

Shifting Identity Politics: The Dalit Move toward the BJP in Uttar Pradesh

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Summary

Identity politics played a significant role in mass and electoral politics in Uttar Pradesh during the 1990s, due to a strong wave of Dalit assertion and the dominance of the Bahujan Samaj Party. However, in the 2000s, important changes have taken place, which have affected electoral politics, particularly since 2014. How do we understand the changed Dalit political landscape, and how and why has identity politics undergone a change in the last decade, particularly in the context of the rise of right-wing hegemony?

The Dalit electoral preference in the 2000s differs in different parts of the country; there is no pan-India pattern. The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in West Bengal does rely on a Dalit support base to a large extent. In Punjab though, the Dalits are a substantial number, but they have not moved towards the BJP and continue to support the Akali Dal and the Congress party. In Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, following the decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Congress has gained a modicum of the Dalit vote. In Maharashtra, the Dalit vote is divided between fractions of the Republican Party of India, the BJP-Shiv Sena combine, Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi and the Congress-Nationalist Congress Party. In states such as Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, it is the regional parties that have retained their support. In Tamil Nadu, the Dalits and the parties representing them, are stridently and violently opposing the entry of the BJP into the state.

Hence, the way the Dalits vote will affect the 2024 elections is different across states and looking at Uttar Pradesh (UP), a key state, is useful as substantial change has taken place here, which has affected national electoral politics since 2014. UP presents three scenarios in which the nature of the Dalit crisis is clearly reflected: the decline of the BSP under Kumari Mayawati and identity politics that once shaped national politics; the shift of a considerable section of the smaller non-*Jatav* Dalits towards the BJP, and its redefined subaltern-*Hindutva* under Narendra Modi; and the rise of a new leader, Chandrashekhar Azad¹ in western UP, and many other such small, competing Ambedkarite leaders in various sub-regions. The Dalit movement in UP, consequently, is facing fragmentation along class, ideological and sub-regional lines. It is the triangular contestation and intersectionalities between three players: Maya, Modi and Azad, and the newly formed pre-election Indian

¹ Chandrashekhar Azad, a rising Dalit youth leader, formed the Bhim Army in 2015 and later the Azad Samaj party in 2020, following the collapse of the BSP post-2014, and rising atrocities against the Dalits in western UP. See A. Sethi, "Ambedkar's Army: A Dalit force fights caste atrocities in Uttar Pradesh", *The Quint*, 2016, <https://www.thequint.com/quintlab/ambedkar-dalit-army-fights-caste-atrocities-in-uttar-pradesh/>. In this presentation, these new forms of Dalit assertion have not been covered. For details, see Sudha Pai, "New Phase in Dalit Politics: Crisis or Regeneration", in K. Raju (ed) *The Dalit Truth: The Battles for Realizing Ambedkar's Vision* (New Delhi: Penguin Random House, 2022), pp. 115-126.

National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) and the possibilities it presents, which is important for 2024.

The reason for the existential crisis of the BSP lies in the interface between two developments: a declining Dalit movement and a rising *Hindutva*. Undoubtedly, the immediate failures on the part of Mayawati, organisational breakdown, expulsion/defection of senior and influential BSP leaders post-2012 (which has led to hollowing out of the party) lack of an alternative ideology and strategy following the *Sarvajan* policy, lacklustre campaigning on Mayawati's part, particularly after 2019, are important reasons. However, longer-term developments have played a seminal role.

Social and political change has been rapid in UP, and the resulting shifts are reflected in changing ideas within the Dalit community. The impact of globalisation was 'late' in UP compared to the states of southern and western India, as the 1990s were a period of hung assemblies and short-lived governments. It was the weakening of identity politics beginning in the late 1990s that created a feeling of being left behind, and a shift from the desire for social justice to heightened economic aspiration for material advancement.²

Simultaneously, the smaller sub-castes in the backward regions were entering the political arena and experiencing cultural modernisation. Consequently, there is today a new relationship between *caste, development and electoral politics*, which helps explain the decline of the BSP and the BJP's successful outreach to Dalits in a new form of inclusionary politics, as well as the emergence of new Dalit organisations combined with parties such as the Bhim Army or the Azad Samaj party of Azad.

