

DALIT CONSOLIDATION BEHIND BSP IN UP

In the era of identity driven developmental politics, contingent upon ‘numerical electoral sense’, Dalits with 20.7% of Uttar Pradesh population emerge as the intensely sought after social group by political parties across the ideological spectrum, employing various strategies from their respective vantage points.

Analysed from a top-down perspective, the canvassing for Dalit support for the ensuing Assembly election ranges from, resurgent BJP’s deployment of borrowed weapons like Ram Das Athawale, Ram Vilas Paswan and Udit Raj, all non-Jatav Dalit leaders; incumbent Samajvadi Party government’s attempt to reconfigure Dalit base by recommending the inclusion of 17 non-Yadav OBC castes into Dalit fold to unsettle political calculations of BJP and BSP; Mayavati’s discreet invocation of the memory of her previous rules having somewhat privileged position of Dalits by conveying messages and distributing booklets; Congress’ plan to invoke the memory of bygone era of its rule and have a separate Dalit manifesto, to identitarian Muslim parties like Asaduddin Owaisi’s MIM expediently clubbing ‘Bheem with Meem’ (Dalits with Muslims), leading to state emerging as a contending site of competing electoral contestations.

However, the Dalit response, their electoral articulations, as seen from the ground, across the state, is unambiguously clear even though the rationale for the same varies from person to person. A fieldwork undertaken in the election bound state revealed the unprecedented consolidation of an overwhelming majority of Dalits across sub-castes behind BSP, so much so, that the dominant political analysis presupposing past election based assumption of divergence in electoral articulations between Jatavs and non-Jatavs Dalits, doesn’t hold the ground, at least for the coming election.

There are 66 Dalit sub-castes in Uttar Pradesh wherein 6 sub-castes, namely, Jatav-Chamar, Pasi, Dhobi, Kori, Valmiki and Khatik constitute around 87% of the community’s population. Remaining 60 Dalit castes like Musahar, Sapera, Basor, Tantwa etc, in the words of social scientist Badri Narayan, are numerically meagre, spatially scattered and internally fragmented, making them electorally insignificant vis a vis the five sub-castes.

Percentage of Dalit castes in total Dalit population and States population

DALIT CASTE	%age in state Dalit Population	%age in total state Population
JATAV	54.2	11.3
PASI	15.8	3.2
DHOBI	5.9	1.2
KORI	5.5	1.1
VALMIKI	3.2	0.7
KHATIK	2.2	0.5

Source: Census 2011

Contrary to the dominant argument of the trend of non-Jatav Dalits like Pasi, Valmiki, Khatiks and others being seen as fascinated and consequently swayed by Hindutva discourse as a socio-political fact with significant bearing on elections, it was found that while Dalits shared some of the Hindutva's anti-Muslim outlook as a socio-cultural fact in riot affected districts like Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, Mau and Gorakhpur, politically the same didn't translate into a positive vote for BJP. In fact, the same set of non-Jatav Dalits like Valmikis in Muzaffarnagar & Shamli as well as Pasis and Khatiks in Mau & Gorakhpur opined a strong preference for BSP while admitting voting for non-BSP parties in previous elections. This shows the gap and fluidity between their socio-cultural and political outlooks which may synchronize in some contexts while fall apart in the other.

While Jatavs consolidation behind BSP has been a dominant trend in the state on account of both Kanshi Ram and Mayavati belonging to the same caste and their conscious policy to place them in crucial leadership position within the party, the consolidation of non-Jatav dalit sub-castes like Pasi, Valmiki, Dhobi, Kori, Khatiks etc behind the party is primarily the result of the rampant anti-Dalit hostilities informing the incumbent Samajvadi Party's tenure; the successive disenchantments with Congress and BJP who they shifted to in significant numbers in 2009 and 2014 Lok Sabha elections respectively leading to a sense of critical appreciation of BSP's previous tenure that ensured safety and focused welfare measures for them.

The causality behind pro-BSP sentiment of non-Jatav Dalits in the coming election is reflected in the response of a Kori Dalit at Ayodhya who stated: "SP ke raaj me humlogo ki police me sunvayi nahi hai" (police is non-responsive to Dalits in the incumbent S.P rule). Similarly, a group of Pasi respondents living on road side makeshift accommodations near Jhansi falling in Bundelkhand region of the state pointed to the nearby abandoned apartment based 'Kanshiram Awasiya Colony (Kanshiram Residential colony) that was built during

Mayavati's time and allotted to Dalits and other poor sections. However, it was pointed out that within six months of the incumbent Samajvadi Party's coming to power in 2012, the water and electricity supply of the colonies got discontinued, thereby forcing the Dalit inhabitants to abandon the place and shift to the makeshift accommodations. In another instance, a Valmiki youth at Shahjahanpur mentioned the discrimination in selecting the villages under "Adarsh Lohiya Gram" (Ideal Lohiya Village)- a pet project of the incumbent government- wherein the selected villages are given funds for infrastructural developments. It was pointed out that in contrast to the BSP's policy of "Ambedkar Gram" (Ambedkar village) wherein the selected villages used to have significant dalit population, the Lohiya Gram (Lohiya Villages) are primarily composed of villages with lesser Dalit population. Besides this policy of pitting the symbol of Lohia against Ambedkar under the Samajvadi Party rule, the Dalits are also taking into cognizance the increasing instances of impunity in relation to violence and crime against them in the last 5 years in spite of the soft image of C.M Akhilesh Yadav.

Dalit Voting in Past Elections in Uttar Pradesh

DALIT CASTES	2007				2012				2014			
	BJP	BSP	SP	CONG	BJP	BSP	SP	CONG	BJP	BSP	SP	CONG
JATAV	3	86	4	2	5	62	15	5	18	68	4	2
NON-JATAV									45	29	10	4
PASI	12	53	16	7	4	57	24	7	--			
VALMIKI	11	71	2	4	3	42	9	12	--			
OTHERS	9	58	16	4	11	45	18	17	--			

Source: National election study, Conducted by CSDS – Lokniti

Further, expressing their sense of disillusionment with Congress, a Dhobi respondent at Sultanpur stated, "Congress Dimag se Utar Chuki Hai" (Congress is out of our political cognizance). However, the massive case of non-Jatav dalit's disenchantment is not against Congress but rather against BJP that got 45% of their votes in 2014 Lok Sabha election. Two and half years of BJP government at the centre is considered a non-starter by majority of the non-Jatav Dalits and to compound their sense of disillusionment, the everyday hardships on account of 'demonetization' with no signs of improvement in ground situation and a complete lack of tangible benefits in sight, has further gravitated them towards BSP.

Thus, for Jatav and non-Jatav Dalits alike, the ouster of BSP and Mayavati from power in the backdrop of hostile and anti-Dalit image of Samajvadi Party government, the political insignificance of Congress party and a massive sense of disillusionment against Narendra Modi led BJP government at the centre, signify a loss of power to the community, leading to their unprecedented consolidation behind BSP. In fact, a Pasi Dalit respondent at Faizabad marked the shift in Dalit electoral articulation in the coming election with his witty remark that he voted for Modi as then Mayavati was not in the race for PM in 2014 and now he would vote for BSP rather than Modi as the latter would not be C.M.

In this backdrop, the interplay of Dalits nostalgia for BSP rule and their massive disillusionment with other parties is likely to make BSP the prime contestant in the coming election on account of an unprecedented consolidation of Dalits whose numerical significance would be too formidable to be matched by the rival parties. It could be reasonably inferred that BSP may witness the highest ever percentage of Dalit votes in 2017.