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DALITS SOLIDLY 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.

Analyzed 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 Samajwadi 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; Mayawati’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, Tanta etc, in the words of social scientist Badri Narayan, are numerically meager, spatially scattered and internally fragmented, making them electorally insignificant vis a vis the five sub-castes. 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 Mayawati 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 Samajwadi 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 Mayawati’s time and allotted to Dalits and other poor sections. However, it was pointed out that within six months of the incumbent Samajwadi 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 Samajwadi 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.

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 Mayawati from power in the backdrop of hostile and anti-Dalit image of Samajwadi 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 Mayawati 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.

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

Caste Wise Dalit Voting in Past Elections in Uttar Pradesh: NES

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

Percentage of Dalit castes in total Dalit population and States population: Census 2011

MUSLIM VOTES IN UP: CANDIDATE IS KING

In post-Ram Mandir context, Muslims with 19.3% of state population hold the key to Lucknow in 2017. Primarily, there are two parallel electoral arithmetic, namely, their alignment with Dalits (Dalit-Muslim combination) and Yadavs (Muslim-Yadav alliance) that needs to be explored to gauge the potential Muslim voting trend in the ensuing Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, which in turn, will decide the two main contestants from among the widely perceived triangular contest among BSP, BJP and SP.

A fieldwork among the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh, concluded just before the multi-faceted expulsion drama in ruling SP unfolded, provided some glimpses into and important insight about, the ongoing Muslim electoral articulation for the coming state election.

The combination of three factors, the perceptual fluidity about the dominance of respective parties, the tenuous reasoning about the non-Muslim support base of BSP and SP and the candidate profile of three political parties in respective constituencies, are constituting the layered Muslim mindset vis a vis their political preference, wherein, an overwhelming majority of them are willing to wait till the final declaration of candidates by all the relevant political parties, namely, BSP, BJP and SP.

Objectively, the popular perception of a positive correlation between Muslim vote and Samajwadi Party on account of latter's political articulations and focused policies still hold the ground among majority of Muslims- a factor, compounded by immensely positive image of Akhilesh Yadav. However, as the qualitative and non-statistical electoral wisdom goes, the appreciation of a party and leader must not be treated as a positive vote for the same. If one asks the Muslims about the desirability of a party forming the next state government, incumbent Samajwadi Party, unambiguously emerges as the most preferred option.

However, the moment the Muslim respondents are asked about their subjective preference, multiple factors like assembly constituency level demographic composition, the candidate profile, the knowledge of the shifting social base of core voters of various candidates, the permutations and combinations of perceived floating voters, emerge as the superseding electoral determinant of possible Muslim voting clouding the edge that Samajwadi Party enjoys in their objective perception. This gap between 'subjective' and 'objective' response of the Muslims coming from their desired political choice and context specific actual electoral choice, is something that most of the 'closed questionnaire and quantitative survey based' election surveys tend to miss, leading to projecting the 'objective' response of the Muslim electorates, wherein Samajwadi Party tend to get over-represented at the cost of BSP. On the other hand, a narrative method based field study despite limited sample size has the cognitive advantage to delve deeper into and decipher the fluid, complicated and layered articulations of the respondents as here, besides capturing the socio-political response, the interpretative method is simultaneously employed by the interviewer.

Thus, the fieldwork revealed that across the state, the Muslims, divided sociologically, along the lines of sects (Devbandi and Barelvi; Shia and Sunni) and castes (Ashraf and Pasmada), are also divided in their politico-electoral preferences and yet united in one way, that is, voting for a non-BJP party- something that differs from region to region and constituency to constituency. Therefore, the crucial question whether Muslims in general would give more weight age to a 'party' or a 'candidate' in the ensuing Assembly election could be reasonably settled in favour of the latter. It's the 'candidate factor' that would matter the most for the Muslims for the coming election. Further, the candidate has to be from two parties, namely Samajwadi Party and BSP and despite the sympathetic outlook of Muslims towards Congress Party, their candidates, barring rare exceptions, doesn't fare a chance in their electoral calculations on account of the lack of their 'winnabilityfactor'.

The essence of this dominant electoral articulation among Muslims was captured in the responses of two respondents, a Yadav and a Muslim at Orai and Bareilly when asked about the expected electoral preference of the Muslims wherein the former, suing 'Hinglish' gave a experiential formulaic remark, "Jiska Danda High Wahi Bada Bhai" (Muslims would vote for a non-BJP party expected to win); while the latter remarked, " hum BSP aur SP me 10 wale ko support karenge na ki 5 wale ko taki humara vote unko jeeta sake" (In between SP and BSP we'll support the candidate that enjoys the bigger support so that our vote leads to their victory).

Here, it must be noted that Muslims in general are not only preferring candidate over party between BSP and SP, but also opining for a positive vote to ensure the winnability of a candidate rather than negative vote with the view to make BJP defeated. Hence, it could be inferred that Muslims are voting in strategic manner by opting for non-BJP party but the nature of the same is 'positive' rather than 'negative'.

Besides the traditional refrain of Muslims from BJP, there have been additional factors making Muslims not preferring for BJP for the coming election despite the developmental rhetoric of the latter. Here, besides the colossal rise in the instances of communal issues like 'cow vigilantism, 'love-jihad', 'low-intensity riots', the issue of 'Triple Talaq' has convinced Muslims about the hostility of BJP towards the community and an overwhelming majority of the Muslims respondents see the raising of the issue as an interference into the internal matter of the community. In fact, an old Muslim respondent at Amethi gave a slippery slope remark, "BJP Aaj Talak pe Faisala Kar Rahi Hia, Kal ye Namaaj pe Faisala Kareng" (Today BJP is deciding upon Talaq issue, tomorrow they will decide upon Namaaz). Similarly, in Poorvanchal region at Gazipur, sitting in a group, a Muslim had a witty take on the issue when he wittily remarked, "Dilli ki Janata ne BJP ko Dilli me pehla Talaq dia, Dusra Talaq BJP ko Bihar ki Janata ne Dia aur Teesra Talaq UP ki Janata degi" (BJP got its first divorce by the voters of Delhi, second divorce by that of Bihar and it will get its final and third divorce by the voters of UP).

