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Inclusive Dimension of Divisive Tools of Caste & Religion: Electoral Politics of Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

In the 1990s, a resource-distribution debate emerged in politics, instigated by the rise of the plebeians in structure, which was formalised by the Mandal Commission's recommendations. They demanded their share in national resources; however, this demand was further challenged by the simultaneous politics of the Hindutva movement, based on the upper-caste vote bank, and considered Hindus as one identity irrespective of their caste. This debate was more pronounced in Uttar Pradesh, manifesting as the SP/BSP, rooted in caste politics, and the BJP, rooted in Hindutva politics. However, since no party's social base was able to cross the assembly threshold of 50+1, in the FPTP system & diverse society of Uttar Pradesh, they started creating alliances, first a political alliance and then a social alliance. In this context, authors are examining the impact on electoral politics in Uttar Pradesh and find the inclusive nature of politics to be undermined by divisive tools of religion and caste. Both ideological groupings underwent a dramatic change when it came to electoral politics; exclusivity in ideology became inclusive in electoral politics. The study of politics for the Assembly elections and Lok Sabha elections proved that caste and religion alone are not responsible for divisive politics, societal diversity & fragmentation and the electoral system has a great role in deciding the divisiveness of caste and religion.

Keywords: Electoral politics; Caste & religious mobilisation; Assembly elections; Diversity; FPTP.

Introduction

The post-behavioural era has changed the party system, giving importance to the C5 notion – cleavage, catch-all, consociational, cartel, conservancy. (Choudhary, 2017). Among all, three are empirically visible in Uttar Pradesh's electoral system: cleavages in the form of caste and religion, catch-all & consociational in the form of social osmosis & sarvjan strategies used by political parties since the 1990s. However, it is not simply the outcome of the post-behavioural era but the rise of religious and social justice movements in a system where the first-past-the-post system is at work, which holds the ability to disproportionate the vote-seat convergence, making it necessary for parties to expand their social base.

Rise of the Backwards Castes & Religious Politics

Cleavage based mobilization in India traced back British separate electorate policy, which was declared illegal after independence; however, illegality benefitted privileged section, except for the S.C. reserved seats, lower castes had no guarantee to be nominated by the Congress. (Zerini, 2009) But the rise of the Backwards has its history, which starts from the platform of the national social conference, seen in the Poona Pact of 1932, after a conceptual clash between Gandhi and Ambedkar, finally Article 340 was put in the constitution, the outcome of which was the Kaka Kalekar report of 1953. However, its recommendations were not implemented; still, it launched a debate in the public through AIBCF. Indira Gandhi took steps, but did not stand for long. Gandhi, even after justifying the emergency for the backwards work against them, hence Indira Gandhi followed the same strategy of coalition of extremes. Socialists had shown their interest in low-caste upliftment; Lohia, Karpoori Thakur, and Mahamaya Prasad Sinha worked well in Bihar in 1967. In this upliftment process, Jat kisan politics of Chhotu Ram and Ch. Charan Singh, who unconsciously helped in Uttar Pradesh, organised the kisan movement in the form of AJGAR against Banyas and landlords. However, when Jats were not included in the Mandal criteria of OBC, Lok Dal took a step back. In such a situation, Mulayam Singh and Chandra Shekhar, like leaders, emerged. (Jaffrelot, 2003)

In the same period, the campaign of 'Hindu Awakening' started by the Sangh Parivar, although the rise of Hindutva was initially seen in contrast to the rise of plebeians. However, since the BJP could not ignore this social revolt, it started accommodating them. Although it was only in 2014 that Narendra Modi succeeded in changing its image (Jaffrelot, 2021). However, Association of religion with politics is not remain exclusive to BJP, since no exclusive identity been able to form government in Uttar Pradesh, hence all party started exploring new identity through social osmosis, as sangh parivar include caste, caste parties also include soft-hindutva, which can be seen in slogans; like "bali aur bajrang bali dono hamare", "hathi nhi ganesh hai brahma Vishnu Mahesh hain", "ram versus parsuram" etc. however one identity remain core to each, religion for BJP and caste for S.P & B.S.P. Congress faced a kind of threat as it was unable to gain any significant vote share and seats as it continued to play an umbrella strategy where the upper caste left for the BJP, the SC for BSP, Muslim for SP (Kanchan Chandra, 1997). Congress left behind because voters have non-congress alternatives and Congress picks residual votes, it was more pronounced at the state level, where the competition was multiple bipolar. (Yadav, 1999)

Failure of Politics of Exclusion: Coalition Phase in Uttar Pradesh (1990-1996)

As there is no such thing as 'Up-Ites', UP is divided into many regions culturally & electorally, which became the reason for the AJGAR strategy initially by Ch. Charan Singh with the Janata Party and later on by Mulayam Singh with the Janata Dal. Everything was going well, with 208 seats in 1989, but the Janata Dal split and the BJP got the benefit. (Rai, 1999). From here, the politics of exclusion start.

