Why doesn't the BJP face greater resistance from lower castes in Gujarat? Part 2

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2013/03/13/bjp-face-greater-resistance-part-2/

In Part 1 of this post, LSE's Dr Manali Desai (Department of Sociology) and Dr Indrajit Roy (Research Fellow at Queen Elizabeth House) ask why the BJP does not face greater resistance from the lower castes in Gujarat. Using a political subjectivity lens, they argue that the social engineering of consensus around the promise and premise of development has generated support for Chief Minister Narendra Modi. Here, they explore two other factors for support for Modi among constituencies that one might have expected to oppose him.

The perception that the security environment has improved. Many Hindus defined the past 10 years of BJP rule (since 2002) as one of 'security', citing the better law and order situation (i.e. absence of riots). This was despite the perceived lack of avenues outside oppressive work and declining living standards. There was a general perception, experienced first-hand by the authors, that Ahmedabad was by and large safe at very late hours: although public transport was not very reliable, autorickshaws plied till very late in the night. It was common to see – at least in the central parts of the city, the more conservative old town and the upscale western suburbs – young women, sometimes dressed in western outfits, out until late in the evening, albeit in groups.

This sense of security did not always find echo among the city's Muslims, partially on account of them having been at the receiving end of state-orchestrated violence of 2002 as well as because the bulk of them were compelled to live in colonies and settlements with little or no public amenities such as tarred roads and streetlights. Increased security for the bulk of the Hindus has come at the expense of Muslims (as well as Dalits in rural Gujarat, as exemplified by police firing on four youth from among this community). The Chief Minister's later electoral speeches bordered on scaremongering. In one, delivered in his home constituency, he commented on an alleged deal between arch-rival Pakistan and India's central government controlled by his opponent the Congress Party. He warned his audience, a cheering crowd of perhaps over two thousand that if these policies continued, "the enemy would soon be knocking at your doors."

The perception that Modi was the only guarantor of the state's security, which would be severely compromised if the opposition acceded to power, was widespread among a majority of the Hindus. A few of our interviewees echoed sentiments widespread among Hindus that they had it coming: they had been flirting with 'criminal elements', the argument went, and ought to have been more sober in their 'support' for gangsters such as the dreaded Abdul Latif. Most Muslims reacted angrily to the suggestion that such gangsters had been heroes for their community, but accepted that they had not done enough to counter such a characterisation. Their insecurities notwithstanding, they were emphatic that they would cast their vote and try and change their situation through electoral mechanisms. One 45-year old Muslim widow from the 2002 riots in Juhapura was clear: "We are citizens of this country. There is no question of us not voting. That's our right, and our obligation." Such spiritedness was matched by the Hindus: a 45-

year-old OBC Hindu shopkeeper in Khadiya said, "we must vote in order to preserve our security. Otherwise, it will be like the misrule of the 1980s." As with development, the Modi regime appears to have successfully constructed a political identity around enhanced security of life, including the bulk of the population to the exclusion of others.

The belief that the BJP encourages rapprochement between the different ends of the caste spectrum into a socially respectable undifferentiated Hindu community. Our interviews also suggested that some Dalits and OBCs felt that the BJP (Modi in particular) had offered them respect and integration into upper caste society. An OBC Hindu family from Shahpur, of the Devipujak community, proudly said, "Modi gave us identity, respect." That they continued to be (and feel) discriminated by local elites from the self-styled ritually pure communities was not inconsequential to them, but they could draw solace from the fact that at least they could now claim a respectable status. Modi's own elevation as the son of a local teacher to that of the state's Chief Minister, and his own origin in a ritually 'low' (but not 'untouchable') caste, was often held up as a model of upward social mobility offered by the BJP in the state. Indeed, central to the political identity forged by the BJP was the leaders' claim that it encouraged rapprochement between the different ends of the caste spectrum into a socially respectable undifferentiated Hindu community.

The Congress Party was seen as a party of the poor, of Dalits and Muslims, without the promise of being lifted out of these social locations and their associated stigma. The BJP, on the other hand, offered Modi's career trajectory as the model for those who aspired to better lives. Although there were reportedly many party leaders who disdain him on account of his social origins (with particularly crude and vulgar jokes about the caste group he is affiliated with), he remains an important symbol for the upward mobility that is crucial to maintaining the mythology of BJP rule. At the same time, he is also offered as the quintessential 'subaltern' hero, battling the dynastic rule of the Congress Party, a disparaging English-speaking liberal secular intelligentsia, and yet one who can do business with corporate interests and get them to set up shop in the state.

In a situation of pervasive material insecurity and a deep sense of 'lack', with little hope held out for the future by either of the two political parties, the rhetoric of a development-oriented security-enhancing regime offering avenues for apparent upward social mobility found many takers. That this was fallible was evident from election results in Sanand, the showcase industrial township a few kilometres north of Ahmedabad, which provided home to the much-hyped Tata Nano automobile project. A resident complained of land deals being cut between the supra-local BJP leaders and representatives of big business with little benefit to the ordinary folk. Long considered a safe seat for the BJP, these elections were expected to cement the party's long-term presence in the constituency; however, the party suffered a defeat, exposing the chinks in its strategy of promulgating development as a strategy of social engineering.

Our research suggests that the method of correlating electoral outcomes with social structural data gives us a clue to the kinds of 'pacts' that are forged between parties and citizens, but does not tell us much about the subjective political orientations of these citizens. The high voter turnout suggests that people in Gujarat are politicised, and keen to make their voices heard. However, there seemed to be very little positive sense that much would change in their lives once the elections were over. The predominant subjective orientation was pessimism towards the future – not many felt either they or their children would have a better life.

Click here for Part 1 of this post.