In this backdrop, the crucial question as to which party will be the biggest beneficiary of ‘candidate and win ability’ centric Muslim electoral articulation in the coming election could be seen as veering, a significant majority of the community’s vote, towards BSP from SP on account of two factors- a. BSP has fielded more Muslim candidates (about 100) than SP and second, the intense consolidation of Dalits behind party and the knowledge of same among others will give a perceptual advantage to the winnability of BSP candidates affecting the Muslim electoral response. Thus, compared to 2012 Assembly election as shown in the table, in absolute terms BSP’s gain of Muslim votes would be direct loss of SP even if latter end up getting relatively more Muslim vote. Hence, the bottom-line of Muslim electoral choice in the coming election would be the primacy of candidate’s winnability in respective constituencies over party placing BSP in an advantageous position.

Muslim Voting for Political Parties in Percentage

Party	2007	2009	2012	2014
BSP	17	18	20	18
SP	45	30	39	58
BJP	3	6	7	10
Cong	14	25	18	11

BJP HAS EDGE IN CAPTURING NON YADAV OBC VOTE IN UP

The political psychology of non-Yadav OBCs, as a clustered community, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, is caught between the pulls and pushes of their 'aspiration to have political domination like Yadavs-their OBC companion' and 'the feeling of relative deprivation vis a vis both Yadavs and Dalits'. The only OBC caste exception to this trait happen to be Jats, who on account of their concentrated spatial location into the western part of the state, relatively better economic position in post-Green revolution phase, with the legacy of a leader like Charan Singh, are partially immune from the feeling of 'relative deprivation', even though the tinge of jealousy against Yadavs dominating the state emerges as a factor in their demand for a separate State.

Roughly considered a third of the state population their support emerges as the 'balancer' upon the distinct 'core support base' of various parties like SP, BSP and BJP, who leave no stone unturned to woo them for their electoral support in the coming election. Trapped in between this 'aspiration-anxiety axis' and driven by their 'caste-centric logic' they have been swinging among and negotiating with the discourses of 'Hindutva, Mandal and Bahujan' from election to election. Their frustration of playing second fiddle to Yadavs in Samajwadi Party, Dalits in BSP and Upper Castes in BJP, has many a times, resulted in formation of caste parties, albeit with dismal electoral success, leading to their political destiny of responding to the best offers that various political parties, most notably, BJP, SP and BSP come up with.

Since 1990s, not only a majority of these castes like, Pal, Nishadh, Kahar, Kumhar, Rajbhar etc. have failed to utilize the reservation policy to their advantage but rather, have been on the receiving end with the political rise of Yadavs and Dalits. While, Rajnath Singh led BJP tried to woo them in early 2001 by earmarking a separate quota for them within the existing OBC reservation- a move struck by judiciary and declared a conspiracy against Yadavs by then leader of opposition Mulayam Singh Yadav, the Samajwadi Party leadership responded in 2005 by putting many OBC castes into SC category, leading to Mayawati being put in a dock.

This time, all the parties are coming with focused program and policies for them. BJP with its aggressive 'Pichhda Varg Sammelan' (Backward Caste Conclaves) one each for two Assembly segments across the state; Incumbent Samajwadi Party, by recommending to the Central government the inclusion of 17 OBC castes into SC category; BSP via its caste-centric 'Bhaichara Sammelan (Brotherhood Conclaves); are competing for their electoral support.

How these non-Yadav OBCs would respond to the offers of various political parties would hold the clue about the possible front runner in the coming Assembly election. A fieldwork undertaken in the election bound state revealed three 'distinct but interrelated' existing electoral articulations among them, namely, a. they would be voting for a candidate from their respective castes and therefore, b. their vote would be scattered and divided, however, c. in the absence of any candidate hailing from their respective castes, they are more likely to vote for BJP.

The caste centric electoral rationality of non-Yadav OBCs could be understood in the response of Mati Prasad Maurya, a Kushvaha voter in Kanpur-Dehat, when he justified his preference for BJP by stating: "Hum Log Is Bar BJP ko Vote Denge Kyunki Yadav Padeshan Karta Hai Jab SP ki Sarkar Aati Hai, aur SC Padeshan karta hai Jab Mayawati ki Sarkar aati hai, Hum Beech Wale Jaye to Kaha Jaye, Isliye BJP ko Vote Denge" (This time we would vote for BJP as Yadavs bother us when SP is in power and Dalits bother us when BSP is in the power; where else would we intermediary castes go if not BJP).

However, it was found that a significant number of non-Yadav respondents also preferring SP and BSP by giving conducive secular and developmental logic which in the final analysis turn out to be, primarily, contingent upon the caste profile of respective candidates fielded or likely to be fielded by the preferred political parties in their electoral constituencies.

On part of the political parties, BJP seem to have an 'off the bloc' advantage over SP and BSP as far as these OBCs are concerned. With the aim to woo OBCs, BJP, appointed an OBC, Keshav Prasad Maurya (Kushvaha by caste) as its state president. This was followed by a series of follow up measures like inducting dissident OBC leaders, like Swami Prasad Maurya from other parties, especially BSP; inducting various OBC caste leaders like Om Prakash Rajbhar, Sanjay Rajbhar and merging their insignificant but symbolically important caste parties into BJP; appointment of Anupriya Patel (Kurmi by caste) as central minister besides organizing around 200 OBC conclaves (Pichhda Varg Sammelan) around the state covering 403 constituency, giving BJP an edge over the others among these OBCs.

The decision of ruling Samajwadi Party to include 17 OBC castes into Dalit category on the eve of election is intended precisely to reverse this shift of OBCs to BJP fold besides putting BSP in a dilemma. Of 17 OBC castes recommended to be included into Dalit category, the Kahar, Kumhar, Nishadh and Rajbhars constitute significant voting bloc in many assembly constituencies and have been divided among all the three main contender, SP, BSP and BJP, depending upon their loyalty to local caste leaders since 1990s. These caste leaders have conveniently chosen the political ideology of Hindutva when joined BJP, of Mandal when joined hands with SP and Bahujan when aligned with BSP and their support base, driven by the logic of caste representation, has followed the suit.

Therefore, one finds, the castes which have their prominent political face in any party decisively shifting to the respective party, like Lodh and Kushvahas, predominantly batting for BJP while other OBC castes like Kurmi, Pal, Rajbhar, Nishadh, Prajapati, lacking a prominent leader being divided from region to region and constituency to constituency. This trend is well captured in the response of a Prajapati (Kumhar) respondent at Sultanpur, "Humari Vote Badalti Rahti Hai Kyunki Humaari Koi Apni Party Nahi Hai, Humara Ek Hi Hisab Hai Ki Jidhar Lahar Chal Padi, Udhar Chal Diye (Our vote keep shifting from election to election as we don't have our own party. We follow just one trend that we go by the wind).

