

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF DALIT-BAHUJAN POLITICS IN UTTAR PRADESH

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Abstract

Uttar Pradesh is known as the “heartland” of Indian politics. There is a famous saying that *Delhi ka rasta UP se hokar jaata Hai* (to reach Delhi one has to cross UP). The state has been the epicenter of various events since Independence and one such was the rise of a successful Dalit political party in the form of the Bahujan Samaj Party. With the Dalit leadership at the core, BSP changed the dynamics of Indian politics in various ways. While BSP became a national party in the 1990s it was UP where the party was most successful with its leader Mayawati becoming chief minister four times. Often the rise of BSP and other regional parties in the late 1980s is linked with the decline of the Congress and its unwavering what Paul Brass called “coalition of extremes” However, this paper traces the growth of Dalit – the Bahujan movement in Uttar Pradesh and argues that there was continuous Dalit- Bahujan churning in UP, though hyper-local that facilitated the growth of the BSP.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit, Movement, RPI, Scheduled Caste Federation.

Introduction

The political ground of Uttar Pradesh which for almost three decades since independence was dominated by the upper caste, witnessed the surge of Dalit-Bahujan politics in the 1980s. A.K. Verma argues that states like Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan did not witness backward caste movement despite having a sizeable Dalit and backward population because in these states backward have been accommodated in the political structure by two national parties, viz BJP and Congress. These parties by giving sufficient space to Dalits and backward have prevented the fragmentation on caste lines. On the contrary, Uttar Pradesh witnessed a strong Dalit Bahujan movement in the 1980s, especially with the decline of the Congress party (Verma 2005).

The genesis of Dalit-Bahujan politics in Uttar Pradesh can be traced back to the Bhakti Movement where saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Shivnarayan, and others made efforts to eradicate caste-based discrimination through their popular folksongs and preaching. Various sects like Kabirpanthi, Ravidasiya, and Shivnarayani emerged among the untouchables. Bhakti was used as a means of assertion as it preached a message of social

equality among all castes and was a way of worshiping supreme divinity through personal attachment and devotion irrespective of one's caste identity. In the early 1920s self-assertion and identity consciousness of the untouchables found a new realization through the Adi Hindu Movement which was started by leaders such as Swami Achhutanand and Ram Charan in Kanpur.

Swami Achhutanand who was born as Hiralal originally belonged to the Farukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh but spent most of his childhood in Devlali cantonment and received his education there. A study of his life reveals that in his initial days, he joined Arya Samaj and was named swami Hariharanand. After working actively for the Arya Samaj, he developed disenchantment with it as according to him it was only interested in minor reforms among Hinduism and didn't want any radical change to take place which could ameliorate the condition of the untouchables. He was particularly against the Shudhi movement and saw it as an attempt to Brahminise the untouchables. All this led to Achhutanand leaving the Arya Samaj in the 1920s and starting his own Adi-Hindu movement. (Pai 2002: 47).

Achhutanand considered that untouchables can come out of their centuries-old oppression and exploitation through education and this education can be gained through missionaries and political action. He firmly believed that freedom or swaraj should not be confined to a privileged one and every individual irrespective of their caste should benefit from it. He was one of the members of the depressed classes committee who gave their representation to the Simon Commission. Achhutanand started a monthly paper named Achhut in 1922; Prachin Hindu in 1922- 23; and the Adi Hindu journal between 1924 and 1932. Many of the leaders from other parts of the United Province joined him in his works like Shyamlal Yadav, Babu Baldev Prasad Jaiswar and Rai saheb Nanakchand Dusia worked actively in Allahabad. The idea that Achhutanand tried to propagate through his Adi-Hindu movement is that the untouchables or the depressed classes are Adi-Hindus (ancient Hindus). They are the original inhabitants of the northern plain and all others including the Aryans are the migrants who have conquered the original population. Adi Hindu movement gained substantial ground among the untouchables because it came up with a historical explanation of their poverty and oppression. It also gave them a sense of pride in their glorious past and a belief that they could regain their lost rights and privileges (ibid: 48).

