

CHANGING PATTERN OF DALIT POLITICS IN UTTAR PRADESH: CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND EMERGING TRENDS

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ABSTRACT

Emergence of Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh can be traced back to the pre- independence period. But the southern India states were the first to witness the rise of Dalit politics. A formal and evident role of Dalits in the politics of Uttar Pradesh can be seen from the 1980s. The Dalit population in Uttar Pradesh in the initial years after independence was with the Congress. With the emergence of Republican Party of India (RPI) in Uttar Pradesh there can be seen a slight shift in the Dalit support but it was insignificant for the Congress. Towards the end of 1970s disintegration of Congress led to the shift in Dalit voters to other political parties and in the 1984 with the emergence of Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the Dalit population was mobilized under a single umbrella of the party. BSP played a very important role in representing the Dalit population in the politics of the state under the leadership of Kumari Mayawati till the assembly elections of 2007. Since the three assembly elections i.e. 2012, 2017 and 2022 there can be seen a shift in the Dalit support to the party towards other political parties. This paper is an attempt towards analyzing the main reasons behind the shift in the Dalit support from one party to the other. This paper also tries to see the future trend of Dalit support to the political parties in Uttar Pradesh.

KEY WORDS- Dalit Politics, Scheduled Castes, Bahujan Samaj Party, Bhartiya Janta Party

EMERGENCE OF DALIT POLITICS IN UTTAR PRADESH

The term 'Dalit' is one of the most contested terms in India. In this paper the term 'Dalit' will be understood as a class which is 'officially Scheduled Caste, formerly Depressed Class, Harijan, or untouchable.'¹ This denotes to the 'member of a wide range of social groups that were historically marginalized in Hindu caste society. The

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dalit> see on 15 May 2022

official designation Scheduled Caste is the most common term now used in India for people in these groups, although members of the Scheduled Castes often prefer the term Dalit.²

Just after independence, the Dominance of Congress throughout the country is quite evident as it 'included all streams of ideological thought and all the most important social interests.'³

The Congress organization was also the main instrument that knit together state and society, which is to say that it was India's central integrating institution.⁴ This was the reason that when we notice the mobilization of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh, they were initially mobilized by the Congress. 'Even though there is no reliable survey data on political allegiance in India before the late 1960s, most village studies and monographs suggest that a majority of Scheduled Castes voters supported the Congress party after Independence.'⁵ 'The two extreme poles of the caste system (i.e. the Upper Castes and the Scheduled Castes) were represented here (in the Congress).⁶ Thus, it can be noted that 'the Congress has effectively managed a large chunk of Dalit votes from the beginning.'⁷

'The formation of Ambedkarite Republican Party of India (RPI) in 1956 in western UP was another landmark in the Dalit movement which, after a brief span of success, again experienced similar problems and was absorbed by the Congress Party in the late 1960s.'⁸ It can be said that the RPI's electoral breakthrough was short-lived in Uttar Pradesh and till the 1970s Uttar Pradesh did not witness a strong Dalit movement.

In the 1970s and 1980s, uncontrolled factionalism in the party resulted in the scattered social base of the Congress and the breakdown of the 'Congress system', there can be marked a shift in the Dalit allegiance towards other parties. Parties representing caste interests and identities started gaining a strong hold in the state. In UP the process of democratization accelerated moving downwards, leading to a lower-caste upsurge- a second wave of mobilization of the Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and Dalits – that played an important

² Ibid

³ Kothari, R. (2009): *The Writings of Rajni Kothari*, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, New Delhi, p. 83

⁴ Manor, J. (1978): *Indira and After: The Decay of Party Organisation in India*, The Round Table, LXIII (272), October, pp. 315-24

⁵ Jaffrelot, Christophe (2003): *India's Silent Revolution- the rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics*, Permanent Black, Delhi, p.89

⁶ Srivastav, S., 'Uttar Pradesh, politics of neglected development' in Narain, I. (ed.) (1976): *State Politics in India*, Meenakshi Prakashan, New Delhi, p. 352

⁷ Omvedt, G. *Ambedkar and After: 'The Dalit Movement in India'* in Shahs, G. (2002): *Social Movements and the State*, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, p. 305

⁸ Lynch, Owen (1969): *Politics of Untouchability Social Mobility and Change in a City of India*, Columbia: Columbia University Press quoted in Pai, S. (2002): *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh*, Sage Publication India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi p. 5

contributory role in the defeat of the Congress part in 1989 and its eventual collapse in the 1990s.⁹ Taking benefit of this opportunity, Dalit leaders tried to mobilize the Dalit population and form a separate political party. One of the most important example of this type of mobilization of Dalits in UP was the formation of the BSP.

