



The changing dynamics of BSP in India's fourth party system: Analysing a decade of political shifts (2014-2024)

Divya Kumari

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India

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Abstract

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has played a crucial role in the evolution of India's party system, particularly within the context of the country's fourth party system. Emerging as a powerful political force under the leadership of Kanshiram, The BSP sought to offer a new social identity for Dalits and marginalized castes, empowering these communities with an alternative sense of belonging and representation and offering them a platform to assert their political power. This political assertion challenged the dominance of upper-caste elites, particularly in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, contributing to a more inclusive and representative democratic process. The rise of BSP culminated in the leadership of Mayawati, who made history as the first Dalit woman to complete a full term as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. However, since 2012, BSP has faced a continuous decline both electorally and organizationally. This decline coincided with the resurgence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which, despite its Brahminical outlook, has successfully mobilized Dalit and backward castes, groups once championed by Kanshiram and the BSP. This shift raises critical questions about BJP's strategies to broaden its social base, the dynamics of electoral mobilization, and the evolving political landscape in India. The changing fortunes of BSP in the fourth party system thus offer a rich avenue for exploring the intersection of caste politics, party strategy, and social churning in contemporary India. This paper aims to address key questions surrounding the evolving trajectory of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). It is structured into three distinct parts: the first explores the rise and evolution of BSP as a significant political force; the second analyses the party's decline post-2012; and the final part examines the impact of this decline on marginalized groups, particularly Dalits and women, in Uttar Pradesh. The paper concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of BSP's shifting dynamics for the state's political landscape.

Keywords: Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), dalits politics, political mobilisation, marginalised and women voters, new welfarism, identity politics

Introduction

Bahujan Samaj Party's Evolution in Indian Politics: A Decade of Change

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), established by Kanshi Ram in 1984, emerged as a powerful political force focused on advocating for the rights of marginalized groups, particularly Dalits, Backwards, and other socially excluded communities in India. The rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Indian politics represented a significant shift, particularly in north India. The BSP positioned itself as the sole political force offering an alternative social identity to the vast sections of marginalised communities, collectively referred to as the 'Bahujan' encompassing Dalits, Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), and minorities. The party's primary aim was to represent this demographic in the electoral process, contesting the dominance of upper-caste political establishments. Kanshi Ram, the founder of BSP, famously articulated the necessity of political empowerment for these communities, stating, "Hume maangne wala nahin balki dene wala banna hai," which translates to "We must become leaders rather than remain at the receiving end of society" (Kanshi Ram, 1994). This vision of empowerment marked the emergence of Dalit-Bahujan politics, which became distinctly prominent with the advent of BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

Kanshi Ram's approach involved uniting SC, ST, OBC, and minority groups under the umbrella of Bahujan,

emphasizing their shared struggles and advocating for collective political mobilization. Having witnessed caste-based discrimination firsthand during his time working at a defense laboratory in Pune, Kanshi Ram was deeply impacted by the systemic oppression faced by Dalits. This experience motivated him to dedicate his life to the cause of marginalized communities, whom he believed were victims of the entrenched Manuvadi system of caste-based hierarchy. Initially, Kanshi Ram sought to organize Dalit, backwards, and minority groups, particularly those employed in government services, to work towards the upliftment of their communities. His advocacy centered around the idea that those who had benefited from affirmative action policies should take responsibility for empowering and supporting other members of their communities. This approach laid the foundation for the BSP's rise as a significant political force dedicated to challenging the existing power structures and providing political representation to marginalized sections of society. In 1978, Kanshiram established the Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), aiming to build an educated and employed Dalit cadre that could support the Bahujan movement both financially and intellectually. However, since BAMCEF's members were mostly government employees unable to contest elections, Kanshiram formed the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangarsh Samiti (DS4) in 1981. Unlike BAMCEF, DS4 had a more politically active agenda, and it explicitly excluded

government employees, focusing instead on marginalized groups. Radical slogans like "Brahmin, Thakur, Baniya chor, baki sab hai DS4" (Everyone except Brahmins, Thakurs, and Banias belongs to DS4) were used to emphasize its transformative goals.

Seeing the potential of his earlier organizations, Kanshiram founded the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984, using the occasion of Ambedkar's birth anniversary. He famously likened the 15% upper-castes, referred to as "Manuwadis," to the clip of a pen that controls the rest of society, symbolizing the dominance of upper-castes over the 85% Bahujan masses. BSP's political strategy gained traction in the 1993 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, when Kanshiram saw an opportunity to form a coalition government with the Samajwadi Party (SP) following the BJP's rise. However, the partnership collapsed in 1995 after the 'guest house episode,' a major setback that deepened Kanshiram's resolve to use political power to bring about change for Dalits and other marginalized groups.

In 1995, BSP aligned with the BJP, resulting in Mayawati becoming Uttar Pradesh's first Dalit Chief Minister. By 2007, Mayawati secured an outright majority, winning 206 seats with 30.45% of the vote. Her victory was partly attributed to her strategic outreach to upper-caste groups, particularly Brahmins. Mayawati hosted Brahmin conferences and allocated 139 tickets to upper-caste candidates, marking a shift in BSP's traditional focus. The party's slogan, "Hathi nahi Ganesh hai Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hai," symbolised this broader appeal, portraying BSP's elephant symbol as not just political, but also a spiritual metaphor, aimed at uniting the Dalit and upper-caste communities.

