ISAS Working Paper

Memory, Identity and the Politics of Appropriation:

'Saffronisation' among the Dalits of North India

In a comprehensive study of the politicisation of the Dalits in North India (those regarded in some quarters as "untouchables" in the past), the author discovers how the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), an ideological patron of India's current ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has re-defined and appropriated, for its own political purposes, the memories and identities of these communities. In explaining this, the paper delves into the formation and current crystallisation of these memories and identities.

Key words: Memory, Identity, Dalits, Myths, Politics of appropriation, Uttar Pradesh

Badri Narayan[1]

One of the major defining features of Hindu society in India is the caste system with its rigid hierarchy. At the apex of this hierarchy are Brahmins while Dalits occupy the bottom most

---

rung. In the context of contemporary politics, 'Dalit' is a generic term that includes not only the untouchable (achhut) castes, but also other oppressed lower castes. Thus, Dalits include the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), the so-called criminal tribes, nomadic tribes and Other Backward Castes (OBCs). All these groups are socially, economically and culturally underprivileged and have remained so for many centuries. Historically, they have been oppressed and exploited by the upper castes, a practice that has been sanctioned by ancient Hindu religious texts.

According to the 2011 census, Dalits make up 16.6% of India's population.[2] The Dalits and the other lower castes thus constitute a huge vote bank for different political parties. Although the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) purports to represent the Dalits in north India, especially Uttar Pradesh (UP), in the recent 2014 parliamentary elections a large proportion of Dalits voted instead for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing party comprising mainly of upper caste Hindus. The BJP swept the polls and is now ruling over India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. One reason why a large section of Dalits voted for the BJP is that, as the lowliest group, they aspire for a respectable position and identity within Indian society which the BJP, paradoxically, promises them. In keeping with these Dalit aspirations, the `Hindutva' forces have recently intervened successfully in the process of Dalit identity formation, which enabled the BJP to sweep even the reserved seats in UP. In this paper, we will analyse the relationship between Dalits and the Hindu right wing and the strategies being adopted by the latter to win over Dalits in north India.

The BJP, traditionally seen as a Hindu right wing party, swept the polls in the recent 2014 general elections. It won an absolute majority since people across castes and religions voted for it. Perhaps most astonishing was that the Dalits in north India, especially UP, also voted for the BJP rather than their own party, the BSP. Each of the 17 seats reserved for SCs in UP[3] was won by the BJP. This victory of the BJP should not be viewed as a flash in the pan. Rather, it was the result of its long term political strategy that aimed at winning over and appropriating the Dalits of UP to its side. Since UP is still strongly divided on caste lines, the BSP or the

---

[2] This figure refers to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Source: B Sivakumar, Half of India's Dalit population lives in 4 states, The Times of India, May 2, 2013.

[3] The 17 reserved seats refer only to SCs. Source: AK Biswas, Aftermath of Parliamentary Elections 2014: Fears and Uncertainties may revive call for separate Electorate., Mainstream, Vol LII, No 31, July 26, 2014

party of the majority population (bahujan) could – until the last elections – win a considerable number of seats. This time, however, almost all the Dalits voted for the BJP, which is known for its upper caste/Brahminical norms. This shows the great efforts made by the BJP and other members of the Sangh Parivar (the Hindu right wing family), including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Bajrang Dal. Among these, the RSS, the cultural arm of the Sangh Parivar, has been most active in mobilising the Dalits to vote for its political affiliate, the BJP.

The RSS succeeded because it tapped into the strong desire of different lower caste communities to assert their identities for political gain. These communities want to use their voting power to exert pressure on political parties and the government to extract their share of the development pie. Political parties, due to the compulsions of democracy, are also trying to mobilise them electorally in their favour by whatever means that can satisfy the urge of these communities. For this purpose, the historical past of these communities is being used to build up a collective identity and the entire process of identity construction around "pastness" has become a political project linked to the working of democracy. Such mobilisation is a remarkable shift away from the earlier strategy of all political parties, which consisted of making promises and offering allurements to the mostly illiterate and gullible masses who were assumed to be passive beings waiting on the margins of the country's democratic space for the fulfilment of their dreams by the various parties. The shift away from this political strategy started in the 1980s when small and marginalised Dalit castes started emerging as major forces with the potential to tilt the existing power balance. This process is still continuing as smaller and even more marginalised communities are entering the democratic arena and demanding their share of welfare schemes and other development programmes launched by the government. The entry of these smaller castes and communities is causing the democratic arena to expand steadily and political parties, recognising the latent power of these communities, are being compelled to give them adequate space in their electoral discourse even as they seek to bring them under their umbrella. Political parties are, therefore, continuously striving to develop newer and more creative strategies to mobilise these smaller castes and communities by arousing their sense of "pastness", which is reinforced by the strong desire of these communities to assert their identities. The interplay of these two forces has led to the evolution of the current political strategy that is based on the exploitation of narratives of the past.

Past Identity and History

History and the past have become essential components of this project for the RSS and Hindutva forces. A sense of "pastness" is evoked through the process of finding heroes, picked from the myths, histories and legends present in the oral culture of these castes and communities. These heroes are then reinterpreted, recreated and reconstructed to suit the political ideologies of the party concerned and transmitted back to the people as symbols of their caste identities with whom the caste-members can easily identify.