DALITS AND THE BSP IN UTTAR PRADESH

When it comes to the Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh, its formal beginning can be traced back to the 1980s which was also a formal beginning of political consciousness among the Dalits. By following the legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram adopted a similar political course by establishing Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Sami (DS-4) in 1981 and finally, by establishing a political party i.e. Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984. Mayawati succeeded him in the year 2003. Later on, Mayawati took it forward as a powerful political force in the politics of the state. Thus, one can say that, the 1980s was the formal beginning of political consciousness among the Dalits in Uttar Pradesh.

The centrality of Dalit mobilization in UP politics is seen from the fact that all parties are competing to gain the support of the Dalits. The new Dalit identity, created by the BSP has a powerful electoral appeal among Dalit belonging to the urban, educated middle class and the rural poor thereby providing it with a strong base in parts of the state.¹⁰

The first significant political success for the BSP was in the 1993 assembly elections, when it entered into an alliance with the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh. This was done in order to prevent the BJP from coming to power. This election launched the BSP and it created more political space with an increase in its vote share from 10.26 to 28.53 per cent of the seats for which the party contested (see Table 1). However, in 1995, the BSP left the coalition, and with the support of Bhartiya Janta Party she became the chief minister of the State. Her first term lasted for less than five months, until the BJP withdrew its support. In the year 1997 she became the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh for six months and in 2002- 03 for 15 months.

During the 2000s, there can be seen a shift in the party's ideological stand. Now the 'Dalits-only' image was taking the form of a 'Sarvajan' image. During the initial years of the 2000s, the BSP focused on 'social engineering' to bring upper castes and especially Brahmins and

⁹ Pai, S. 'The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh – Dominance, Decline, and Revival?' in Pai. S. (2013): Handbook of Politics in Indian States- Regions, Parties, and Economic Reforms, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p.113

¹⁰ Pai, S. (2002): Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, Sage Publication India Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi p. 9-10

the Dalits together through the policy of 'Sarvajan'. This can be seen as a major shift in BSP's ideological and electoral stance. Many meetings were conducted to bring the Brahmins in the party such as "Brahmin Jodo Sammelans" throughout the state, and at the district level "Bhaichara Committees" were formed to bring the Brahmins and the Dalits together. This social engineering resulted in a huge victory for the BSP in Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in the year 2007. The growth of BSP in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections from 1989 till 2007 can be seen in the following table. (Table 1) But the assembly elections of 2012, 2017 and 2022 show a downward trend for BSP which depict the downfall of the party in the state.

Table 1 Performance of BSP in Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections (1989-2017)

Year	Seat Contested	Won	Deposit Lost	Vote% of total polled votes	Vote% in seats contested
1989	372	13	282	9.41	10.72
1991	386	12	299	9.44	10.26
1993	167	67	44	11.12	28.53
1996	296	67	28	19.64	27.73
2002	401	98	91	23.06	23.19
2007	403	206	36	30.43	30.43
2012	403	80	51	25.91	25.95
2017	403	19	81	22.23	22.23
2022	403	1	287	12.88	12.88

Source: Election Commission of India

CHANGING PATTERN OF DALIT POLITICS: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

In the assembly election of 2012 and 2017 BSP managed to win only 80 and 19 seats out of 403 respectively and in the 2022 assembly election it managed to win only one seat out of 403. Even there can be seen downfall in the vote percentage of total votes polled i.e. 25.91, 22.23 and 12.88 in the assembly election of 2012, 2017 and 2022 respectively. From the point of view of Lok Sabha elections as well, the condition remains the same. In the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the party failed to win even single seat¹¹ and in 2019 Lok Sabha elections it managed to win only 10 seats¹². This shows a downward trend for the BSP which must be understood in the light of some of the major causes which are discussed as further.

¹¹ State Wise Seat Won & Valid Votes Polled by Political Parties- Election Commission of India, General Elections, 2014 (16th LOK SABHA)

¹² State Wise Seat Won & Valid Votes Polled by Political Parties- Election Commission of India, General Elections, 2019 (17th LOK SABHA)

Firstly, the start of BSP in Uttar Pradesh was very impressive in terms of providing good administration to the state. But with the passage of time many charges of corruption were imposed on the party leadership which resulted in the downfall of the party in the assembly elections as well as in the Lok Sabha elections.

