

# The Bahujan Samaj Party: Between Social Justice and Political Practice

Social Change

44(1) 21–38

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SAGE Publications

Los Angeles, London,

New Delhi, Singapore,

Washington DC

DOI: 10.1177/0049085713514819

<http://socialchange.sagepub.com>



**Sambaiah Gundimeda**

Assistant Professor

Council for Social Development—Southern Regional Centre

Hyderabad

[samgundimeda@gmail.com](mailto:samgundimeda@gmail.com)

## Abstract

The Bahujan Samaj Party's concept of social justice consists of two interconnected aspects: horizontalisation of the vertical social order and democratisation of the undemocratic political order. Following a critical examination of these two aspects, this article makes two arguments. First, by encouraging the Dalits and other lower castes to claim their respective caste identities, the BSP's activities around the caste question are aimed at the horizontalisation/equalisation of caste rather than its annihilation. Second, by adopting the method of caste-based distribution of seats in political representation, the BSP has shown a means to bring the hitherto socially excluded and politically oppressed castes into the process of democracy, thereby laying a path by which to democratise the undemocratic order. Yet, this method of distribution also leads to the exclusion of castes with small number of population from the democratic process. The article also attempts to explore the reasons for the failure of the BSP in the 2012 assembly elections. It argues that it was the sub-quota politics of the Congress that forced Muslims to shift their loyalties from the BSP to SP, and that shift, in turn, led to the subsequent electoral debacle of the BSP.

## Keywords

Ambedkar, Ambedkarisation, Bahujan Samaj Party, Dalit, democratisation, horizontalisation, Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, political power, social justice

## Introduction

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which sprang up from activities undertaken by the All India Backward (SC/ST/OBC) and Minority Communities Employees' Federation (BAMCEF) and later by the *Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti*

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(DS-4, an umbrella organisation of the oppressed castes), was formally floated in 1984.<sup>1</sup> Since then, its journey through Uttar Pradesh's volatile political terrain, raising the slogan of 'social justice for the Bahujan Samaj',<sup>2</sup> has been excruciatingly painful. Yet, ultimately it did achieve the Ambedkarites' long-cherished goal of attaining political power. What is interesting in the manifestation of this goal is the emergence of a Dalit woman, Ms Mayawati, as the leader who brought the party to the seat of power in an otherwise male-dominated political world. In addition to this, she became the chief minister four times: a record not just in UP, but in any state in the Indian Union.<sup>3</sup> However, two prominent questions arise: Does the party have an ideology? What has it done to improve the condition of the oppressed? These are important questions, for many commentators have criticised the basis of BSP's appeal and political mobilisation around the caste axis rather than around class orientation, as well as its primary aim of attaining political power. Two criticisms seem to be particularly relevant. First, commenting upon the early activities of the party, Jagpal Singh (1993: 109) remarked that 'mobilisation of the rural poor is seldom done based on issues emanating from the capitalists' agriculture'. Looking at the BSP through the same lens, Dreze and Gazdar (1998: 104) noted that the BSP is another example of 'unprincipled factionalism', a characteristic in UP politics of not going beyond 'relatively narrow objectives such as caste-based reservation in public sector employment'. Second, it has been charged that, aside from its overwhelming emphasis on 'political power', the party has neither a concrete programme of action nor an ideology for the emancipation of the Dalits.

Two main aspects of the criticisms levelled against the BSP are as follows: (a) that the BSP does not have any ideology and (b) that the BSP has done little for the emancipation of the Dalits. The BSP, from the perspectives of these commentators, can be seen as a party that epitomises growth in Dalit consciousness and yet increasingly politicises caste. Given the BSP's emphasis on caste, these observations appear to be true; in bringing 'caste' into the centre of democratic politics, the 'class' factor is apparently pushed backstage. But political parties like the BSP cannot afford to ignore the class factor. The people whom it claims to be mobilising are not merely victims of caste discrimination, but also victims of the prevailing material inequalities. In other words, those who suffer the caste system in most cases also suffer because of class. Of course, this does not mean that victims of material inequalities are also victims of caste inequalities. For instance, a number of people who belong to the upper castes are vulnerable to material inequalities, along with those from lower castes. However, when it comes to social spaces, the upper castes, irrespective of their material standing, dominate over the lower castes.<sup>4</sup>

The BSP, since its formation in 1984, has claimed *Ambedkarism* as its ideology and Ambedkar's idea of social justice as its ideological vision. From this claim one can infer that social justice forms part of Ambedkarism. However, the party has never differentiated between Ambedkarism and Ambedkar's idea of social justice; it has been using both terms interchangeably. But what is Ambedkarism?

In an election manifesto released on the eve of State Assembly elections in UP in 1993, the BSP announced two core programmes that are supposed to be at the heart of its social and political agenda: horizontalisation of the vertical social order and democratisation of the undemocratic political order. According to the party, these programmes form the guidelines to achieve social justice in both the caste-based Indian society as well as the *savarna* (upper castes) dominated Indian polity (Atey, 1997: 155–68). From this it is clear that social justice or Ambedkarism is BSP's ideology, and horizontalisation of the social order and democratisation of the political order are the two core elements of that ideology. The present article, which aims at examining the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), mainly focuses on the party's concept of social justice and explores the reasons for its failure in the UP State Assembly elections in 2012. The article has been divided into three main sections. The first section examines the BSP's idea of horizontalisation of the social order and its activism to realise that idea; the second section critically examines the party's idea of democratisation of the polity and its efforts towards actualisation of that idea. An attempt is made in the final section to explore the reasons for the party's failure in the UP State Legislative Assembly elections in 2012.