The decade of 1930 was an important period in the growth of Dalit Bahujan politics in the United Province. It was the time when many educated Dalit leaders got inclined towards the national movement and they started to see Ambedkar as an alternative to Gandhi. They decided to give up the Gandhian term Harijan and started to call themselves as schedule caste and even Achhut. This has been highlighted by Owen Lynch who in his study of Agra has highlighted that by this time Jatav leaders have started to identify themselves with other oppressed and untouchable sections of the society (Lynch 1969: 87). Also, it was the time when many educated Dalit leaders have started to actively participate in public life. One of them was Khemchand Bohare who between 1918 and 1936 was nominated as a member of the Agra municipal council. He was also a member of the United Province Legislative Council between 1930 to 1936. In the legislative assemblies, he came up with the suggestion that one member from depressed classes should be nominated in every district in the united provinces. Once accepted it led to the emergence of many leaders from the depressed classes like Dharam Prakash in the region of Meerut, Pyarelal Kureel in Agra, and Mahadeo Prasad in Gorakhpur. In 1928 when Simon's commission came to India Khemchand Bohare himself gave testimony before it and was also elected as the Vice-president of the All India Depressed Classes League formed by M C Rajah. Impressed by the ideas and works of Ambedkar these leaders formed United Province Schedule Caste Federation (UPSCF) which was a branch of All India Schedule Caste Federation formed by B.R Ambedkar in 1942. The AISCF was formed when Dalit consciousness and awareness among them were on the rise and they were presenting themselves as separate from Caste Hindus (Pai 2002: 53-55).

The UPSCF actively participated in the provincial elections of 1945-46. They carried out protests demanding a separate electorate for Dalits, reservation in educational institutions, and government jobs.

However, notwithstanding all these developments that took place in the United Province noted Political scientist Sudha Pai in her book *Dalit Assertion and Unfinished Democratic Revolution* (2002) argues that on the whole there was a late development of consciousness in the United Province in comparison to states like Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra which had witnessed a strong anti-Brahmin and identity conscious movement during colonial period. She attributes several reasons for this like the nature of mobilization adopted by leaders of Indian National Congress did not provide scope for the growth of any substantial Dalit

Movement at the pan level. Moreover, the relative backwardness of this region accompanied by disabling poverty also strengthened the traditional hierarchy.

In her work, Pai also highlighted that Anti Brahmanism seems to emerge in southern and western India because in these regions caste-based hierarchy seems to be very rigid with Brahmins at the top and untouchables at the bottom with negligible presence of other twice-born varnas. However, unlike this Northern Plains with relatively higher proportion of twice-born castes and a more gradual and continuous hierarchy leading it to a less oppressive structure and made less susceptible to horizontal mobilization from below by the untouchable caste groups (ibid: 68).

Dalit- Bahujan politics in post-Independent Uttar Pradesh.

The lack of a strong pan-state level anti-caste movement during the colonial period had its consequences in post-independent Uttar Pradesh. Society remained fairly divided and the hold of the upper caste remained firm over economy and polity in the first two decades leading to independence. Post-Independence Dalit leaders of Uttar Pradesh were largely dwelling on the question of how to organize their future course of action against the unjust social order. Should they join hands with the Congress which has the legacy of leading national movements or should they carry out their separate distinct identity? This was more perplexing because it was the time when Ambedkar agreed to work with Congress and was made chairman of the Drafting Committee of the constitution and law minister in the first cabinet. Though this association between Congress and Ambedkar lasted for a short period and in 1951 Ambedkar tendered his resignation from Nehru's cabinet, nevertheless, it did influence some leaders of the UPSCF to join hands with Congress. It was also the time when BR Ambedkar started to realize the limitations of the All India Schedule Caste Federation and was pondering on forming a party that is broader based in its outlook and willing to cooperate with other parties. However, before working more on it Ambedkar passed away in 1956, and later on, it was his followers who formed the Republican Party of India with its Branch in Uttar Pradesh. A quick analysis of the ideology of RPI can be made from the manifesto that the party presented for the 1962 elections. RPI took many issues which exhorts to both Dalits and non-Dalits like it promised:

- The portrait of Ambedkar, the father of the constitution must be given a place in the Central Hall of the parliament.
- The idle land of the Nation should go to the tiller of the land.

- Idle and wasteland must go to landless laborers.
- There must be adequate distribution of food grains and control over rising prices.
- The lot of slum dwellers should be improved.
- There should be full implementation of Minimum Wages Act 1948.
- Extension of all privileges guaranteed by the Constitution to the Scheduled Castes who have embraced Buddhism.
- Harassment of depressed classes should cease forthwith
- Full justice be done under untouchability (offences) Act, 1955 to them.
- Reservation in the services to the Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe be completed as soon as possible, not later than 1970 (ibid: 75-76).

In Uttar Pradesh the leadership of RPI came into the hands of erstwhile leaders of UPSCF firstly Tilak Chand Kureel (1958-60) and later on Chhedilal Sathi (1961-64) was appointed as the president of the UP branch.

RPI in Uttar Pradesh did not create much impact and remained a marginal player. It had to face many organizational and financial problems. The base of the party was also confined to a few urban areas like Agra, Meerut, and parts of the Rohilkhand region.

In the beginning social base of RPI was largely limited to the Chamar caste among Dalits. They failed to create identity consciousness among other Dalit communities who till then did not see themselves separate from the larger Hindu fold.

