IJRAR.ORG E-ISSN: 2348-1269, P-ISSN: 2349-5138
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND ANALYTICAL REVIEWS (IJRAR) | IJRAR.ORG
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

THE PRISM OF CASTE POLITICS IN UTTAR PRADESH

Oliviya Kunjumon
MA (Politics), Savitribai Phule Pune University

Abstract: *The structure of Uttar Pradesh has been carved at various junctures to bring in to its contemporary shape. However, at present political scenario the role of Congress Party is not much inveigled rather trying hard to achieve the lost political ground. The identity of the heartland has been shaped and reshaped over times but issues emerged as mien the symbolic identity viz communal politics (Babri Masjid-Ram Mandir issue), electoral politics and caste politics (Dalit politics). The identity of caste politics was shaped in a system of 'Dalits Politics' under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati. The emergence of Dalits politics was shaped throughout the Dalits ideologue. The ideological foundations of the Dalits- Bahujan movement in India was laid by Ambedkar, Phule, Narayan Guru, E.V. Periyar, and others. The subject of politics is never the same; rather it changed and alters over space but caste endure imminent in the politics.*

Keywords: **Uttar Pradesh, Caste, Politics, Parties, Dalit**

INTRODUCTION

Caste-based politics has always remained at the centre stage of the Indian political landscape. The brew of caste and politics seemed inseparable, and the politicization of caste has generally occurred throughout the recorded history of India, where British policies made the caste system much more inflexible than ever before. The factor of caste has influenced Uttar Pradesh since the independence, especially the voting behaviour of the electorates. The Congress won supermajority in assembly elections held in 1952, 1957 and 1962 and dominated Uttar Pradesh politics with strong support of upper caste and received substantial vote share of lower castes as well. Charan Singh became the first CM outside the 'upper caste' who broke previous CM's profile but his govt. was short lived. Thereafter, power oscillated between congress and its rivals. The upper caste dominancy was not challenged until 1989. But by 1989, caste factor acquired a greater salience and also the downfall of Congress gave rise to various other parties like Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samajwadi party (BSP). The interesting thing here is that these parties dealt with various castes and used it overtly to increase their vote banks. Hence it can be said that politics in Uttar Pradesh at times is based on caste and caste acts as a political faction.

According to Rajni Kothari, casteism in politics is no more and no less than politicization of caste. The key process was and is politicization. He further argues "Caste is the great secularizer". In response of Mandal Commission report he implied that forces like OBCs cut across religious barriers. They unite people of the same caste either if they belong to one religion or other. While M.N. Srinivas responded that it is Kothari's illusion of secular upsurge. He asserted that every caste itself is internally differentiated and which according to Kothari is cutting across religious division is at best a partial truth and at worst an illusion. Hence the role of what caste does to the politics is still to be debated.

CASTE AS AN ANALYTICAL CATEGORY

If examined carefully, it can be seen that in Uttar Pradesh caste has become a factor of instability, violence and fractured verdict. It gave rise to impetus regionalism, multiparty system, Mandalisation with anti-Mandal agitation and rise of lower castes on the political front. Caste based parties are largely strong at their regional level as compared to national politics. So is the case with parties like SP and BSP being strong in regional level than national.

Even parties use the caste as a category against other caste, mostly witnessed during the Post Mandal era in Uttar Pradesh. It resulted to a clash between upper castes and OBCs on the one hand and lower castes opposition to OBCs on the other. Caste can be considered a secularizing force but at times it ends to various struggles and violence in the state. Parties like BSP use the identity of caste politics as their "Natural Rights" opposing other caste groups openly and other parties like BJP uses "indirect Dalitization".

The 1989 General election was a crucial point in the Uttar Pradesh history as the known Umbrella Party 'Congress' was liquidising its support base and caste-based parties was emerging as a force. Major campaigning scene of the election was congress hoarded its traditional Brahmin Harijan Muslim Votes, BJP with its Hindutva politics majorly with an eye on Upper castes, Janata Dal on OBC votes, Muslims, Jats and Rajputs whereas BSP emerged merely as a "Dalit Party" with the old slogan *Brahmin, Thakur, Bania chor, Baki sab hain DS4'* (Dalit Shoshit Sangharsh Samiti).