## Horizontalisation of the Vertical Social Order

The BSP's idea of 'horizontalisation of the vertical social order' can be summed up in Kanshi Ram's demonstration using a pen, which he gave in all his public meetings. First he would hold the pen vertically comparing it to the Hindu social order, and then horizontally, pinpointing that just as he had moved the pen from a vertical to a horizontal position, the BSP's mission was also to reposition the vertical social order horizontally, thereby achieving equality among the castes.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, placing the castes on an equal footing was one of the BSP's primary social objectives. But what did the BSP do to horizontalise the vertical social order?

The BSP and its Dalit constituency employ three strategies to achieve the stated objective. The first is to publicly showcase Dalit caste identities with great pride. For instance, at all her public meetings Mayawati begins her address by introducing herself as: *Mai Chamar ki beti hoon, mai Dalit ki beti hoon* (I am the daughter of Chamars; I am the daughter of the Dalits). After that, she calls out the names of several Dalit castes—such as the Mahashahs, the Satnamis, the Balmikis, the Pasis, the Dhobis, the Koris, the Muzhabis and the Mujhwars—as a way of salutation, welcoming them to the meeting.<sup>6</sup> As Mayawati reels off these names in public, the audience at the meetings is filled with pride and claps aloud in acknowledgement, reflecting similar feelings about their own caste identities to those expressed by upper caste Hindus.

The second strategy is that of adopting individual caste titles to their proper names. For instance, Soma Sunder becomes Soma Sunder Jatav or Soma Sunder

Chamar and Naresh becomes Naresh Balmiki.<sup>7</sup> Attaching caste titles/identities to their names has been practised by members of the upper castes and Shudras for a long time; however the lower castes, especially the Dalits, never used to do this because it exposed their lineage, in terms of the caste they belonged to. 'That may be true, but when the *savarnalog* (upper caste Hindus) and Shudras can claim their caste, why can't we (*hum kyo nahi?*),' asks Ajay Kumar.<sup>8</sup>

The third and final strategy is that of puncturing upper-caste pride through the Dalit adoption of the former's caste titles, supposed to be the exclusive preserve of the caste Hindus. For instance, titles and caste identities such as Choudhury, Singh, Varma, Pandey and Shukla have been adopted by the Dalits, especially those in the community who are educated and/or middle class. Such adaptations have been justified on two grounds. First, the moment they disclose their (original) names, which do not contain the caste tags, they are immediately recognised as people belonging to the lower caste and are treated as inferior. The use of these titles is thus a strategy to avoid the 'pain of ill-treatment' by others, especially the upper castes.<sup>9</sup> Second, when Dalits use their 'real' titles they are routinely subjected to humiliation, mistreatment and exploitation by the upper castes. But when the Dalits adopt upper-caste titles, members of upper castes have no choice but to address them with respect. Laughing at this lack of choice, Raj Bhupal, a Pasi from Jhansi, notes: 'Now that we have adopted their caste titles, they (the caste Hindus) have to address us with respect. Otherwise, they would be disrespecting their own castes'.<sup>10</sup> This may be so, but, are Dalits endorsing the caste system by claiming their respective caste identities and thereby accepting their lowly position in the structure? Further, would caste-based assertions and claiming equality of castes result in the horizontalisation of the vertical social order?

Let us begin by asking what caste labels entail and why it is that only the upper castes attach such labels to their names? The reasons are well known. Identifying an individual's caste is not a simplistic thing; it is complex and many layered. Most specifically, it emphasises where an individual stands in the hierarchical social order. The 'location' is crucial because to be higher up indicates social superiority; lower down means humiliation and contempt. To put it in the words of Ambedkar (1990: 25), caste hierarchy is 'an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt'. And that is precisely why members of the upper castes flash their castes with such self-assurance by tagging them onto their names. Sharma, Mukharji, Pandey, Thakur, Gupta, Choudary, Reddy are some of the upper caste tags that we are all familiar with. Caste is also justified using the *karma* theory. According to this theory, the birth of a person into a particular *varna* depends on the good or bad deeds he/she has done in the previous birth. That is to say, if a person has done much good in his previous birth, he will be reborn as a Brahmin in his next birth. If he has done less good, he will be reborn into the Shudra and Panchama categories lower down the rungs. It translates that the lower castes, particularly the Dalits, have done only bad things in their previous births. In a way, it is precisely this *chosen people* label which the upper castes flaunt that makes them feel superior to others. What does it mean for the Dalits?

Interestingly, the caste tags ascribed to the Dalits were used by the caste Hindus as words of abuse, to demean the former. For instance, the word 'Chamar' and 'animal' are interchanged by the caste Hindus as if they were synonymous: 'The upper castes do not recognise any difference between Chamars and animals' (*savarnalog Chamar ko janvar samajhte hai*).<sup>11</sup> This demonstrates the attitude of the upper castes towards the Chamars in particular, and Dalits in general. On account of such attitudes, as well as the public insults heaped on them on a daily basis, no Chamar (for that matter, no Dalit) wishes to disclose his/her caste in public. The shame of being a Dalit is internalised, affecting their approach to all aspects of life; and the humiliation heaped on them because of their caste bruises their conscience. Pride in one's own identity and respect earned from others are basic psychological factors that contribute to making a person confident and positive. The Dalits, who are treated with contempt by the upper castes, face disrespect and hatred from others on a daily basis and as a result suffer mental agonies and a lack of self-worth. But the question before us is, could laying claim to such humiliated identities earn respect for the Chamars? To put it differently, might the Dalits' assertion of their caste identities lead to equality of castes? Is such a strategy in tune with Ambedkar's idea of the 'annihilation of caste'?<sup>12</sup>