Politicians and intellectuals who constitute the think tank of these parties rigorously rake through the dialects, symbols, feelings, aspirations and other identity resources of different cross-sections of the target population making up their vote bank and select heroes who they feel are appropriate for their political purpose. Celebrations are organised, statues are erected, rallies are held, booklets and pamphlets narrating legends in the form that fits the ideology of the party are distributed, and various other methods of propaganda are carried out, in order to mobilise the community to vote for the party concerned. The identity construction of the community that takes place through these methods is often successful in swaying the people to vote in favour of the political party.

The Hindutva forces are trying their best to cash in on the desire of the Dalits to be accepted by the upper castes. This desire for upward social mobility through the acknowledgement of their cultural symbols by the upper castes has a historical antecedent. During the colonial period, the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform body, tried to inculcate self-respect and a desire for social mobility among Dalits by annexing some symbols of Brahminical traditions, the use of which had earlier been denied to them by religious norms. These newly adopted Brahminical traditions included wearing the sacred thread (*janeu*) and the right to read the sacred books of the Hindus. However, these attempts were later rejected by the Dalits since they actually ended up strengthening the caste-based socio-cultural hierarchy. Many Arya Samaji scholars also attempted to write the history of the middle and lower castes and to create a space for them within the Brahminical order. In fact, during the colonial period, the caste history of many lower groups was written not by scholars of their own caste but by Arya Samaji activists and scholars who tried to give the middle and lower castes an identity of their own. Many books

were published enumerating the characteristics and qualities of persons belonging to the Brahmin or Kshatriya castes while books written mainly by Arya Samajis appropriated Brahmin and Kshatriya status for many middle and lower castes.

Some caste histories published during the colonial period were the *Kshatriya Varg Kosh* translated in Hindi by Pandit Hardayal Sharma of Meerut in 1899, the periodical *Pandit* brought out from Kashi in 1898, and the *Nishad Vanshavali* written by Devi Prasad published in 1907 to chronicle the Pauranic history of the Nishad caste. The book *Kalvar Sanhita* in which the Kalvars were projected as Kshatriyas was published in 1912. In the same series, also in 1912, Arya Samaji Mathura Prasad Sharma published *Maha Lodhi Vivechana*, published from Nagpur. In 1914, Dileep Singh Yadav of Etawah composed *Ahir Itihas ki Jhalak,* while another book on the Ahir caste, *Ahir Raj Kul*, written by Bal Dev Chaudhry Updeshak was published from Aligarh and Allahabad in 1924. In 1917, Bhola Nath wrote *Vaidom Vanshi Darziyon ki Vanshavali*, which was published from Badayun. This book linked the Vamkul Vanshi Darzis with the Yaduvansh Kshatriyas. In 1918, the famous Arya Samaji Satya Vrat Sharma Dwivedi of Sikanderpur near Farrukhabad, published *Telivarna Prakash* from Allahabad proving the Teli caste to be Vaishyas. Similarly, in 1921, Ganga Prasad Gupta wrote a book published from Banares in which he proved that castes like the Koiri, Kachhi, Murad and Kushwaha were Kshatriyas. Another book *Kurmi Kshatriya Itihas*, published from Banaras in 1927, was written by Arya Samaji Abhayanand Saraswati, who claimed that the important agricultural caste of Kurmi was Kshatriya, while the book *'Mali Jati Nirnay*, published in 1935, established the genealogy of the Basailiya Pali caste. The *Lodhi Rajput Itihas*, written in 1936, contended that agricultural communities like the Lodhi were Rajputs. Similarly, in 1939, the All India Bhartiya Koli Rajput Mahasabha published the book *Kol Rajput Jaati ka Sankshipt Parichay*, the foreword of which was written by the famous Arya Samaji Shri Nand Kumar Shastri. In 1940, Baijnath Prasad Adhyapak wrote a short history called *Rajbhar Jati ka Itihas* centering around the Rajbhar caste of UP, in which he tried to establish that the Rajbhar was a ruling caste linked with the ancient Bhar tribe (Narayan 2004:197).

These caste histories written under the influence of the Arya Samaj reflected the competing aspirations of these communities (Dirks 1997:121) and provided an opportunity to the backward and lower classes to lay claim to a higher status in society. Contemporary Hindutva forces are following this same method more aggressively in their political mobilisation of the

lower castes. For this purpose, as has been mentioned above, the cultural resources of the Dalits at the local level, including their caste histories, legends and heroes are being reinterpreted and recreated with the aim of saffronising the Dalit psyche and memory, ultimately transforming them into sites for political control.

Villages are a fertile breeding ground for the RSS. In the RSS imagination, an ideal village is one which is governed by the Hindu upper castes while the untouchable Dalit castes are imbued with their Brahminical values. The Dalits are expected to willingly function as soldiers of the upper castes and fight battles on their behalf. Thus, in these ideal villages the growing chasm between the upper and lower castes is reduced, social harmony is restored and together the upper and lower castes fight against Muslims. The RSS believes that the Dalits will agree to become soldiers who will safeguard Hindutva against Islam because they have been reduced to their present condition through the machinations of the Muslims during Mughal rule in India. The Hindutva forces have tried to establish that before the arrival of the Muslims there were no untouchable castes like the *Bhangis*, since the practice of humans carrying night soil on their heads did not exist as Hindus did not have toilets in their houses (Narayan 2009: 50). It was only after the Muslims came to India that they captured some Hindus who were forced to either convert to Islam or to collect garbage from people's houses. Those who chose to remain Hindus became *Bhangis*.

