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Wajeaha Kamal
Ph.D Research Scholar,
Department of Political
Science, University of
Jammu, Jammu and
Kashmir, India.

Dalit Assertion and Electoral Politics in India with reference to UP

Wajeaha Kamal

Abstract

Dalits struggle for their human rights started alongside with the Indian struggle for freedom and commenced with the assertion to represent themselves rather than being represented by somebody else. Dr. Ambedkar sought political rights for Dalits from the British directly and insisted on their independent and exclusive initiative in seeking their rights and reversing their social status otherwise they would have remained stuck in the web of political 'cooption'. After prolonged efforts of the Dalit movements in different parts of the country to bring about radical changes within the social structure and processes, the Dalit movement in Uttar Pradesh (UP) came out with a political agenda that the state is an important means to bring about social change. The emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party is an illustration of this approach. The strategy of giving importance to the political project diluted the identity of the Dalit Movement in Uttar Pradesh which is reflecting in the political and developmental priorities of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh.

Keywords: Dalit Assertion, Electoral Politics.

1. Introduction

During last half a century Dalit community has emerged as a vibrant and assertive group on the social and political scene of India. After centuries of subjugation, deprivation, collective ostracism and sufferings, it has come a long way to political assertion and economic, political and social emancipation. The political assertion by Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the most popular political party of Dalits has led to a revolution in the Dalit assertion which touched new heights after the capture of political power by BSP in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous state of India. No doubt, majority of times the party came into power by making an alliance with other parties but the fact remains that Dalits could not even contest a Panchayat election independently in earlier times and now they are capable of capturing power on the basis of their independent political initiative. Initially the Dalit political leadership remained tethered to their exclusive social domain, but now they are forging new social and political alliances with other segments of society and thus expanding their political sphere.

The Dalit movement in India find roots in the reformative Bhakti Movement which was anti-caste, anti-elite, anti-sanskrit, pro-women and pro-poor. The Bhakti Movement was not an organised movement but thrived in pockets across country over several centuries by the individual efforts of various saints and social reformers. The movement was not an exclusively Dalit movement nor proposed any radical changes in the Hindu social structure, but questioned the Hindu social order which later provided a platform for an organised Dalit Movement with a strong voice for social reforms. The social reformers of the Bhakti Movement failed to bring any structural changes in the existing social order of Hindu society which pushed the present Dalit movement into politics. The successors of the Dalit movement used 'Caste' as a political strategy to enter into political discourses. The Dalit movement that began in UP during the late Seventies and early Eighties, and accentuated during the Nineties followed the same trend. In the pre and post-independence periods, UP had not responded much to the Dalit movement, but the things changed dramatically in the late Seventies and early Eighties when there was resurgence of the Dalit movement in the state with a clear political agenda for social change. According to them increase in the economic and political status of upper castes has continuously provided them with enormous power and ensured them a dominant social position. Thus the main objective of the movement was to capture state power with the help of which Dalits would get enough economic and political benefits which would automatically improve their social status. To achieve this purpose BSP, an exclusive Dalit political party, was formed in 1984 and it is the chief political party in UP politics.

Correspondence:
Wajeaha Kamal
Ph.D Research Scholar,
Department of Political
Science, University of
Jammu, Jammu and
Kashmir, India

2. Dalit Assertion in India

Dalits have been successfully mobilised by various political parties in the past across the Indian landscape. From the very beginning, the congress has effectively managed to get a large share of Dalit votes. However with the emergence of Republican Party of India (RPI) in some areas in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a shift in the Dalit votes in those areas. Since 1977, the dalit vote got divided between the Congress and Janata Party (later Janata Dal). The Congress's monopoly over dalit votes has shrunk considerably inspite of the fact that Congress still receives the largest chunk (27%) of the dalit vote nationally. The main reasons responsible for this shift of Dalits votes are the rise of regional parties in the states during the years of party system fragmentation and the simultaneous arrival of the BSP as a major claimant of political loyalty from dalits.

The 11th Lok Sabha election of 1996 embarked a phase of fierce competitive politics in Indian polity. It ended the era of one party dominance and marked the beginning of multi-party players in different states. These changes were expressions of larger changes enveloping Indian society where different sections tried to assert themselves in politics. Failure to get accommodated in established national political parties led to rise of backward castes. Despite their inter and intra-caste divisions and conflicts they found strong political representation in parties like Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Janata Dal (JD), Samajwadi party, Samata party. Muslims allied with other parties in order to ensure the defeat of congress & the BJP.

In the past political participation of Dalits was largely confined to casting their votes. Their level of participation, whether small or large, never changed their conditions. Their unconditional and overwhelming support to the congress failed to reduce their political deprivation which led to the organised protest movements in various states like Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and parts of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa etc. But these movements also led to slow and steady changes in the socio-economic and political status of the SCs. To overcome this deprivation SCs increased their level of participation by getting organised under mass organisations, trade unions, political parties and various protest movements and started asserting distinct dalit identity. This boosted their confidence and aspirations and encouraged them to overcome their socio-economic and political deprivation.