Gaya Charan Dinakar, a BSP MLA from Baberu assembly segment in the Banda district of UP, points out that 'the BSP's idea of equalisation of castes' should not be treated as the Party's shift from the Ambedkar ideology.<sup>13</sup> The Party's call for 'equality of castes', according to Dinakar, gels with Ambedkar's vision. Dinakar goes on to explain that although Ambedkar's vision of a casteless society is theoretically flawless, the strategy he proposed for realisation of the vision was flawed: 'If individuals are part of castes and if castes are part of a hierarchically organised social order, then the first step towards the realisation of an individual-based society would be equalisation of castes rather than annihilation of castes.'<sup>14</sup> Dinakar's argument is that caste, whether one accepts it or not, is a reality in India and in order to realise Ambedkar's vision of equality of individuals, one must work from within the caste structure rather than try to annihilate it. He argues that we should face up to the fact that a Dalit is discriminated against and humiliated by the caste Hindu society because of his caste and not because of his personality or behaviour. 'And we are using caste to weaken the caste mindset', claims Dinakar.

It has been further argued by the leadership of the BSP that although the Dalit movement all over India has focused on annihilating caste, caste has not disappeared; rather it has gained in strength. The upper castes have been using that strength to continue their social domination and political control and also to oppress the lower castes, especially the Dalits. Given the big picture, the BSP leadership argued, there is need for a change in strategy against caste. Even before working for the annihilation of caste, there is need to achieve equality among castes. It should be recognised here that when the BSP leadership says 'equality of castes', they mean 'notional equality' rather than substantive equality. Making the Chamars and other Dalit castes identify themselves with their caste identity and forcing non-Dalits to address them with their caste name, is a means of teasing out

the negative notions to achieve the positive. Ultimately the positive will replace the negative. Thus it is here that we witness an interesting use of caste by the BSP and Dalits. More than the annihilation of castes, the Dalits are focusing on achieving equality of castes. Through a positive assertion of caste identities, they are not merely turning the tables on their oppressors but also subverting caste hierarchy and its ideology.

Democratisation of the Undemocratic Political Order

For the BSP, the Indian political order is undemocratic for one simple reason: it denies ‘equality of political opportunity for all’. The denial, however, is not an inherent characteristic of the order; rather the Indian system has acquired that character on account of the control and dominance exerted by the upper castes. By virtue of such control, the upper castes have not only been appropriating the national resources for their own benefit, but also controlling the opportunities of the Bahujans (read as the lower castes). And, as has been argued by the leadership of the BSP, it is only through the realisation of political power by the marginalised sections of society that political control of the upper castes can be wiped out and social equilibrium achieved—that is, to ‘restore to the majority the power to decide, by doing so the BSP will democratise the political order’.<sup>15</sup> To put it in the words of Kanshi Ram: ‘Political power is the *guru killi* (master key), which enables its wielders to open every lock, whether social, political, economic or cultural’ (quoted in Dubey, 2001: 288–89). But, how does the BSP propose to acquire political power and democratise the political order? Before we answer this question, it is suggested that we look at the political situation in UP prior to the emergence of the lower caste-based political parties.

After India won its independence, for more than three decades political power in UP was dominated by the upper castes and the following Table 1 delineates this point:

Table 1. Caste and Community Representation in the UP Assembly, 1952–74 (in %)

Castes & Communities	1952	1957	1962	1967	1969	1974
Upper castes	58	55	58	45.3*	43.9*	45.8*
Intermediate castes	3	3	2	—	—	—
OBCs	9	12	13	29.2	26.8	28.4
SCs	20	21	22	—#	20.9	16.3
Muslims	10	9	7	5.6	8.2	9.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Meyer (1969 in Jaffrelot, 2007).  
Notes: \* Includes Bhumihar, Tyagi, Vaishya, Kayasth and Khatri; # data is unavailable.

As Table 1 demonstrates, since the early 1950s and until the mid-1970s, the upper castes had control over political power, to the exclusion of the lower castes in the state. But this situation began to change since the early 1980s, especially

with the emergence of the lower caste-based political parties—BSP and the Samajwadi Party (SP). These parties not only questioned the upper caste domination but also facilitated an increase in the lower castes' share in the political power structures of UP. Although this is not the place to examine at length, yet it should be recognised that the end logic of the politics of the Shudra-based SP differs from that of the politics of the Dalit-based BSP. While the former's politics aim at reversing the earlier situation, that is, at the replacement of the upper castes by the Shudras in the positions of power, the latter's politics are aimed at homogenisation of power among all the caste and communities. Indeed, one can sum up the BSP's idea of homogenisation of power or democratisation of the undemocratic order in one of its political slogans: *Jiski jitni sankhya bhari—uski utni bhagedari* (Political representation and share in power will correspond to the support of the particular caste in terms of number of votes). The party believes that political power should be distributed equally among all the castes on the basis of each caste's weight in the total population. To that extent, the BSP's politics are not to reverse the earlier situation but to infuse equality in that situation by the method of caste-based distribution of the seats in representative bodies. This method is to ensure the presence of not only the lower castes but also the upper castes in the power structure. In what follows I will attempt to examine how the party is seeking to democratise the undemocratic order.