Electorally also RPI was unable to make much headway and this was evident in its electoral performance in the Assembly elections of Uttar Pradesh. In the 1969 Assembly Election, while it contested 122 seats, it managed to win only 8 seats with a 3.7 percent vote. Similarly, in 1967 it contested 168 seats and won 10 with 4.1 percent of the vote. In 1969 it contested 181 seats and managed to win only 2 seats with 3.5 percent of the vote.

Sudha Pai argues that the failure of RPI to make much of headway in Uttar Pradesh can be attributed to various factors it was the product of ideas and development that took place in the late colonial period in the United Provinces and gave rise to UPSCF and those ideas were no longer relevant. Consequently, according to Pai party lacked a clear identity. He also stressed that the leadership of the party remained deeply divided. Many of the leaders of RPI felt that in place of carrying out an unnecessary movement against the established order, they could better achieve social upliftment by utilizing constitutional opportunities

that promised them the abolition of untouchability, reservation of seats, and a favorable socio-economic environment. RPI lacked clarity regarding its relationship with the Congress and hence it was unable to break the patron- client relationship developed by the upper caste leaders of the Congress. In addition to this Congress party had its organisation to mobilise Dalits which enabled it to garner a large chunk of votes. In Uttar Pradesh RPI failed to create any mass leader who is committed to carrying out the cause of the untouchables. On the whole, it was the time when the Dalit movement in Uttar Pradesh was on a decline because of the lack of a well-organized leadership and a distinct ideology (ibid: 76-80).

This argument is also supported by Christophe Jaffrelot who argues that in the post-independent period, it was the Congress party that got most of the Dalit Votes He attributed several reasons for this though, earlier social reform was not on the agenda of the Congress party but under the influence of Arya Samaj influential leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai and others party took up the cause of untouchables. In 1909 Lala Lajpat Rai vehemently criticized the upper caste Hindus for not allowing the lower classes their due position in society as a result of which they are turning towards Islam and Christianity who are openly embracing them. Untouchables came closer to the Congress largely because of the efforts made by Mahatma Gandhi to mobilize them. Gandhi vigorously tried to improve the lot of untouchables. He formed an All India Anti Untouchability League (Harijan Sewak Sangh) whose volunteers were asked to work for the total abolition of untouchability. After independence leaders like Nehru were committed to giving substance to the dream of Mahatma Gandhi. Provisions were made in the Indian Constitution to prohibit untouchability in all its forms (article 17). Similarly, reservations to Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes were also provided in proportion to their population. In addition to that Nehru Government made a series of progressive laws to give a sense of security to the untouchables in 1955 Untouchability (Offences) Act was passed which aimed at protecting the untouchables from all sorts of discrimination. Apart from this Congress policy of co-opting emerging Dalit leaders of RPI also provided it the necessary support for mobilizing Dalit voters, for example in the 1960s one of the most prominent and emerging leaders of RPI was B.P. Maurya who won the Lok Sabha election of 1962 from Aligarh. His popularity can be measured by the fact that in 1957 he organised a mass conversion in which around 100,000 Jatav converted to Buddhism. According to Jaffrelot,

he was well on his way to becoming a Schedule Caste leader of national status. His radical thought can be gauged from the slogan that he had given in 1962. It was 'Jatav Muslim bhai bhai, Hindu kaum kaha se Aaye'. (Jatav and Muslims are brothers from where do the Hindus come from). (Jaffrelot 2003: 109). However, he was subsequently co-opted by Indira Gandhi who offered him a ministerial berth. The same was the case with Chhedi Lal Sathi, who was one of the main architects of RPI in Uttar Pradesh but he too was co-opted by Congress (ibid: 112-113). All these efforts electorally strengthened the relationship between the congress party and the Dalits hence leaving limited space for others to mobilise Dalits.

Dalit Movement in Rural Uttar Pradesh.

One of the major reasons behind the limited success of UPSCF and later on RPI is that these parties failed to penetrate rural areas. The leadership of these parties was in the hands of urban-educated Dalits and both of these parties carried out movements in urban areas. However, few movements emerged in rural Uttar Pradesh both in the later colonial period and post-independent period. Two of the prominent movements were the Anti-Begari agitation in the 1940s and the Nara Maveshi Movement in the 1950s