The 2007 victory of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh is often attributed to Mayawati's strategic outreach to the Brahmin community. However, this perspective requires further scrutiny. The CSDS 2007 post-poll survey reveals that only 16% of Brahmin voters supported BSP, which is less than the 18% that Congress received. Since the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, Brahmins have predominantly aligned with the BJP, a trend that has continued into recent years. Therefore, the factors behind BSP's 2007 success and subsequent decline demand a more nuanced analysis.

Shifting Fortunes: Examining the BSP's Challenges and Transformations Post-2012

In the 2012 assembly elections, BSP secured only 80 seats with approximately 25% of the vote share, while the Samajwadi Party (SP), led by Akhilesh Yadav, returned to power with a majority. BSP's defeat was commonly attributed to issues of governance, including corruption scandals involving Mayawati's administration. Notably, the BJP also faced a historic low in this election, winning just 47 seats with 15% of the vote share. Yet, while the BJP's fortunes revived in the following years, BSP's electoral performance continued to falter. The 2014 general election marked a dramatic shift, with the BJP dominating Uttar Pradesh, winning 71 of 80 parliamentary seats. Despite maintaining a 20% vote share, BSP failed to secure any seats, signalling a sharp decline. This trend persisted in the 2017 assembly elections, where the party's tally dropped to just 17 seats. BSP's continued struggle to win reserved seats points to a broader decline in support among its traditional voter base.

The BJP's unprecedented rise in Uttar Pradesh forced traditional rivals, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), to form an electoral alliance in the 2019 general elections. Despite the BSP contesting 38 seats and the SP 37 seats, their alliance proved insufficient to halt the BJP's advance, as the BJP ultimately secured 61 seats while the BSP won only 10 and the SP just 5. Two primary factors account for the alliance's failure. First, the alliance was forged too close to the election, leaving party cadres and local leaders minimal time to build rapport and organize coordinated campaign efforts. Second, the alliance's strategy and resources paled in comparison to the BJP's extensive canvassing and the national appeal of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's charismatic leadership.

The 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly election only underscored the BSP's declining influence, with the party winning just a single seat, Rasra in Ballia district, under the leadership of Uma Shankar Singh, and seeing a 10-point decline in vote share. In a field of 403 seats, the BSP secured a second-place finish in only 19. This stark decline has led observers to question the BSP's direction and effectiveness. Political figures like Chandrashekhar Azad of the Azad Samaj Party (Kanshiram) argue that the BSP has abandoned its core mission to advocate for the interests of the Bahujan Samaj, raising questions about the future of Dalit-Bahujan politics in Uttar Pradesh.

To understand the trajectory of Dalit-Bahujan politics in post-independence Uttar Pradesh, three distinct phases emerge. The first phase, roughly paralleling the Congress-dominated era, can be characterized as a period of political subservience. Though the constitutional reservation of seats allowed Dalit representatives to be elected, they wielded little real influence over the agendas of their parties. Political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot describes this phase as one of patron-client relationships, with the Congress Party's dominance effectively curbing the agency and autonomy of Dalit representatives.

The second phase, which emerged with the Congress's decline in the 1980s, marked a period of assertive Dalit-Bahujan politics under Kanshiram's leadership. Sociologist Vivek Kumar challenges the narrative that the BSP's rise was merely a byproduct of Congress's decline, pointing out that while the Congress suffered setbacks across states, only Uttar Pradesh saw the emergence of independent Dalit-Bahujan politics (Kumar, *The Roaring Revolution*). This unique development was driven by the growth of an influential elite within the Dalit community, beneficiaries of decades of affirmative action who bolstered Kanshiram's movement and established the BSP as a formidable political force.

The third phase, often seen as the era of BSP dominance, began in 1995 when Mayawati became the first Dalit woman to serve as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Despite sharing power with the BJP during her initial tenures, Mayawati crafted a reputation for strong administration, notably implementing the Ambedkar Village Program to improve infrastructure in Dalit communities. During her tenure, she maintained communal peace by preventing organizations like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal from disturbing communal harmony. This era reached its zenith in 2007 when the BSP formed a majority government. However, since then, the BSP has experienced a steady electoral decline, leading to a crisis for autonomous Dalit-Bahujan politics in Uttar Pradesh. This decline signals

that Dalit-Bahujan politics in Uttar Pradesh is at a crucial juncture. While once a powerful movement for social and political transformation, the BSP's electoral setbacks and ideological drift have left its base fractured, prompting activists and scholars alike to question its future direction.