According to Kanshi Ram, restoring power to the powerless is a two-stage process. In the first stage, the bahujans, in the vanguard of the BSP, would capture state power. This would be done not by means of violence, but by the 'ballot box', that is, by taking part in the electoral process. In the second stage, the Party, by making use of the State, would initiate programmes such as the provision of better wages and good working conditions, which would empower the marginalised, thereby leading to a social transformation (Pai, 2002: 121–26). In a way, the BSP seeks political power for a dual purpose: (a) to secure an opportunity for the socially marginalised and politically voiceless to be part of the political rule, and thus democratise the undemocratic political order; and (b) to use the state to empower the marginalised and thereby bring about social transformation. For want of space I shall focus only on the first aspect.

The BSP, despite being wedded to the idea of sharing of political power across all castes and communities, did not embrace this idea when it appeared in the political arena of UP in the early 1980s. It attempted to mobilise the Dalits and other marginalised sections of the UP society to the exclusion of the three major upper castes in the state—the Brahmins, Thakurs and Banias. But by the late 1990s it began to soften its exclusivist policy, opening its doors to the hitherto excluded upper castes and now, in the early 2010s, the doors of the party are completely open; it is no longer an exclusively Dalit party, it is the party of sarvajan (literally, all castes and communities). Some of the mobilisational and electoral slogans of the BSP reflect this social trajectory:

1989: *Tilak, tarazu aur talwar, inko maro joote char* (Hit the Brahmins, Thakurs and Banias with shoes)<sup>16</sup>



1996: *Brahmin, Thakur, Bani chhor, baaki sab hain DS-4* (Barring the Brahmins, Thakurs and Banias; everyone is DS-4: Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti)

2002: *Brahmin saaf, Thakur half, Bania maaf* (Finish off the Brahmins, Thakurs could be pardoned and Banias are forgiven)

2007: *Hathi nahin Ganesh hai, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hai* (It is not just an elephant; it is the symbol of Ganesh, Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh)

2009: *Sarva jan hitaya, sarva jan sukhaya* (In the interest of all and happiness of all)

The trajectory of BSP's political inclusion is not confined to political slogans but reflected in the distribution of its seats. Table 2 illustrates this aspect.

**Table 2.** Caste and Community of the BSP MLAs (in %) (1989–2002)

Caste & Community	1989	1991	1993	1996	2002
<b>Upper Castes</b>			1.5	13.5	16.6
Brahmin			1.5	4.5	6.8
Rajput				6	6.8
Banya					1.3
Bhumihar				1.5	1.3
Kayasth				1.5	
<b>Intermediate Castes</b>	<b>22.8</b>	<b>91.4</b>		<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.3</b>
Jat				1.5	1.3
OBC			44.7	42	39.7
Yadav	7.6	16.6	14.9	1.5	2.7
Kurmi	7.6	16.6	7.5	12	10.9
Lodhi			1.5	1.5	4.1
Koeri					1.3
Shakya				1.5	1.3
Rajbhar		8.3	2.9	3	1.3
Saini					2.7
Pal/Gadaria				6	2.7
Kashyap					1.3
Kushwaha			1.5	6	2.7
Muraon/Maurya				3	2.7
Nishad		8.3	1.5	4.5	1.3
Bhagel				1.5	1.3
Gujar					1.3
Other	7.6	41.6	14.9	1.5	2.7
<b>Scheduled Castes</b>	<b>38.4</b>		<b>34.3</b>	<b>27.2</b>	<b>25.9</b>
Jatav				16.6	20.5
Pasi				7.6	4.1
Khatik				1.5	
Other				1.5	1.3
<b>Muslim</b>	<b>30.7</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>16.4</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>10.9</b>
Non-identified			2.9		

**Source:** Jaffrelot (2005).



Interestingly, distribution of party seats on the basis of the numerical strength of castes and communities in the political process as well as in political power shows that the party's earlier criticism of the *manuvadis* (upper castes that wedded to the ideology of caste hierarchy) and its slogans against them, as *Brahmins, Baniya, Thakur chhor, baaki sab hai DS-4*, are no longer noted. Inviting the upper castes into the BSP's fold, Mayawati observes: 'BSP is no more a caste-based party because it has adopted the policy of *Sarvajan hita* (welfare of all castes)... the Party now wants to take the help of all to remove the disparities prevailing in society' (*The Pioneer*; 20 February 1998). Starting from the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, the party began to nominate candidates in proportion to the caste and community breakdown in society. Out of 85 candidates, the BSP fielded 17 Muslims (20 per cent), 20 Dalits (23.5 per cent), 38 OBCs (45 per cent) and 10 upper castes (12 per cent)—five Brahmins and five Rajputs.<sup>17</sup> Caste-based distribution of the party's tickets was further crystallised in the state legislative elections in 2007. Out of 403 assembly seats, the BSP allocated 139 seats to upper castes (89 Brahmins, 38 Thakurs, 14 Vaishya and 1 Kayastha), 110 to OBCs, 93 to Dalits and 61 to Muslims. This form of allocation of tickets actually led to the BSP's success in the 2007 assembly elections and helped it to form a government on its own strength for the first time. The BSP adhered to the same sarvajan-formula during the 2012 assembly elections. It gave 88 seats to the Dalits, 85 to Muslims and religious minorities, 74 to Brahmins, 33 to Thakurs; and as many as 113 seats were given to candidates from backward communities (more on the outcome of 2012 elections in the next section). Thus, it is clear that despite campaigning for the inclusion of all castes and communities in the power structure of the state, by mobilising the Dalits, OBCs and other marginalised sections to the exclusion of the upper castes, from the party's inception until the mid-1990s, the BSP did not practice what it preached. It was only during the late 1990s that the party began to transform itself from an exclusive Dalit-based party to a sarvajan-based party. But what led to such transformation?

