

Samvidhan: Sita Of The Election Epic

Why Opposition & BJP both say they're on a mission to save the Constitution. In village & small town campaigns, the C word has become a catch-all for rights to state resources

Anastasia Piliavsky & Vikramaditya Thakur



This year and for the first time ever *samvidhan* – the Constitution – has become as pivotal to Indian electoral politics as it is to American.

A week before polls opened this year, a video suggesting plans were underway to replace the Constitution with another, based on *Manusmriti*, 'which not even Baba Saheb Ambedkar himself could abolish', circulated on social media. The following day, on Ambedkar's 133th birthday, online media space filled with calls coming from all corners of Opposition, from Congress to AAP, to rescue the Constitution. The video turned out to be a fake, but its claim hasn't gone away.

Since then, *samvidhan* has established itself as the Sita of the electoral epic, uniting every player in a shared mission to rescue it from the others.

Brandishing a copy in Bilsapur last month, Rahul Gandhi insisted that it is the solemn duty of Congress – together with Dalits, tribals, minorities and the poor – to rescue the Constitution from BJP. Modi, in turn, accused Congress of 'hating' India's constitution (and its identity and family values too), and of preparing to turn SC, ST and OBC reservations, which the Constitution guarantees, over to religious minorities, a move that would have shocked Ambedkar.

While Kanhaiya Kumar casts Opposition as 'the Constitution's true guardians' (*hum hain samvidhan ke asli pahredaar*), BJP president JP Nadda is busy reassuring voters that govt is better placed to protect constitutional rights and values than a *sankalp rahit* (agenda-less) and *mudda vihin* (issue-free) Opposition.

After all, it is this govt that in 2015 designated Nov 26 as India's Constitution Day. In an early public hint at tensions between RSS and BJP, this was a retort to RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's suggestion to revise constitutional reservation quotas.

Neo-constitutionalism | Though the Constitution is a brand-new electoral plaything for party bosses, over the past decade it has been a flag flown high by different political movements across the country.

In 2017-18 the Jharkhand Pathagadi movement for the protection of tribal land inscribed 15ft stone slabs, set up at the entrance of many Munda villages, with quotes from the Constitution. And in 2019, JMM

rode to govt in Jharkhand by invoking the Constitution to demand that Adivasis be recognised as bearers of Sarna Dharma, neither Hindu nor Christian.

In 2019-20 agitators against CAA, most notably those in Shaheen Bagh, also referred to constitutional values. Demands for reservations by peasant youth from the Jat, Maratha, Gurjar and more recently even Rajput communities, which rocked northern India over the past decade, have also placed the Constitution into spotlight – although their demands have been more narrowly focused on reservations.

Everyman activism | A sect of Ambedkarite Mahar neo-Buddhists in Maharashtra may well celebrate Nov 26 as Preamble Day in their *Baudh viharas*, as they chant, after their leader: 'One man, one vote, one value.' But most Indian citizens do not have the Constitution on their tongues. While illiterate villagers and educated city dwellers alike have a lot to say about their state or central govt (*sarkar*, *shaasan*) or administration (*prashaasan*), the world's longest constitution leaves them tongue-tied – an arcane matter best left to lawyers and judges.

A new generation of rural activists has set out to change this. Santosh, a Bhil activist, the first from his family to attend school and now in possession of a master's degree in social work, runs constitutional awareness workshops in tribal northern Maharashtra. Using stories and songs in local languages, he explains to a crowd of barely-literate villagers, gathered after a long day's work: 'The road to your village, govt welfare schemes, forest rights, the court, all come from this *deshachi pustak* (country's book).'

Dhanaji, a lower-caste activist from Kolhapur, Maharashtra, says: 'Dams and electricity, which created rural prosperity, tie back to state planning, and, eventually, the Constitution. So do primary health centres in villages and reservations for women.'

Dadabhai, a Dalit school teacher in Nandurbar, Maharashtra, adds: 'Many historically subordinated groups, especially women, Dalits, and Adivasis are now thinking, what's my problem, and how can it be addressed using the Constitution?'

Everyday un-enlightenment | But is this what they really think? Few people in Nandurbar, an ST district, where activists promote constitutional consciousness, invoke Article 15 guaranteeing equality or Article 342 guaranteeing tribal reservations. The absence of the C word in everyday political conversations stands in sharp contrast to the language of welfare and development, which most freely speak.

Youth across the countryside, where unemployment is pandemic and agriculture increasingly unprofitable and uncertain, have been pursuing reservations as part of their demand for stability. Caste censuses conducted

in AP and Bihar and demanded in other states are part of this country-wide preoccupation. As activists rile up villagers in support of their demands, the Constitution is helping them bridge well-familiar welfarism with the latter-day politics of reservation.

For all rural activists' efforts, it is, however, the 'rescuers' of the Constitution in Parliament who are now most effective at adding the statute to people's claim-making lexicon. In just six weeks the C word has been transformed from an obscure technical term into a buzzword of India's political common sense.

Piliavsky is a social anthropologist at King's College London. Thakur teaches anthropology at University of Delaware



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