the Brahmin-Baniya-Patel hegemony. But the 2016 Una atrocity broke the unity of Bahujan. It might be a conspiracy of the RSS but again Dalit-Bahujan were trapped in this conspiracy. People who fought against the *gau-rakshaks* aligned with the quota leaders such as Hardik Patel and other mass leaders. You may think that there is no basis for this hobnobbing and unity but when you think that both the agitations are remotely controlled by the Congress then you can understand that these players are prepared and motivated and funded by the Congress party and the BJP. These kind of manipulations of Dalit-Bahujan movement for election purposes by both Congress and the BJP have hampered unity of Dalit-Bahujan, SC, ST, OBC and other marginalized communities including Muslims. After 2015 and 2016, there are so many groups and organizations that are working for this unity at the grassroot level.

Now, we can see that there is a renewed interest to read writings and speeches of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Dalit-Bahujan youth are ready to understand (Jotiba) Phule, Savitrimai, Periyar and what these people wrote and spoke about. Now, the youth of Gujarat are reading Periyar, Phule

² *Gau rakshak* translates as cow protector. *Gau rakshaks* work as informal vigilante groups that claim to protect cows as part of their religious duty.

and Babasaheb. A lot of publications have come up and they are publishing many books and so many people are translating them into Gujarati. A slow and steady process of enlightenment and awakening among Dalit-Bahujan youth is taking place. One needs to see that in the coming days this unity can convert into a larger political unity for a larger political change. I am hopeful that Dalit-Bahujan movement in Gujarat will touch upon core issues of marginalization—education and health.

There is nothing like post-Corona. Corona will continue. But in this Corona-age education and health are two important and prime issues impacting our people. Now Dalit-Bahujan people need to focus on these core issues and organize people around these issues; that should be the future of Dalit-Bahujan politics in Gujarat.

Another thing I want to point out. Take examples of Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra where Dalits are between 22% and 15%, so 10% poor Savarna quota you may not hurt there. But in Gujarat it hurts Dalits severely because when a roster is made first three seats go to the General category, then fourth one goes to OBC, then fifth and sixth goes to the General category, then seventh goes to the tribal candidate (Scheduled Tribe), eight and ninth goes to the General category and the tenth goes to poor Savarna (Economically Weaker Section), eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth goes to General category and fourteenth goes to Dalit (Scheduled Caste). So, when a roster is prepared a poor Savarna will come before a Dalit because they are given reservation of 10% and Dalit reservation is 7%. When reserved seats are filled a poor Savarna will be given job before a Dalit. Thus, in Gujarat 10% EWS reservation is hurting Dalits the most. The seats of Dalit are being reduced, this will be the concern and will be the course of unrest among Dalits in Gujarat. It may not be the case in UP or Maharashtra. Wherever Dalit population is more than 10% it may not hurt as much but wherever Dalit population is less than 10% poor Savarna will get benefitted at the cost of Dalits; they will get the jobs and Dalit will remain behind.

The thing is that Gujarat being the laboratory of fascism, it is very difficult for Dalits to fight against the fascist forces in Gujarat. There are Dalit castes like Nadia, Sainma, Turi, Garo—their populations are between 1-2 lakhs and it is very easy to saffronise them because being smaller in numerical strength they feel we may be safer in the Hindu fold and Hindu identity is something they need. So, they reject the identity of scheduled caste; they think we are better placed in a wider Hindu fold. Major castes like Vankar and others, it is their responsibility to unite them. But Vankars themselves are going to the BJP fold. So, it is very difficult to break this saffronisation among Dalits and likewise among the Tribes. But I am very much hopeful that in the coming days the unity of SC, ST, OBC and marginalized will take place and Dalit intelligentsia particularly will play an active role in it.

We have formed one Gujarat Shikshan Parishad or Gujarat Education Council. Many research students, primary teachers, and lawyers are joining it. That experience has been very satisfying. If we take the issue of education we can unite many Dalit-Bahujan in the coming days. Thank you!

Upper caste intelligentsia uses atrocity as a distraction, as a subversion to break the unity of the marginalized because majority of the perpetrators are said to belong to the OBCs. We can take the example of Una, they were OBCs. So, when it happens a common response of a Dalit is to hate the OBCs and that is very pleasant for the upper castes media, upper castes intelligentsia, upper caste academia to use these atrocities as a great divide between SCs and OBCs. We can take the examples of 2002 riots for there was a marginal or no participation of Dalits. But what happened was that the upper caste media and upper caste intelligentsia portrayed that the Dalits were the villains of the 2002 genocide. But that was not the fact. Perpetrators of those crimes were non-Dalits. My opinion is whenever any atrocity happens, we should fight against it through legal interventions and mobilizations. But we must stick to the core issues—health and education—which can unite SCs, STs and OBCs, marginalized and poor. We must stick to the basic issues. It is my experience of decades that education is the thing which can bring together SC, ST, OBCs. So, whenever an atrocity happens, we must not be distracted or diverted and we must not let the upper castes divide us.

After the 10% poor Savarna reservation it should be crystal clear for the OBCs that it is the Savarnas who are eating into our share. That realization is coming, very slowly and steadily but it is coming!

My experience is that the Muslim is a victim here, he has been crushed under a brute majority. Whenever you think of a Gujarati, you think of a man in *dhoti*, a timid, shy, and obedient person who says *kem cho* (how are you?). So, you are confused how such a timid, shy docile Gujarati can become so violent against Muslims and Dalits. It is a great subject of research that a vegetarian Gujarati will die the moment he sees the blood of chicken or a piece of mutton. How can such a Gujarati become so violent and such a maniac against Muslims or Dalits or Tribals? How does that happen? It has become the same vegetarianism that asks them to follow a strict code of conduct, which is the basis of hatred of that Gujarati. You cannot teach the upper caste Gujarati to give up his hatred for all the people who are non-vegetarians.

Let me make it clear that all upper caste Muslims, they are with the Congress and upper caste Muslims always look at the Nehru family as a pious, divine, humanitarian, clean and these upper caste Muslims will never accept the leadership of Dalits. Hindu nation or Muslim nation is not a matter of concern for me, the fact is they are not ready to accept the leadership of Dalits. They think that Rahul Gandhi is a Brahmin and Congress is an upper caste party and we are with the Congress and this is the reason why they are beaten and persecuted and why there is no true solidarity between them and marginalized groups. They sit, eat and talk with the Dalits, but when it comes to elections they go to the Congress. Upper caste Muslims never in their dream want to leave Congress, that is their problem.

I will not give the example of Mayawati. The question is not that they are bigots or fanatics, the question is political because it is about fighting a political battle. You are fighting a political ideology and a political enemy. Unless and until upper caste Muslims accept leadership of the marginalized, they will be persecuted and their Congress will remain a punching bag of people like Narendra Modi.

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