They also argue that upper caste Hindus have always been inclusive towards the lower castes. In order to support their argument, they claim that earlier there were no separate steps for Dalits and the upper castes for ritualistic bathing on auspicious days. Everybody bathed together and no one enquired about anybody else's caste. Further, at all famous Hindu pilgrimage spots in the country, there was no caste-based denial of entry to anyone. They have spread the notion that before the arrival of the Muslim invaders, the entire society followed all Hindu traditions and lived in harmony (Narayan 2009:51). Through such arguments and narratives the saffron forces have tried to create a memory of oppression and domination by the Muslims among the Dalits.

Desire, Appropriation and Strategies

In order to fulfil their long term agenda of establishing a Hindu cultural nation based on upper-caste norms even as they include the Dalits into their political and social fold, Hindutva forces initiated intensive programmes in various parts of the country. During the last two decades, the saffron forces have used a variety of cultural stratagems especially in the villages - culture is an important aspect in rural society - in order to bring Dalits into the Hindu fold. This cultural intervention has wrought a number of changes in the performative domain of villages across north India. Many fairs celebrating Hindutva myths have been organised, many folk theatres (*nautankis*) composed and existing ones reinterpreted along Hindutva lines (see Narayan 2009). Thus, communalisation and saffronisation of public spaces have brought the Dalits into the Hindu fold along with the upper castes. In this process, new cultural expressions conforming to the Hindutva creed have become visible in villages across north India.

In addition to cultural intervention in public spaces and in the performative domain, the RSS units also run weekly meetings in Dalit-dominated villages. It is continuously injected into Dalits and backward castes that for rebuilding the country it is important to create social harmony which is only possible through the efforts of the RSS units. They are told that the RSS accords equal respect to each caste and that good moral values will be inculcated into children through its work. In a study of village Rithaiya in UP, it was found that RSS volunteers had formed an organisation called Vanavasi Kalyan Ashram for Dalits.[4] Through this organisation and the Shishu Shiksha Mandir, a school run by the RSS, Hindu festivals like Guru Purnima and Makar Sankranti and other events and workshops are regularly organised for Dalits. RSS volunteers exhort the Dalits to attend the events regularly at which they are inculcated with the ideals of Hindutva. RSS volunteers also visit Dalit clusters in villages and distribute books and other literature. According to Ramashiromani Mishra, a prominent RSS member, the RSS aims to organise some event or the other in Dalit hamlets in all villages by the river Ganga[1]. All these efforts are part of the long term strategy to mobilise Dalits and saffronise them in order to make them feel a part of the Hindu fold and to become the foot soldiers of upper caste Hindus.

---

[4] It was founded in the year 1952. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vanavasi_Kalyan_Ashram.

The BJP, in collusion with other members of the Sangh Parivar like the RSS and the VHP, is now following a dual strategy vis-a-vis the Dalits. On the one hand, it is accommodating leaders of Dalit communities in state and national politics and trying to satisfy their urge for representation in power politics. On the other, the Sangh Parivar is appropriating cultural symbols and folk icons popular in Dalit oral traditions and redefining local societies in north India by imbuing them with a saffron tinge. The emphasis has now shifted from national Hindutva formulations to the local. For this purpose, they are now selecting local heroes of various castes, particularly the Dalits, in different regions of the country and incorporating them into one unified Hindutva meta-narrative. Local myths and legends are being recreated, reinterpreted, and re-narrated by saffronising them to fit into the overall political ideology of the BJP. While mobilising Dalit communities at the local level, the BJP uses flexible strategies by tactfully downplaying its Hindutva philosophy and highlighting local myths even as these are being intricately woven into its overarching political plan. Thus, the Sangh Parivar's sphere of operation continuously shifts from national to local, and again from local to national, extending to global.[5]

As a matter of fact, it has been pointed out by Arjun Appadurai that Hindu fundamentalism at home is being actively aided and supported by the process of de-territorialisation, since it is clear that the overseas movement of Indians has been exploited by a variety of interests, both within and outside India, to create a complicated network of finances and religious identifications, by which the issue of cultural reproduction for Hindus abroad has become tied to the politics of Hindu fundamentalism back in India (Appadurai, 1997: 38). The continuous inflow and outflow of ideas and images through the use of electronic media like satellite television and the internet is changing the very meaning and forms of various local societies and cultures and new, redefined versions are being produced. Through this process, the Hindutva forces ultimately aim to develop a unified national and global saffron narrative which will unite all Hindus under one common cultural rubric.

---

[5] The Sangh Parivar has its own interpretation of Hindutva myths, heroes and histories at the national level. The members of the Parivar disseminate these memories among the local people who perceive them in their own ways. The local people make additions and deletions to these memories which are passed on to them. The local grassroots-people then take these memories to the national level and depict them as the people's history. Finally these memories are taken to the global level. They are first floated among the international diaspora, and in this way they spread at the global level.

One reason why the Hindutva forces have succeeded in saffronising the myths and heroes of the Dalits, thereby facilitating the community's political mobilisation as a whole, is because of the strong urge of the Dalits themselves to gain acceptance from upper caste Hindus. Historically, upper caste Hindus have always culturally and socially marginalised the Dalits, practices which they claim were legitimised by ancient Hindu religious texts and epics like the *Ramayana, Mahabharata,* the *Manu Samhita*, and the *Puranas*. A close reading of the oral culture of many lower castes shows that there is a strong desire to be appropriated into the upper caste dominated socio-cultural and religious order of north India by linking themselves with Brahminical temples, rituals, gods and goddesses and also replicating many of them (Karanth, 2004). This adoption of the cultural resources of the very people who have oppressed them and from whom they want liberation is seen by the Dalits as a possible way to elevate themselves in the eyes of the upper castes, thereby gaining acceptance in their exalted circle.