The Kalyan Singh government in the state were expelled due to the Babri Masjid demolition on 6 Dec. 1992, and new electoral politics came in 1993, signifying in the slogan of "Mile Mulayam Kanshi Ram Hawa Me Ud Gaye Jay Shri Ram". SP/BSP together got 176 seats (28% vote share) and formed the government. However, this coalition was political, and socially, there was rivalry between Backwards and Dalits, politically as well, both were contesting for the Muslim vote base. Finally, the coalition broke on the grounds of breaking each other's parties in June 1995 (Duncan, 1997). It came with violence at the Meerabai guest house by SP workers, and a decision not to coalition again. However, the decision against coalition with SP was not simply personal hatred of Mulayam-Mayawati but a calculated attempt to weaken SP, as each electoral base was the same; it was unequivocally accepted by Kanshi Ram. (Kanchan Chandra, 1997)

Transition to Inclusiveness: Coalition Phase in Uttar Pradesh (1996-2007)

This politics of exclusiveness took a transitory step towards inclusiveness from the 1996 elections. The 1996 elections saw dramatic politics when ethnic mobilisation was clearly visible, but there was no clear ethnic polarisation, as all parties were moderate. Congress continues its umbrella strategy; BSP too became a 'catch-all party' and used two cards- anti-goondaism & anticomunalism to oppose SP & BJP. BJP want to be seen as a responsible party nationally, hence it uses soft Hindutva with development. However, all parties here & there use religion and caste. (Kanchan Chandra, 1997). However, this shift towards inclusiveness was not sufficient to attract all ethnic communities towards a single political party; consequently, no party succeeded in forming a government, and the hung assembly came. Mayawati formed a government in March 1997 with a policy of power sharing with the BJP; however, the BSP withdrew support later over the issue of anti-Dalit and pro-communal policies. Still, the BJP was successful in continuing till 2002 with a fraction of the BSP & Congress.

In the 2002 election, caste-based parties clearly took a transitory step, by making educated silence over Hindutva-centric arguments-terrorism, mandir, etc., and raising the development issue along with social justice. (Verma A. K., 2002). It provides them with electoral gains, with 143 going to the SP & 98 to the BSP.

Ethnic politics & de-ideologization have created a hung assembly, which was the outcome of fragmentation, lack of vision for economic-development policies, ethnic based populism (Yadavization & Dalitization of posts for short-term electoral gain), criminalisation and corruption. (Pai, 2002).

Inclusiveness of Caste-Center Parties- Sarvjan Alliance in electoral politics (2007-2017)

The 2007 event surprised the electoral politics as Mayawati Sarvjan Alliance (208 seats/30.43% share-gain of 108 seats/7.31% share), which was started by Nasimuddin Siddiqui in the 1990s and later softly accepted by Kanshi Ram in 1996(sending Jayant Malhotra, H.Dixit & Ram Upadhyay to Rajya Sabha), worked against expectations. BSP consolidate every section through Bhaichara committees, Brahmin-Jodo Sammelan, Atma-Samman speeches, recognising upper caste highness in society for their own political highness, panna pramukhs, & mission Muslims, etc. are examples. Brahmin, tired of BJP (1999 Virat Brahmin Mahasammelan in Sitapur recognised that BJP is becoming a backwards-favours party) and SP, who were also following the sarvjan strategy through Parsuram Jayanti & 'Bahujan-Mahajan Bhai Bhai' with a lighter version, hence they preferred BSP. This strategy continues during minister & cabinet selection and policy making. (Pai & Kumar, 2023).

However, under pressure from the core Jatav community, it returned to the Dalit agenda again, spending on Dalit icons & policies and asserting private sector reservation, and its narcissistic behaviour. Despite the failure to consolidate this social alliance, it continued up to 2012.

In 2012, SP came to power, bringing back traditional voters with the Sarvjan policy of SP Azam Khan, which brought back to unite left-out communities. (Mirza Asmer Beg, 2014). BSP was fighting this election to save its core, lost 126 seats/4.5% share (won 15/85 reserved seats). Launched in 1999, Akhilesh Yadav headed this campaign to attract youth and reform the party. He started the strategy of B-Y-M(Brahmins-Yadav-Muslims) to win the election, initially starting from Rohilkhand to attract Muslims, in which he succeeded in defeating Congress Rahul Gandhi over the issue of quota, promising to push the Rangnath Mishra commission recommendation against Rahul Gandhi's 4.5% share in 27% OBC reservation, further Yadavs were united through local leadership. Brahmin youth were targeted, since older people had the Ayodhya incident in mind and were loyal to the BJP. However, they also knew that only SP can defeat BSP, not BJP. (Ramaseshan, 2012). After BSP's inclusive use of divisive tools, SP learned to use them and gain electorally in the 2012 elections.

Rise of Plebianized Hindutva- Sangh's Social Alliance (2017-2022)

For the first time, SP/BSP were facing to deal with Muslims and Dalits in the Muzaffarnagar riots 2013, where Dalits hugely participated and showed sympathy for affected Hindus, BJP won 71 seats/42.3% share(all sections had voted here, it seems like a wave) with subaltern face Narendra Modi. BJP had two aims in the election: defeat caste parties and bring SC, ST, and OBC into the saffron fold (Sudha Pai, 2023).