Voting provides an important opportunity to choose the kind of government the common masses want to install in parliament and state assemblies. Many empirical studies in the initial decades of post-independence period show that dalits lagged behind upper castes in terms of exercising their franchise. Various reasons are responsible for this pattern of voting, the most important being denial of voting opportunity by upper castes. The dalits feared backlash if their candidature preferences came in conflict with upper caste groups. However conditions have changed with the passage of time and the voting percentage of SCs has steadily gone up. In the 1996 general election, percentage of SC voter turnout was 89.2 percent as against 87.3 percent of national average and 85.6 percent in the case of upper castes. The same trend continued in 1998 elections when the voter turnout for the SCs was 93 per cent and that of upper castes was 91.9 per cent.

An important feature of recent upsurge in dalit politics has been the change in their party preference. The SCs were considered a 'committed' vote bank of the congress since independence. However, during elections held in the late

1980s and the early 1990s, signs of decline in its SC vote share became evident. A changed electoral landscape was evident in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections where the congress was deserted by SCs in many states like UP and Bihar. The same pattern of SC voting was followed in 1998 elections. Presently, barring a few states, Congress no longer is the choice of the SCs. Rejection of Congress by the SCs in many states, symbolizes their disapproval of vertical integration process penetrated by the upper castes. Apparently the SCs no longer follow the voting preference of the upper castes or the local notables, a characteristic feature of elite politics during first four decades of independence. This shift signifies a rupture in the patron client relationship in the realm of party politics.

The BSP's improved performance, a remarkable feature of 1998 elections, is a typical case of SC assertion in electoral politics through a party which mainly has a base among them. In 1996, 67.4 percent and in 1998, 60.6 percent of the BSP votes came from the SCs. In the states of UP, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh and Punjab, the party performed exceptionally well, both in terms of vote share and the number of seats it won. The All India election figures of the year 1996 show that the BSP contested 201 seats, won 11 and was able to get 3.8 percent of the total valid votes of all India SC votes, the party's share was 12.1 percent. The BSP's vote share showed a steady increase in all the four states, namely UP, Punjab, MP and Haryana where the party had strong base. Table 3 shows this increase.

Table 3: Performance of BSP- 1996 and 1998

State	1996		1998	
	Seats won	Total Seats	Seats Won	Total Seats
Punjab	3	08.96	-	12.65
MP	2	06.73	-	08.70
Haryana	-	06.59	1	07.68
Jammu and Kashmir	-	05.95	-	05.05
Uttar Pradesh	6	20.16	4	20.90
All India	11	03.80	5	04.68

The BSP has emerged strong in states where there is a sizable concentration of SC population. According to 2011 census, the SCs in UP constitute 20.5 percent of the population, 31.9 percent in Punjab, 15.2 percent in MP and 20 percent in Haryana. All India average of SCs to the total population is 16.6 percent. The emergence of BSP in the four north Indian states in the 1980's and the 1990's has altered political context and the SC community itself. The steady decline of Congress which earlier represented majority of SCs all over the country, created a political vacuum, which could not be occupied by BJP as it is dominated by twice-born castes i.e., the main subjugators of Dalits in the past. Because of this, SCs party preference is quite dispersed among different parties.

3. Dalit Assertion in UP

The political consciousness and the participation of Schedule Castes has traditionally been very low in UP which did not witness any anti-caste Dalit Movement in the Colonial period unlike other states of India. There were negligible lower caste agitations in UP during colonial period and it was very difficult for these agitations to keep their identity alive and separate from vast anti-colonial movement which came in UP under the umbrella of Congress. The party being quite accomodative provided significant space for lower caste people but with minimum representation which was enough

for Dalits to raise their voice against the upper caste atrocities but the movement, being part of the Independence Movement, was not able to raise social issues along with political issues. In the first few decades after independence, the Dalits in UP could not mobilise themselves socially or economically which restricted their capacity to mobilise themselves politically due to which the All India Schedule Caste Federation (SCF), an exclusive political party for Dalits founded by Ambedkar, could not find any political space in the state and could not win any seat in the first two assembly elections in the state (1951 and 1957).

In 1957, the SCF was changed into a new party namely the Republican Party of India (RPI) which had two clear goals i.e., to defeat the congress and to improve the condition of Schedule Castes but it largely failed in its agenda and remained marginalised in state politics. The poor influence of Dalit Movement was due to the hegemony established by Congress which was strengthened by the reputation it enjoyed during the freedom struggle and its accommodative politics. After the failure of RPI, the state witnessed a very strong movement under the leadership of Kanshi Ram in 1970s and 80s who pushed the Dalit politics into the mainstream politics of the state. He established a category called 'bahujan' comprising 85 per cent of the society and used it explicitly as a political tool for the mobilisation of the Dalit. On December 6, 1973, he established a non-political organisation called the All India Backward and Minority Castes Employees Federation (BAMSEF), the membership of which was open to Dalits employed in Public sector only. In 1981 Kanshi Ram established a political organisation called Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti, popularly known as DS-4. In 1984 DS-4 was completely transformed into a full fledged political party i.e., BSP whose goal was based on an axiom of Ambedkar that political power was the key to all problems.

