

Casting their votes by voting their caste

In rural India, old class divisions still rule local politics. Will this spell trouble for Narendra Modi?

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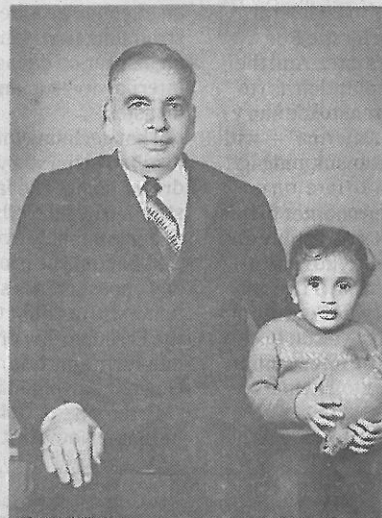
When I was growing up in India in the 1970s and '80s, my father's job as a naval officer took our family from one big city to another, from Bombay to Singapore. But every summer, we spent a month with my maternal grandparents in Bijnor, a small city in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, and one of its poorest.

Today, my city friends are surprised to hear I have roots in the "mofussil," a British colonial term for the countryside that Indians now use to refer to rural places where old ways run deep. And few traditions run deeper than the 3,000-year-old caste hierarchy. Originating in ancient Hindu teachings, the system divided the Hindu majority by

occupation, with Brahmins — priests and scholars — at the top, followed by warriors, traders and laborers. At the bottom were night soil workers and other "untouchables."

Shortly after independence in 1947, India banned caste discrimination. Leaders of the untouchables proudly renamed themselves Dalits and demanded an end to their daily indignities. But many of the old ideas and practices endured, especially in places like Bijnor, which in the 1980s was not unlike America in the 1880s, or even 1950s, when raw discrimination was normal.

Pillars of the community like my grandfather, a Brahmin lawyer and landowner beloved to many as Babuji, lived by the rules of the mofussil. Brahmin homes kept separate plates for wealthy Muslims — poorer Muslims and Dalits stayed outside. Those who worked Babuji's sugar cane fields sometimes communicated with him by bel-



SHARMA FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH

The author as a child with his grandfather, a Brahmin lawyer and landowner.

lowing down the long veranda, on which they knew not to tread.

In a society that associates light skin with upper class and caste, my unmarried aunts would slather themselves with a pungent milk cream and roam the house like so many ghosts. Should one of us children touch a member of the caste assigned to emptying toilets, we would be rushed off to bathe. The staff was scolded with a string of invective ending in a vulgar epithet. Once, when the adults blurted the epithet, my 4-year-old cousin forgot it out. Everyone laughed at how clever she was.

