

THE ETHNIC PUZZLE OF INDIAN ELECTIONS: BOOK REVIEW OF MOBILIZING THE MARGINALIZED

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NAME OF BOOK: MOBILIZING THE MARGINALIZED:
ETHNIC PARTIES WITHOUT ETHNIC MOVEMENTS

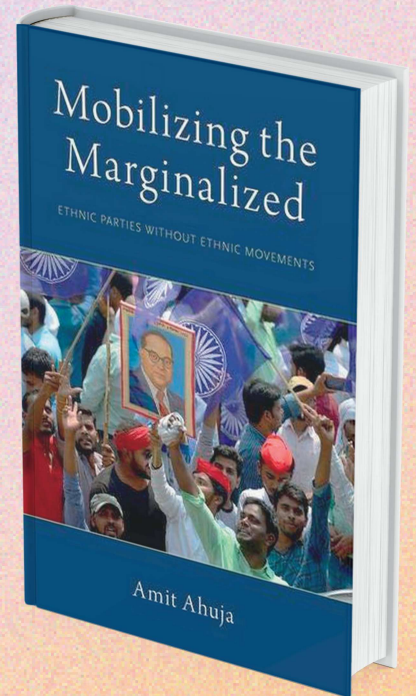
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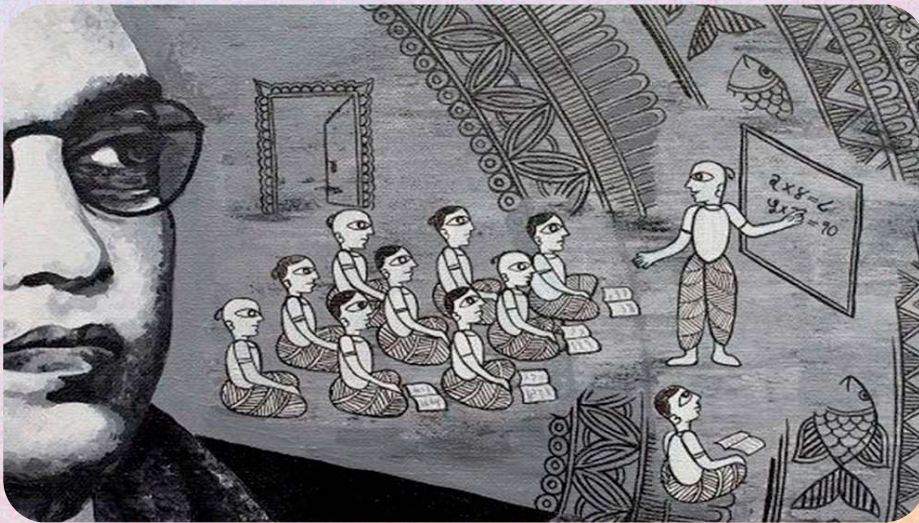


"Dalits are among India's most marginalized citizens". Amit Ahuja from the very first paragraph of his book *Mobilizing the Marginalized*, gives us the focal subjects of his exploration- Dalits. Amongst all ethnic groups, the position of Dalits in Indian society has been one of suppression since ancient times. It would seem that with the onset of democratic practices their conditions would take a recognizable turn, especially one marked by their cohesion for a common cause (their upliftment) during electoral settings. Though Ahuja in his exploration finds that this thought is not spatially consistent throughout India, and finds a rather particular paradox regarding the same. The main aspect of this paradox, as he puts it is, "Dalits' ethnic parties have performed poorly in elections ... where their historical social mobilisation has been strong, yet ... performed well in elections in states where their social mobilization has been absent or weak". For this, he explores the relation of the ethnic mobilisation of the Dalits in the electoral settings through different states, with each having a different prior Dalit mobilisation history. Therefore, in this review we are going to inquire into the arguments put forth by Ahuja in his book, to see the different aspects related to the social and political mobilisation of Dalits in different states in India. We will do so while giving primary focus to the issue of internal cohesion amongst Dalits in their electoral practices in different states, and the reactionary strategies of parties towards this.

THE CENTRAL PUZZLE

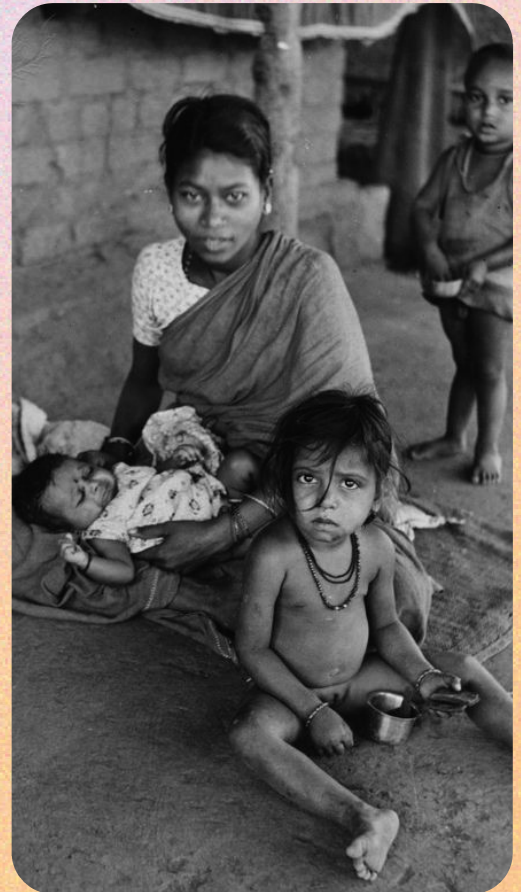
As mentioned earlier, the book revolves around the central puzzle of the disparity in the performance of Dalit parties as well as the attitude of Dalits towards the same in different states. For this Ahuja takes four states- Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and categorises them as either 'movement states' or 'non-movement states', based on if they have had a recognisable prior social mobilisation of Dalits. Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, having

