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## **Dalit Politics and the BJP - A Study of Contemporary Developments in the State of Uttar Pradesh**

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### **Abstract**

Dalit politics in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) is in flux. Having jettisoned the “Chamcha Age” politics of the *Manuwadi* Congress, Dalits in UP under Kanshi Ram, and later Mayawati, saw the need for autonomous mobilization and rallied behind the BahujanSamaj Party (BSP), the largest for-Dalit political outfit in the state. The BSP’s successful social engineering from Dalit-only to Dalit-*Bahujan*, and later *Sarvajan*, helped it secure an absolute majority in the 2007 UP Assembly elections. However, the Dalits soon got disillusioned with the style of the BSP’s functioning and its vision, that they found lacking. The Dalit politics of UP therefore entered a state of identity crisis, where the largest Dalit political outfit in the state, the BSP, was unable to encapsulate evolving Dalit aspirations. The Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) worked astutely to fill this vacuum through a combination of welfare economics, cultural outreach, and political symbolism. The Dalits on their part rewarded the BJP’s efforts through successive electoral support, beginning with the 2014 elections to the Lok Sabha. This paper, while providing a brief account of the history of Dalit politics in UP, discusses the reasons behind BJP’s electoral successes and new found popularity among the Dalits in the Hindi heartland state. In conclusion, the paper discusses how the BJP’s journey ahead is not free from roadblocks and lists the challenges that it’s Dalit politics could face in the coming years.

**Keywords:** Dalit politics, BJP, Hindutva, Bahujan, BSP, Congress.



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## Introduction

Dalits, officially Scheduled Castes, are a class of people belonging to the lowest-caste/ outside-caste groups as per the traditional Hindu society(Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). The term Dalit means ‘broken/scattered’ in Sanskrit and Hindi, a reference to the history of socio-economic oppression (including gruesome forms of untouchability) and political marginalization of the community. Even though Dalits originally formed caste-groups within Hinduism only, however, as a result of religious conversions Dalit castes can now be found across different religions – Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam – in the Indian subcontinent. The historical and present socio-economic conditions of these non-Hindu Dalit populations is comparable to their Hindu counterparts.

Numerous social reform measures introduced as part of the Hindu Renaissance in 19<sup>th</sup> century British India alleviated the plight of the Dalits to some extent. Later, the Dalit Rights Movement championed by the likes of Dr. Ambedkar, Periyar, Gandhi, etc. resulted in the recognition of political, educational, and movement (e.g., temple entry) rights of the Dalits. The British Government in India that had already taken steps, albeit in their colonial interests, to secularise education & government appointments, enforce the rule of law, etc., which to some extent granted equality of opportunity & before the law hitherto denied to the Dalits, also implemented the Poona Pact of 1932 between Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar to grant political reservations to the Dalits in the provincial and central legislative councils through the Government of India Act (1935).

The Constitution of free India sought to provide a logical conclusion to the emancipatory struggle of the Dalits by abolishing untouchability (Article 17), guaranteeing equality before the law (Article 14), providing reservations for the Dalits in proportion to their population in state legislatures, the Parliament, in public employment & education, and so forth. Although a major milestone in the Dalit struggle, the Constitution has failed to usher in a truly egalitarian social order where Dalits are treated on par with forward castes. For instance – (i) crimes against the Dalits increased by 6% between 2009 and 2018 (National Dalit Movement for Justice - National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, 2020) despite presence of stringent acts like the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989; (ii) in 2016, every third Dalit in India was multidimensionally poor

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(Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2018); (iii) in 2011, the literacy rate among Dalits at 66% was 8% lower than the national average; (iv) untouchability persists in newer forms like manual scavenging.

The aforesaid highlight the pitiable plight of the Dalits in India 75 years after independence and point to the need for better organization, greater activism, and concerted action by them, especially in the political sphere. Paik(2022) reminds us of Dr. Ambedkar underscoring the need for Dalits to seek political power as means for their overall development. While Dalits need access to political power for their progress, political parties need Dalits in order to be voted to power. This is particularly true for states like Uttar Pradesh (U.P.) with sizeable SC population – 20.5% of the total SC population in India. U.P is also the most notable example among states associated with the success of independent Dalit political outfits - the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in this case. However, the relationship between Dalits and politics in UP is not, and has never been, free from changing electoral equations and power dynamics. The BJP, for example, has upset the established Dalit-Bahujan calculations by garnering a significant share of Dalit votes in the past decade or so thereby helping it shed the ‘Brahmin-Baniya party’ epithet.

In light of the aforesaid, this paper, along with providing a brief history of Dalit politics in UP, shall inquire into the performance of the BJP in recent elections with respect to the Dalit voters, the reasons for its apparent success, and the challenges it is likely to face in the coming years.

### **Dalit Politics in UP: A Brief History**

Dr. Ambedkar had emphasized the need for independent Dalit political outfits for Dalits to fight inequality and oppression (Narayan, 2020). With this intent in mind, he founded the Republican Party of India (RPI) in 1956. It was the RPI that had pioneered independent Dalit political mobilization in UP (Pai, 2001).

