

Monetary Fund. This policy-designation has enforced a practice in which Bangladesh has been systematically denied investment and any aid for infrastructure development.

For example, in 1975, American statesman Lyndon LaRouche, along with friends in Europe, attempted to negotiate the sending of dredges to Bangladesh from the Netherlands, which would have permitted Bangladesh to deepen its river channels for flood control. The potential deal was directly sabotaged by Henry Kissinger, then U.S. secretary of state.

Today, Bangladesh is one of the world's ten poorest countries, with an average per capita national income of \$160, according to the World Bank, and an infant mortality rate of 117.8 per every thousand babies born. Life expectancy at birth is 50 years.

Bangladesh had severe economic problems before the cyclone, including having to repatriate about 100,000 workers from the Persian Gulf oil producing states at enormous cost during George Bush's war. The workers, whose remittances are a major source of foreign exchange for Bangladesh, are only now returning to the Gulf.

Such dire poverty, imposed by the international bankers, is responsible for the magnitude of the calamity that hit Bangladesh, not "Mother Nature." The vast majority of those who died were the poorest Bangladeshis, who, without land of their own, have occupied the low-lying islands, where occupancy is officially illegal. These islands have been built up from the silt brought by the huge Ganges-Brahmaputra rivers that course through Bangladesh, and are subject to precisely the type of inundation that swept through them in April.

Secondly, Bangladesh lacks the capability to relocate millions of people on the 24-48 hours notice provided by storm warnings. A coastal defense plan, devised against such storms, has not been carried out for lack of funds. Under this plan, embankments and concrete bulkheads would break the power of the tidal waves that hit the country's coast.

Thirdly, the financial crunch imposed on the country has prevented the Bangladesh government from building cyclone shelters, as was planned following the 1970 cyclone, a storm of comparable magnitude which claimed 100,000 lives. The London *Guardian* noted May 6 that the cyclone shelters that had been built since 1970 all stood through the storm intact, and everyone who made it into a shelter survived.

### The long-term problems

The longer-term effects of the cyclone could be as tragic as the immediate disaster. In addition to more than \$500 million in estimated damage to Bangladeshi agriculture, including the destruction of the winter rice crop, which was ready for harvest, and nearly all livestock in the 200,000 square mile stricken area, the Chittagong oil refinery, the most important in the country, was badly damaged and huge quantities of fuel contaminated by salt water. The "export-processing zone" in Chittagong, where about 70 processors earned vital foreign exchange, has also been wiped out. The

entire salt-producing industry has been destroyed, as well as shrimp cultivation. Hundreds of fishing boats have been destroyed, and the lucrative shrimp industry in the city of Cox's Bazaar has been wiped out. There will be more loss of livestock because there is no fodder, the government reports.

But this human catastrophe has been a cause for rejoicing among the international financiers who have written off the "Fourth World," who are committed to eliminating the darker-skinned populations of the world's South. Writing from Tokyo, where she attended the recent meeting of the conspiratorial bankers' society, the Trilateral Commission (see page 8), *New York Times* senior columnist Flora Lewis hailed the news of the death of thousands of Bangladeshis, noting that the region's fertility allows people to "proliferate to the very brink of survivability. Only recurrent, quite expectable natural disasters put some limit on population growth, and not much at that."

## The caste factor in Indian elections: a poll analyst's myth

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan B. Maitra

When the results of the tenth Lok Sabha elections are out by the end of May, the myth of caste division within Hindu society playing a major role in deciding the polls' outcome will be shaken up. Equally certain is that the analysts, bereft of real contacts with the majority of Indian voters, will cling on to the myth, rationalizing the election outcome through a myriad of equally mythical assumptions and calculations.

With less than two weeks now left before the election (at the time of this writing), the Indian media are churning out article after article harping on the old theme: how the caste factor is going to influence the vote. So far, this election, held in the shadow of some political parties' relentless campaign on behalf of caste solidarity, has been a delight for Indian and foreign poll analysts. They are busy calculating and re-calculating caste and ethnic combinations based on demographic figures extrapolated from an ancient census carried out by the British Raj. It is interesting to note that the British were always careful to enumerate caste, sub-caste, ethnic and religious strengths in the censuses they carried out. Although the practice was abandoned following Independence, the intrepid election analysts carry on with figures provided by those same censuses, scaled up, of course, to account for population growth in the interim.

This demographic game played by analysts here, and

lapped up by foreign correspondents unabashedly, is self-serving in a number of ways. In the first place, to be an expert poll analyst one does not have to know anything about the aspirations of the people in general and the realities that concern them. The innumerable caste permutations and combinations can be calculated sitting in an air-conditioned room, with or without a calculator, but decidedly far away from the distant, unfathomable, and inscrutable people, otherwise known as rural Indians.

