



By KAUSTUBH NAIK

Bahujan Leaders, Not Bahujan Faces

The student union elections at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi recently concluded with the Left Unity Panel, a political alliance between Student Federation of India and All India Student's Association, winning all the four posts on the student panel. The student politics at the JNU campus has always been a closely watched affair and following the national attention that JNU had garnered after controversial slogans raising events in February this year. In this election, both left and right wing parties on the JNU campus jostled to capture the field after the highly acrimonious and divisive scenes following the state's crackdown on JNU in response to the aforementioned events in February.

While these two factions battled for their dominance on the JNU campus, the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Student Association (BAPSA) emerged as the show stealer, despite not being able to win any of the central panel posts. BAPSA was the single largest party to be voted in the JNU student union polls. BAPSA gave a clarion call for the unity of the oppressed, ensuring that Dalits, Bahujans, Adivasis, Muslim students came together to consolidate a formidable opposition not only to the Hindutva forces on the campus, but also to the leftist political outfits that otherwise claim to be in solidarity with the struggles of the oppressed.

BAPSA positioned itself as a political force of the minoritised sections of the students, with opposition to caste as a fundamental basis on which its politics was founded. The rise of BAPSA in JNU is in tune with the various caste based movements emerging from different parts of India, such as the resistance of the Dalit communities in Gujarat under the leadership of Jignesh Mewani, or the nationwide movement that was spurred after the institutional murder of Rohith Vemula, a research scholar at the University of Hyderabad. These political uprisings are indicative of a pattern wherein Dalit-Bahujan and minoritised communities are altering not only the narrative of the Indian politics, but its grammar too.

One manner in which BAPSA has been able to do this is to launch a vocal critique of the Indian leftist political outfits which, for decades, have been positioning themselves as the vanguards of secular and liberal politics in India. However, these left political outfits are very much plagued by the caste hierarchy with upper castes holding (onto) key political positions.

Moreover, the anti-reservation stance of these leftist groups during the implementation of the Mandal commission report or even their unfounded critique of Ambedkar and Ambedkarism is also indicative of their outlook towards caste politics. The newer Dalit bahujan political outfits, such as the BAPSA, have been consistently highlighting the inherent casteism within the left parties, arguing that they are no different from their right wing counterparts.

In this context, the takeaways from BAPSA's politics offer some interesting insights to rethink bahujan politics in Goa. The bahujan communities within Hindu and Catholic communities, have played a crucial role in shaping Goa's political scenario. All parties field bahujan candidates to ensure maximum success. However, this representation of Bahujans within the political outfits in Goa has often, if not always, been reduced into mere tokenistic representation. A look at the recent political outfits that are gearing up for the upcoming assembly elections in Goa would tell you that though all these parties are promising assured representation of bahujan and minoritised communities, their supreme leaders are predominantly upper caste individuals. Most of the parties have their bahujan faces in cadre that does the groundwork but when it comes to assuming leadership positions, it has always been dominated by the upper caste leaders of these parties.

The implications of such usurping of positions of power by upper caste leaders are many. Firstly, while most of the parties will claim that they represent interests of all communities, the interests of the upper caste communities get preference by the virtue of them being led by the upper caste members themselves. Secondly, it renders the bahujan leadership within the party ineffective; the bahujan leaders lack the power to counter the assertion of upper caste interests because they understandably try not to rock the boat so as to maintain whatever position of influence they have within the party. Thus, the bahujan leaders are rendered as baits to garner bahujan support while the upper caste power structure does not allow them to safeguard political interests of the bahujan communities.

BAPSA's act of distancing itself from the left parties on JNU campus is precisely to overcome such usurping of power. BAPSA has no qualms about clearly indicating whose interests they are representing and remain committed to foregrounding the struggles of the oppressed communities. Similarly, Goan bahujan politics needs to be reinvented to distance itself from the political outfits that operate not in the bahujan interest, but to serve upper caste interests disguised as those representing a cross section section of the Goan society. Instead, a

bahujan alliance that brings together both, the Hindu and Catholic bahujan communities in agreement of sharing power can go long way in changing the fate of bahujan communities in Goa. Otherwise the upper caste leaders will continue to remain in positions of power, not only through the support of aforementioned *bahujan faces* but also at the cost of bahujan communities' access to social and political upliftment.

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