As the following Table shows, the BJP has the tough challenge to retain the massive support it gained of non-Yadav OBCs in 2014 election- a task the saffron party is following to the hilt- while BSP and SP are competing to retain a share of the same, which in turn, would witness their votes scattered among the three main contender with slight edge to BJP.

Voting Preference of OBCs in Uttar Pradesh (in percentage)

OBCCastes/Party	Congress				BJP				BSP				SP			
	2007	2009	2012	2014	2007	2009	2012	2014	2007	2009	2012	2014	2007	2009	2012	2014
Yadav	4	11	4	8	5	6	9	27	7	5	11	3	72	73	66	53
Jat	2	13	11	13	18	31	7	77	10	41	16	6	8	10	7	8
Kurmi-Kushvaha	6	28	13	16	42	20	20	53	16	18	19	4	17	18	35	17
Other OBCs	9	17	12	8	17	29	17	60	30	19	19	11	20	25	16	1

HOW THE UPPER CASTES VEERED BACK TO BJP AGAIN IN UP

“UP me ATM (Ahir, Thakur and Muslim) ki Sarkar hai”, (The ruling dispensation at UP means the rule of Ahir, ie, Yadav, Thakur, i.e, Rajputs and Muslims), remarked a middle-aged Thakur (Rajput) respondent at Kunda, Pratapgarh in 2012 after Akhilesh Yadav led SP government was formed, trouncing BSP and reducing BJP to its lowest tally of 49 seats. The statement, besides Muslim-Yadav equation, signify an important dynamic informing the state, namely, the dominant trend of electoral intra-upper caste rivalry in general and Brahmin-Rajput rivalry in particular, since independence. In the typical political trait of Hindi heartland (UP, Bihar and MP), the non-Brahmin upper castes, especially Rajputs, appalled by the Brahmin’s dominance in Congress started shifting to the non-Congress parties in significant numbers. In UP, the Rajputs were the core social constituency of non-Congress, as propounded by Rammanohar Lohia and executed by Charan Singh in the form of famous non-Brahmin AJGAR (Ahir, i.e, Yadav, Jat, Gujjar and Rajput) electoral alliance in 1970s and 1980s. Though Congress tried to win back the support of Rajputs by giving them Chief Minister ship across the Hindi-heartland since 1980s, the Brahmin-Thakur rivalry continued.

In fact, the 1989, Lok Sabha election that was the first personality centric election in north India in 1980s, the acrimonious campaign by Rajiv Gandhi (perceived Brahmin) and V.P Singh (Rajput) had its bearing upon the social constituencies wherein the Rajputs are said to have voted significantly in favour of the latter. The trend continued in the 1989 Assembly election in the state, bringing Mulayam Singh Yadav led Janata Dal in power by defeating the incumbent Congress party led by N.D Tiwari.

This social aspect in electoral arena is significant as in the popular understanding the decades from late 1960s to late 1980s, i.e., the era of Congress-dominance famously known as 'Congress System', is considered the continuation of the older dominance of upper castes as a homogeneous bloc, who were, unsuccessfully but relentlessly, resisted by lower castes under the banner of socialist parties. In that dominant narrative of 'upper caste vs. backward caste' electoral rivalry, the aspect of intra-upper caste rivalry, especially in UP has often been understated. This understanding needs to be factored in any political analysis as the intra-upper caste rivalry gripping the state was not just confined to the elections but rather extended to spheres like institutional access and Mafia rivalry for dominance over public resources. Moreover, the social scenario of upper caste domination till 1980s made their internal rivalry electorally significant as they operated in prevailing context of political-clientelism, bringing additional support base from among the lower-castes for different parties, making democracy competitive.

However, an important shift came in the wake of Mandalization of north Indian politics since 1990 causing an unprecedented consolidation of upper castes behind BJP, making the saffron party a dominant electoral force in the state throughout 1990s. By 2000s, the electoral decline of BJP on account of factors like, desertion of OBC leaders like Kalyan Singh, Ram Temple becoming a non-issue, coupled with friendly overtures from regional parties, namely, compelled upper castes act as the balancing factors, tactically oscillating between them from election to election, besides supporting BJP. The data suggests that more Rajputs were tilted towards SP while Brahmins towards BSP.

It is in this backdrop that 2014 Lok Sabha election emerged as the second shift when swayed by the Modi wave the upper castes converged behind BJP as its core voters- a trend continuing in the ongoing assembly election.

The fact that upper castes are vouching for BJP in 2017, despite factors like, being at the receiving end in the wake of demonetization affecting agriculture adversely; both BSP and SP fielding significant number of upper caste candidates; BJP focusing primarily upon non-Yadav OBCs; a general sense of appreciation regarding Akhilesh Yadav's leadership and the image of Mayawati as a tough administrator, reveals the deep interplay of identitarian plank and winnability quotient of the ongoing Assembly election in the state. As a pro-BJP Brahmin farmer unhappy with demonetization persuasively remarked at Jhanshi, "2007 me BSP ko aur 2012 me SP ko vote diya kyunki BJP race me nahi thi, lekin BSP ke Raaj me Dalit aur SP ke Raaj me Yadav ka bolbala ho jata hai, Is baar BJP race me hai aur fir humare pas BJP ke alawa chara bhi kya hai", (I voted for BSP in 2007 and SP in 2012 as BJP was not in the electoral race. However, Dalits and Yadavs dominate the social space in the regime of BSP and SP respectively. This time BJP is in the race and otherwise also what option do we have besides supporting BJP).

Interestingly, the complex dynamics of the centrality of 'identitarian plank' and 'winnability factor' in the ongoing election could be seen in the comment of a Brahmin respondent at Chillupar assembly constituency in Gorakhpur wherein both BJP and BSP have fielded Brahmin candidates, "Here the Brahmins are divided among both BJP and BSP due to candidate factor. However, everyone desires BJP forming the next government in the state".

Thus, the factors like, continuing enigma of Modi among upper castes, post-2014 perception of BJP being the political force to reckon with, the Yadav and Dalit centric image of SP and BSP and the perception that an upper caste stands a chance of being appointed as C.M if BJP forms the government, have led to the consolidation of upper castes behind BJP, despite latter's overwhelming focus on non-Yadav OBCs. The sentiment was summed up in the response of a Rajput respondent at Baldev Assembly constituency in Mathura, "earlier we used to shift to other parties as there was no wave for BJP. Now we are completely with BJP as there is Modi wave making the party winnable once again."

