

POLITICAL APPROPRIATION: A CASE OF RSS-BJP COMBINE TRYING TO RECREATE NATIONAL HISTORY

SHIBI KIRAN M¹

¹Former Guest Lecturer in Political Science, Maharaja's College and Devasom Board College, Ernakulam, Kerala, INDIA

ABSTRACT

The RSS-BJP combine in a politically expedient manner is trying to appropriate national leaders of various other political parties of India in order to earn legitimacy and gather votes. Through this process they are recreating their place in the nationalist discourse in which they played nil roles. This paper looks at how it will affect contemporary and future political discourse in the country.

KEYWORDS: RSS, BJP, History, Political Appropriation

To counter the Congress (which is the largest National leaders are often the crucial link joining politics and history. The role that they play in the political life of a country becomes part of history later on. Therefore, appropriating national leaders is tantamount to redefining and recreating history the way the appropriator wants it to be. As a consequence of it, something which was never part of history is suddenly shown to have a pre-eminent place in it.

The origin and evolution of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has virtually no role in India's freedom movement, as well as, the constitution making process is an established fact. It therefore becomes necessary for the organization's political protege, the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), which surprisingly came to power after winning the 2014 general election, to rewrite nationalist history. Without doing so, the party can never hope to establish their authority and to perpetuate it.

Here are some of the national leaders who have been appropriated by the BJP.

SARDAR PATEL

When Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister of Gujarat for over 10 years, he gave shape to the resentment shared by Gujaratis over the negligence of the place of Sardar Patel in India's history. Modi projects himself as the 'ironman' and decides to make the world's tallest statue in Patel's honour. During his tenure as CM he styled himself as "Chota Sardar" (Small Leader) to get close with the powerful Patel Community and to show his toughness on muslims (*The Huffington Post*, Oct 2, 2015).

After becoming Prime Minister, on 31st October, 2014 the Modi led BJP celebrated the birth anniversary of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel as 'Ekta Diwas' or National Unity Day (*The Hindu*, Nov 1, 2014). The day expanded into a weeklong commemoration as Rashtriya Ekta Saptah from 31 October to 6 November. It must be noted that the same day coincided with the 30th death anniversary of Indira Gandhi and that her birth anniversary on 19th October is already celebrated as the National Integration Day.

Sardar Patel was an important leader of Indian freedom struggle and his role in the integration of the country post-independence gives him a special place in history. Patel who was a rightist in the Congress did not get the recognition that he deserved and it is this legacy that the BJP is trying to exploit now, like for example, by planning to build a statue for him in Gujarat. What is interesting is the fact that he was firmly against the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS during that period.

MAHATMA GANDHI

The first thing that the BJP did after coming to power was to wean Gandhi from the Congress fold. On 2nd October, 2014 Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched initiated the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan to clean Indian cities and villages by 2nd October, 2019 which coincides with the 150th birth anniversary of Gandhi. He invoked Gandhi in his tweet: "Let us fulfil Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Clean India – Swachh Bharat." (*Hindustan Times*, Oct 1, 2015) Thus in one sweep Gandhi's inheritance is weaned away from the Congress.

Also by launching the Clean India Drive from Balmiki Basti (scheduled caste locality) in Delhi he sent a symbolic message that he cared both for cleanliness (safai) as well as cleaners (safai karamcharis). It may be noted that Gandhi cared for harijans and their votes were available for Congress until the rise of Bahujan Samaj Party and other Dalit parties. Through this act Modi is trying to convince that there is somebody to work for them.

JAWAHAR LAL NEHRU

The BJP led government celebrated Jawaharlal Nehru's 125th birth anniversary on 14th November, 2014 (*The Hindu*, Nov 16, 2014). The Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh released a Nehru portal and commemorative coins. The government also allotted Rs. 20 crore for the yearlong commemoration and Minister of State for Culture Mahesh Sharma taking a dig at the Congress said that, "This 'Rastrapurush' (man of the nation) is not the heritage of any family or dynasty." The day also saw the two parties vying to claim Nehru for themselves.