D S-4 (DALIT SHOSHIT SANGHARSH SAMITI)

After Indian independence, having less or none of the opportunities in the state and the absence of social-inequality and the increased dissatisfaction among the educated Dalits, Kanshi Ram established the D.S-4 i.e Dalit Shoshit Sangharsh Samiti on December 6, 1981 in New Delhi. The main objective of this establishment was to mobilize the Dalits by using popular cultural forms. This movement attain to foster a unity among diverse Dalit castes in different parts of India. Especially, in Uttar Pradesh this association created strong local roots for Dalit activism by promoting the ideology of Dr Ambedkar.

POLITICIZATION OF CASTE AND THE PARTIES

The paradox of the politicisation of caste continues to be relevant in the contemporary electoral framework of Indian democracy. The mixture of caste and politics is almost inseparable, and the politicization of caste has generally occurred throughout the history of modern India. For example, the implementation of the Mandal Commission report that granted a reservation of 27% to Other Backward Castes in central government jobs and educational institutions and increased the total caste-based reservations to 49.5%, which, in turn, transformed the face of electoral politics in India. The Dalit and Bahujan leaders and thinkers undoubtedly gave specified names to social organisations that were based on universal principles such as justice, freedom, dignity and equality. Caste was used to forefront these agenda among those who have been historically condemned to social degradation and political insignificance.

Uttar Pradesh has seen the politics of political parties in dominance to a phase to the fragmentation of them. In a sense, the Uttar Pradesh politics can be classified into four phases. Firstly, the congress dominance Phase from first election in the 1951 to the mid-1960s. Second Phase was witnessed with the emergence of opposition parties. This phase also witnessed the split in congress party and the emergence of coalition governments in various states. The third phase through the 1980s saw two changes – one, return of congress to the power and second, the rise of three parties – the BJP, BSP and various socialist formation. The fourth phase was marked by caste and religious polarization. Chronic instability in government, inter-party rivalry and social polarization which all led to electoral competition and failure of coalition in Uttar Pradesh. By the period of 2000, there was a decline of national parties and incline of regional parties with their traditional rule game of upper caste antagonism to embrace more inclusive discourses and electoral strategies.

The political parties with communal ideological orientation seek the support, for example of the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and "non-Chamar/Jatav" Scheduled Castes in order to counterfeit the winning combination in the previous assembly and Lok Sabha elections. Even on the eve of the Uttar Pradesh -assembly election 2022, such parties did try to use tokenism by giving ministerial positions to several leaders from the lower castes.

CHANGING PROFILE AND HETEROGENIZATION OF POLITICAL CLASS IN UTTAR PRADESH

The changing profile of Uttar Pradesh can be analysed into the lens of two different angles – Voters and Parties. From the perspective of parties, the variable which they use for their electoral strategies is 'Caste'. Parties divide the electoral map of the basis of social divisions and divide the political tickets demographically based on local caste. Apart from all these caste plays a fundamental character for the voters, as of the saying *Vote their caste while casting their vote'.*

It can be largely understood and admit that the evolution of sociological composition of state assembly provides a base for the political empowerment of caste and the communities. This sociological composition can also narrative the stories of the parties - that dominates the Uttar Pradesh politics, the story of the rise of OBCs and as well the decline story of Upper castes.

To proffer it in simplistic manner, the BSP targeted the support from the Dalits by incurring the upper castes and OBCs. On the same side, the SP sought to consolidate its support by favouring the Yadav base and admiring the Muslims who went to give their support to Mulayam after the Ayodhya Incident. The congress once been in the majority, deprived of a core support base and declined further wise. The BJP sought to achieve its goal by targeting the upper caste and lower backward caste through its religious mobilization strategy conducted on the ground by the RSS. The BJP although succeeded in amalgamating the support from the Upper caste by the 1990s but the support quickly eroded and went in favour of other parties. But the same party regained its support base in the 2017 and 2022 election with the majority.