JAT GHAR WAPSI SPELLS TROUBLE FOR BJP

“Ajit Singh ko Beizzati Hai Har Party Ne, Jat Samaj Is se Aahat Hai” (Jats are pained by the humiliation of Ajit Singh by all the political parties)- a remark by a group of Jats at Iglas village in Aligarh-is the running sentiment informing Jats across poll bound western Uttar Pradesh. The community that witnessed its economic and political ascendancy since 1960s on account of dividends reaped from ‘Land-Reform’ and ‘Green-Revolution’, which was coterminous with the political rise of Charan Singh, had always felt comfortable with latter’s leadership and legacy, so much so, that even Ajit Singh’s political opportunisms and oscillating image was politically tolerated and electorally endorsed. However, things came to an abrupt end in post-Muzaffarnagar 2013 ‘Jat-Muslim’ riots when the Jats deserted Ajit Singh and RLD for maintaining silence and acquiring political neutrality rather than supporting them against Muslims. They retaliated by shifting en-masse to BJP in 2014 Lok Sabha election and ensured a humiliating defeat to Ajit Singh, his son Jayant Chaudhary and other RLD candidates as a whole. Back then, Ram Kumar, a Jat and Pradhan in riot affected Fugana village in Muzaffarnagar district justified their decision to desert Ajit Singh and support BJP by opining, “Humne Charan Singh ke Naam pe RLD ko Aankh Mund ke Support Kia, Par usne Dange me Humara Saath Nahin Dia, Dangoke case me Humare Bachche aaj bhi Jail me hain, Humara Saath keval BJP ne Dia aur Ab Humara Neta Sanjeev Baliyan hai” (In the name of Charan Singh we supported Ajit Singh blindly but he deserted us during riots. Still our boys are behind the bars in cases related to riots. Only BJP came to our support and now BJP leader Sanjeev Baliyan is our leader). That was Ajit Singh’s first humiliation at the hands of his own community members- Jats. However, the saga of humiliation has come full circle for Jats in UP- from humiliating Ajit Singh in 2014 to feeling humiliated by his political negligence in 2017- making them nostalgic about the past when they acquired political centrality in the region till recently.

A tour across the western UP, comprising the 'Braj and Upper Doab' sub-regions including the districts like Agra, Mathura, Aligarh, Bulandshahar, Meerut, Baghpat, Shamli, Muzaffarnagar, particularly in their rural parts, throws a clear pattern of Jats articulating their case for RLD quite enthusiastically. The enthusiasm informs elders and youths alike. Suddenly, in a qualitative shift delineating their conception of 'self' as compared to 2014 and 2015, when they privileged their Hinduness over trademark peasant identity and started flirting with the saffron party, the peasantness is coming again to the fore, which in turn, is making them hostile not only to the SP-Congress alliance but equally against BJP. In fact, a group of Jat respondents at Lilon village in riot-affected Shamli district took exception upon comparing Sanjeev Baliyan, a Jat and the new Hindutva face of BJP, with Ajit Singh and asserted latter's unchallenged leadership on account of representing the legacy of Charan Singh. Their enchantment with Narendra Modi has significantly dissipated and they are brutal in blaming BJP for selling them false dreams. The return of their caste based peasant identity over religious one is revealed in the clichéd remark by a father-son duo at Timakhiya village, falling under Shival Assembly constituency in Meerut district, "BJP KisaanVirodhihaikyunki ye Baniyoki Party Hai" (BJP primarily is anti-farmer for being the party of Baniyas).

Compounding their sense of alienation from BJP and other parties is the feeling of relative deprivation, leading to the emergence of 'reservation' demand quite significantly. Jats, who are already OBC in the state of Delhi, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh desires to be included into the central OBC list and have been launching constant agitation under the banner of 'AkhilBharatiyaArakshanSangharshSamiti" led by its national president Yashpal Malik, who has unfolded a vicious anti-BJP campaign in the region and has reportedly employed around 125 teams to mobilize Jats against BJP in the ensuing election.

Ironically, the humiliation of Ajit Singh at the hands of SP-Congress alliance by not taking him into their fold is hurting BJP the most as the community is being considered as its confirmed voter. Their shift to RLD in significant numbers would have a negative bearing upon the electoral prospect of the saffron party as the core support base of later is already narrow, making a repeat of 2014 like massive Jat support indispensable.

This seemingly sudden shift of Jats from BJP to RLD on the eve of election and the corresponding internal bickering among the BJP support base is quite evident in the response of a Baniya respondent at Muzaffarnagar who opined, “Jat BJP me mazboori me aaye the kynukidango me BJP kealawekisi party ne inkasathnahidia, inpe BJP kokabhibharoshanahikarnachahiyetha, 2016 February kiMuzaffarnagarupchunavkesamay hi ye apna rang dikhane wale the lekin tab Sanjeev Baliyan ne kisitarahparty me apniizzatkavasta deke inhemanayatha. Jatkevalapnafaydadekhtahai”, (Jat came to BJP fold out of compulsion rather than love for the same as no other party supported them in riot related cases. They were about to show their true colors by deserting BJP in February 2016 Muzaffarnagar by-election itself, but back then, Sanjeev Baliyan somehow persuaded them by pleading for his image in the party. Jats by nature seek their own benefit).

Thus, the occurrence of communal riots in Muzaffarnagar prior to 2014 Lok Sabha election, causing the religious identity taking primacy among Jats in western UP, leading to their tremendous mobilization in favour of BJP wherein, as the table shows, its vote share increased from 7 percent in 2012 to 77 percent in 2014, seem to taking a reverse swing in favour of RLD and the emerging Jat narrative is forthrightly unambiguous that Ajit Singh, rather than Sanjeev Baliyan and others, is their unparalleled leader and every party would have to take him seriously. One Jat respondent wittingly remarked, “JatokiGharWapsi ho Rahi Hai”, (Comingback to RLD is Gharwapsi of Jats)- a worrying electoral scenario for BJP.

HOW JATS VOTED IN UP

Party	2007	2009	2012	2014
CONGRESS	2	13	11	-
BJP	18	31	7	77
BSP	10	41	16	6
SP	8	10	7	8
RLD	61	-	45	-

‘NOTEBANDI’ LEAD TO ‘VOTEBANDI’ FOR BJP IN UP?