Equally important are the inherent, longer-term weaknesses within the Dalit movement in UP, which, with the unravelling of the BSP, have come to the fore. While there was consolidation behind the BSP in the 1990s of all Dalit sub-castes, it was *only insofar as voting was concerned*. Bahujan identity and consciousness formulated by Kanshi Ram did not penetrate into all the sub-castes; it remained an *elite and not a mass phenomenon*. It was the numerically larger, dominant and better-off *Chamar-Jatavs* (Scheduled Caste) who were deeply influenced and remained loyal to Mayawati. The smaller, poorer sub-castes, for example, the Balmikis, in the more backward regions subjected to 'Hinduisation' since the colonial period, have retained their specific sub-caste identities. Hence, rather than identity, important in defining and cementing socio-political relations among the Dalits earlier, today, social jealousies, cultural aspirations and economic anxieties are the driving forces. Consequently, the Dalit movement today is characterised by fragmentation into the pro-BSP or Ambedkarite, and the pro-BJP or Hindutawadi Dalits, but the groupings are more complex and each of these groups is further divided on the ground.³

Another contributory fact was the shift in the mid-1990s, by the BSP from a radical movement to a competitive party to capture power. As a result, downward democratic

² Sudha Pai, "From Social Justice to Aspiration: Transformation of Lower Caste Politics in Uttar Pradesh in the 2000s", in Sujata Patel (ed.) *Neo-liberalism, Urbanisation and Aspirations in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp.212-232.

³ Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar Maya, *Modi, Azad: Dalit Politics in the Time of Hindutva* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2023), p. xvii.

mobilisation, as earlier, of the smaller sub-castes, the Pasis, Musahars and Balmikis, particularly in the more backward regions, did not take place. This shift also led – as in the case of Dalit movements everywhere – to political compromise in ideology and strategy with the upper caste parties.⁴ The BSP did achieve partial success – it shared power with the BJP in the 1990s and gained a majority in 2007 – but Mayawati’s *Sarvajan* experiment described below, created differences and a return to the ideology of social justice has not been possible.

Moreover, the BSP was formed primarily to provide the Dalits dignity, self-confidence and empowerment. It was not meant to be and is not a party equipped to provide an alternative economic agenda for the Dalits. By the time Mayawati attempted her *Sarvajan* experiment⁵ in 2007 of good governance and welfare for all, it was too late. The UP economy, due to competitive populism by both the SP and BSP, was in poor shape; it was in a debt trap.⁶ With funds provided by the central United Progressive Alliance government and hard work, Mayawati did achieve a great deal using her new strategy. According to official figures, the fiscal deficit declined, gross domestic product rose to 7.28 per cent as against a target of 6.1 per cent, compared to 6.92 per cent from 2012 to 2017 under Akhilesh Yadav, and a gross state domestic product compound growth rate of only 1.95 per cent per annum, and per capita income increase of merely 0.43 per cent on average, over 2017-21 during the period of the Yogi Adityanath government.⁷ Expenditure on welfare for all sections was increased considerably, and much infrastructure was added; the construction of many highways and the new Jewar airport began during Mayawati’s time and was later inaugurated by Yadav and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.⁸ However, the BSP suffered a crushing defeat in the 2012 assembly elections, obtaining only 80 seats and 25.91 per cent of the vote, compared to 206 seats and 23.92 per cent of the vote in 2007. The Dalit support dropped sharply. The CSDS post-poll survey revealed a desire among a section for expenditure on *development*, rather than *identity*; most were unhappy with the construction of memorials for Dalit icons which, it was felt, left little funds for better education, health, roads and other facilities.⁹ Corruption in the government and the wealth amassed by Mayawati was

⁴ Tamil Nadu provides a good example where the Dalit Panthers have found it necessary to form alliances with the Dravidian parties. See Hugo Gorringe, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratization in Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004).