The RPI, however, failed to wean away the Dalit votes from the Congress, despite the latter being a Brahmin-dominated entity at the time. The failure of the RPI can be attributed to the forward caste dominated nature of the UP society and politics where independent Dalit mobilization couldn't take root at the time (Pai, 2001). The Congress, consequently, could

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successfully retain the Dalit vote-share and co-opted the Dalit leadership without giving them any significant share in the power structure of the party (Jaffrelot, 2003). Narayan (2020) points out that the stream of Ambedkar's RPI got divided in the years that followed, with some even getting merged or linked with the Congress. Thus, even though representation was guaranteed via political reservation introduced by the Constitution, autonomous Dalit mobilization failed to materialize in UP in the Congress-era Dalit politics.

Congress' dominance in Dalit politics in UP was challenged by Kanshi Ram. He referred to the Dalit leaders of the time as stooges working for *Manuvadi* parties and stated the need for re-emergence of autonomous Dalit political mobilization (Ram, 1982/2018). Towards this end he founded the BSP in 1984, which by the 90s had become a force to reckon with. Interestingly, the political landscape of UP had changed by now and the BSP, now led by Mayawati, found itself competing with the BJP and the Samajwadi Party (SP) instead of the Congress. The BJP and the SP had respectively dented the Congress vote bank among the forward and intermediate castes (& minorities) owing to the *Mandir/Kamandal* and *Mandal* developments. Mayawati, however, with the Dalit voters now rallying behind the BSP, was able to secure enough number of seats to become the Chief Minister of UP thrice in 1995, 1997, and 2002 with support from the BJP. Having established herself as the foremost Dalit leader of UP, Mayawati sought to widen BSP's vote base by rechristening it as the party of *Bahujans* (the majority of the population comprising of the SCs, STs, OBCs and minorities), and later, *Sarvajans* (party for all) through effective social engineering. With its successful outreach to the upper castes with slogans like *SarvajanHitaaySarvajanSukhaay* and campaigns like *Brahmin BhaicharaSammelan* the BSP was able to secure an absolute majority in the 2007 state elections, the first party to do so in more than a decade and a half. The BSP later gave key party positions and ministerial berths to the brahmins.

The electoral fortunes of the BSP, however, saw a steep fall in the 2012 state elections and have been going downhill ever since. It failed to win any seat in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections and won just one seat in the 2022 UP Assembly elections. The primary reason for this precipitous fall of the BSP has been the shift in its upper-caste, but more importantly, also its Dalit constituency towards the BJP for reasons discussed in the next section.



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### **Dalit Politics in UP: the BJP Factor**

Out of 80 seats up for grabs from UP in the 2014 and 2019 general elections to the Lok Sabha, the BJP won 71 and 62 respectively, a monumental increase from 10 seats it had won in the 2009 elections. Similarly, in the 2017 and 2022 elections to the UP Vidhan Sabha, out of a total of 403 seats, the BJP won 312 and 255 seats respectively, coming to power twice in a row after a hiatus of 15 years since 2002. psephologists, pundits, and political scientists alike have attributed, with a degree of certainty, the electoral successes of the BJP to its growing popularity among the Dalits, along with other factors like – consolidation of its traditional upper caste vote bank, making inroads into non-Yadav OBCs, etc. Comparative analysis of CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey data by Beg et al. (2022) shows that the BJP & allies' share among the Dalit voters was a significant 40% in the 2017 election, and further increased to a whopping 62% in the 2022 elections.

This migration of Dalit voters to the BJP in UP can be attributed to a number of factors. First, winning over the non-*Jatav* caste groups within the Dalits (Jaffrelot, 2021). The Dalits don't constitute a homogenous community, but are a collective of different *jatis* with a shared history of discrimination. The non-*jatavs* are less well off than their *jatav* counterparts (who generally supported the BSP), and resented the latter's monopoly over reservation benefits meant for the Dalits as a whole. The BJP was able to cash in on this resentment to the BSP's disadvantage.

While the movement of the non-*jatav* voters to the BJP can be explained by the inability of the BSP to accommodate these groups within its power structure and the BJP taking advantage of the same, what explains the BJP's success in attracting a share of *jatav* voters, hitherto BSP loyalists? Yes, the BJP increased its vote share among *jatavs* from 8% to 21% between the 2017 and 2022 Assembly elections, whereas the vote share of BSP among its core vote bank fell from 87% to 65% during the same period (Beg et al., 2022). This points to a deeper malaise plaguing the independent Dalit outfits like the BSP than the *jatav* (dominant) vs. the non-*jatav* (non-dominant) dichotomy pointed out by Jaffrelot (2021). This brings us to the second reason for why the BJP has been succeeding in wooing the Dalits, *jatavs and non-jatavs* alike. The BJP has responded positively to the economic aspirations of the Dalit middle classes whose priorities have undergone significant change,

