



# Small books, big tasks: Democracy, Development and Dalit assertion in Uttar Pradesh

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## INTRODUCTION

On 11<sup>th</sup> May, 2007 Bahujan Samaj Party (henceforth BSP) emerged as a single majority party in the Uttar Pradesh (henceforth UP) state assembly elections. A party formed as recently as 1984 and climbing up the status of a majority party so quickly deserves attention. One is compelled to investigate the changing political terrain of UP society and politics which led to this upsurge of BSP. It is here that I find myself asking questions about the nature of Dalit politics and society in UP with respect to democracy and development. This paper is divided into five parts. In the first part, I describe the growing popularity of the BSP, the second part then looks at history of the growth of awareness among Dalits in UP, in the third part, I introduce the booklets being circulated among Dalits, their buyers, sellers, writers and publishers. The fourth section deals with the messages, histories and myths in the booklets. The formation of a politicised section of Dalits and its successful assertion behind BSP forms the substance of the fifth section of the paper. The paper concludes by giving few theoretical implications for revisiting the presuppositions underlying democracy and development as envisaged in modern western political thought which we can draw upon from the empirical investigation carried on in the paper.

## 1. GROWTH OF BAHUJAN SAMAJ PARTY

The term *bahujan* means majority of the people. The BSP ideology at the simplest level is, therefore, to devolve power to that section of society which faces discrimination and is poor. This ‘majority’ or Bahujan comprises of SCs, Muslims, Hindu OBCs, STs and women; at least this is the aim of the BSP to bring all these sections of society under its fold. BSP believes that these sections need proper political representation in both legislature and executive. For BSP the mainstream parties, notably Indian National Congress (henceforth INC or Congress) and Bharatiya Janta Party (henceforth BJP), have treated lower castes as mere vote banks through patronage system (Brass, 1965). These big parties won elections using lower caste votes but drew their leaders from upper castes and thus, in turn, cater to Hindu upper caste interests. Though, as an exception, there have been a few SC legislators in the Congress but they could only serve the hegemony of upper caste Congressmen (Ram, 1982). BSP intends to turn the table in favour of the majority for the larger goal of establishing a just social order.

Most studies on Dalit assertion in UP focus on the rise of BSP (Pai, 2002). Some scholars have explored BSP as a political party and the kind of choices it has made to win seats (Guha, 2013). Such works do not ask questions such as “how” and “why” people started accepting the BSP as a better alternative than other parties in UP. The choice of a political party to study Dalit movement is quite justified but leaves the room for further enquiry into the social

changes happening at the grassroots. Few scholars have tried to understand the sociology of Dalit assertion in UP like Owen M Lynch (1969), Badri Narayan (2011) and Vivek Kumar (2001). Nicolas Jaoul (2007) delves into the question of All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (henceforth BAMCEF) and Dalit Panthers as important contributors to and indicators of the Dalit awakening in UP. Suryakant Waghmore (2013) explores how Dalit movement, BSP politics and NGOs headed by Buddhists all help each other in carrying forward the message of BR Ambedkar. BSP can be looked upon as the most concrete form of Dalit assertion in UP.

### Uttar Pradesh Vidhan Sabha (Lower House)

Vidhan Term	Sabha	UP elections	Seats contested	Seats won	% of votes	% of votes in contested
10 <sup>th</sup>		1989	372	13	9.41	10.72
11 <sup>th</sup>		1991	386	12	9.44	10.26
12 <sup>th</sup>		1993	164	67	11.12	28.53
13 <sup>th</sup>		1996	296	67	19.64	27.73
14 <sup>th</sup>		2002	401	98	23.06	23.19
15 <sup>th</sup>		2007	403	206	30.43	30.43
16 <sup>th</sup>		2012	403	80	25.91	25.95

**Source:** Statistical reports on General Election, 1989-2012 to the Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh. Election Commission of India.