⁵ The *Sarvajan* experiment refers to both the electoral strategy employed to gain a majority in the 2007 assembly elections and the governance model used by Mayawati to achieve power. Instead of giving tickets to the upper castes particularly the Brahmins, she attempted to gain their electoral support by promising to share power with them and provide economic benefits to them during her regime together with her core constituency the Dalits. Instead of Dalit-oriented policies, as in her earlier stints as chief minister, the ‘priority areas’ in the economic agenda announced by Mayawati’s government were “rural development, agriculture, social development and infrastructure, all-round development of all social segments and regions, and making the state conducive for attracting investment”. For more details, see Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar, *Maya, Modi, Azad: Dalit Politics in the Time of Hindutva*, op. cit., Chapter 2.

⁶ A. K. Singh “Uttar Pradesh: Deeper into the Debt Trap”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 2002, Vol. 37, No 49.

⁷ Santosh Mehrotra, “As Uttar Pradesh heads to polls, how does the Yogi govt’s economic performance hold up?”, *The Wire*, 20 December 2021, <https://m.thewire.in/article/economy/uttar-pradesh-election-adityanath-economic-performance>.

⁸ For budgetary details, see Sudha Pai, “Decline of the BSP: Dalits Politics under Rightwing Hegemony” in Sudha Pai, Shyam Babu and Rahul Verma(eds.), *Dalits in the New Millenium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 59-77.

⁹ The survey is provided in Oliver Heath and Sanjay Kumar, “Why Did Dalits Desert the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh?”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 July 2012: pp. 41-49.

another reason. However, an important reason, which showed the change in Dalit thinking, was that *Mayawati's 2007 victory had roused more aspirations and expectations than could be fulfilled in five years*. The Dalits had expected their economic condition would undergo a dramatic change, which was not possible. Also, they felt the upper castes had benefited much more.

It is this unhappiness with the BSP and the newfound confidence and expectations which explain the search by a section of the Dalits for a party that would offer them economic advancement. Beginning in 2014, Dalit politics underwent a profound change as the BSP obtained no seats. The BJP under Modi has won resounding electoral victories in assembly and national elections in UP. Modi realised that to win power at the centre, he needed to perform well in UP, which has 80 parliamentary seats. From the late 1990s, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh had already been mobilising on the ground, earlier it was the Outwards Backward Class but now the Dalits, as they felt under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the *Hindutva* ideology of the BJP had been shelved.¹⁰ Modi's achievement lay in harnessing this downward mobilisation successfully. More importantly, the BJP, under him, has successfully gained increasing votes from the smaller Dalit sub-castes. The aim has been twofold: electoral to defeat the social justice parties, and gain control over this key state; and cultural to bring the Dalits into the saffron fold to build a consolidated Hindu identity.

During the electoral campaigns since 2014, the BJP employed multi-layered, inclusionary, socio-economic strategies, ranging from deftly bringing together promises of rapid development and communal discourse to reinventing *Hindutva* as a subaltern ideology, the use of nationalism and religiosity and social media to build the brand image of the party and its leader.¹¹ However, two strategies have been central to the Dalit inclusion: one, a *new politics of recognition* of their distinct cultural identity, neglected by the BSP, which they view as a *Jatav* party; and two, the provision of "new welfarism"¹² or economic benefits offered by the government, in which bank accounts, cooking gas, toilets, housing, free rations and cash are projected as part of a well-organised welfare state successfully creating *labhartis* (beneficiaries) through a *new politics of re-distribution*.

At the same time, the decision to shift towards the BJP is layered and complex. There are two contradictory positions: while the Dalits protest strongly against upper-caste atrocities, why do they vote or support the BJP in the elections? Also, is this support temporary, tactical and instrumental due to the decline of the BSP, or does it reflect the conversion of the Dalits to the *Hindutva* ideology? These issues are important to understand the future of the Dalit movement.¹³

¹⁰ Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2009).