“Have you seen a single rich man or a politician standing in Bank queues? It’s the poor who suffered due Demonetization”, is the common denominator of anti-demonetization remarks across Uttar Pradesh, coming not only from among the Muslims, Yadavs, and Jatavs-the support base of non-BJP parties- but also from many, non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits and others who are considered potential pro-BJP floating voters by the saffron party. That demonetization would emerge as such a significant electoral issue in the state popularly perceived to be driven by caste and community centric fault lines defies common-sensical perception governing the electoral calculations of various political parties. The fact that there was hardly any popular agitation over the issue gave the impression that despite extremities of opinions, the same would not have any significant electoral bearing in the state, a fact visible in the complete silence over the issue among all the parties. However, the undercurrent against among the electorates in general and poor class in particular over demonetization would be the crucial factor determining the course of electoral outcome in UP.

“Notebandi pe log khamosh the kyunki logo ko ghar chalane ke liye pahle paise chahiye the. Wo bank aur ATM ki line me lagte ya virodh karte? Lekin logo me is baat pe gussa hai aur wo election me dikhega” (The people didn’t protest over demonetization as getting money to run the house was their priority. Were they to stand in Bank and ATM queues or came out in protest? But the people’s anger would reflect in their voting), opined an otherwise pro-BJP school teacher, a Bania by caste, at a village in Moradabad.

The narrative over demonetization is layered but clear. In general, there is a sense of anger and disillusionment among the people seen in terms of their occupational identities of being a farmer, daily-wage laborers, small and medium businessmen and people working in informal sector. However, the degree of angst and anger over the issue gets mediated by their caste and religious identities entrenched in the local power arithmetic, wherein, while the core voters of BJP, like upper castes and Bania along with a section of non-Yadav OBCs like Lodh and a section of Kushvaha, more often than not, sound apologists of demonetization, admitting subjective and tangible sufferings but defending the move, albeit half-heartedly, for abstract and distant benefit; the non-BJP voters like Dalits, Muslims, Yadavs as well as a significant bloc of other OBCs are aggressively vocal in their response over demonetization and the sufferings it caused to them for no reasonable justification.

This leads to a paradigm shift in the role of the ‘opinion-mobilizer’ caste groups who traditionally hailed from upper castes including Banias who despite their relative numerical weakness, have been dominating the local public deliberative spaces like village Chaupals, tea shops gatherings, market squares, thereby setting the argumentative resources with the aim to convince and confuse core voters of non-BJP parties in favour of BJP. Their dominance in popular articulations in multiple public spaces had a significant bearing upon the electorates popularly considered as ‘floating voters’ who tend to go by the wind based upon their subjective perceptions of winnability factor. With demonetization causing a general suffering across the occupational categories, the upper castes have lost the necessary confidence to act as ‘opinion-mobilizer’ at the best and have become the apologists at the worst. It is the voters of non-BJP parties, like Yadavs, Muslims and Dalits who are not only articulating the anti-demonetization narratives but also dominating the public deliberative spaces.

This role reversal was visible in a village at Sitapur where the pro-BSP Jatav respondents confidently and logically silenced some Thakur respondents over demonetization when the later tried to present a bright picture over the issue.

Seen in the backdrop of the spectacular success of BJP in 2014 Lok Sabha election in UP, when it succeeded in getting 42.3 percent of popular votes, again of 25 percent from 2009, the pro-BJP sway of ‘floating voters’, primarily hailing from non-Yadav OBC and non-Jatav Dalit castes emerged as the prime factor for its historical performance, besides the temporary desertion of core voters of BSP and SP, Jatav-Dalits and Yadavs respectively, in favour of the saffron party. However, a fieldwork conducted across the state revealed that shift that has taken place from 2014, wherein, not only the core-voters of SP and BSP, the Yadavs and Jatav Dalits have returned to their respective parties, but also the floating voters are seen sharing the anti-demonetization sentiment dominating the public sphere in the election bound state. The sentiment was summarized in the response of a group of Brahmin, Nishad and Kurmi respondents at Mangari village falling under Gosaiganj Assembly constituency at Faizabad who remarked, “Notebandi ka Jawaab Votebandi” (Demonetization to be avenged by non-voting for BJP).

Another factor as to why the issue of demonetization would work significantly against BJP is their Modi-centric campaign strategy rather than projecting a C.M face to lead the candidate. While 2014 Modi signified hope and aspiration for the lower castes, the Modi of 2017 in UP represents sufferings and hardships on account of demonetization. Tales after tales recounting the instances of day to day hardships of not getting money to treat an ailing family member, drastic decline in daily wages, struggles to procure fertilizer and seed for farming, day long bank queues to get their own money and depressing experiences and struggles to manage pre-fixed daughters’ marriages constitute the dominant narrative of impact of demonetization. With Modi as the face of BJP campaign, electorates compare him to Akhilesh and Mayawati, making the negativities of demonetization superseding the positive claims of BJP. The Modi wave that swept the floating voters in 2014 are more likely to be swayed by the charm of Akhilesh Yadav who signify tangible, immediate and concrete welfare measures and Mayawati who still fares as the preferred choice for electorates privileging ‘law and order’ over other indicators.

Hence, it can be reasonable inferred that the defensive posture of pro-BJP voters in the state on account of demonetization would have a serious bearing upon the electoral performance of the party which seems failing in enthusing its core voters and swaying the floating one. The sentiment was well captured in Bundelkhand, the worst hit region of the state, when respondent remarked that as a Brahmin he is pro-BJP but as a farmer he is anti-BJP. The 'Achhe-Din' claim of demonetization seems to have boomeranged in the state as the resonating chorus happen to be 'Kala din rather than Kala Dhan', 'Bure Din rather than Achhe Din', 'Barbadi rather than Khushhali', making demonetization a demon for the people.

Performance of Political Parties in UP Lok Sabha Election (2014)

Party	Seats Contested	Won	Change from 2009	Vote (%) 2014	Change from 2009 (%)
Congress	67	2	-19	7.5	-10.8
BJP	78	71	+61	42.3	+24.8
BSP	80	0	-20	19.6	-7.8
SP	78	5	-18	22.2	-1.1
RLD	8	0	-5	0.9	-2.4
AD	2	2	2	1.0	+0.2

Source: CSDS Data Unit.

MAYAWATI IS LOSING PERCEPTION WAR BUT DOES SHE CARE?

The formation of BSP on April 14, 1984, was symptomatic of the larger trend of replacement of class by ascriptive identity in socio-political sphere. The state of Uttar Pradesh witnessed similar trend as was reflected in the general decline in the citadel of left in places like Mau, Azamgarh and other areas that off late are dubbed as communally sensitive places. Kanshiram, the founder of BSP and mentor of Mayawati, had a clear conception of the structural mosaic of 'Bahujan' that was like a 'cake model' wherein the base had to be Dalits and the toppings had to come from lower OBCs and Muslims. He succeeded not only in consolidating the Dalit base but also in nurturing many lower OBC leaders who shared his conception of Bahujan that was deeply rooted in identitarian aspirations.