Looking at the table above, we see that the BSP has grown steadily from 10<sup>th</sup> Vidhan Sabha in 1989 till 15<sup>th</sup> Vidhan Sabha in 2007. The increasing influence of BSP can be felt in both columns, seats won and the percentage of votes. It is only in last two Vidhan Sabha elections (2012, 2017) that we see a fall in both the factors– seats won and percentage of votes. It is here that my paper intends to ask a simple question– why and how lower caste people started to rally behind the banner of BSP in the time period covered? The paper is a small attempt to answer this broad question by using the concept of booklets. I have drawn largely upon various works by Badri Narayan (2006).

## 2. HISTORY OF THE EMERGENCE OF DALIT PUBLIC

The spread of education right from the colonial times made the ground fertile for the emergence of educated Dalits and then slowly a small middle class. Education, we know, is not only about the ability to read and write but is also about changing the world view of the persons. The seeds of change were sown in British times itself. In case of UP, apart from the colonial intervention in the realm of education, the work by Arya Samaj was quite influential. Arya Samaj allowed lower caste children to get education in its school. The counter-effects of this soon happened. Some of the Dalits who got educated in Arya Samaj tradition either distanced themselves from it or revolted against the tradition. Most prominent names are those of Swami Achchutanand (Gooptu, 2001) and Mangoo Ram (Juergensmeyer, 1982) who made significant contribution to the improvement of the Dalits.

The contributions to Dalit assertion was also a side-effect of education by both Muslim and Christian organisations. The implementation of Common Code in 1818 by the British government made education a state responsibility and furthered the cause of education of Dalits. The shot in the arm was the growth in the number of young Ambedkarites who looked upon modern education as a tool for social justice and Dalit empowerment. Ambedkar libraries and trusts were formed across India. Dalit intellectuals in Allahabad, Kanpur, Agra and Lucknow (Khare, 1984) assert that moving to cities, mainly in the cantonment areas, have helped Dalits to move out of the clutches of brutal caste based practices in rural areas. We see that these Dalit intellectuals were influenced by a number of ideologies. For example some were influenced by Arya Samaj, some by BR Ambedkar and some others by Saint Ravidas.

## 3. WHAT ARE THOSE BOOKLETS?

In a village Shahabpur, near Allahabad, the sight of men reading and discussing booklets is common. In fact, this is common in many villages in UP. People usually read from these booklets during the day and discuss about what they have read during evening tea. Tea stalls often become the place where such congregation happens. Literate people often sit and discuss the stories which they have read while those who cannot read sit with them and listen. Many times this happens at an open space outside homes, and the stories spread from a handful of villagers to many ears and minds. Due to the spread of literacy in general, one finds educated youths actively participating in such discussions. They might not be employed but are politically aware and motivated. They participate, in whatever ways they can, in the Gram Panchayat, Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha elections. They work for BSP and attend its rallies. They are the spirit behind the Dalit movement at the grassroots level and booklets are their chief source of information.

What made these booklets so effective a tool for the mobilisation of Dalits? One reason is their low cost. They cost anywhere between Re. 1 and Rs. 25 and have cheap quality of paper and print. They are much less eye-catching as compared to any publication by established Hindi publishing houses. The target audience of such booklets is the poor section of Dalits. They are sold mainly during those events which are frequented by the target population like Dalit political meetings, fairs and awareness forums. They are sold during BSP rallies in cities like Lucknow, Kanpur and Allahabad in makeshift stalls. Some even buy books in bulk and sell them across villages and small towns in the area where they live. Such is the zeal for the awakening of the Dalit masses. Among them, one such person is Sangam Lal Vidrohi.