In order to include Dalits in their fold, keeping in mind their political agenda of establishing a Hindu cultural nation based on Brahminical norms, the Sangh Parivar has propagated the concept of *Ramarajya* in which the upper and lower castes live together in harmony. The *Ramayana* and Lord Rama have been projected as symbols of unity by contending to Dalits that Rama was always linked to the deprived masses and that the *Ramayana* was centred on them. According to this point of view, Dalits played a significant role in Rama's life history. For winning the battle in Lanka, Rama did not send for soldiers from Ayodhya; instead he took the help of Sugriv, Angad, Jamvant, Hanuman and the monkey brigade. These figures actually symbolised the deprived and underprivileged who succeeded in finding Sita (not just the wife of Rama, Sita was the very soul of India). That is why Rama forsook everyone except for Hanuman and kept him by his side throughout his life. This is meant to imply that Rama took to his bosom all those who defended the country and helped contribute to his victory in the fight against evil.

To disseminate this viewpoint, the Sangh Parivar has created its own propaganda literature which is distributed through various forms of print and visual media. A special issue of *Panchjanya*, their mouthpiece weekly newspaper, called *Samajik Nyay*, was published[6] which

---

[6] Panchjanya, 24 January, 2004

reflected the Parivar's attempts to absorb the growing Dalit dissent against Brahminism and to acknowledge the growing Dalit struggle for self-respect and equality by interpreting their past and history and incorporating their newly emerging Dalit-Bahujan identity into an all-encompassing Hindutva identity.[2]

In this manner, the RSS and BJP started projecting Dalits as the saviours or protectors of Hindu dharma. They contended that the Dalits and backward castes are the communities that contributed the most to keeping the cultural heritage of Hinduism alive in India's long, chequered history. The world over, India was known as a golden bird only because of the contributions of the Dalits and backward castes. The BJP-RSS combine further argued that even when the Mughals attacked north India, it was the Vanvasis, Bheels and other so-called Dalits of today who lent their support to Maharana Pratap to fight against Akbar when no Rajput king agreed to do so. Later, along with Shivaji in the battlefield against Aurangzeb, stood the Bhavlis, Paharis and Vanvasis, all of whom were Dalits. Shivaji is supposed to have established a Hindu kingdom in the south with the help of these deprived communities and shaken the foundations of the Mughal monarchy. Thus it was the Dalits who helped end Mughal rule, ultimately re-establishing Hinduism in the country.[3] Hence, depending on the nature of local myths, sometimes local heroes are given warring identities and projected as saviours who fought against foreign Muslim invaders intent on despoiling Hindu or Indian (both are viewed as synonymous by the saffron forces) religion and culture, while in other regions they are either reinterpreted and reinvented as Hindu mythological figures in order to fit them into the meta-narrative of Hindutva, or linked with the story of Rama in the *Ramayana*.

The BJP went on to say[7] that in all the communal riots that have taken place in India since its Independence, of all the people who fought and died for Hinduism, the maximum number came from the Dalits and backward castes. Their houses, for instance, were burnt down the most. This means that they were the ones who stood their ground against the Muslims to protect Hinduism. The BJP tried to make it appear that what inspired the Dalits was the feeling that the Hindu religion was theirs too. Because of some historical distortions, Dalits might not be getting their due respect in society today but whenever any danger falls on Hinduism it is the Dalits who have saved it. That is why Hinduism is indeed their possession and they are the true

---

[7] Panchajanya, 6 April, 2003

guardians of the Hindu faith.[4] In spite of this rhetoric that aims at including Dalits within the Hindutva fold, the BJP was conscious of its failure to ensure social justice for the marginalised castes during its reign in the '90s.

Contesting Myths and Forging Narratives

Initially, political parties like the BJP and BSP sought to mobilise Dalits by launching a homogenous discourse. At the grassroots level, however, there is a great deal of heterogeneity among the various Dalit castes. Only a few communities have cordial social and political relations among themselves. For the most part, the castes are in competitive and conflicting relations. Thus, the political parties engaged in mobilising all these mutually differing castes with their separate and constantly evolving identities, have now realised the need to develop a political discourse that can influence both their specific caste identities as well as their unified homogeneous Dalit identity. By including STs, ex-criminal and nomadic tribes, OBCs and BCs in their net, the Dalits have now evolved into a formidable grouping making up a huge chunk of the national vote bank. No political party can ignore their sheer number, which can decide a party's electoral fate. As awareness of this power, and with it their democratic rights, increases, their electoral importance is also increasing. This is swiftly transforming them as a political power to be reckoned with.

Seeing the new turn of events, the mobilisation of Dalits to promote its own political agenda has become top priority for the BJP, in association with its other wings like the VHP and the RSS. But rather than the term Dalit, which was used by Dr B R Ambedkar, the Sangh Parivar prefers to employ 'vanchit' (deprived) in its discourse. The term evokes a sense of pitifulness and therefore has a more passive connotation than Dalit which translates into a protesting ideology against upper castes. Hence the saffron forces - who mainly consist of upper caste Hindus - try to avoid using the term Dalit. Sometimes, they employ the term 'achhut' (untouchable) which too contains an echo of passivity and pitifulness that is contrary to the protesting Ambedkarite meaning of Dalit. However, under pressure of democratic politics (the Dalits are a potential major vote bank due to their large number), the BJP started reluctantly identifying with the Dalit category. The BJP, however, is trying to modify its meaning to

signify deprived people who were once glorious saviours and protectors of Hindu religion and culture but became 'vanchit' due to the Muslim intrusion in Indian society.