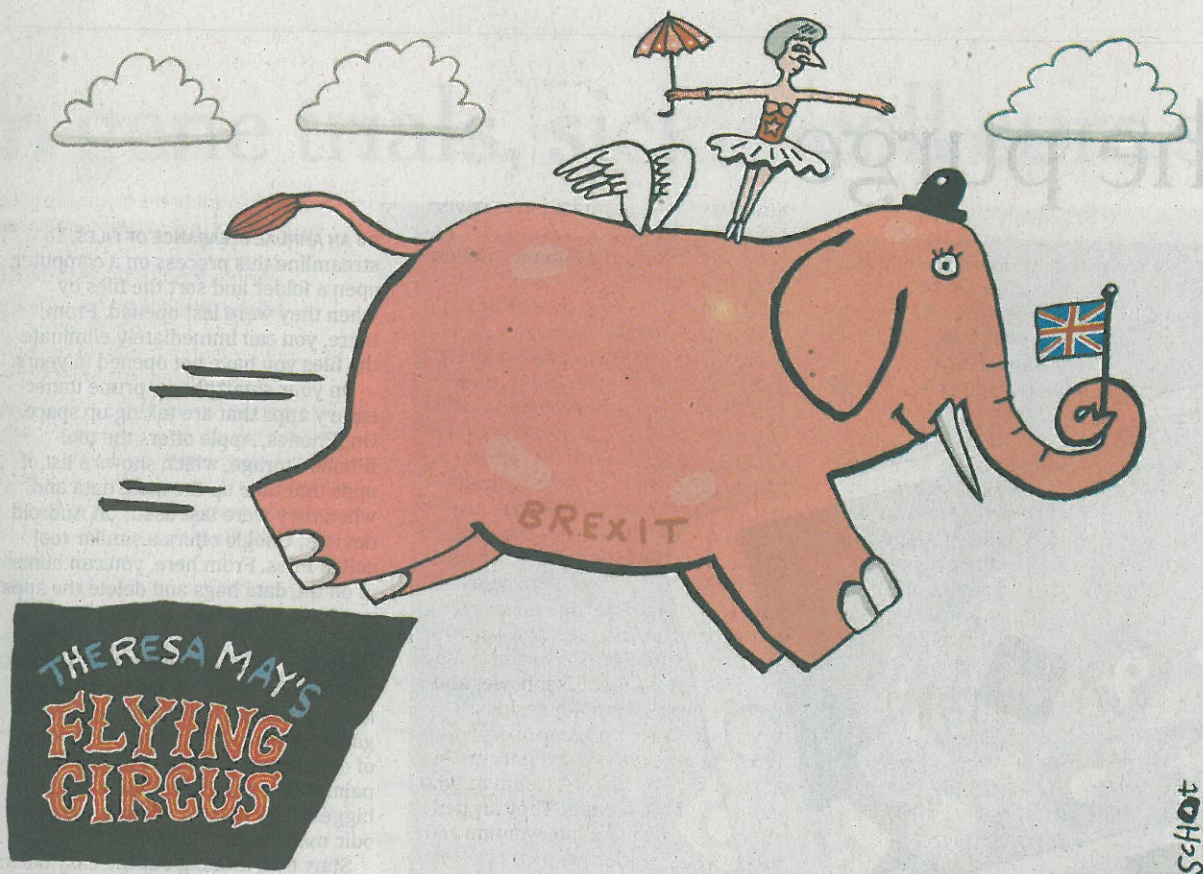
Lacking parks, pools or steady electric power, Bijnor had nothing for a boy to do. So I started following India's favorite spectator sport: politics. I would listen as the adults hurled insults at the sole state TV channel and its propaganda for the then-dominant Congress Party. By my early teens, I was venturing into the town square to

soak up the debates, often monopolized by upper-caste complaints about how the Congress leaders were "coddling" Muslims and Dalits, reserving government jobs and privileges for them, threatening the Hindu way of life.

Babuji, the rock of our family, passed away in 1993. I moved on to college and stopped visiting Bijnor, but my taste for politics remained. In my early 20s, I formed a group of fellow writers to follow Indian campaigns at least once a year. Even after taking a day job as an investor and moving to Manhattan in 2002, I kept returning. Twenty-seven trips later I had crisscrossed every major state in India, but had not visited Bijnor until late last year.

I returned with the idea of ending a forthcoming book about India in a classic mofussil town. The dirt roads and pontoon river crossings that once separated Delhi from Bijnor had been re-

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placed by paved highways and suspension bridges. But the 100-mile trip still took four hours, thanks to recent development and the traffic it has created. The town square was more chaotic than ever, crowded with motorcycles weaving fast among the cows. And while some caste lines had faded, they remained as rigid as ever in politics.

A joke about the changing social mores of urban India has a mother telling her child in the 1970s to marry anyone, so long as they are in your caste. In the '80s that became anyone in your religion, in the 1990s anyone in your country, and in the 2000s anyone of the opposite sex. But Bijnor drew the line at marrying outside one's religion. Bijnor's district magistrate — the most powerful local official — was a Brahmin named Atal Kumar Rai, who said he still got complaints about "Love Jihad," an alleged conspiracy to convert Hindu women to Islam through marriage.