¹¹ Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar, *Maya, Modi, Azad: Dalit Politics at the Time of Hindutva*, op. cit.

¹² Abhishek Anand, Vikas Dimble and Arvind Subramaniam, "New Welfarism of Modi govt represents distinctive approach to redistribution and inclusion", *The Indian Express*, 22 December 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/national-family-health-survey-new-welfarism-of-indias-right-7114104/>.

¹³ The arguments that follow are based on interviews and fieldwork conducted while writing our book, Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar, *Maya, Modi, Azad: Dalit Politics at the Time of Hindutva*, op. cit.

We argue that political dynamism and electoral determinism such as assertion and integration are simultaneous. These are two levels with a gulf between them, the political is dynamic and full of contradictions and protest, but the electoral realm is insulated from the political aspect. There will be agitation against injustice, but it will not translate into autonomous, successful Dalit politics. A complex situation has emerged – there is respect for *Behenji* as a tall leader, Azad is called in when atrocities take place, but the vote is cast for the BJP.

Regarding the second issue, adopting the binary viewpoint means we see the preference for the BJP as the product of the more *immediate* developments, but ignore underlying historical processes. Much literature points to a process of ‘Hinduisation’ in north India among the smaller sub-castes, such as the Balmikis, in the late 19th century. ‘Hinduisation’ was initially a quiet feature in immediate post-independence India, but with the rise of the BJP under Modi, it is a more open, societal and political project with reflection in the electoral process.

In fact, we are simultaneously witnessing, tactical and ideological attraction towards the BJP. The initial shift is often driven by calculated considerations such as better incentives promised by the BJP. Thereafter, if the electoral support is sustained for an extended period to the BJP, the Dalits move into the saffron fold because, along with emphasis on material issues, cultural issues have acquired a new momentum. However, if the duration of the shift were not to be sustained beyond one or two elections, the Dalit interface could be tactical. Thus, reversals back and forth are possible but do not seem likely in the near future. Some sub-castes may prefer the BJP due to ideological affinity, others tactically, for the material incentive. ‘Hinduisation’ and the fascination with being Hindu has taken deep roots, and even if the BJP were to lose state power, there would be no ‘social reversal’.¹⁴

Does this mean the BSP has outlived its *foundational* purpose and usefulness for Dalits? The Dalit movement in UP has entered a post-BSP phase, a development which need not be seen in a negative light, as much has been achieved. The BSP has, in great measure, fulfilled its original promise of providing the Dalits self-respect, and contributed to the social deepening of democracy. We are witnessing the maturing of the Dalit movement, with the Dalits confident of making their own electoral choices. Other caste groups – the upper castes and backwards – have exercised their political preferences, constantly moving to different parties; the Dalits too are now exercising their options.

Against this backdrop, we can understand why Mayawati is not joining the INDIA group. She feels the BJP will return to power under Modi in 2024, as the INDIA group is weak and badly divided. Given this calculation and the weakened position of the BSP, if she joins the alliance, the BJP and the SP will take away much of her remaining social base, including, perhaps, her core *Jatav* constituency.¹⁵ For Mayawati, it is a matter of survival of the BSP and the Dalit movement in UP; she will bide her time and keep the flock safe for another

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Sudha Pai, “Why Mayawati Walks Alone”, *The Indian Express*, 24 January 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/why-mayawati-walks-alone-9124521/#:~:text=By%20not%20joining%20the%20INDIA%20alliance%2C%20she%20would,further%20encroachments%20by%20the%20SP%20and%20the%20BJP.>

round of Dalit assertion. While recognising all the failures of the BSP's leadership, it is important to understand that the Dalit movement today operates under the shadow of a hegemonic, right-wing Hindu majoritarian party. Given the nature of identity politics in 2024, it appears that the emerging multi-cornered contest in UP will benefit the BJP.

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