Since early 1980s mobilization strategies of the BSP evolved over a number of stages, as a reaction to the changing political situation in U.P. Initially, between 1985 to 1989, BSP was both a radical movement and a party using three mobilization strategies: social-cultural, agitational and electoral. This phase of militant vertical mobilization idealized caste as a tool to break existing social order and denounce mainstream parties as manuvadi, to politicize dalits by highlighting failures of Congress regime. It launched agitation for self-respect and annihilation of caste. The second phase lasting upto 1995 was dominated by two competing mobilisational strategies of caste and communalism. While the Hindu caste cleavages arising from the Mandal reservation policy attracted BJP, the BSP moved closer to the Samajwadi Party (SP) representing the backwards. It contained the Hindutva of BJP and constructed a "Bahujan Samaj" based upon dalits, backwards and tribals drawing inspiration from Ambedkar's conception of an autonomous Dalit Movement with a constantly attempted alliance of dalits and shudras.

This strategy proved successful in the 1993 elections and was perceived as the victory of the secular forces and lower orders against entrenched upper caste rule. Between 1985 and 1995 BSP gave equal importance to all the three strategies and increased its seat share in the Assembly over the 1989, 1991 and 1993 elections from 13 to 66. The fall of the SP-BSP coalition in June 1995 inaugurated a post- Bahujan phase when BSP formed two coalition governments with the BJP in 1995 and 1997, and an electoral alliance with Congress. It was a tactical shift for attaining political power by any means.

During its short span of existence BSP has created a new identity and a counter-ideology to varna system, namely

"Dalit" and "Ambedkarism". It has succeeded in removing the hold of Brahminical ideology and submissive attitude of dalits, and provided them a new confidence of self betterment and led to the decline of the Congress system to emerge as a strong political party in UP.

Dalit assertion, a feature of UP since the late 1980s intensified in the 1990s. The BSP has steadily improved its performance from two seats and 9.9 percent votes in 1989, one seat and 9.4 percent votes in 1991 and six seats and 20.6 percent votes in 1996, enabling it to become a national party within a span of only 12 years. It suffered a setback in 1998 gaining only four seats though its vote share (20.9) rose slightly.

Over the last few elections, the support base of BSP has remained intact. It is the result of a carefully planned two pronged electoral strategy: increasing consolidation of the dalit vote and selective distribution of tickets to candidate belonging to other caste/ communities, in a bid to increase its seat share. The second strategy arose out of a realization that BSP cannot capture power in UP on its own where votes get divided between three groups- the dalits, upper castes and backwards. Thus the upper and backward caste candidates were selected carefully and were expected to campaign using the party ideology.

Thus throughout the politically volatile decade of the 1990s, Mandir and Mandal increasingly became irrelevant and new issues emerged. In this fluid situation BSP emerged as winner in the 1999 election by keeping its support base intact and taking advantage of changing political scene.

Under electoral compulsions BSP renounced its exclusionary politics and started gravitating towards inclusionary politics thus shifting the party's ideology from Bahujan Samaj (Majoritarianism) to Sarvajan Samaj (whole society) which meant an ideological turnaround. Now the party insists that it is not opposed to Hindu religion, but wants to build a society based on equality. It claims that it was mis-representative as an anti-upper caste party and gave tickets to 26 Brahmins in the 2002 assembly election and to six in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. Since the beginning of 2005 Mayawati started mobilizing Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Kayasthas vigorously. In a pragmatic move she distributed 86, 38 and 14 tickets to Brahmins, Rajputs and Vaishyas respectively in the 2007 UP elections. In all the BSP's leadership followed a different strategy by directly forging an alliance with castes and communities instead of having an alliance with political parties. Along with its core constituency of Dalits, OBCs and Muslims, the BSP mobilized the so-called upper castes who also voted for it.

The victory of BSP in the 2007 UP elections was the result of a process started by Kanshi Ram some three decades ago which divided India's populations into two imaginary groups; 85% Bahujans and 15% Manuwadis. A common history of exclusion was constructed to bring together different castes in the social hierarchy. Lower caste muslims were also brought under this fold by making them conscious of exclusion within their own religion and an agenda of development with independent leadership was handed over to them. While other parties offered food, shelter and employment, BSP offered them "self respect".

4. Conclusion

One of the important aspects of economic, political and social relations revolves around the issues of inequality based on class, caste, race and gender. In the Indian context, caste based politics has always remained in the forefront. But during the last few decades, the assertion of low castes people

including the Dalits has assumed unprecedented significance. The democratic institutions are gaining greater legitimacy among the scheduled castes in the post-independence period, when the later became conscious of their numerical strength in electoral arena and are exercising their voting right more forthrightly. This has shifted them from passive voter-supporter in the environment of subjugation and subordination, to active participants of new parties espousing their interests only. The SCs have deserted Congress in various states and the growing class differentiation amongst them has resulted in the lower class dalits opting for exclusively SC-based parties like the BSP, the Left Front or the left-of-the centre regional parties. According to the CSDS survey, inspite of the support of the SCs to the political institutions of Indian democracy, there has been an erosion of their confidence in the political parties. This alarmingly signals that the support extended by the dalits to the parliamentary system should not be taken for granted.

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