The BSP experiment succeeded since 1990s in the context when every political party were employing the social engineering primarily by weaving caste and religion from different vantage points like Hindutva, Mandal and Bahujan, catering to the political aspirations of different sections. BSP's spectacular success in 2007 under the leadership of Mayawati was the outcome of similar identitarian craft wherein sensing the Samajwadi party led domineering 'Yadavisation' as a common other among the Dalits, lower OBCs and upper castes, especially, Brahmins, she reinvented the party's electoral strategy creatively and imaginatively by rhetorically shifting from the conception of 'Bahujan to Sarvjan' and inverting the symbolic image of elephant differently for different sections. Hence, BSP's elephant became revered lord Ganesh for the Brahmins while for Yadavs it was the symbol of intimidating vanquisher as reflected in party's three slogans:

"Brahman Shankh Bajayega, Haathi Badhta Jayega" (The Brahmin will blow the conch and auspiciously set the elephant on the path of victory); "Hathi Nahi Ganesh Hai, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh Hai" (The elephant is the incarnation of Ganesh and trinity); "Chadh Gundo ki Chhati pe, Batan Dabegi Haathi pe" (Crushing the chests of rowdies the elephant would emerge victorious).

The interplay of these three slogans captured the identitarian imaginations of varying castes and communities and creatively constituted an electoral alliance by channeling the social fault lines wherein the upper castes, lower OBCs and the Dalits were given a common other in the form of much disdained Yadvisation. Thus, the 'cake model' got another layer of Brahmins and a section of other upper castes upon the already existing base of Dalits and lower OBCs.

All this would have been fine had the political craft in the state remained the same. What Mayawati failed to see was the structural limitation of identity politics in post-1990 context wherein while the caste and religious arithmetic mattered, the exclusivity of different sections of different parties were getting blurred on account of every party employing the old-Congress mode of 'catch-all' strategy, giving the same social constituencies varying options to weigh and explore. The phenomenon was linked to the larger shift in the outlook of political parties that started treating electorates as consumers who must be tapped into the political market. Except for the core voters of different parties, like Dalits (BSP), Yadavs (SP) Jats (RLD), Banias (BJP) etc., other sections who didn't have long-term political contingencies to any political outfits, who were considered as swaying voters, increasingly became 'swinging/floating' voters from election to election.

Therefore, in post-Mandal 2000s, the electoral decline of BJP in UP made upper castes emerge as balancing factor, a section of whom used to oscillate alternatively between the only viable available options of two regional parties, BSP and SP besides BJP. Similarly, the non-Yadav OBCs kept swinging among all the three outfits as per the incentive offered and felt.

She won 2007 elections, not only on account of her positive efforts but equally because of being perceived as the best alternative to the Samajwadi Party and the lawlessness that prevailed. However, her victory in 2007, blurred the undercurrent trend of saturation of identity politics in old mode wherein all a party had to do is to rope in some popular caste leaders in its fold who would act as the conduit for their castes' votes. Ironically, the 'Sarvajan' that Mayawati employed had become the new trait of all the parties, wherein every party was sending overtures to every caste, making the new identity politics extremely competitive.

The competitiveness of new identity politics raised the expectations of the electorates who now desired more and more visibility of the leaders, their targeted policies, and their accessibility in everyday life, to feel relatively privileged over others. The electorates, now pampered by all the parties who were competing to send better overtures, acquired a comparative vantage point, to pause, ponder and assess the alternatives and then choose the one they perceive the best.

While Mayawati, succeeded in proving her credential as an able administrator, she failed as a politician in the new context that demanded a sense of humility, accessibility and constant visibility from a leader both in power as well as opposition.

Her presence in state, that too extremely inaccessible from the vantage point of new aspirational electorates, has been only when she is in power. Come electoral defeat, she retreats to Delhi, leaving the party to the second rung leaderships who have no imagination among their respective constituencies. In fact, there has been a complete lack of political activism when she is out of power. Her sudden quest for Dalit-Muslim electoral alliance on the eve of election doesn't capture the imagination of a significant percentage of Muslim electorates as, except for condemning, she failed to encircle BJP and ruling Samajwadi Party on the issues like Muzaffarnagar riots and Dadri incident. Seen in the backdrop of other two parties, namely SP and BJP, who tend to hit the street as opposition parties, the desertion of political field by BSP as an opposition party; the refusal of Mayawati to sit in UP Assembly as the leader of opposition to lead the popular protests against the apathy of the government of the day, end up alienating a great majority of voters except the core one, making its election driven social engineering like recent quest for Dalit-Muslim unity, opportunistic and crudely instrumentalist. In spite of her political invisibility, she happens to survive the political arena on account of the entrenched Dalit support, a constituency meticulously created by Kanshiram.

At a time when every political party has seriously taken cognizance of the heightened electoral expectations; when the political actors are going for massive image-makeovers; when the PR-agencies are employed to constitute a perception-advantage, BSP and Mayawati, it seems is still caught into the old mode of political strategizing that lack any innovation.

Take for instance some simple facts that BSP activists keep proudly vouching about: BSP doesn't release election manifesto as no one reads it, especially their core voters! BSP doesn't contest local and by-elections as a policy as the party doesn't want to waste its energy before the final battle, i.e., the assembly and Lok Sabha election! BSP doesn't have a spokesperson as a policy as Media is Brahmanical!

The plain refusal of Mayavati to come to terms with the changed political context that demands a constant visibility of the leadership and the party, not only on the ground but also in media, her reliance on the old mode of caste and community based quasi secret 'Bhaichara-Sammelans' signify her over reliance on the assumption that a consolidated Dalit base would convince other electorates to see a 'winnability quotient' behind BSP, leading to emergence of successful electoral equation. These assumptions were relational and closer to the political reality when SP was led by Mulayam Singh and his likes who shared the assumption of adding a layer to their core voter as the central electoral strategy- a fact reflected in their 'pre-family feud' steps of bringing leaders like Amar Singh (a Rajput), Beni Prasad Verma (a Kurmi), Ateek Ahmad & Mukhtar Ansari (Muslims) within SP fold. Had Mulayam Singh Yadav succeeded in having his way, Mayawati's strategy would have made sense. But with a rival like Akhilesh Yadav who has successfully reinvented not only his own image but also of SP, the old assumptions of having the core vote intact and adding the layers of other caste and community have become inadequate.