During its initial phase, or what one may call the Bahujan phase, the BSP focused its energies on mobilising the bahujans, particularly the Dalits, Muslims and the Other Backward Castes against the political domination of the upper castes. The savarnas, by controlling the spaces of opportunities and by excluding the bahujans from those spaces, have been the major beneficiaries of the caste system. For instance, the Brahmins, by controlling education and occupying the highest position in the traditional social structure; the Kshatriyas, by controlling the land and dominating temporal power; and the Vaishyas, by controlling trade, have kept the bahujans from those avenues. Even in post-Independence India, the savarnas have re-established themselves by controlling political power. In normal circumstances, in a democratic framework, it is the majority that rules. But the upper castes, who make up a mere 15 per cent of the total population of the country, are able to monopolise political power. In casting their votes for candidates belonging to the upper castes, members of the lower castes, who constitute 85 per cent of the population, continue to remain the ruled. This is the

reason why, during the 1980s and early 1990s, we did not see the presence of the upper castes in the party structure. Indeed, Kanshi Ram was categorical about not including the savarnas: 'There are lots of other parties which accommodate upper caste people, but they should avoid us' (Akela, 2006).

Interestingly, unlike the other Dalit parties—especially the Republican Party of India in Maharashtra, which works exclusively with the Dalits—the BSP did not want to confine itself to the Dalits. For the BSP, as noted in the above, the OBCs and the religious minorities were part of the Bahujan Samaj. This was the reason why it considered the Yadavs-based Samajwadi Party as friend in its mission of 'political power for the bahujans' and thus entered into an electoral alliance with it during the assembly elections in 1993. Not surprisingly, their combined strength helped to improve their electoral tallies. The SP won 109 seats and secured a share of 25.83 per cent of the votes and the BSP won 67 seats and secured 11.11 per cent of the total votes polled. More importantly, immediately after the elections, a coalition government was also formed by the combined parties. While Mulayam Singh Yadav became the chief minister, the BSP obtained 11 out of 27 ministerial portfolios and the coalition began with a great show of comradeship. However, it lasted just for 16 months, from November 1993 to June 1995. The split or the failure of the coalition government was said to be caused by personality clashes and political rivalries between the SP and BSP. In addition to this split, during the late 1990s some of the OBC leaders of the BSP also deserted it in order to form their own political group. For instance, Raj Bahadur and Jung Bahadur—the two Kurmi leaders—orchestrated a split from the BSP to form the BSP (R) and the Bahujan Samaj Dal, respectively. Another Kurmi leader from the BSP, Sone Lal Patel also deserted the party to float his Apna Dal. With these splits and desertions by the OBCs, the Party became uncertain of their support and began to look for other social categories to widen their support base. It was as a result of political compulsion that the BSP turned away from its Bahujan ideology to embrace the sarvajan ideology.

The BSP might have moved away from its earlier ideology of Bahujan to Sarvajan out of political necessity, but such a move was certainly a step towards enlarging of the space of democracy. That is to say, although India had formally adopted the system of democracy, on account of the presence of caste system, it functioned in an undemocratic fashion for several decades after Independence. The information pertaining to the caste and community backgrounds of the representatives in the UP Assembly from 1952 to 1974 given in the above Table 1 clearly demonstrates the dominance of the upper castes which constituted a minority in the overall population. The lower castes, despite their numerical majority, remain in the category of the 'ruled'. This phenomenon, as pointed out by Kanshi Ram, is nothing but the rule of the minority over the majority under the veil of democracy. By adopting the method of a caste-based distribution of seats in political representation, the BSP has shown a means by which to bring the hitherto neglected and excluded castes into the process of democracy, thereby laying a path for the democratisation of the undemocratic order. Of course, it is

important to recognise that this method of distribution also leads to the exclusion from the democratic process of castes with small populations. For instance, in UP there are 66 Dalit castes, constituting 21 per cent of the total population of the state. According to the 2001 Census, the Chamars/Jatavs made up 56 per cent of the Dalit population. The Pasis constituted 16 per cent, while the third rung comprising Dhobis, Koris and Balmikis made up another 15 per cent. The fourth rung comprising Gonds, Dhanuks and Khatiks, constituted about 5 per cent. Of these four groups of castes, the BSP has generally distributed its Dalit reserved seats in the state legislative assembly and Lok Sabha among the Chamars and Pasis. There is hardly any representation for Gonds, Dhanuks and Khatiks. Apart from this, the BSP's sarvajan strategy is certainly a step forward in its idea of democratisation of the undemocratic Indian political order. If the BSP has a better formula of inclusion of all the castes and communities in the power structure, why did it fail in UP Assembly elections in 2012?

## **BSP's Failure in UP Assembly Elections in 2012**

Prior to its electoral victory in the UP assembly election in 2007, the BSP ruled the state three times. But on none of those occasions did it win a sufficient number of seats to form a government on its own. As such, it had to depend upon other political parties for its survival in the seat of power. But in 2007, the Party formed its government on its own strength for the first time, by winning a majority of seats in the State Assembly elections. One of the winning strategies of the BSP was the sarvajan-formula: a rainbow coalition of four major communities in the state: the Dalits, Brahmins, Muslims and the Most Backward Classes (MBCs). This formula is clearly a move away from the BSP's earlier aggressive position of having exclusively Dalits and other marginalised castes and communities in political power. Despite following the same sarvajan-formula, the party lost the elections in 2012 rather miserably, winning a mere 80 seats. Why did the Party fail in the 2012 elections?