### A chimerical votebank

Former Prime Minister V.P. Singh has made his rallying cry undying support to the Mandal Commission Report of the late 1970s, which recommended that the government reserve 60% of the government jobs for the thousands of castes and sub-castes who are socially and economically backward. V.P. Singh, whose 11-month rule has little to show other than a chain of chaotic events and petty intra-party infighting, expects that by promoting this complex and controversial report he will grab the votebank that the 60% of the backward caste grouping represents. To substantiate the claim, a few so-called backward caste leaders were projected as V.P. Singh's loyal lieutenants, who accompany him from one stop of the roadshow to the next. The implication is that these so-called leaders are the flagbearers of the backward castes and they will deliver the backward caste votes *en bloc* to the V.P. Singh-led Janata Dal party.

This absurd concept, a sham in fact, has been swallowed by all Indian poll analysts, barring a few. According to these caste-based poll analysts, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the two most populous states in the union, are overridden with caste factors. In the tenth Lok Sabha parliamentary elections, according to this analysis, both these states will go solidly behind the Janata Dal since the backward castes, who are reportedly highly excited by the former prime minister's crusade for social justice, will vote *en masse* for the Janata Dal. In addition to the backward caste votes, a candidate who belongs to the forward caste, as is the case of V.P. Singh himself, will also split the forward caste votes.

Is it really so simple to analyze how Uttar Pradesh and Bihar will vote this time around? Hardly so, as history indicates. On Dec. 7, 1984, a little more than three weeks before the eighth Lok Sabha polls were held, a leading Indian political commentator and poll analyst, Chandan Mitra, who has been writing in leading Indian English-language news dailies for years, wrote a piece in the Calcutta-based *The Statesman*. In analyzing the "crucial nature" of the Uttar Pradesh vote, Mitra said: "The Lok Dal/DMKP [Lok Dal, now split and of little political strength, took the new name, DMKP, before the 1984 polls] vote is unlikely to collapse mainly because the party has an identifiable area of support and also represents distinct economic interests. Further, it overtly exploits caste equation and is particularly strong in regions where intermediate castes—Jats, Ahir/Yadavs, and Kurmis—dominate."

But after all the authoritative analysis of caste equations, the Lok Dal/DMKP came out a cropper in Uttar Pradesh and, in fact, all 85 seats were swept by the Congress (I) Party! Such a result is typical. Similarly, the Congress's poll record in the state gives the lie to the caste analyst. In 1967, the Congress won 47 seats; in 1971, 73 seats; in 1977, none; in 1980, 51 seats and in 1989, nine seats. All these variations happened while the caste equations remained the same. The Congress's alleged votebank of Brahmins, scheduled castes, and Muslims never changed, but the Congress vote certainly did.

That is not to say that caste does not play *any* role in electing a candidate or helping a party to get seats in certain regions. But those caste equations are played by almost every party, and, for that matter, that is the way the electoral system works everywhere in the world. For example, in a Yadav-dominated area, most major parties put up a Yadav candidate just as a black or a Hispanic candidate is put up in U.S. congressional districts where these ethnic groups dominate. In the last elections, in Hajipur, Bihar, for example, Ram Vilas Paswan won by a record margin. Against whom did he register such a huge margin? Another Paswan, belonging to the Congress (I)! Moreover, all major parties in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are armed with leaders who belong to the dominant caste or castes.

Since the caste equations never in fact explain anything, the analysts hold on to the myth only by adding it with "other factors," such as the "wave phenomenon," religious factors, etc. In the process, however, the analysts completely overlook the organizational strength of the winning political party, the credibility of the winning candidate, and the bread-and-butter issues that affect the electorate, among other factors that truly determine the outcome of elections.

Behind these analysts are the sociologists who have made a career of recording the various distinctions that thousands of castes and sub-castes have. One such is André Beteille, a French sociologist married to an Indian sociologist at Delhi University. A great believer that caste is pretty much the main foundation on which Indian society stands, Professor Beteille maintains that it is not that the pre-Independence image of caste being on the retreat was wrong. But he says, what was overlooked was that while the influence of caste was waning in some spheres, it not only had a foothold but was gaining a stranglehold over another field—politics.

In an interview with the *Times of India* in November 1989, Professor Beteille heralded the Janata Dal's campaign on the Mandal Commission Report as proof of his wisdom and the benchmark of a new, lawful epoch in Indian politics. V.P. Singh's move converted what was a state-level issue into an all-Indian one, Beteille declared. The issue of reservations, he said, revolves around two axes—one of social justice and the second of power. The coming election will give the lie, again, to such pompous pronouncements. The Mandal Commission reverberation issue will prove a non-starter.