Sangam Lal Vidrohi established the Dr Ambedkar Sahitya Kala Kendra (Dr Ambedkar Literature and Art Centre) in Varanasi. He has been distributing these booklets for the last thirty-five years while carrying them on his bicycle. He sells the books door to door to his Dalit readers. After some days, he visits the homes of those who had bought the books to discuss them. He finds that villagers mostly prefer small booklets. Demands suddenly started to rise quickly from 1990 and he had to set up book stalls during Ambedkar Jayanti and other such occasions. He has set up his own publishing unit for publishing books which he thinks might be of interest and raises the consciousness of the community. History is a matter which concerned him a lot. It helps to shift the focus from higher castes' history to lower castes. He claims that even Savarnas (upper caste Hindus) buy books from him so that they can rectify their past deeds of oppressing Dalits. The change brought about by these booklets is quite visible for him.

The places of selling these booklets, one would not believe, are marriage ceremonies and even cremation grounds. The zeal for many activists is such that they set up marquee (*pandal*) during those occasions and people buy them from bookstalls. But it is the birth anniversary of BR Ambedkar which pulls a big crowd of Dalits across UP. No denying that life sketches, histories of the community, BSP songs and Ambedkar songs are sure sellers even at such places.

Many people want to know about the life and struggles of BR Ambedkar and hence the demand for the biographies of Ambedkar is very much high. Other booklets in demand are based on the teachings of Buddha, history of the Dalit community, folklores, biographies of Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule along with Kanshi Ram and Mayawati. While Dalit autobiographies are now hot cakes in academia they are not much preferred by villagers. People usually avoid buying books which cost more than Rs10. Women buy books but prefer choirs (*kirtans*) on Babasaheb. We see that these booklets have coarse pages and rough outlook. Indeed Dalit women do not even check the price of thick and glossy booklets. These booklets are basic, modest, can be folded and put either in the pockets or in a corner of a small room. We see a peculiar difference between preferences of middle class and those of Dalit villagers. Not only that, the difference is more striking when it comes to see the popularity of sale of booklets.

#### a. WHO READS THEM?

It is during such big gatherings that we see people from various sections of the society rubbing shoulders with one another. The customers of the booklets include civil servants and officers, engineers, doctors, students and even BSP leaders and ministers. Such booklets have a large readership across various sections of Dalit society. These booklets are distributed in urban areas of UP and in few other states. Their sales having increased during the past few years, these booklets are now being sold by those publishing houses also which are not directly working for Dalit empowerment. Even people as poor as rickshaw pullers buy these booklets. They keep them safely under the passenger seats of their rickshaws. Such is the influence of these booklets that even Mayawati has to take their help. She has grown up reading the booklets and, for a long time, used to read them for her speeches.

#### b. WHO WRITES THEM?

The writers of the booklets are Dalit activists. Many times they write the purpose behind writing the booklets in the introduction chapter. The authors and publishers of these booklets are found in the narrow lanes of towns and cities. The publishers, writers and the booklets all have the element of humble beginnings. While some writers are active members of BSP politics, rest are supporters and sympathisers of BSP. Needless to say, all are committed to the idea of Dalit empowerment by raising awareness among the Dalits about their history, present and future. They

are that minuscule group of Dalits who are educated middle class and have the zeal to improve the conditions of their fellow Dalits. These writers are activists, civil servants, merchants, teachers, doctors or any other middle class persons who are keeping the flame of Dalit struggle alive through hard work and sincerity.

#### 4. WHAT DO BOOKLETS WHISPER?

As has been mentioned earlier the booklets contain biographies, folk songs, plays, BSP's own statements, and some other themes. Most of them are on history: history of Dalits, history of lowered castes, history of India, of oppression, and of various caste heroes and heroines. A brief look at the titles of the books shows that most are intended towards making the Dalits aware of their present abysmal conditions and their glorious past. It is not that history of lower castes was not written earlier, but in the booklets we see the history written by the Dalits themselves. While many scholars use the class analysis of Indian society, these booklets posit caste analysis. The question of the past remained an important aspect of the Dalit booklets.

Debates around the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations pushed Dalits into looking back at their pasts more seriously in an organised way. The past was exhumed to bring to the fore the injustices done historically by Hinduism. The claim on past was to help in understanding the present and creating a better future. Dalits project a counter narrative to the dominant mode of scriptures like the Vedas, Puranas, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Thus one finds a growing need for exploring local heroes to counter dominant myths of Brahmanism. These attempts are not mere move to the past but an attempt to reconstruct the past on the basis of challenges posed by the present. The challenge is that Dalits have had little space and now they desire that space. Hence a desire for self-identity is evident.