Combined vote share of SP-BSP-Congress in 2014 was 49.6%, but the 1995 incident prevented BSP to join hand with SP; finally, the Congress-SP coalition happened unconsciously & seat-sharing arrangement of 298/105 happened. Congress failed with 7 seats (6.25% share) & SP with 47(21.8% share), as it was a non-coherent alliance (Adman Farooqui, 2017). BSP fought the 2017 election with Dalit-Muslim consolidation in the context of rising atrocities against Dalits and Muslims. Despite all these efforts, BSP obtained only 19(80 in 2012) seats & 22.2% share. The BSP organisation continuously declined. BJP's alliance won 325 seats and the BJP 312. Most backward classes voted wholeheartedly for the BJP in 2014 & 2017, which was the base of SP & RLD naturally, by being the party of social justice.

The credit goes to the strategy to include EBC's & Mahadalits in the development process. Rajnath Singh, in 2001, with the help of Hukum Singh, divided SC into 2 sections, Jatav and non-Jatav, with 10% and 11% reservation and OBCs into 3 sections: backward, more backward (8 castes with 9%), and most backwards (70 castes with 14%). It was a clear consolidation of non-Yadav OBC's (31% of Uttar Pradesh) against Yadav-dominated SPs so that they could vote with the 19% upper-caste vote bank. (Vignesh Karthik KR, 2019). This strategy of consolidation by division continues in the 2018 Rohini commission. The politics of consolidation of backwards within backwards, includes Muslims too, 8% upper caste Muslims, 16% Ashrafs-Pasmanda, of the total voted for the BJP. It was seen as 3rd democratic upsurge in Uttar Pradesh as caste identities were weakened & politicoeconomic empowerment came to the centre for all parties through inclusive politics, also giving rise to small & marginal parties belonging to caste groups, and interestingly, Muslims supported this trend. (Verma A. K., 2016). However, this trend was not new but part of social osmosis and osmotic pressure, where every party loses and gains each other's vote base to cross the constitutional threshold of assembly; hence, identity politics was not weakened but changed its character, making it inclusive rather than exclusive. BJP started giving importance to non-Yadav OBC's, who have importance in all political parties, and each party is trying to inculcate its leadership (Kumar, 2022). Since caste-based parties were centred around one caste leadership, BSP around Jatavs & SP around Yadavs, the BJP succeeded in consolidating them.

Bipolar election of 2022 won by BJP with 255 seats/41.29% (312/39.67 in 2017), it increased in terms of vote share, if not the seats. Yogendra Yadav highlights factors for such winning, social coalition (Upper caste-non-Yadav-Jatav OBC-SC), political connection of welfare scheme, huge communication machine of Sangh Parivar was given responsibility. (Yogendra Yadav, 2022). Communal politics of 80/20 were used, but remained restricted in speeches, which were overcome by local leaders. Rahul Verma, too, adds that lower OBC's and SCs are incorporated by the BJP at the district & constituency level, which retains the Hindutva ideology along with inclusiveness. (Verma R., 2022). In this way, the BJP, along with other factors, mobilised voters using identity; however, it was not exclusive in character but inclusive, which was excluded by caste-centred parties, giving representation to non-represented SCs, OBCs & Muslims.

Conclusion

The evolution of Uttar Pradesh's party system reflects a dynamic interplay between deep-rooted social cleavages, primarily caste and religion and strategic adaptations driven by the first-past-the-post electoral framework. What began as exclusionary identity politics in the early 1990s, exemplified by the AJGAR coalition and the short-lived SP-BSP alliance, gradually transitioned toward inclusiveness due to the imperatives of vote-seat disproportion and the absence of a majority ethnic group capable of single-handedly forming governments.

This shift manifested in "social osmosis," where parties broadened their bases through catch-all strategies. The BSP's sarvjan hit under Mayawati in 2007 ingeniously incorporated Brahmins and other sections via bhaichara committees, while the SP countered with its own versions, targeting Brahmin youth and consolidating Muslim-Yadav alliances under Akhilesh Yadav in 2012. Simultaneously, the BJP transformed its upper-caste Hindutva image into a plebeianized version, accommodating non-Yadav OBCs, non-Jatav Dalits, and even Pasmanda Muslims through subcategorisation policies, welfare schemes, and organisational expansion. This culminated in the BJP's dominant victories in 2017 and 2022, forging a broad coalition of upper castes, lower OBCs, and segments of SCs under an inclusive Hindutva umbrella.

This transition from exclusionary politics to inclusionary politics shows that alone, caste and religion politics could not produce the exclusionary nature; the presence of the electoral system & nature of diversity in the constituency play a significant role. The diversity of Uttar Pradesh motivates all political parties to consolidate the unconsolidated communities to cross the threshold necessary to win the constituency.

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