

Maya, Modi, Azad: Dalit Politics in the Time of Hindutva
by Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar
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There are only a few books which come out at the most appropriate time and engage with the complex, immediate and impending social-political questions of their times. *Maya, Modi, Azad* is one such book to be published in recent times.

Maya, Modi, Azad, at the initial instance, looks like a book about three different leaders at three different phases of their political journey. One who became the supreme icon of Dalit assertion and managed to achieve the feat of becoming the first Dalit Woman Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (UP) but is now purportedly at the end of her political career with no strong hold and influence over Dalit voters anymore. Quite dissimilar to this is *Azad*, a young energetic activist who has emerged from the streets as an aggressive and articulate leader willing to take the new generation of Dalits forward and in the process offer a challenge to the old guard and their brand of politics. The third leader in the title is *Modi* which seems to be an interesting case not just because he has become arguably the tallest leader of Hindu Nationalism but has also been able to attract sections of non-dominant Dalits and OBCs (Other Backward Classes) that have now turned to Hindutva in recent times. This is the central theme of the book. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership Modi has refuted many conventional wisdoms one of them being that a political formation based on a 'Brahmin-Bania' core will struggle to gain support from the Dalits and other marginalised castes. What is the reason behind the shift of these hitherto estranged groups towards Hindutva is the primary purpose that the book seeks to serve.

The book is divided into three parts and eight chapters. Part I is titled *Building a 'Rainbow' Party with a Dalit Core* and talks about the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), how it played out its Sarvajan experiment and the possible reasons behind the recent decline of the party. One of the questions that this part raises is whether the BSP is facing an existential crisis in today's time and has the Dalit movement entered a post-BSP phase? Part II, titled *Dalit Interface with Hindutva*, is about the inclusion tactics of Hindutva, how it tries to bring Dalits into its fold and whether it is really inclusionary in the real and significant sense of the word? A major question that crops up in this

section of the book is whether the recent shift of some of the Dalit and OBC communities is instrumental or ideological in nature? Can this shift be read as an instrumental and pragmatic decision to align with a political force that is in power and has a better chance of providing material goods owing to its control over the resources? Or is this shift deeper and goes beyond the dimension of resources and their distribution suggesting that the ideological tenets of Hindutva and Hindu Nationalism have become attractive and acceptable for the more marginalised castes? Finally, Part III looks at the new Ambedkarite organisations that are slowly developing and expanding and now operate in UP, fighting against caste atrocities and discrimination, the most prominent among these organisations being the Bhim Army led by Azad. This part is titled- *New Stirrings: Emerging Dalit Organisations*. This is the last section of the book and it deals with the question of fragmentation of the Dalit Movement in UP. Can the emergence of so many groups and factions be seen as a clear sign of a movement that is divided and fragmented? And what is the likely result of this fragmentation on the future success or non-success of the Dalit movement in UP?

One of the major theoretical arguments that comes out of this book is the distinction that the authors draw between the social and the political (also, electoral. Dalits facing violence and atrocities socially will assert and fight back and will also become politically visible and significant. But both these things need not happen through the same platforms or in the same manner. When atrocities against them take place, they might call upon someone like *Azad* but their vote loyalty is still for *Maya*. The book is seeking to put forward a claim that identity works differently in different realms in different times. Approaches to understand the Dalit identity and Hindutva politics should keep this in mind. The shift of some of the backward castes towards the BJP, what is referred to as Subaltern Hindutva, again raises this distinction between the social and the political. Two factors may be playing a role here- one is the *labharthee* model of welfarism that the BJP has adopted with direct cash transfers and the other is related to its successful outreach to some sections of the non-dominant Dalits and OBCs through the cultural realm. Even though the BJP has failed to stop caste atrocities and violence, it does not naturally mean that the party is seen as the only stakeholder failing. The evidence provided in the book suggests that for Dalits, caste violence is not a phenomenon that came after BJP came to power and that parties before had also failed to provide sufficient protection to them. With the added element of *labharthee* welfarism, BJP seems to be the better option for some of the marginalised castes. Thus, social discrimination does not naturally and immediately mean that these backward castes will not

back the BJP politically or electorally. Hence, there is divergence between social experience and political preference. Social and political behaviour can be different, at times perhaps, even contradictory to each other. That is the point that the book is making.

One of the prominent points that arrive from the book is that there can be multiple ways in which mobilisation can happen in a larger movement, such as the Dalit movement, which has been under progression for many decades. Movements are multi-dimensional and non-linear. While BSP could be one dimension of Dalit mobilization, Bhim Army and other similar Ambedkarite organisations could be another dimension and flirtations with Hindutva could be another. All in all, the book is a compendium which deals with several topics such as Dalit identity and its changing contours, social-political lives of Dalits, historical development of an independent Dalit politics and its current state, activism and assertion in civil society space, how to look at the debate between an apparent choice dignity and development, workings of Hindutva politics and the reasons for its stupendous rise, among others.

This is not to suggest that the book provides answers that should be taken as final. No text, however authoritative, can become unquestionable in intellectual pursuits. Even perfection has faults. And the main failure of this book is its inability to provide a theoretical framework and basis for drawing the distinction between the social and the political-electoral. Methodologically, the book could have become richer with ethnographic focus on the behaviour of Dalits during election times and how much variance or similarity there is when compared with non-election times. Lastly, some light could have been thrown at the distinct leadership style of the three leaders that constitute the title of the book- *Maya, Modi, Azad* and their significance as major players in the making of *past, present, future* of Dalit and Hindutva politics.

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