Mr. Rai and others said progress was more visible in the commercial sphere: Muslims and Dalits were no longer denied service at lunch counters; castes were no longer confined to divinely decreed occupations. Many were working in local restaurants, some as cooks, where former "untouchables" were now allowed to touch the food of higher castes.

By comparison, politics seemed stuck in the past. From 2014 to 2018, 100 million Indians had reached voting age, and many pundits thought this youth bloc would ignore caste loyalties. Instead, we found last year that people of all ages were voting along familiar battle lines of caste or religion.

My escort in Bijnor was my second cousin, Prashant Mishra, known as Monty, who excused himself at the town square, saying that as a prominent Brahmin and supporter of the ruling Hindu nationalist party — the Bharatiya Janata Party, or B.J.P. — his mere presence would discourage Dalits and Muslims from speaking openly to me.

Upper castes spoke of how the B.J.P. prime minister, Narendra Modi, was defending the Hindu way of life from the

growing Muslim minority and reforming a corrupt economy. Muslims and Dalits spoke of how he was destroying jobs and business, and how the party was conspiring to manipulate electronic voting machines to steal the national elections in April, when Mr. Modi is up for re-election. Underlying these theories was a weary skepticism that any party would do anything to raise living standards — meaning voters might as well pull for the politician most loyal to their own religion or caste.

At the Bijnor jail, the warden, Radha Krishna Mishra, spoke proudly of modernizing the lockup, including by installing machines that bake roti. But caste politics had persisted. Asked about criticism of the B.J.P. for promoting upper-caste officials like him, he

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said that the previous state government had favored its supporters, mainly Muslims and Yadavs, a caste once linked to cattle herding. "Now that our government is in power, we have

the good postings," Mr. Mishra said. "That's the way life goes."

We drove to the sugar cane fields Babuji once owned, and we found that voters there were also skeptical of economic progress and divided by faith or caste. The former caretaker, a kindly man who gave me rides to the town square on Babuji's tractor, was now so frail, despite being only in his 60s, that his son carried him outside in a wheelbarrow. His replacement, a young Brahmin and avid B.J.P. supporter, showed us WhatsApp videos purportedly showing illicit fortunes amassed by Mr. Modi's leading rivals.

The Congress Party, once the nation's most dominant political force, has been supplanted in many states by regional parties, each championing one of India's thousands of castes and subcastes. In Uttar Pradesh, the B.J.P.'s main rivals are the Samajwadi Party led by Akhilesh Yadav, and the Bahujan Samaj Party led by Mayawati, a legendary

Dalit who goes by one name. Mayawati had risen to power from Bijnor in the 1980s, when her supporters used to chant, "The upper-caste Brahmins, Bania and Thakurs, thrash them with shoes."

These caste bonds will be hard to break, even for a leader like Mr. Modi, India's most powerful prime minister in decades. Once seen as an economic modernizer who rose above the caste fray, he has bent to Indian reality, trying to build his support beyond his party's upper-caste base by playing up his family's humble roots as tea sellers. In 2014, the B.J.P. took a majority in Parliament with just 31 percent of the vote, because the rest of the vote was scattered among hundreds of opposition parties — most of them organized around castes.

This year may be different, as the opposition is more unified, fearful that Mr. Modi is becoming a Hindu nationalist strongman. In Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati and Mr. Yadav recently joined forces. Similar anti-Modi alliances are forming in other major states. Mr. Modi's fate depends largely on how many of these alliances across caste lines come together against him.

Returning to Bijnor was a stark reminder for me of the adage that Indians don't cast their vote, they vote their caste. Those loyalties still hold beyond the ballot booth. Babuji's mansion had remained vacant since my grandmother passed away in 2003, when my relatives fell into a classic Indian battle over who would inherit it. The Dalit party led by Mayawati had recently swooped in trying to seize the abandoned property for its own use, Monty said. He had mobilized his upper-caste allies in the local B.J.P. government to stop it. Brahmin versus Dalit, once again.

Gazing wistfully at the cracking pillars and crumbling walls of our embattled family home, Monty whispered to me, "This palace was once mighty."

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