Many arguments have been put forward by critics and scholars in their post-poll analysis of the failure of the BSP in the assembly elections. Of these, three noteworthy arguments are as follows: One, that the BSP government was embroiled in corruption and scams, such as the Taj Corridor case; two, that the BSP government incurred the wrath of the public by wasting huge amounts of money on constructing the Ambedkar Memorial and installing statues of Dalit-Bahujan pioneers in the public domain (Vaidya, 2012); and finally, the Dalits, who constitute 21 per cent of the population of the state and who have been the BSP's solid support base since its inception, deserted the Party during the Assembly elections in 2012 (Heath & Kumar, 2012: 41–49). The desertion by the Dalits tilted the balance in favour of the other political parties, especially the SP. Although I do not subscribe to these arguments, I do not completely reject them either. For me, the BSP's

failure in the assembly elections lies neither in the corruption charges against its government, nor the vehemence of the non-Dalit public, nor in its desertion by the Dalits; rather, it lies in the shifting of Muslim loyalties from the BSP to the SP. Before I elaborate on this, let me respond to the above three arguments.

With regard to the first argument, I do not think that the corruption charges against the BSP government would have had such a great effect on the voting behaviour of the UP public against that Party. For, in contemporary India, every political party and outfit is involved in various corruption charges and scams. In that context, it is not surprising to see something of the same pattern in the BSP. Of course, it should be recognised here that I am suggesting neither that since every political party is involved in corruption; BSP should follow the same path, nor supporting any corruption under the BSP regime. I am only saying that when corruption has become the order of the day, and when the voters are accustomed to electing those political parties enmeshed in corruption and scams again and again, there is no sense in pointing a finger at the BSP alone. Rather this has to be dealt with systematically, like the electoral rejection of all those corrupt political parties. And with regard to the second argument, we have already noted above that a majority of the non-Dalit public in UP neither liked the installation of the statues of Ambedkar and other Dalit–Bahujan leaders, nor appreciated the construction of the Ambedkar Memorial Parks in Lucknow and other locations. Hence, it may be that the vehemence of the non-Dalit public against the Dalit–Bahujan memorials resulted in their turning against the BSP during the assembly elections. But then, the percentage of this category of non-supporters cannot be so big as to upset the winning possibilities of the BSP.

Critics, who put forward the third argument, that the abandonment of the BSP by the Dalits led to its downfall in the assembly elections, justified it on account of the failure of the BSP to secure a majority of the seats in the reserved constituencies. This may be so, but if one were to look at the evidence from the last three assembly elections provided in the Table 3, below, it was only during the 2007 elections that the BSP secured maximum number of seats in the reserved constituencies. Otherwise, the BSP has always had poor track record in securing the reserved seats.

An important question at this juncture could be: Why is a Dalit-based party not winning in these reserved constituencies when other parties are winning? Although I do not want to go into the details of this question, it is sufficient to

**Table 3.** Performance of Political Parties in the UP Reserved Constituencies

Year & Party	BSP	SP	BJP	Congress	RLD	Others	Total
2012	17	54	3	4	2	8	84
2007	62	13	7	5	1	1	89
2002	25	35	18	–	–	11	89

**Source:** Election Commission of India: <http://eci.nic.in> (accessed on 8 May 2013).

mention here that the main problem lies in the very notion of a reserved constituency. A constituency is reserved for the Dalits or Adivasis on account of the fact that a majority of the population in that constituency belongs to the reserved category of people. But there is a possibility that the combined population strength of the non-Dalits/Adivasis may be greater than that of the reserved category population. In such a constituency, it is easy for any political party to win in any election if it manages to secure the support of two or three castes or communities; and this is how the non-Dalit based political parties have been winning in the reserved constituencies in UP. And if one looks at the BSP's failure to win the majority of the reserved seats from this vantage point, such a failure does not really mean that the Dalits have deserted that Party. If this is so, what really went wrong for the BSP in the 2012 elections?

Although from its BAMCEF (The All India Backward [SC, ST& OBC] and Minority Communities Employees Federation) days onwards the BSP considered Muslims as part of the *bahujan* Samaj, their presence in the Party, especially in its earlier phase, was considerably marginal. But that situation began to change in 1993. Partly inspired by its own *Bahujan* ideology and partly compelled by electoral politics, the BSP began to allocate a good number of seats to Muslims—both in the State Legislative Assembly and Parliamentary elections. UP has 18.5 per cent Muslim voters, who play a decisive role in at least 130 Assembly seats. The importance of Muslims in the Party began to increase further when the Party, following its *sarvajan* formula, gave them 61 seats during the 2007 elections and again 85 seats in the 2012 elections. Of course, it was not just the BSP that had been eyeing the Muslim vote bank. The SP was also one of the prime contenders in the competition for the support of the Muslims. Indeed, after the Yadavs, Muslims constituted major support base for the SP. Just like the BSP, the SP also began to allot good number of seats to Muslims. For instance, during the 2012 Assembly elections, the SP allotted them 78 seats (43 won). And when the elections for the UP State Legislative Assembly were announced, just like the SP, the BSP was also quite confident that it would come back to power on account of the support it enjoyed among the Brahmins and Muslims, in addition to its traditional support base, the Dalits. But then Rahul Gandhi's appeasement of the Muslims, in the form of a sub-quota of 4.5 per cent within the 27 per cent quota for the OBCs, changed the politics of the assembly elections as well as the winning chances of the BSP.

