

History wars

Why Narendra Modi has embraced an anti-caste icon

B.R. Ambedkar dedicated his life to challenging Hinduism

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A statuesque legacy

THE FATHER of the Indian constitution was not allowed to sit inside the classroom at school. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) was a Dalit: formerly known as an “untouchable” at the bottom of India’s caste hierarchy. Even so, he went on to obtain an economics PhD from Columbia University before becoming a lawyer and minister. A fierce critic of Hindu nationalism, he warned that “the assertion by the Hindus that India is their country is untenable”. In 1956 he converted to Buddhism, along with nearly half a million Dalits. This

year, however, Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government declared his birthday, April 14th, to be a national holiday.

The announcement marks a high-profile intensification of the government's efforts to claim Ambedkar. On March 30th Mr Modi visited the site of Ambedkar's conversion in Nagpur, in the state of Maharashtra, where the prime minister pledged allegiance to the icon's principles.

Mr Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is on the back foot on caste politics. When Mr Modi was re-elected in 2019, the BJP's vote share among India's approximately 232m Dalits was 34%, up from 24% in 2014 and only 12-14% in previous elections. But in the general election last year, in which the BJP failed to win an absolute majority, the support of Dalits for the BJP dropped by three percentage points, even as national support declined by less than one. During the campaign an opposition alliance including the Congress party, the BJP's main rival, spread a rumour that if the BJP won an absolute majority it would pursue constitutional changes that could jeopardise Dalit rights.

Not all of the BJP is on board with the reclamation of Ambedkar. Amit Shah, the home minister, said in a speech on the constitution's 75th anniversary last year that invocations of Ambedkar were merely "a fashion". Recently, the BJP's central leadership sent out a communiqué urging cadres to avoid derogatory remarks on Dalits. But on April 6th Gyan Dev Ahuja, a BJP politician, caused outrage by "purifying" a temple in the state of Rajasthan after a Dalit politician from Congress entered it, suggesting that among some politicians old attitudes die hard. (Two days after the incident, he was suspended.)

Meanwhile, the Congress party is loth to share Ambedkar with the BJP. The party organised "Ambedkar Respect Marches" to counter Mr Shah's remarks (it is unclear how many people actually attended them). Its party president, Mallikarjun Kharge, is a Dalit. But even

with Congress, the legacy of Ambedkar is complex. He clashed repeatedly with the upper-caste Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

And despite the national holiday, Ambedkar's vision of a casteless India is far off. The National Crime Records Bureau reports over 50,000 caste atrocities against Dalits every year. Demands by the opposition to include an all-out accounting of caste in a delayed national census, which is due this year, will probably show that Dalits comprise a larger share of the population than the 16.6% recorded in the 2011 census. This means that India's politicians will continue to chase after their votes, whether or not Ambedkar would have lent them his. ■

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