.Anti-Begari Agitation

At the time when UPSCF carrying movements in Urban areas in the 1940s, rural Uttar Pradesh was witnessing the Begari movement in districts like Deoria, Rae Bareilly, Gorakhpur, Sitapur, Etawah, Etah, Pratapgarh, Banda, and Fatehpur. Begari which means unpaid work was rampant in United Provinces. It was a system where landless laborers were forced to work in the houses and agricultural fields of big landlords without any payment. It was one of the most oppressive systems that existed in rural India. The main aim of this anti-Begari movement was to liberate the landless laborers from the bondage of local zamindars. Unlike the movements carried out by UPSCF which seeks to attain political rights, anti-Begari movement aims at getting economic rights for the landless labourers. One of the reasons behind the growth of this movement in eastern districts of Uttar Pradesh was the fact that these districts had witnessed peasant movements like Kisan movement and Ekka movement under the leadership of Dalit leaders like Pasi Madari and Baba Ramchand during the colonial period. Under the impact of this movement, many untouchable laborers demanded high wages. In some districts, they refused to do their traditional occupation of carrying out the bodies of the dead animals. In districts like

Hamirpur, they refused to carry out the Begari imposed by the Government servants. One of the important aspects of this rural movement was the active participation of women. In districts like Bijnor, Gorakhpur, Azamgarh, etc, they not only refused to do begar (unpaid labor) but also demanded fair wages for their work (Pai 2002: 65-68).

Nara-Maveshi Movement.

One of the most important rural movements that occurred in the post-independent Uttar Pradesh was the Nara-Maveshi movement. It started in the 1950s in Uttar Pradesh by the Chamar caste and spread to other north Indian states like Bihar. Badri Narayan in his book *'The Making of the Dalit public in North India:Uttar Pradesh,1950-Present(2011)* has discussed in detail about this movement. He argues that this movement which played a crucial role in politicizing the Chamar community in the region of Eastern Uttar Pradesh and thus providing a readymade cadre for BSP at the time of its inception has been largely neglected in both academia and mainstream media (Narayan 2011: 35).

The Chamar who is the lowest group among the untouchables had a caste-based occupation in which male members of the community have to tan the skin of dead animals (Maveshi) and female members of the community had to cut the Umbilical cord of the new-borns and return they used to get few ounces of grains and clothes under the Jajmani relationship. Badri Narayan in his work has done a case study of a few of the villages of eastern Uttar Pradesh namely Shahabpur village in Allahabad district, Katka village in Majhwa block of Mirzapur district, Bihra Village of Varanasi district, Juragpur Village which is situated 55 km from Allahabad on Allahabad Kaushambi highway. Narayan in the absence of a credible written source of information has employed the *'baat se baat* (talking in local languages) methodology' which is aimed at getting information through semi- structured conversation has done extensive interviews with people of various age groups hailing from different castes. In long interviews conducted by Narayan in Shahabpur village, various elderly people of the Chamar caste remembered how the Chaudhary (most respected person of the caste) of their caste explained to the people that these polluting occupations of tanning the dead animals and disposing of their carcasses and cutting the umbilical cord of the new borns were not only dirty and demeaning but also prevents them from getting other jobs. Influenced by the words of the Chaudhary's Chamars of the Shahabpur decided to end this polluting task. However, this invited the wrath of the upper caste like Brahmins and Thakurs, and the middle caste like Patels.

Chamars of the Shahabpur were threatened that if they refused to carry out their designated work then they would not be allowed to walk on the road, get firewood, and use wells for water. In the initial part of the movement many Chamars in the absence of an alternative source of employment and continuous pressure from the upper and middle caste returned to their traditional occupation. However, as a result of continuous mobilization by their Chaudhary, all chamars got united to fight against the other caste. This assertiveness shown by the Chamars and their firm stand to give up their demeaning caste-based occupation led to violence and bloodshed in the village where along with upper and middle castes various other lower castes like Musahars, Khatiks, Dhobis, and Pasis joined hands with them and carried out various atrocities against the Chamars. However, the Chamars of Shahabpur continued their struggle notwithstanding all the atrocities. They had to tread 25 Km for their daily necessities because local shopkeepers had stopped giving them rations and other food grains under the pressure of the dominant castes. Finally seeing no way forward Chamars decided to approach the District Collector of Allahabad named Bhurelal who also happens to be from the Dalit community. Chamars explained their plight in front of Bhurelal and return he assured them that no one would force them to carry out any work against their will. He paid a visit to the village and in a public meeting declared that no one can compel another to carry out any activity against his or her will. The situation in Shahabpur improved after this as many Chamars started to look for alternative sources of livelihood like pulling rickshaws in the city. With time upper castes of the village also started to give them work in their field. Similar stories of struggle and resistance have been narrated by the Chamars of other villages. Unable to digest this newly emerging assertiveness of the Chamars not only the upper caste but also middle castes and non-Chamar Dalit caste who viewed themselves as superior to chamars have used all sorts of measures to pressurize them (ibid: 36-57).

The biggest impact of these movements (anti-Beggary and NMM) was that they politicized the Dalit communities about their rights. They were no longer ready to carry out their demeaning hierarchical occupation and when BSP came into existence in the 1980s, it was this politicized Dalit community which provided a strong social base to the party.

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