The trend of these targeted caste category support by various parties continued through the 1990s and towards the end of this phase parties started to change their style and electoral strategies. From then onward, parties seek to transfer the votes from their core support group categories towards candidates belonging to other groups including social coalition. The system of failed coalition changed the discourse from caste-base appeal to a generalist approach on social justice by giving a wider definition of 'backwardness'. For example, in the case of SP or the re-analyzation of the BSP as a *'Sarvajanwad (for the entire society) Party'* rather than a *'Bahujanwad (majority) Party'.*

For an instance, the fact provides the base for an argument that caste politics has become more localized in the Post Mandal/ Post Mandir years against the perception of parties becoming less caste-minded. The 2007 Uttar Pradesh assembly election marks this point. The BSP led by Mayawati succeeding in winning with a single majority with a vote share of 30.5% attaining 206 seats out of 403. A clear-cut swing of 7.3% compared to 2002 election. On the other hand, the BJP vote share decreased by 3.12% to 17% whereas the SP and Congress maintained a vote share at 25.4% and 8.6%. The SP adopted a vote share strategy targeting a larger number of non-Brahmins notably the Banias and Rajputs. The strategy of SP didn't work well compared to the BSP as the core support of BSP – the Dalits – is stronger and larger (21% of population) than other parties. Although there was a significant incline and decline of vote shares among the parties in further held elections.

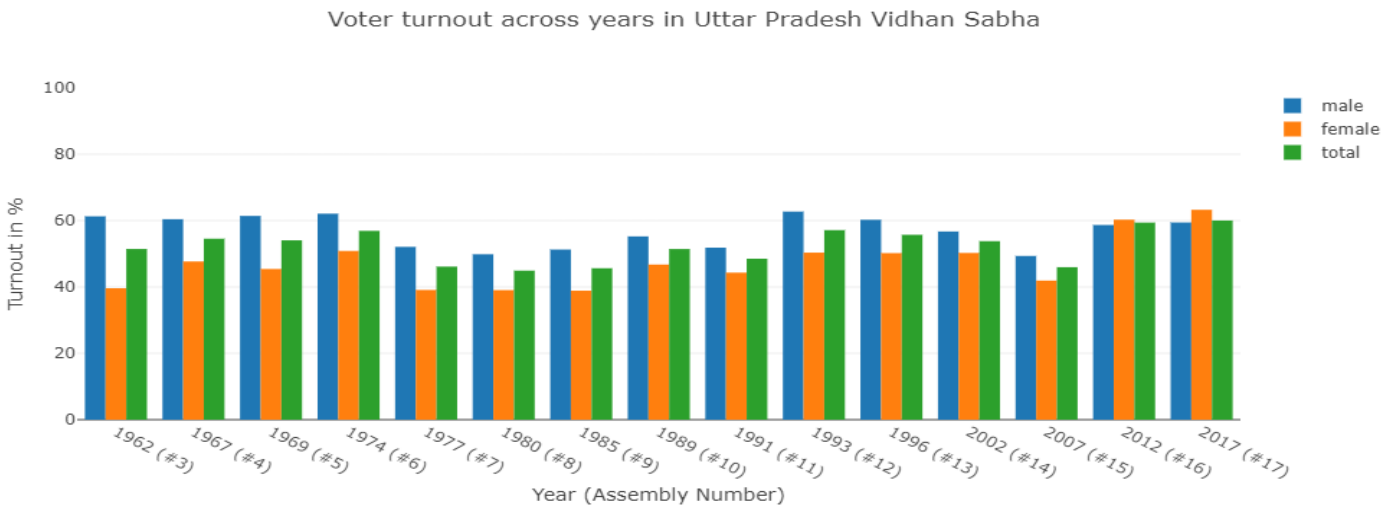
THE BJP AND TURNOUT IN UTTAR PRADESH ELECTION

The BJP wins in India's most populous state with a big majority again in the 2022 could offer clues to the national mood before a 2024 general election. The ruling party was re-elected again with a majority seats of 251 of the 403 in Uttar Pradesh Assembly election. The national ruling party win again in Uttar Pradesh might have puzzled many due to some factor that should have worked against the incumbent government.