significant social movements by Dalits in their history have been categorised as the movement states, where the prior mobilisation of Dalits “has produced measurable change”. On the other hand, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have been categorised as non-movement states, as it is argued that most mobilisation of the Dalits took place only after the onset of electoral politics. In this regard, he tries to elucidate why the factor of prior social mobilisation plays a role in electoral politics, particularly when it comes to the group voting behaviour of the Dalits. One might assume that due to the history of prior mobilisation of Dalits in movement states, the Dalits are already ethnically mobilised and hence would act in cohesion when it came to electoral voting. Which in turn would result in the ethnic parties like VCK in Tamil Nadu and RPI or BSP in Maharashtra accumulating more of the votes from the Dalits (getting the bloc vote). But it doesn't seem to be the case, rather in non-movement states, where the Dalits had been mobilised only recently, that too for electoral purposes, ethnic parties like BSP in UP and LJP in Bihar have been doing fairly well in elections. It must be noted here that Ahuja keeps in mind how to vote share alone can't be seen as “an insufficient indicator of caste-based bloc voting”, and hence supplements by referring to his findings from the data (Indian National Election Survey). In this, we see that 38% of Dalits in movement states and 54% of Dalits in non-movement states agreed to “vote the same way as members of one's caste or community” (116).



DIFFERENCES IN VOTING AND MOBILISING PRACTICES

Therefore, we see this common phrase- ‘Indians don't cast their vote, they vote their caste’, to have spatial fluidity while describing the collective voting behaviour of Dalits. Ahuja while trying to unravel this phenomenon, takes in various factors affecting the voting behaviour based on state category, but emphasises two of them heavily. First, the way parties mobilise the marginalised in different states, and second the importance of the identity of being marginalised. When it comes to the strategies adopted by the parties to mobilise the Dalit votes, we have a cross-sectional view as we take into account the role of both ethnic parties and multi-ethnic parties in both movement and non-movement states. programmatic ideas, therefore, remained a cohesive voting bloc, with support usually to the ethnic parties. These attributes also affected the other side, as parties' attitudes were influenced by voters' attitudes. Parties in UP and Bihar usually gave fewer campaigning efforts to Dalit localities, as ethnic parties already counted on their votes as a bloc, whereas multi-ethnic parties saw little chance of drawing them from their ethnic parties' fold. In the movement states, the mobilisation of Dalit and non-Dalit voters remained similarly competitive in the electoral setting for the political parties. This ties to the second major emphasis



involved in social change through the past movements, they have largely also been included in other movements and hence to a degree a greater identity has subsumed the exclusion. We see this happening in Tamil Nadu, where the electoral mobilisation based on Tamil nationalism included many marginalised castes. In Maharashtra, we see that due to the significance of the prior social mobilisation (especially by Dr Ambedkar), multi-ethnic and ethnic use Dalit symbols alike for electoral mobilisation. As Ahuja quotes a Dalit MLA from the Congress party, "You cannot compare the Dalit voter in Maharashtra to one in Uttar Pradesh. The voter in Maharashtra is looking for economic progress. We cannot mobilise our brethren in the name of Babasaheb [Ambedkar] alone... Everyone uses him." Further parties like Shiv Sena and BJP have included Dalit symbols in their respective mobilising strategies. In contrast, the non-movement states have seen the growth of Dalits as an ethnic voting bloc, mainly towards ethnic parties, which may be attributed to the relatively less development (social and economic) they experience due to the lack of a prior mobilisation. Therefore, it can be argued that they choose ethnic parties as their hope and chance for upliftment. Therefore, their identity of being marginalised persists and hence there exists a cohesion between them towards their ethnic parties.

CONCLUSION

Hence, we can say Ahuja gives a very vivid account of the processes of ethnic electoral mobilisation in different states in India, stemming from the description of the past (or the lack of) social ethnic movements to the contemporary party practices which shift from state to state. We also take note of the argued tangentiality when it came to his survey to establish identity entrapment through matrimonial attitudes and contrasting it with larger identity politics, especially concerning elections. Other than this we see Ahuja's arguments seeming coherent and are well evidenced with theories and supporting data, thus we could also make the connection of other aspects like patronage politics and developmental politics with this discourse. Therefore, Ahuja does indeed give us one answer for the existence of the puzzle of the differences in ethnic politics in different states, and why Dalit's electoral behaviour varies from state to state.