During an election rally on 15 December 2011 in Badaun town, Rahul Gandhi announced that the Central government, led by the Congress Party, would soon announce reservations for Muslims in government jobs (Fredrick, 2011). Following this announcement, on 22 December 2011 the Union Cabinet cleared a 4.5 per cent sub-quota for minorities, which was to be carved out of the 27 per cent quota for the OBCs in Central government jobs and Central educational institutions (*The Hindu*, 23 December 2011). It does not require much effort to work out that since this announcement came just before the Assembly elections in five states—Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and Manipur—the Union Government was

targeting these states with its sub-quota decision. In the 2009 general elections, the Congress won 21 Lok Sabha seats in UP thanks to a shift in the Muslim vote from the SP. But with the gradual return of that vote to the BSP and SP, the Congress needed to do something to bring that vote back into its fold. The Congress knew that if it could succeed in winning the support of the Muslims, it could easily weaken the support bases of both the BSP and SP. This became obvious in the speeches of Rahul Gandhi and other Congress leaders during their election campaigns. For instance, questioning Mulayam Singh Yadav's intentions to give reservations to Muslims, Gandhi remarked that although the Yadav had promised an 18 per cent quota for Muslims, he had never given reservations to Muslims, despite assuming political power in UP three times (Khan, 2012a). The intention behind Gandhi's criticism of Yadav became clear through the words of Beni Prasad Varma, a Union Minister in UPA government. Describing the quota decision as a 'gift from the UPA government', Varma said it would 'make the Samajwadi Party and Mulayam Singh irrelevant [in the coming Assembly elections]' (*The Hindu*, 24 January 2012). Thus, the sub-quota decision of the UPA government was a clear-cut electoral strategy to appease the Muslims and weaken the SP and BSP.

But once the hornet's nest is stirred in the guise of a sub-quota, other political parties are left with no choice but to respond either in favour of or against it. While the SP dismissed the UPA government's decision and instead demanded reservation for the minority as per their population; the BSP supported the sub-quota decision. But, it also demanded a national reservation policy and an increase in the 27 per cent quota for the OBCs for giving reservations to backward religious minorities (*ibid.*). And, as expected, the BJP, which had been looking for some issue to mobilise its upper caste constituency, opposed the sub-quota as the 'dirty game plan' of the Congress to destroy the unity and integrity of the nation ('BJP to Oppose Religion-based Reservation', in *The Hindu*, 11 January 2012). Indeed, the BJP saw the sub-quota debate as a good opportunity to boost its prospects in the Assembly elections. For, as there was no chance of the BJP getting Muslim votes, it had nothing to lose by opposing the quota for minorities, which would essentially benefit the backward Muslims. Moreover, the Party believed that the quota politics could help it to consolidate its voter base among the upper castes, who traditionally sided with either the BJP or the Congress (*The Hindu*, 13 January 2012).

Interestingly, the Muslims were not overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the decision. For instance, the Peace Party, a new entrant in the political horizon of UP which posed a potential threat to the SP, BSP and the Congress with respect to Muslim votes, described the decision as the 'biggest betrayal of Muslims since Independence' (*The Hindu*, 23 December 2012). The stance of the Peace Party appeared to reflect the position of a large number of Muslim voters in UP. While they rejected the Congress, regarding the sub-quota as its 'political gimmick', they had also moved away from the BSP. It has been alleged that Mayawati government let loose a wave of harassment against the Muslim youth by the Hindutva forces in the state. A section of the Muslim population also feared that



the BJP might attempt to capture power by exploiting the sub-quota issue in order to prompt the mobilisation of the upper castes and the OBCs. They somehow came to believe that SP would protect their interests, and this resulted in the shifting of loyalties by a good percentage of the Muslim voters from the BSP and Congress to the SP. Unmistakably, it was this shift that led to the BSP's debacle and the victory of the SP in the elections. The BSP's chief, Mayawati, has more clarity on this shift and its impact on the outcome of the Assembly elections than anyone else. She agreed that 'About 70 per cent of the Muslim vote was transferred to the SP, which also gained from the support of the OBCs and upper castes', this in turn, 'led to the victory of Muslim candidates entered by the SP in constituencies where the minority community exercised a domineering influence over the poll outcome' (Khan, 2012b).

## Conclusion

In this article, I attempted to examine the BSP's idea of social justice and the reasons for its failure in the electoral battle of the 2012 assembly elections. I noted that the social justice of the BSP is consisted of two inter-connected aspects: (a) horizontalisation of vertical order and (b) democratisation of undemocratic political order. In my close examination of these two aspects, I have noted that some of the strategies adopted by the BSP, such as the recognition and public acknowledgement of the hitherto humiliated and misrecognised identities, instilled a sense of social confidence among the Dalits. This, in turn, led to their claim of equality of castes. On the *democratisation* front, despite the existence of political democracy, sections of people from the oppressed groups continued to remain as the 'ruled'. Despite constituting only a small percentage of the population, the upper castes managed to hold on to the positions of political power on account of their social dominance and economic superiority. The BSP, however, tried to end the political dominance of the upper castes by providing representation for all the castes on the basis of each caste's weight in the size of population. Although this method of distribution might result in the inclusion of hitherto politically suppressed castes and communities into political process, it may also result in the neglect and isolation of those castes that have a small or negligible population size from the democratic process. Finally, in my analysis of the failure of the BSP in UP Assembly elections in 2012, I argued that it was the sub-quota politics of the Congress that forced the Muslims to shift their loyalties from the BSP to SP; and that shift, in turn, led to the electoral debacle of the BSP in the elections.