The BJP win for the second consecutive election in Uttar Pradesh at the end of a five-year term was something that only Sampurnanand, the state's second chief minister, succeeded to do so in 1957. The BJP victory is much impressive as it also increased their vote share from 39.7% in 2017 assembly election to 41.3% in the 2022 Uttar Pradesh assembly election. Although there was a relative decline of seats – 255 against 312 in 2017 – comes from the fact that the SP played well in a bipolar election.

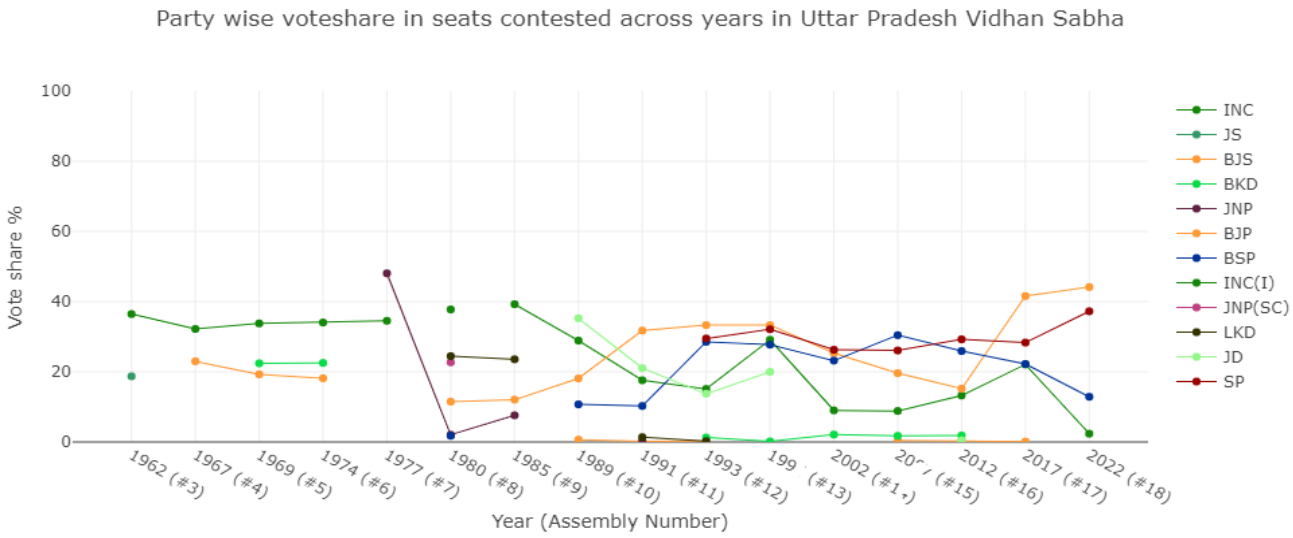
The SP boarded its highest vote share of 32% ever but couldn't succeeded to convert the votes into as many seats as it had hoped. The SP failed to break the social coalitions that have enabled the BJP to now win four consecutive elections in Uttar Pradesh.

Chart 1: Voter turnout in Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections (in % 1962-2017)



Source: Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Source: Lok Dhaba

Chart 2: Party wise vote share in seats contested in Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections (in % 1962-2022)



Source: Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Source: Lok Dhaba

CONCLUSION

The significant political changes occurred in Uttar Pradesh after the Mandal and Mandir period can be classified into two inter-related aspects. First, it led to growing domination of regional parties and second, there was a gradual heterogenization of caste representation within them. Even the economic changes or the social, political transformations induces the emergence of new elites.

The electoral politics of India has undergone a process of localization resulting to localization of electoral strategies. Parties seek to produce social alliance in order to broaden their support base. Parties with a history of winning elections for the past 20 years or so adapt a strategy to localize social, economic and political configurations covering the inner space of caste and elite structures. It can be concluded that even if state-wide caste-based mobilization no longer operate the way that it did of in the late 1980s and early 1990s, caste and politics are in a sense inter-related and will remain deeply intertwined.

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