Hindutva forces active in different regions of the country are engaged in the process of creating 'another local' by creating various histories, myths and 'pasts' of the local society or region. Through this past, they are trying to define the aspirations and politics of the people. People's imagination is being oriented through different inventions of history, myths and the past, and their memories are being reframed by intervention in the collective memories of that society through various ways such as forging narratives, constructing visuals in the form of statues, calendars etc., composing new rituals and reframing ongoing rituals, writing popular booklets, and creating new myths and heroes. In this process, they are in fact trying to develop another public sphere by replacing the already existing social sphere. These new narratives developed in one 'local' are also being transmitted to other 'locals' and are picked up and re-narrated by communities there, sometimes in the way that have been designed by powerful political forces and sometimes on their own. The reinterpretation and recreation of local myths in the saffron idiom helps the BJP to create popularly acceptable memories and myths of the Hindu past of that region, especially to reinterpret the Dalit past as a Hindu past. This is one way the BJP is spreading its national political narrative in different areas by inserting it into the collective memories of local societies. In this process, it applies selective remembrance and selective forgetting, and is trying to dominate the remembrance of certain versions of caste and collective memories.[5] In other words, it wants the targeted communities to forget all other forms of collective memories and narratives even as it adds its own narratives to the accounts of local heroes and erases some of their other multiple popular dimension which were prevalent earlier.

An example of how local myths are being reinterpreted by projecting their heroes as reincarnations of Lord Rama can be seen in the region of UP adjoining Bihar, which is dominated by the lower caste Musahars. It is being postulated that Dina-Bhadri, two brothers who are popular heroes of this caste, were reincarnations of Lord Rama and his brother Lakshman. Sahles, a popular local hero of the lower caste Dusadhs of UP and Bihar is also being projected as the reincarnation of Lord Rama. Examples of how Dalit heroes are being linked to Lord Rama can be seen in one part of UP where Savari, who was a minor character in the *Ramayana* and was supposed to have belonged to the Musahar caste, is being used for mobilisation of this caste. In the same way, the myth of Guhya, who was the king of the lower

caste Nishads and another minor character in the *Ramayana*, is being deployed to mobilise the Nishads of Allahabad and its surrounding region. In this manner, the symbolism of Lord Rama is being stretched at the local level by either finding similarities with indigenous heroes whom Dalit castes concentrated in a particular region can identify with, by proving them to be reincarnations of Lord Rama, or linking local Dalit heroes with the story of Lord Rama. It can thus be said that local myths and heroes are being 'Ramised' by the BJP and the nationalist discourse of Hindutva politics is shifting to the local level.

Consider in detail the example of how Sahles, a very popular Dusadh Dalit folk hero in the Mithila region and the northern parts of Bihar, especially in the areas bordering Nepal, has been Brahminised through a long process of transformation due to the efforts of the socio-political elite of the region. Myths and stories associated with him now serve as readymade cultural material for the Hindutva forces who are re-interpreting and appropriating this hero to mobilise the Dusadh caste and bring it into its fold.

Sahles is also known as Raja Sahles, Devta (Lord) Sahles or Bir (Brave) Sahles. He is worshipped in the form of a Manukh Devta (Human God). One can find many Sahles Thaan (Place of Sahles) underneath *peepal* and banyan trees in this region. These spots are also known as 'gahwar' in the local language. At these *gahwars* are installed small statues of Sahles along with other characters associated with his story. Sahles is usually shown sitting on an elephant with one tusk who is called 'Bhauranand'. On the elephant's back is seated the mahout (keeper) whose name is Mangala. On Sahles' right is his brother Motiram while on his left is his other brother Babua Budheshwar, both astride horses. Sahles is flanked on both sides by two flower girls holding baskets of flowers. Raja Sahles' bodyguard 'Kewla Kirant' is shown holding an open sword in his hand (Jha, 2002: 107).

The story goes that Sahles was a brave youth of the Dusadh community who wielded a lot of power over the wild animals, demons and thieves of that region. They were all very afraid of him but many were also a part of his army. Sahles used to protect the region's weak kings and rulers from attack by powerful enemies. It seems that he had some kind of supernatural power by which he could save people from natural calamities such as floods and droughts. He could bore a hole in the ground and draw out water even in places where there was scarcity of water. He could cause a pond to appear by sticking an arrow in the ground. Wild animals on the verge

of attacking innocent passers-by used to turn around in mid-air the moment Sahles' name was uttered. These tales of his immense psychic and physical prowess are the basis of various plays and ballads and are still frequently narrated among the people of that region (Acharya 2002: 57).