Off late elections are fought and won by swaying the swing voters and this requires constant innovation and creativity. Seen on this parameter, Mayavati seems lagging behind. Her speeches lack any dialogic mode- a fact which goes against the contemporary fashion of likes for extempore speeches.

At a time when the leaders are making witty and aggressive overtures against their rivals, one could find an element of defensiveness in Mayawati's speech when she constantly repeats that no statues and parks would be made if she comes to power. This betrays her acceptance of the opposition propaganda that she wasted money in building statues and parks. Nowhere, she mentions about her colossal achievements in providing reasonably decent residences to the poor classes in general and Dalit and lower OBCs in particular, by way of her policy of 'Kanshiram Awasiya Colonies'. Also absent is any reference to her unique experiment of developing poorest villages by providing them with logistical support and monetary allocation by way of the policy of designating them 'Ambedkar Gram'. Her concept was copied by Akhilesh Yadav government with a nomenclatural change of designating the villages as 'Adarsh Lohiya Gram' and he is marketing the same with full vigor.

Except for asserting her credential as a tough administrator, she doesn't have much to offer for the middle class and floating voters. Her style of addressing the big rallies as compared to the same of her prime rival Akhilesh Yadav, who is consciously seen as addressing more, frequent and small rallies wherein there is a better sense of connectedness to the audiences, is not only making her relatively invisible but from electoral point of view is going against her prospect of capturing the extra votes as she is increasingly losing in the war of perception that has a bearing upon the electoral choice of the floating voters who are accustomed to go with the wind. This war of perception is fought in the realm of media which requires a constant engagement with the same. However, Mayawati's disdain for middle class gets extrapolated in her disdain for media and by extension for the floating voters when one finds a near absence of her engagement with media even on the eve of election.

At a time when her rivals are going all the way out to sway the floating voters on their sides by dominating the war of perception, like ensuring the release of spurious exit polls before the polling, in complete defiance of election commission guidelines, Mayawati, from the perspective of floating voters is becoming invisible.

Her exclusive reliance on cementing the Dalit-Muslim electoral alliance has made her blind to the importance of the crucial role that floating play in tilting the electoral outcome and unfortunately, she is not seen taking any measures in that regard. It's the rivals who are setting the agenda and dominating the war of perception. Seen in terms of social background, the majority of floating voters who hail from non-Yadav OBC castes, a significant section of whom used to be quasi loyal voters of BSP, are being approached by BJP and SP and a majority of them are not taking her Muslim centric approach in good humor. Affected by the sense of relative deprivation these lower OBCs desires a pampering, attention and a sense of being considered as the core of respective political parties' target groups. Ironically, Mayawati is seen not only lagging behind in capturing the aspirations of these lower OBCs but also of the Muslims who are still swayed by the overtures of Akhilesh Yadav led SP. Wherever, Muslims are voting for BSP candidate, they are found voting for instrumental reason of backing the candidates for reason of their better winnability rather than an enthusiasm for seeing Mayawati as the C.M. Rather, its Akhilesh who majority of Muslims desire to see as C.M of the state.

It's high time; Mayawati takes cognizance of the changed electoral context and electoral aspirations and reinvents the image of her leadership as well as the party. She needs to be accessible, approachable and visible to meet the challenges of new mode of identity politics.

MARKETING STRATEGIES IN UP - 2017

A look at the 'political advertisements' across Uttar Pradesh throws an interesting case of 'omission and commission' by various parties that can act as a gateway into the minds of the 'electoral strategists' or new crop of professional 'election-management-experts' who are leaving no stone unturned to ensure the return of their client party into the corridors of power.

BJP, whose campaign strategy is being managed by extremely low profile members of 'Association of Billion Minds (ABM)', comprised of members who started their 'electoral management' career with Prashant Kishore under the forum of 'Citizens for Accountable Governance (CAG)' that managed Modi's 2014 blitz-Krieg campaign primarily centered on the five frontiers, namely, 'Data Analytics', 'Media and External Communications', 'Research', 'Digital Communication' and 'Field Operations', has employed the predictable 360 degree campaign strategy by carpet bombing all the public spaces through its 'political advertisements', with the aim of constituting a 'perception-advantage' vis a vis its rivals. The strategy is the repetition of party's approach in 2014 Lok Sabha election and 2015 Bihar Assembly election. This game of constituting 'perception advantage' is a well-planned strategy in campaign management wherein the faces of the leaders are carefully planned and projected to construct the central narrative of the election around the said leader/s. Thus, the BJP's posters, banners, billboards and stickers, shining throughout the market squares, important public spaces as well as around streets and corners of the state, reveal the trend of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah occupying the central space, while, Rajnath Singh (Rajput), Kalraj Mishra (Brahmin), Uma Bharti (Lodh OBC) and its state president Keshav Prasad Maurya (Kushvaha OBC) finding a constant presence, albeit, in miniscule sizes. From analytical viewpoint, what is most intriguing and counter-intuitive in BJP's posters is the missing face of Atal Bihari Vajpayee that has happened for the first time in the electoral history of the state since 1980 when the saffron party came into existence. The fact

that Uttar Pradesh had been Atal Bihari Vajpayee's political turf and BJP needs to appeal to numerically significant Brahmins, who still claim to have special reverence for the party patriarch, makes the strategy of blanking out his image all the more puzzling. Even at the party headquarter at Lucknow, that surprisingly has one lone poster of L.K Advani, the same of Atal Bihari Vajpayee is completely missing despite the fact that 25th December was his Birthday when Modi shared an old video to claim his closeness to the grand old leader. Technical explanations apart, the visual act of 'omission and commission' by BJP seem to be driven by the twin compulsion of the party, namely, a) to build the narrative exclusively around Narendra Modi in the backdrop of its dilemma on the issue of projecting any Chief Ministerial face that may boomerang by alienating some castes/communities who have selective preference for leaders for the post, and, b) to cater to the political aspirations of non-Yadav OBCs by sending a subtle but clear message, marking the heralding of a new era under the joint leadership of Narendra Modi at the centre and Keshav Prasad Maurya at the state. Assured by the inclination of upper castes towards BJP, the party is investing most of its energy in consolidating the non-Yadav OBCs by various means including 200 'PichhdaVargSammelan' (Backward Class Conclave). Interestingly, BJP, that has also organized separate conclaves for woman and youths, doesn't have any such program for Dalits, which indicate the party's focused strategy to focus primarily on castes/communities, that in its assessment, are more likely to be steered towards its fold, rather than targeting sections who are considered committed voters for other parties. Moreover, the factors like the mitigation of 'Goonda-Raj' image of incumbent Samajwadi Party under the leadership of Akhilesh Yadav displacing BJP's central plank of asking for change against lawlessness and hooliganism; the emergence of demonetization as an electoral liability denting BJP's strategy of asking for mandate in the name of development; the electoral saturation of Ram-Temple centered grand Hindutva agenda depriving the party of constructing a 'Hindu' vote-bank; have left the party with overt dependence upon the strategy of crafting electorally viable 'social-engineering' by privileging non-Yadav OBCs over others. This explains the poster puzzle of BJP.