Secondly, after the record breaking victory of BSP in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections of 2007 and its successful completion of the term, there can be seen many instances of defections towards Samajwadi Party and the BJP, especially since 2014. Many influential leaders of backwards castes and scheduled castes left the party for some other political parties. This shows the weakening of leadership in the BSP which in turn is resulting in the downfall. 'Out of 276 candidates who switched parties during the 2022 assembly polls in five states, 27 per cent left the BSP.'¹³

Thirdly, the political aspirations of some of the emerging Dalit leaders led them to form other parties with the same Dalit vote bank, which proved to be a major setback for BSP which was till then considered as the only party to represent the Dalits. Bhim Army chief Chandrashekhar Azad is a good example who can be seen as a big challenge for the hegemony of BSP over the Dalit vote bank.¹⁴

Fourthly, the BSP left its 'Dalits- only' image by the inclusion of Brahmins and other upper castes in the party. The magic of social-engineering worked only once i.e. in 2007, but side by side it brought distrust for the party amongst the Dalit population of the state. No doubt, they continued to vote for the party, but there was a clear-cut divide in the Dalit votes thereafter. Drop in the vote percentage of the BSP is quite evident in all the elections since the 2012 assembly elections.

Fifthly, The BSP, from the day of its establishment started with the image of a Dalit party. But with the passage of time the most important and negative thing about BSP came to the fore that it has gained the impression of a Jatav party in place of a Dalit political party. Besides other reasons, this was one of the main reasons why the other Dalit sub-castes started

¹³ 276 candidates switched parties to contest 2022 assembly polls; 27% left BSP, 13% Cong: ADR, Deccan Herald, 28th April 2022 report at <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/276-candidates-switched-parties-to-contest-2022-assembly-polls-27-left-bsp-13-cong-adr-report-1104160.html> seen on 14 May 2022

¹⁴ Dalit group led by Chandrashekhar Azad likely to join hands with Samajwadi Party, The Hindu, 1st December 2022 at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/dalit-group-led-by-chandrashekhar-azad-likely-to-join-hands-with-samajwadi-party/article66205896.ece> seen on 19 December 2022

feeling cheated in the party as the special focus of the party was only on the Jatavas and which in turn converted in the loss of the party at the elections.¹⁵

Sixthly, the revival of the BJP under a new-generation leadership, and its promise of economic development and cultural inclusion of the Dalits within the party attracted many Dalit sub- castes. 'There can be seen a clear cut shift of Dalits towards BJP, which aggressively wooed the socially depressed community through social welfare schemes.'¹⁶ This has helped the BJP obtain high seat and vote percentages and the BSP lost considerable Dalit support.'

CONCLUDING REMARKS

From this study we can see how the Dalit vote bank and Dalit support has been shifting from one party to the other in Uttar Pradesh since independence. No political party was in a position to monopolize the vote bank of Dalit. To a certain extent the BSP successfully tried to keep a strong hold over the Dalit support, but due to several reasons analyzed in this paper, it could not maintain that hold for long. Now a trend can be noticed that the Dalit leaders are showing maturity and moving to the political parties which can best protect their interests. Now the Dalit support to any political party is not based on mere historical, socio-cultural, and emotional or some other traditional reasons. Understanding their potential they are moving towards the parties which can better protect their interests.

Dalit support to the Congress was due to historical reasons. Support for the RPI was due to socio- cultural and emotional reasons. Support for the BSP can be seen due to the mixture of socio-cultural, emotional and political reasons. But now the utilitarian outlook towards politics has changed the game. Dalit voters and population at large, is more concerned about their economic, social and political wellbeing. They are more concerned about their representation in every sphere of human life. In other words it can be said that now the Dalit voters have become more practical and this is a positive sign for the empowerment of this section of the society. Now this is going to be a challenge for the political parties to maintain a strong hold over this section.

¹⁵ See Heath, O. and Kumar, Sanjay (2012): 'Why Did Dalits Desert the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh?', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.47, No. 28 (July 14), pp.41-49

¹⁶ Shah, P. Uttar Pradesh: Heads roll in BSP, Brahmin LS leader replaced, 16th March 2022 at http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/90243041.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=txt&utm_campaign=cppst seen on 15 May 2022