Sahles' story is widely circulated in the forested and hilly areas of Mithila comprising the districts of Darbhanga, Madhubani, Samastipur, Munger and Vaishali, and in the Terai areas of the Bihar-Nepal border consisting of Morang, Viratnagar, Jainagar, Rapti and other districts. In these places he is worshipped as a god who can bestow favours on his devotees. By functioning as the saviour and protector of the kings of the Mithila and the Nepal-Bihar region, Sahles slowly gathered enough forces to create his own kingdom called Mahisauth and established himself as its Dalit (Shudra) king and the hero of all the lower castes. Sahles' name, fame and prestige rose so much that Hiteshwar, an important king of that period, wanted his hand in marriage for his daughter Samar. According to folklore, however, Hiteshwar's son did not want his sister to marry a lower caste man. In order to win Samar, Sahles then struggled hard to acquire larger wealth and a bigger kingdom. Gradually, he rose to become an important king in the Mithila and the Terai regions of Nepal adjoining Bihar, and came to be known as 'Lok Devta'. In local lore, Sahles has been portrayed as having to face many obstacles due to his being a Dalit. But by dint of his capabilities and bravery he succeeded in overcoming them, which made him a hero for all lower castes both in that period and even today. His story has been transformed into a myth that is still popular among all the Dalits, especially the Dusadhs of that region.

In order to express their faith in him, every year a fair is held on the day of 'Satuani', a local festival, when prayers are offered to him and attended by people from all castes who come from far and near. In addition, the Dusadhs organise a special worship session for their own caste when collective prayers are held at all his *gahwars*. These prayers are known as 'Sahles Bhao' or 'Bahariya Puja'. Generally, the prayers are held on any Monday, Wednesday or Friday in the month of *saavan* (the rainy season) when a Bhagat who belongs to the Dusadh caste is invited by the people to conduct these prayers.

The saffron forces are now trying to revise the myth in a way that will fit into the Hindutva agenda and will also help co-opt the sizeable Dusadhs and other Dalit castes into their fold.

14

This process is being carried out by playwrights and writers associated with these forces who are penning a large number of plays and stories based on the Brahminical version of the Sahles myth. These are being staged in various parts of Bihar with the aim of popularising a Hinduised version of the myth. During the '90s, theatre companies such as Panchkosi Manch and Sahles Mangiya (Patna) started disseminating the story of Sahles recreated by the Hindutva forces.[6] In these versions, Sahles has been projected as an *avatar* of Lord Rama who vanquished the forces of evil in the form of thieves and demons. The deliberate 'Hinduisation' of the myth of Sahles was seen more clearly when a number of Sahles Pujas began to be conducted in the rural regions of Raxaul, Saptari, Madhepura, Darbhanga etc., under the leadership of Kameshwar Chaupal, the Dalit BJP leader who had laid the first stone of the proposed Rama Mandir (temple) in Ayodhya.[7] Another method the Hindutva forces are using to spread their message among the Dalits, especially the Dusadhs, is to mobilise the Bhagats by organising conferences for them in which they are exhorted to portray Sahles as a Hindu god.[8] Since the Bhagats wield tremendous power and influence, the Hindutva forces try to cash in on this for their own political benefit.

Similarly, in Chittora village near the town of Bahraich in UP, a local myth of the Pasis, the second largest Dalit community in UP, that involves the killing of a Muslim commander, is being reinterpreted and the past of that region is being re-narrated by saffronising it to fit into the overall political ideology of the BJP. The hero of that myth, Suhaldev, who was the king of the Bhar-Pasis, a Dalit caste, is being given a warring identity and is being projected as a saviour who fought against a Mulsim invader (Ghazi Mian). It is popularly believed that Suhaldev was the king of the Bhars, from whom emerged the Pasi community, a Dalit caste of the region.

Due to their large number, the Pasis have been the target of various political parties who would like to marshal this community as their vote bank. Accordingly, the RSS launched a campaign to search for heroes that suit their Hindutva agenda. Such a hero was found in Suhaldev and the RSS started organising festivals to evoke the memory of Suhaldev among the common people of Chittora. Suhaldev has been projected as a *Rashtra Rakshak Shiromani* who defended Hindu society, culture and the country from Muslim intruders by forming a confederation of local kings who fought against Ghazi Mian. In the narratives, Suhaldev is depicted as an ideal Hindu king who protected cows (*Go Rakshak*), protected Indian culture, provided a respectful

position to saints (*Sant Rakshak*) and worked for the upliftment of Hindu culture (*Dharma Rakshak*).[9]

There are two purposes behind the creation of communal warring memories in the myth of Suhaldev. The first is to appropriate the Pasis into the BJP's political fold, and the second is to extend and construct Hindu history against Islam to mobilise Hindus as a whole. In Bahraich there is a famous *dargah* (mosque containing a tomb) of Salar Masood Ghazi who is popularly called Ghazi Mian. This *dargah* is visited daily by thousands of devotees. In May each year, a fair is held in the memory of Ghazi Mian, which is attended by lakhs of devotees (*jayren*), of whom the maximum are Hindus. These people attend the fair to pray for the fulfilment of their desires since the *dargah* is reputed to be a place where the wishes of all devotees are granted. In order to counter this phenomenon and to bring such straying Hindus back into the saffron fold, the BJP organises a fair around the same time to commemorate the memory of Suhaldev. This is held within the precincts of a temple built in the memory of Suhaldev in Chittora. Many programmes are organised as part of the fair, which include a *Kalash Yatra*, *Yajna*, sports competitions, a huge (*virat*) wrestling match and a *Ram Katha* (discourse on Ram). The headquarters of the organising committee was mentioned as Keshav Bhawan, Model House, Lucknow, which is also the head office of the RSS in UP.[8]

The BJP-RSS combine has also tried to bolster the image of Suhaldev as a Pasi hero who was the pride of Hindu society through the print media. Several booklets like '*Hindu Samaj ke Gaurav, Pasi Veer Maharaja Suhaldev ki Shaurya Gatha*', written by Trilokinath Kol, a local RSS activist and BJP leader of Bahraich[10] have been published in which he has tried to influence the Pasi community in favour of the Hindutva agenda.

