

India: The Janata Parivar 2.0 initiative — real hope or illusion?

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Among the more interesting recent developments in Indian politics is the attempt to regroup fragments of the old Janata Parivar and launch a new, reunified party which recreates the once-powerful Socialist current in politics. Long a part of the Left, this current was second in importance only to the Communists until the 1970s.

The initiative, whose seeds were sown on November 6, has now resulted in a decision to set up an organisation informally called the Samajwadi Janata Party. It's the combined effort of Samajwadi Party president Mulayam Singh Yadav, Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United), HD Deve Gowda of the JD (Secular), Laloo Prasad of the Rashtriya Janata Dal, the Chautalas of the Indian National Lok Dal, and Kamal Morarka of the Samajwadi Janata Party (Rashtriya).

The details of giving the party a concrete shape, name and symbol have been entrusted to Mr Yadav. Until it's formally launched, these groupings will function as a policy-oriented bloc in Parliament and undertake a joint protest action on December 22.

It won't be easy to select a single symbol because each of the parties is identified with its own individual election symbol. The issues of organisational structure and leadership hierarchy haven't been fully resolved.

It's tempting to see in this unresolved, fluid state of things another instance of the Socialists' indecisiveness. But that would be a lazy person's analysis. The fact that they are coming together fully 26 years after the Janata Dal was formed under VP Singh's leadership, through the amalgamation of a number of Socialist splinters from the original Janata Party, is itself significant.

So is the reported agreement that the new bloc would be led by Mr Sharad Yadav in the Rajya Sabha and Mr Mulayam Singh Yadav in the Lok Sabha.

The leaders also agreed to confront the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government on the Land Acquisition Act (whose consent clause it wants to dilute to favour Big Business), raising the foreign direct investment ceiling in defence and insurance, and diluting the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act.

The new bloc reportedly decided that "social justice" would not be its central plank—not least because the Mandal platform of Other Backward Classes consolidation would not work today given that Prime Minister Narendra Modi is himself trying to appropriate the OBC mantle. If the bloc invests some imagination into the task, it could create a novel political platform.

A personal angle has also emerged, with the impending marriage of Mulayam's grandnephew and Mainpuri MP Tej Pratap, and Laloo's youngest daughter Raj Laxmi. This reconciliation is politically significant because Laloo Prasad and Mulayam Singh became bitter rivals after the RJD chief scuttled the Mr Yadav's chances of becoming the Prime Minister in 1997.

The bloc currently commands 15 MPs in the Lok Sabha and 25 in the Rajya Sabha. If eventually—and optimistically—the reconstituted Janata Parivar can rope in Odisha's Biju Janata Dal, which too was earlier part of it, its strength would rise by 27 MPs, 20 of them from the Lok Sabha. This can give the bloc real political heft.

Three factors have played a major role in catalysing this attempt at the Janata Parivar's regroupment. Two negative ones are the severe setbacks these parties have suffered at the hands of the BJP in the Hindi belt, particularly Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and now Haryana; and second, the exhaustion of their identity-based caste-oriented "social justice" politics over the past decade or more.

A positive factor is that they stand to gain a great deal from coordinating their electoral efforts. For instance, in Bihar, if the JD(U) and RJD were to join forces, their combined vote would be 47 percent of the total, well above the 39 percent polled by the BJP-led alliance in the last Lok Sabha. This would enable them to win 28 of Bihar's 40 seats.

The situation is less favourable in UP, where Ajit Singh's Rashtriya Lok Dal still remains allied with the Congress and where the Bahujan Samaj Party is loath to join forces with SP. (If the two allied, they would poll almost the same number of votes as the BJP.) Nevertheless, the new bloc could have a positive impact even in UP in facilitating new social coalitions.

At any rate, this raises the hope that Socialist current, which ceased to have a coherent organisational expression by the early 1980s, might be recreated in some form. Given the disarray of the mainstream Communist parties, this could be good news for the Indian Left, and might stimulate a sorely needed debate on radical politics at a time when neoliberalism has become socially dominant.