## Acknowledgements

This article is part of the author's PhD thesis at SOAS: 'Mapping Dalit Politics in Contemporary India: A Study of UP and AP from an Ambedkarite Perspective'.



The author would like to thank Dr Rochana Bajpai and Dr Matthew Nelson for their excellent supervision and affectionate support throughout the PhD. He is also thankful to Dr Vivek Kumar (CSSS-JNU) for being generous with his time and for his valuable insights during the fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh. Many thanks also to Avinash Gowtham and Chandu Kandare for their assistance during the fieldwork. Thanks to Zeba Ghory and Erin Anastasi for their companionship during the early stages of the preparation of this article. The author is also thankful to Dr Jens Lerche, Prof. Christophe Jaffrelot, Prof. Sasheej Hegde and Dr Harish Wankhede for commenting on earlier drafts of this article at various stages of its preparation. He acknowledges with gratitude the support and freedom given to him by Prof. Kalpana Kannabiran (Director, Council for Social Development—Southern Regional Centre, Hyderabad) during the final preparation of the article for its publication. The author bears the responsibility for any shortcomings or faults.

## Notes

1. On the BSP's history, see Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998: 218–37; Pai, 2002: 72–111; Jaffrelot, 2003: 387–425.
2. The term 'Bahujan', literally 'the many', or 'majority of people', means the masses 'who have been devoid of humanity for centuries' in contrast to 'a handful who take their pleasure for granted, call themselves superior and live at the cost of the masses'. The term arose in 1906 in the context of the *Satya shodhak* movement in Maharashtra. Excluded from *Bahujans* are 'not merely the Brahmins, but also the educationally advanced castes as well as the merchant castes'. The concept has a class content as it 'tends to exclude the aristocratic and wealthy among non-Brahmins', though if the upper classes come from a primarily peasant or poor non-Brahmin castes, they may identify themselves 'in terms of their social roots' and a culture of sentiments as part of the Bahujan Samaj (Omvedt, 1976: 4). Although I do not have any problems with this broad definition of the term, I wanted to use it in the popularly and academically agreed or understood definition of the term. In recent years the term has come to be equated with either the Shudra category or the OBC category.
3. Mayawati assumed the Chief Ministership for the first time in 1995, and in 2007 she attained that position again, for the fourth time. The details of the tenures of the BSP under Mayawati's leadership are: (a) 3 June 1995 to 18 October 1995; (b) 21 March 1997 to 21 September 1997, (c) 3 May 2002 to 29 August 2003 and (d) 13 May 2007 to 7 March 2012.
4. A number of scholars clearly demonstrated the substantial entanglement of caste and class. For an analysis on this congruence, see Sharma (1994).
5. Kanshi Ram was not the first person to theorise on the horizontal mobilisation and horizontal social order. Earlier Ram Manohar Lohia, a renowned socialist leader, spoke about horizontal mobilisation of the lower castes. In his *The Caste System*, he argued for the mobilisation of the lower castes on issues of social justice. See Ram Manohar Lohia, 1964; also, see D. L. Sheth, 1999, *passim* 10, p. 2510.
6. Based on the presence of this researcher at several rallies and public meetings of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh during 2004–05.

7. It may be mentioned that the adoption of the titles, such as Jatav or Balmiki, was not a new phenomenon among the Dalits in UP. In the early 1920s, during the heyday of Arya Samaj politics in the colonial North India, some Chamars who joined the Arya Samaj adopted the Jatav title to claim their lineage with the god Sri Krishna. But the Chamars' adoption of the same title in the late 1980s was in a different context, which entailed a different line of thinking. There is no mention of Sri Krishna or any invoking of the caste myths that usually link the Chamars with the Brahmins. In tune with the BSP's positive assertion of caste identities, the Dalits have adopted their respective caste titles in a secular fashion. See Gooptu (2001).
8. Interview with Ajay Kumar, Lucknow, 13 March 2004.
9. Interview with Surender Singh, a Chamar by caste and manager of a computer centre in Lucknow, 16 December 2004.
10. Interview with Raj Bhupal, Jhansi, 20 March 2004.
11. Interview with Pradeep Gautham, a BSP worker, Banda, 18 December 2004.
12. For Ambedkar's arguments against Caste System and his ideas on the annihilation of Caste, see Ambedkar, 1979 [1936].
13. Interview with Gaya Charan Dinakar at his residence in Baberu between 21–23 March 2004.
14. Ibid.
15. Author's interview with Ram Kishore Varma, 14 March 2004, Lucknow.
16. Ian Duncan (1999: 58, *passim* 8) has an interesting commentary to offer. According to him, D-S4 and BSP inherited the tradition of chanting slogans during demonstrations and processions from the Republican Party of India, the main vehicle for Ambedkarite politics in the 1960s. Some of the election campaigns of the RPI were contested in the court of Law, particularly the Allahabad High Court, as the campaigners were seeking to win votes on the basis of caste and religion. One such slogan was *Thakur, Brahman aur Lala/Kardo inka munha kala* (Thakur, Brahmin and Banias, make their faces black). Two things are clear from this statement. First, it was a statement to disgrace the Hindu upper castes. And second, it was a statement to show the Jatavs' complaining against the upper castes labelling them as black. This is emphasised by rhyming *Lala/kala*, where *kala* means black and *lala* is a vernacular representation of the Banias.
17. The total number of Lok Sabha seats prior to the bifurcation of UP into Uttaranchal (later on Uttarakhand) and Uttar Pradesh was 85; after the bifurcation, while the Uttarakhand got 5 Lok Sabha seats, the rest remained with the UP.

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