As part of the transmission of Suhaldev in the popular memory, various statues of him have been installed in different parts of UP. A statue erected in Lucknow by the RSS reflects its desire to propagate an aggressive image of Suhaldev. It shows Suhaldev in a valiant, militant stance similar to the general image of Maharana Pratap. He is wearing iron armour, iron headgear and iron breeches, and is holding a spear with a sword by his side.[11] It is markedly

---

[8] This project was launched on May 2, 2004 when a Maharaja Suhaldev Sewa Samiti, Uttar Pradesh was formed in Bahraich, which organised a five-day celebration in memory of Suhaldev. It was named Keshav Bhawan in memory of the founder of RSS Keshav Baliram Hedgewar.

different from a statue in Bahraich installed in the 1950s based on the painting by the Nag brothers. The Bahraich statue depicts Suhaldev more as a medieval folk hero wearing a crown and holding a bow and arrow and the town's residents believe that this statue is a true depiction.[12] Significantly, Maharana Pratap is another myth propagated by the RSS and the attempt to carve Suhaldev in his image might be a reflection of its desire to homogenise militant Hindu heroes and their iconography.

The Sangh Parivar has created a warring history of Suhaldev by projecting him as a defender and saviour of the Hindu religion who laid down his life to save the people from a foreign invader who was destroying the existing culture. Through this narrative, the combine firstly seeks to imbue the myth of Suhaldev with a saffron tinge. Second, it is hoped that linking Suhaldev's myth with the Pasis will help in their electoral mobilisation under the Sangh umbrella. Third, by castigating Ghazi Mian as a Muslim invader who despoiled the culture of this region, the BJP-RSS combine is trying to implant a sense of guilt among the Hindus who still visit the tomb of Ghazi Mian and pray to him to get their wishes fulfilled. This also helps to create a divide between Hindus and Muslims.

The construction of aggressive hatred against Muslims can be clearly observed during the celebration of Suhaldev's memory by the RSS during the annual festival it organises at Chittora. One form of expressing this hatred is through theatre. Before 2002, the festival was restricted to performing Ram Katha, Kalashyatras and Havan and taking out processions. In 2002, at a meeting held in Saraswati Shishu Mandir, a branch of a school run by the RSS all over India to culturally condition young children, it was decided that depicting the life of Suhaldev through theatre would be a more effective medium for transmitting the message of RSS to the masses. The Berunapur Theatre Company was commissioned to prepare a drama based on the life of Suhaldev. The script was written by Mahiraj Dhwaj Singh, a Sangh *pracharak*, with the help of the writer Gopal Shukla.[13] When the drama was performed for the first time during the fair organised at the Suhaldev temple's premises, there was thunderous applause, especially during the scene when Suhaldev chopped off Ghazi Mian's head. Seeing the response of the audience, the organisers decided to make the drama a regular feature and to make that particular scene even more gruesome and aggressive.[14] This version of the play is now being staged by various other drama troupes of the region who perform on various occasions. Thus, a drama developed to celebrate the memory of Suhaldev is now emerging as

a popular theatrical performance of the region and is helping in the creation of a collective memory which posits one religious community against the other.

Conclusion

It can be clearly seen that in north India today, popular politics has been converted into a very creative process in which mapping, reshaping and the use of popular aspirations and identities appear as major constituents. This can be observed mainly in the case of marginalised communities where cultural identities and not promises of development like access to health, education, roads, electricity and clean drinking water have emerged as essential ingredients in the strategies being employed by political parties to mobilise these communities. In this process, politics has been transformed. The earlier forms of election campaigning like raising slogans and organising processions, strikes and rallies have given way to the organisation of celebrations, commemorations and installation of statues of local heroes of different castes, especially of the marginalised Dalit cates. Rather than concentrating on acquiring tangible resources such as money and manpower in the form of cadres and local leaders, the emphasis is now on intangible resources such as building a reservoir of myths, legends and symbols centred on local heroes of individual castes. This is done both to construct well-defined identities of these castes and to juxtapose them against other castes and communities with the aim of creating a division among them.

This transformation in the form of political mobilisation has occurred since the late '80s and early '90s when a noticeable change was witnessed in the political arena of UP and Bihar, especially UP, where the Dalits gradually emerged as a formidable electoral force whose combined strength could make or break a political party. The political parties active in UP who have understood the potential of this group are trying hard to mobilise them in their favour through various strategies. These parties, whose fingers are firmly on the pulse of the Dalits, have come to realise that, for the Dalits, overcoming the memories of their past when they were oppressed and exploited by the Brahminical cultural and moral order is a prerequisite for the construction and assertion of their identities. Thus, these parties are engaged in a constant effort to mould, reinterpret and re-create the 'pastness' of these communities to conform with their own political ideologies; the ultimate aim being the political mobilisation of these communities

on the side of these parties. Since 'pastness' includes both fact and the imagination of the past of each individual or community and takes shape during the process of remembrance, the past of each community that is present today in the form of its folk culture and collective memories is being transformed by the political parties to suit their own interests. Strategies are devised in ways that fulfil, on the one hand, the need of the communities to assert their identities and, on the other, that allow inculcation of the political ideology of the parties among the marginalised communities.