The Socialists originally emerged in 1934 as part of a pressure-group called the Congress Socialist Party within the parent organisation, which included many Communists too. But the Socialists and Communists were allied to different international movements and couldn't recompose their ideological differences, especially over the relevance of caste and class.

Their mutual hostility, and refusal to have an ideological dialogue or political coordination, led to a tragic early division within the Indian Left, for which both paid dearly. This was especially true of Bihar where the Communist Party of India had a strong base, as did the Samyukta Socialist Party, but the two acted as rivals despite their mutual complementarity in regional and social-base terms.

Worse, the Socialists themselves repeatedly split, primarily on the policy to be adopted towards the Congress. Their dominant faction, Rammanohar Lohia's SSP, advocated anti-Congressism as an ideology, and formed a series of non-Congress governments in the Hindi belt after the Congress lost the 1967 elections. These also signified the political rise of the OBCs alienated from the Congress.

Anti-Congressism eventually laid the basis for the merger of the SSP and other Socialists into the Janata Party in 1977 in opposition to the draconian Emergency rule imposed by Indira Gandhi. The Janata Party restored democracy. But it was itself a divided house, with conflicting factions.

Jaya Prakash Narayan, another former Socialist, played midwife to the Janata Party by bringing the erstwhile Jana Sangh into it and giving respectability to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. This proved disastrous. The Janata government, led by Morarji Desai, an incredibly inflexible and angular politician, became a hostage to Right-wing policies and manipulation by the Jana Sangh faction, which tried to topple against the party's state governments, and refused to forswear its primary loyalty to the RSS on the "dual membership" issue.

The Janata Party imploded in 1979. The Socialists who came out of it once again split into rival factions: the Janata Dal, formed by VP Singh, Bharatiya Lok Dal and Congress (S) in 1988, Chandrashekhar's Samajwadi Janata Party in 1990, Mulayam Singh's Samajwadi Party in 1992, George Fernandes and Nitish Kumar's Samata Party in 1994, and Laloo Prasad's RJD in 1997, etc.

The splits were bad enough. More damagingly, some of these factions, including the Samata Party and RLD, and later Ram Bilas Paswan's Lok Janashakti Party and Chautala's INLD, joined BJP-led coalitions for entirely opportunistic reasons, destroying their own "social justice" claims. Only Laloo and Mulayam have refused to break bread with the BJP. Today, three "Rams"—Paswan, Ramdas Athavale and Ram (Udit) Raj—all Dalits, have become Hindutva's greatest apologists.

The Janata Parivar 2.0 project might seem a good alternative to the BJP and the Congress, and especially a powerful counter to the Sangh Parivar, which the old Socialists rightly see as the greatest threat to their own survival. But it is marred by three major flaws or problems. First, Nitish Kumar faces a challenge from his Dalit successor-Chief Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi.

Second, the project lacks ideological coherence and a comprehensive alternative socio-economic programme. A genuine alternative must oppose neoliberalism and corporate capitalism, as well as the BJP's Hindutva ideology. It's not enough to oppose communalism alone.

The Modi regime represents a diabolical combination of communalism, a perverse development model, authoritarian governance, social conservatism, anti-people and anti-environment policies, and militarist national chauvinism. It cannot be fought effectively on a selective, partial terrain.

Unfortunately, many of the Janata Parivar parties succumbed to neoliberalism in the past and followed compromised policies whether on relations with our neighbours, on human rights or on the environment. This must change if they are to offer a credible alternative to the BJP.

Third, the Janata Parivar will gain nothing by excluding the Communist Left and refusing a policy dialogue with it. The more cerebral Left since the mid-1990s has been the mainstay of all initiatives to form various Third Front alternatives to the BJP-NDA and/or the Congress, and provided policy and programmatic thrust to them, which they couldn't generate on their own.

That historical role apart, this is a momentous opportunity for the Socialist regroupment to restart the long-interrupted dialogue with the Communists, who can be expected to be more receptive to it given their own dire straits today. The opportunity must not be squandered.

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P.S.

<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/12/20/The-Janata-Parivar-2.0-Initiative%3A-Real-hope-or-illusion>