Beyond the Ballot: How BSP's Decline Impacts Dalit and Women's Politics in Uttar Pradesh

To address the theme of the BSP's decline and its impact on Dalit and women's politics in Uttar Pradesh after 2014, it is essential to consider the shifting political dynamics, particularly the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its consequences for marginalized communities. The BSP's decline has left a significant void, especially for Dalit women, who once found a voice and leadership opportunities under Mayawati's tenure. However, after 2012, BSP's weakened position has led to increased fragmentation within Dalit communities, which have found new political alignments, primarily with the BJP's development-oriented rhetoric (Pai, 2023; Hindustan Times, 2023) [8, 15]. Nalin Mehta's work, *The New BJP: Modi and the making of the World's Largest political party*. Mehta argues that contrary to much held academic belief, major reason behind BJP's electoral success lies not in assertively pushing a Hindu centric cultural nationalism but its last mile reaches up to the booth level as an organization and its direct benefit to voters as an effective tool of governance. Mehta brings the issue of fault lines in social justice politics and BJP's conscious effort to exploit this by incorporating Backwards and Dalit groups in the party fold. While the BJP's appeal to Dalits is rooted in promises of social welfare and economic upliftment, the actual impact of this shift on Dalit women has been limited. These women, who previously enjoyed political representation through the BSP, now find themselves marginalized in the larger national political discourse, with little attention given to their specific needs and concerns. Scholars have argued that while the BJP has presented itself as a party for all castes, its policies often lack concrete mechanisms to address the deep-rooted inequalities that Dalit women face. The policies largely focus on symbolic gestures and economic promises, rather than addressing systemic issues such as caste-based violence and the lack of equal representation in politics (Pai, 2023) [15]. Moreover, the BSP's decline has reduced Dalit women's representation in the legislative and policy-making processes. Once a critical space for advancing Dalit rights, the BSP has failed to deliver on its promises, leaving Dalit women politically disenfranchised and excluded from crucial discussions on social justice. Many political analysts suggest that without a strong Dalit-centric political force like the BSP, Dalit women are increasingly left out of the conversation in Uttar Pradesh's political sphere, a situation that has broader implications for the overall empowerment of these groups.

Recent academic articles and analyses, such as those by Christophe Jaffrelot, explore the decline of Dalit politics post-BSP and the evolving political strategies of marginalized groups. The shift towards the BJP is also seen by some as part of a larger, national trend in which caste-based politics is becoming less about social justice and more about integration into the broader framework of national development. However, the critiques of this shift highlight that, while integration offers short-term economic benefits, it often fails to address the long-standing social and cultural

barriers that Dalit women face. Ajay Gudavarty in his book, *India After Modi: Populism and the Right* shed light on the evolving political strategies employed by parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to appeal to marginalized communities, particularly Dalits and backward classes. New welfarism refers to a shift from the traditional, often rights-based welfare model to a more populist, developmental framework where the state promises welfare through economic incentives and infrastructure development. This model emphasizes government-led developmental initiatives, such as subsidies, social programs, and financial aid, rather than focusing on rights-based claims, which characterized earlier traditional welfare policies (Gudavarty, 2022) [4]. Political scientists like Hilal Ahmed describe the BJP's approach to welfare as an "electoral bargain" struck by a charitable state, one that offers economic incentives in exchange for political loyalty. This raises critical questions: Is this approach truly fostering redistribution and empowerment for marginalized communities, or is it merely sustaining voters at a level of basic subsistence to secure their support? Does this model address the structural inequalities that keep these communities marginalized, or does it simply create a cycle of dependency that benefits political agendas more than the communities themselves? whether these welfare promises translate into meaningful change for marginalized groups. New welfarism may address short-term needs like economic security, but it may not foster long-term political autonomy or genuine empowerment for Dalits and women (Pai, 2023) [15]. The BJP's focus on development as a means of social mobility, while appealing in the short term, aligns with what political scientist Neelanjan Sircar describes as the politics of vishwas (faith). However, this approach may fall short in addressing the deeper, structural barriers that marginalized groups continue to face, such as inequitable land rights, limited access to education, and, most critically, the ongoing prevalence of caste-based violence and discrimination.

Conclusion

The decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) within India's fourth-party system and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Uttar Pradesh marks a significant shift in Dalit and marginalized politics. The BSP, once a strong advocate for Dalit empowerment, has seen its support wane, while the BJP has successfully garnered Dalit backing through its populist, "development for all" agenda. The BJP's "new welfarism" prioritises economic incentives and infrastructure, which offers short-term benefits to Dalit communities. However, this model raises concerns about its long-term impact on the structural inequalities Dalit women and marginalized groups continue to face.

Despite BJP's welfare promises, these measures fail to tackle the entrenched social barriers of caste discrimination, lack of political power, and violence. While economic development is vital, it cannot replace the need for systemic reforms addressing land rights, education, and the elimination of caste-based violence. Scholars like Ajay Gudavarty, Yamini Aiyar and Hilal Ahmed argue that while BJP's policies may ensure subsistence-level welfare, they do not empower marginalized communities politically or address their deeper needs. The decline of the BSP has left Dalit women especially disenfranchised, with few avenues for meaningful political representation. Thus, the trajectory of Dalit-Bahujan politics in Uttar Pradesh remains

uncertain, with questions about whether the current political climate will provide true inclusion and transformative change for these communities.

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