The BJP and RSS are using the myths and histories of the Dalits to mobilise them in their favour by linking them with a unified Hindu meta-narrative as part of their political agenda of uniting all Hindus to form a single cultural nation and for creating a divide between such a unified Hindu nation and the Muslims. Their success rests on the creation of 'communal moments' by reinterpreting and re-creating local culture, myths, identities and popular symbols in communal ways that help to construct aggressive Hindu identities for fighting against the Muslims who are projected as the enemies of Hindus. This strategy differs from the strategy followed in the '90s when the plan was to link all Hindus, both upper and lower castes, living in rural and urban areas, under one homogenous Hindu identity with Lord Rama as its dominant symbol. Now, the political space has shifted from global and national Hindutva formulations to the local, with local identities and spaces being added on. Local heroes of various castes, particularly of the Dalits, are now being culled in different regions of the country, and being added to the Hindutva meta-narrative. Local myths and legends are being re-created and reinterpreted, and the past of different regions is being re-narrated to conform to the overall political ideology of the saffron combine. Depending on the nature of local myths, at some places local heroes are given martial identities and are being projected as saviours who fought against foreign Muslim invaders who tried to despoil Hindu or, synonymously, Indian religion and culture while at other places they are being either reinterpreted or reinvented as Hindu mythological figures in order to link them with the story of Lord Rama in the *Ramayana*.

Even today, the search continues for communal spaces in the folk memories of Dalits which can be used at the right moment to stir up passions against Muslims. In this process, many Dalit folk stories that are based on love and emotion are being subtly transformed into tales that spew hate and violence. The success of these communal forces rests on the fact that although Dalits are usually seen as a group of subversive people, who are politically conscious and constantly

engaged in a struggle against the dominant upper castes to secure their economic and political emancipation, the reality is that despite the emergence of Ambedkarite consciousness, the formation of Dalit parties and the passage of nearly seven decades since India's independence, only a small section of Dalits has acquired this consciousness. To date, not many lower castes have been able to fight against the hegemony of the upper caste combine, which legitimises its social and cultural oppression and exploitation of the lower castes through the sanction of ancient religious texts. Although it is true that the old Dalit identity has been revised to some extent in today's context and is being reconstructed in a new form, it still bears many historical memories. Nevertheless, in many Pasi, Bhangi and Khatik hamlets in UP one can find BJP flags with the lotus symbol in the centre, fluttering in the wind. Thus, the saffron forces have successfully strengthened their hold on the Dalits. But more than the spread of Hindutva, it is the communalisation of folk culture, folk memories and the infiltration of the politics of hate in the cultural space of everyday life that is increasingly posing the biggest challenge.

. . . . .

End-Notes:

1 Interview of Ramshiromani Mishra by Jaiprakash Tripathi in village Jamunipur, Kotwa, Allahabad, October 20, 2014.

2 *Panchjanya*, 24 January 2004.

3 *Panchjanya*, 6 April 2003.

4 Ibid.

5 See Paul Ricoeur (2004), Vina Das (2001) and Arjuna Appadurai (1999) for more on   selective remembrance and selective forgetting.

6 Pamphlet, Kusuma-Salhes Play, Patna.

7 *Amar Ujala*, Allahabad, 2 April 2004.

8 Field visit, Darbhanga, 21 April 2003.

9 Projection of Suhaldev's image as a cow protector has also been used earlier by the RSS to mobilise the Dalits and backward communities. There were two reasons for making the protection and worship of cows a symbol of Hindu identity, almost canonising it as a Hindu ideal: the first was that it helped establish anti-Muslim feeling among Hindus, and, secondly, it helped to mobilise pastoral Hindu communities like the Yadavs, Kurmis etc. under the saffron fold. During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Arya Samaj, the VHP and the RSS launched vigorous campaigns for cow protection which led to several Hindu-Muslim riots (Vibhuti Narain Rai, *Combating Communal Conflicts: Perception of Police Neutrality during Hindu-Muslim Riots in India.* Allahabad: Anamika Prakashan, 1998, p. 49).

10 *Rashtra Rakshak Veer Shiromani Maharaja Suhaldev*: pamphlet published by Maharaja Suhaldev Sewa Samiti, Bahraich, 2003.

11 Interview of Gopal Shukla, 23 April 2004.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

References

Acharya, H. 2002, 'Daliton ke Devpurush', in Praful Kumar Maun and Rampratap Neeraj (ed.) *Raja Salhes: Sahitya aur Sanskriti*, Namita Prakashan, Muzaffarpur, pp. 55-58.

Appadurai, A. 1997, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation,* Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Dirks, Nicholas B. 1997, 'The Invention of Caste: Civil Society in Colonial India', in H.L. Seneviratne (ed.) *Identity, Consciousness and the Past*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 120-135.

Jha, S. 2002, 'Salhes ka shravani mahotsav', in P.K. Maun and R. Neeraj op.cit.

Karanth, G.K. 2004, 'Replication or Dissent? Culture and Institutions among "Untouchable" Scheduled Castes in Karnataka' in D. Gupta (ed.) *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy, Contributions to Indian Sociology Occasional Studies 12*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

Narayan, B. 2004, *Multiple Marginalities: An Anthology of Identified Dalit Writings*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi.

Narayan, B. 2009, *Fascinating Hindutva - Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

. . . . .