Similarly, Akhilesh Yadav led Samajwadi party that for all practical purposes has already emerged as the true successor of the party in popular perception, in its zeal to match the maddening campaign level of BJP and to compete with the 'leviathan election management' approach of the same has availed the services of political consulting company, 'SJB Strategies International', headed by its CEO Steve Jarding, who also happen to be a lecturer at Harvard University wherein he offers courses on 'Campaign Management' and 'Making of a politician'. Reportedly, they are also adopting the same standard model of demographic and issue profiling, running down to polling booth level, besides marketing and grossly privileging the image of its supreme leaders over others. Hence, much before the inner feud in the family unfolded, the image of Akhilesh Yadav had already eclipsed Mulayam Singh Yadav and other leaders in 'political advertisements'. Alarmed by the electoral liability on account of party's existing 'Goonda image', the new posters of Samajwadi Party started making personalized appeals to its various social constituencies like 'youths', 'women', 'farmers', 'artisans', and even 'businessmen' in the name of Akhilesh Yadav rather than collective leadership. This approach also shares the assumption that politics and elections are manageable and marketable by mapping out the specific grievances of various sections, divided in terms of social and occupational identities, followed by employing the targeted mix of positive and negative propaganda around those grievances, thereby attempting to convert elections as much into a psychological war as a political one.

However, these strategies work effectively only when a party or a leader has an ‘off the bloc advantage’ over others- something that happened in 2014 Lok Sabha election- as non-BJP parties were not prepared to counter the first ever intimidating 360-degree campaign of BJP centered around Modi, meticulously planned in every detail and yet made to appear natural and spontaneous. In the context, when most of the parties become aware of the art of presenting the ‘artificial and managed as natural and spontaneous’ and start availing the services of the experts of ‘political marketing’, the entire exercise becomes a zero-sum game as the targeted sections start getting similar signals from different sources enabling them to deconstruct the propaganda more effectively. It is in this context of competitive electoral propaganda that one witnesses the irony of ‘political marketing experts’ become indispensable for leading political parties, while their effectiveness in selling the artificial as naturally gets diminished day by day. That is why, crowned with the successive credits of 2014 scripting victory for its clients, BJP in 2014 and Bihar Mahagathbandhan in 2015, the leading king of political marketing species, Prashant Kishore, presents a sorry face, as Congress successive announcements in the state seem to be a bundle of confusion. His approach of constituting a team of paid young professionals, coming from the institutional background of IIT, IIM and working with multinational corporations like McKinsey, Goldman Sachs, though excellent in data-analysis and focused planning, are found wanting in navigating the complex maze of political nuances, especially in complex scenario like UP. His political consultancy firm ‘India Political Action Committee (IPAC)’, started with a high pitch campaign of aggressively farmers issue by way of organizing ‘KhatRalley’ and ‘KisanYatra’ led by Rahul Gandhi. Realizing the prevailing agrarian distress and aloofness of BJP government at the centre on the issue, the party was advised to tap on the crisis of this occupational category by organizing measures like, ‘KisanMang Patra’, wherein the party subsequently claimed to have received the demands of more than one crore farmers in the state. To give the agenda a tangible presence, the big glittering banners of Congress with the slogan, “KarzaMaaf, Bijli Bill Half, SamarthanMoolyakaKaroHisaab” (The loan would be waived, electricity bill would be halved and the Minimum Support Price would be increased).

Further, to highlight the overall distress prevailing in the state in general and farmers in particular, the party gave another slogan, “27 Saal U.P Behaal” (UP is in chaos since 27 years when Congress lost power in the state). However, all these well-articulated strategies doesn't seem to cut ice on the ground. How could a party that has projected its Chief Ministerial candidate long ago, who has taken a state wide tour, had made farmers' issue its chief electoral plank, suddenly seems desperate to play second fiddle to any non-BJP party by being their junior partner, thereby abandoning its C.M prospect as well as chief electoral plank? In fact, the absurdity of technocratic class acquiring the center stage in political strategization, based on their 'MBA-ideas' marketing principles, lacking deeper sociological and cultural nuances concerning political dynamics and legacies, gets reflected in majority of the Congress posters disproportionately highlighting Rahul Gandhi while missing the image of Indira Gandhi- the last leader from Congress who still fares in the memory of majority of the voters in the state. The obsession with serving their clients and top leaders by treating them as a market product to be converted into brands outshining the rivals via glittering ads and glossy advertisements, more often than not, leads to a narrow and suffocating obsession with the present with blunderous omission of the past, like Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Indira Gandhi, missing from the BJP's and Congress' advertisements respectively.

Consequently, these hyper aggressive-cum-colossal political managements and electoral marketing may help respective parties acquiring objective ‘perception advantage’, wherein majority of the voters tend to assume and opine the contest being between the parties who happen to be most visible in the public spaces through their advertisements and yet subjectively, may end up voting for a party grossly underestimated in terms of campaign visibility. Here, lies the clue as to why majority of the election surveys, of late, are grossly off the mark in terms of their estimation. In the case of Uttar Pradesh, BSP, it seems is rendered on the third position by majority of the electoral surveys, precisely on account of the erring method of treating the artificially constituted perceptions of respondents as their actual preference for the said party. The BSP which has a traditional refrain from the mainstream media, a fact reflected in party not appointing any official spokesman, is also seen competing on the social media wherein its updates and slogans are seen clumsy and old fashioned in comparison to the high pitch campaign of other parties. The slogans like, “KahoDil Se, Behan Ji Fir Se” (Behan Ji Once Again), may seem dull vis a vis the aesthetically coined slogans of consultancy firm managed parties, but taking the slogans as representative of their edge would be a epistemic fallacy as the reality and societal wisdom, barring few exceptional contexts, are mostly understated.