BHAGAT SINGH

On 23th March, 2016 the BJP celebrated the martyrdom of Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev who were hanged in Lahore jail in 1931 on the same day (*Hindustan Times*, Mar 24, 2016). A three day celebration was also organised which also involved celebrating holi, in which homage is paid to Bhagat Singh by singing 'Range De Basanti Chola.' The day also saw both the Congress and BJP accusing each other of appropriating national icons for political gains.

B R AMBEDKAR

On 14th April 2015 the BJP celebrated the 124th birth anniversary of B R Ambedkar in an effort to appropriate dalit votes. The BJP and RSS leaders were insisting that Ambedkar was too great to be represented by one political party [hinting at BSP]. The day was also declared Samajik Samrasata Diwas or Social harmony day (*Firstpost*, Apr 14, 2015).

In a related way, the BJP led government also celebrated 26 November, 2015 as 'Constitution Day.'*(The Indian Express*, Nov 26, 2015) The day also known as Samvidhan Divas is celebrated in the honour of Ambedkar who is known as the architect of the Indian constitution. The year 2015 also marks the 125th birth anniversary of Ambedkar, who chaired the constituent assembly's

drafting committee and played a major role in the writing of the Indian constitution.

OTHER LEADERS

Some of the other leaders who were appropriated include Subash Chandra Bose. On 23rd January, 2009, Modi celebrated the birth anniversary of Bose by unveiling his statue in Haripura in Bardoli, where he was elected president of the INC in 1938. In Kerala, Modi hailed Ayyankali the dalit icon on his 152nd birth anniversary at a function organised by Kerala Pulayar Maha Sabha (KPMS) which represents the interests of scheduled caste community in the state (*The Times of India*, Sep 9, 2014). In a similar vein he also invoked Narayana Guru who also belonged to the backward Ezhava caste.

The list also include icons like

- Jana Sangh leaders Syama Prasad Mukherjee and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya;
- Socialists like Subhas Chandra Bose, Ram Manohar Lohia, Jayaprakash Narayan;
- Medieval warriors like Shivaji and Maharana Pratap, Maharaja Suheldev;
- Religious reformers and saints like Swami Vivekananda and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu;
- Nationalists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Madan Mohan Malaviya, Sri Aurobindo,
- Hindu Mahasabha leader Lala Lajpat Rai, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Rani Gaidinliu;
- Modern leaders like Narasimha Rao;
- Dalit leaders like Jyotirao Phule, Babu Jagjivan Ram, (*Firstpost*, Apr 8, 2016) and so on.

REASONS FOR APPROPRIATION

1. BJP as a party and its parent organization the RSS has little political history and has played no role in the freedom movement. Hence it wants to join the narrative to show that it has a history and that it can play relevant political roles even now.

2. Since both the organizations has played no role in the freedom movement it has no national icons or popular leaders which can attract people across India. Hence it is selectively adopting icons to gather support in India as a whole.

3. Both the organizations want to show that they have played an important role in the building up of Indian nation state especially in the constitution making process by adopting Ambedkar.

4. Appropriating local icons helps these organizations to appeal to regional voters as well as to establish its presence in those regions.

5. Most of the icons appropriated are those which have been sidelined and neglected by Congress. Both the organizations by picking up such leaders wants to restore their pride of place in India's history.

6. As both these organizations dont have secular credentials, by appropriating leaders with secular outlook will help cover its communal identity.

7. To counter the Congress (which is the largest national party in India) as well as other national and regional parties

CONSEQUENCE OF APPROPRIATION

1. By selectively coopting icons their original message is misinterpreted and helps in confusing the public about their true legacy.

2. It helps in polarising the public in terms of ideology leaving little space for middle ground or taking a balanced view.

3. It helps in spreading false history.

CONCLUSION

When a party comes to power which has political and historical gaps, it suits them to coopt leaders to show that they have a lineage and history. This is only for mass appeal, but the real touchstone for the party is what they do once they are in position of power. It is this memory that will determine whether the party is worthy otherwise it will be discarded.

In terms of present and future implications it will force other parties and organizations to rethink and reinvigorate their ideologies and political actions in order to remain relevant. As for the Congress party, it needs to stop holding onto its past and need to find new sources of inspiration for better political engagement.

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