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from seeking social-justice to desiring economic well-being, as a result of the liberalization, privatization, and globalization reforms of the 90s. RashtriyaSwayamsevakSangh's (RSS) 2015 annual report exhorted the BJP government to cater to these needs and aspirations of the scheduled castes (RashtriyaSwayamsevakSangh, 2015). The government in its turn has responded with policies like 'Stand-Up India' to promote Dalit entrepreneurs. Moreover, the BJP's welfare schemes like Ujjwala, Jan Dhan, Ayushman Bharat, GareebKalyan Anna Yojana, AwasYojana, and so forth seemed to have appealed to the poor, of which the Dalits form a major chunk. Quite recently, the BJP's SC Morcha launched the BastiSamparkAbhiyan to expedite implementation of these central, but also state, government schemes in SC villages in UP (Shah, 2020). The BSP on the other hand couldn't evolve a political language to respond to these new aspirations among the Dalits who lacked the caste-consciousness of the past and were seeking immediate improvement of material circumstances rather than a protracted movement for social justice (Narayan, 2020). Pai (2022) also provides a similar analysis behind BSP's failure to appeal to its Dalit voters.

The third factor behind the BJP's success among the Dalits pertains to its successful accommodation of the latter within its Hindutva fold. A key role here has been played by the RSS, the "garbagriha" or womb of Hindutva politics (Narayan, 2021). RSS, through its expansive grassroots network, has started a massive cultural outreach programme among the Dalits to cultivate their Hindu cultural identity and preclude the formation of radical Dalit consciousness distinct from and opposed to the Hindu belief systems. It is the careful undermining of this consciousness by the RSS-BJP combine among the Dalits that has reduced their traction for Dalit-Bahujan style combative politics of the BSP and increased their support for the accommodative "subaltern Hindutva" model of the RSS-BJP. Narayan (2022) gives an example of how this is carried out:

The histories and heroes of these communities are celebrated and incorporated within the Hindutva fold. Leveraging the stories of *Eklavya* (the archer who sacrificed his thumb for dharma, whom they [the RSS] call 'Dharmaparayan Dalit' or a Dalit who follows his Dharma) and Valmiki (the author of the Ramayana), among others, the BJP-RSS have tried to portray the Dalits as martial races, as the 'rashtrarakshak' and the 'dharmarakshak' (p. 102-103).





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This model of subaltern Hindutva, of accommodating communities from lower rungs of the Hindu society into the Hindu belief & value system hitherto dominated by the upper castes, seems to have gained traction among not just Dalits, but also the *Adivasis* and the *Shudras* contributing to the BJP garnering the political support of these groups.

Fourth, the BJP has successfully appropriated Dalit icons, like Dr. Ambedkar and Sant Ravidas Ji, in order to appeal to the Dalits and instil a sense of pride and belonging in the community, as well as to push forward its message of inclusive development ('Sabka Sath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas'). The BJP government, for e.g., named NPCI's UPI app 'BHIM' and also laid the foundation stone for an International Ambedkar Centre in Delhi. Moreover, PM Modi (himself from a *Shudra* community) while delivering the Ambedkar Memorial Lecture on 21 March 2016, referred to himself as a "bhakt" (devotee) of Dr. Ambedkar (PMO India, 2016). This acclaim is not just reserved for Dalit icons of the past, but extends to present-day leaders from the community as well. An example of this was the choice of Mr. Ramnath Kovind, a *mahadalit* from UP, for the highest office of the land. Although BJP's critics have dismissed these gestures as mere tokenism, Wankhede (2017), for example, had called Mr. Kovind as a "false signifier of Dalit identity", nevertheless, the BJP's embrace of the Dalit leaders seems to have resonated well with its Dalit constituency in UP.

Lastly, the "double engines" of BJP's electoral machinery in UP, PM Modi and the present CM Mr. Yogi Adityanath, are seen as vastly popular leaders across the caste divide. On the other hand, the BSP leadership and party structure was being increasingly seen as inept, inflexible, outdated, and corrupt. This leadership factor has also contributed to the movement of the Dalits out of the BSP and into the BJP.

The BJP's success among the Dalits in UP should therefore be seen in the light of these five factors.

### **Conclusion**

Although, the BJP has made significant inroads into the Dalit constituency in UP, its journey ahead isn't one without roadblocks. For one, its critics highlight that the BJP government in UP has been unsuccessful in preventing atrocities against the Dalits, including the Dalit women (the infamous 2020 Hathras gang rape and murder being a case in point), by members

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of upper caste communities and the *gaurakshak* groups. Consequent insecurity among the Dalits, real or perceived, can turn them away from the BJP. Second, the BJP's policies like the enactment of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Indian Constitution to grant reservations to the Economically Weaker Sections among upper castes and its reluctance to conduct the caste census in UP are often cited as examples of the party's upper caste bias. Third, the emergence of new radical Ambedkarite outfits like Chandrashekar Azad Ravan's Bhim Army that have gained significant support among the educated Dalit youth through politics of direct action and mass agitation on issues of Dalit and national concern (e.g., the CAA-NRC protests) are increasingly challenging the Dalit Hindutva or subaltern Hindutva model adopted by the BJP and the RSS. BJP's ability to retain the support of Dalits in UP will, therefore, depend on its ability to continue to build upon its strengths mentioned in the previous section, as well as, address the concerns mentioned here.

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