

Competitive 'Exclusionism'

The state has to assert itself to defeat the politics of exclusion of the two Senas in Maharashtra.

The politics of exclusion, intimidation and violence has begun to boil once again in Maharashtra, especially in Mumbai. This time there is the added edge of competition with the Shiv Sena seeking to recapture its traditional agenda from the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), whose presence has led to the former receiving a drubbing in two elections over the past year.

The threats to the film actor Shahrukh Khan and the film *My Name Is Khan* have occupied the headlines. But there is something deeper and more worrying that is happening in Mumbai, which goes much beyond the issue of one actor or one film. If the Shiv Sena's recourse to "outsider-bashing" is a case of reaction to the burst of popularity for the MNS in the state, the party headed by Raj Thackeray has already made it a central plank of its politics to mimic – and has, sadly, proved successful in this respect – the formative days of the older party with its rabble-rousing and pursuing a "nativist" agenda. The spurt of attacks on any public figure who reiterates that any citizen can live anywhere in the country (and that therefore no one can be kept out of Mumbai) and the use of the language of threats against migrants from the northern states are reminiscent of the 1960s when the Shiv Sena first went after the trade unions, and then launched its "sons of the soil" movement targeting south Indians.

The breaking away of Raj Thackeray from the parent party and the recourse to nativism have meant that both the agenda as well as the violent "politics of the street" are back. As two insightful commentaries on the Shiv Sena-MNS-Mumbai politics in this issue argue, ever since the formation of the MNS in 2005, the party has taken a strident "Maharashtrian identity" approach, pushing the nativist agenda back to the forefront of politics in the state. The Shiv Sena had during the 1990s ventured into aggressive Hindutva and had tasted power at the centre and in the state. In the process it had toned down one strand of its agenda of exclusion. The MNS has focused on intimidating migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, in particular, trying to fan feelings of hatred among vast sections of Marathi-speaking working people in Mumbai. The party has also gained the support of a section of the upper and middle classes, who share the majoritarian impulse propounded by it.

So virulent has the campaign against migrants from north India become that even the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its patron, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, have distanced

themselves from the rhetoric of their ally, the Shiv Sena. And they have gone on to affirm their "protection" of Hindi-speaking migrants in the state. It is apparent that for the larger national party that the BJP is, militant exclusionary politics of the Senas' variety is unpalatable, coming at a time when the party is suffering a large trust deficit in Uttar Pradesh and faces elections later this year in Bihar.

The "retaliatory" stances by the other major parties in the state, the Congress, in particular, have, on the other hand, been limited to symbolism and theatrics. Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi's visit "defying" the threat of protests by the Shiv Sena struck a chord among a section of the middle classes which was appalled with the Senas' politics. But given how the Congress has in the past either nurtured the Shiv Sena or has made use of defectors to buttress itself (such as the embrace of Sena demagogues like Narayan Rane and Sanjay Nirupam), its opposition to the politics of the Senas has been lukewarm. The long ruling Congress-Nationalist Congress Party government has taken a few genuine steps to curb the activities of the MNS, since it has reaped "the benefits of using" the latter to undercut the support base of the Shiv Sena. Indeed, the presence of the MNS severely hurt the electoral fortunes of the Shiv Sena-BJP combine in the assembly and Lok Sabha elections of 2009. Besides, it helps the state government to keep public attention alive on such issues of identity; far more relevant issues dogging the state such as inflation, difficult living conditions and matters related to livelihood are thereby relegated to the background.

The continued use of illiberal politics and vandalism, the lukewarm reaction by the state government and the mild response by members of civil society in the recent past have only emboldened the MNS and the Shiv Sena. Seen in this light, the remarks by popular actors and sports personalities, of late, against the Shiv Sena and the MNS' politics appear like strong positions. But that is not sufficient to take on the entrenched politics of exclusionism practised by these parties or the cynical opportunism of the ruling parties that has helped sustain it.

Will the state recognise that it has to reassert its constitutional mandate to put down the violent politics of intimidation and blackmail of the Senas? Will the other mainstream political parties realise that they are riding a tiger if they embrace this politics in the hope that they can make lasting electoral gains?