One of the claims of this popular history is that Dalit personalities have never been given due recognition in the pages of formal history. In the booklet *Buddh ke Baad* (1995) we find the author criticizing Brahmanism/Hinduism as the reason behind distortion of history. The book asks Dalits to write their own history: *Today when (ati) shudra are being educated, they should make attempts to know, understand, and write a history of their own.* The authors of these booklets believe that Brahmans, who have written most of the Indian history have not written honestly about the rich and glorious past of the Dalits. Opposition to Vedas, Puranas, Mahabharata and Ramayana is important as these discourses are dominant in UP society. Upper caste Hindus draw a lot from the tradition of Brahmanism contained in those scriptures to form the image of Dalits. There is a desire among the Dalit writers to have their own identity and not an identity given by Arya Samajists or Gandhians or even Marxists. By identity they mean 'self identity': discovering one's identity should be the task by oneself, not others. Taking few examples of contesting histories, myths and memories would help to clarify the point.

The Ramayana is criticized by mentioning Shambuk and the Mahabharata is criticized by mentioning Eklavya. They make the point that such oppression in the past, explains the present state of wretchedness of Dalits. The dominant Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas is looked upon as false and the Ramayana by Balmiki is seen as authentic. Dalits assert that it was Ravana who was the actual hero, not Ram. But since he lost the battle, the winners wrote history in their favour. Dalits believe that they are non-Aryans and had a great civilisation starting from Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. They are the original Indians who believed in communal harmony and social equality, while the Aryan civilization had opposite values. After the non-Aryans were uprooted, a gradual and violent shift in

Indian society happened. They have memory of Sita, as well. Their Sita is not the Sita as present in the dominant narrative. They project Ravana as a handsome man and Sita fell in love with him.

Some booklets have used the memory of struggle against the British and their oppression. They are in the form of poetry and recited by people. These booklets have pictures. These are preserved in the local collective memory of local people and have not yet been recorded in formal history books but present only in the small booklets. Like the Tanda Kisan Andolan (peasant movement) in Awadh can be found only in the local folk memory. It is here that we see that identity formation is also linked with the issue of public memory (Halbwach, 1992). Memory provides a fertile soil for the formation of certain identity and its ever changing nature (Nora, 1989). The history present in the memory of people is utilized by intellectuals and politicians to give the community a particular form and direction.

## 5. BSP, BOOKLETS AND THE MAKING OF DALIT

Having smelt the growing popularity of booklets, BSP quickly took steps to cash in on the situation. BSP asked some Dalit intellectual class to make a repertoire of Dalit literature. This would include histories of various castes, biographies of various caste heroes, collection of myths, local histories and reinterpretation of Indian history. The structure of this research group acts on three levels— State, *mandals* and districts. Meetings are conducted where various leaders of respective castes speak of their glorious histories. Thus various stories are collected and then documented. The research unit then forwards the documented histories in booklet forms to the BSP members. They read those histories with interest and curiosity. Also discussed in these meetings are those personalities which have toiled hard for lowered castes like Phule, Shahuji Maharaj, Periyar, Narayan Guru, and Ambedkar. From the past few years a shift can be seen as new icons like Balmiki, Kabir, Ravidas, Jhalkaribai, and Avanti Bai have also entered into the memory. These icons are narrated in the context of the present struggles. Dalits are looking back at their past so that they can move forward to their future.

Once BSP has taken note of those, it starts to use those local icons in its speeches and events. One finds Kanshi Ram mentioning Dalit heroes like Ravidas, Balmiki, Shambuk, Eklavya, and Jhalkaribai. During her tenure as the Chief Minister of UP in 1996, Mayawati built and named many places and buildings in the memory of these folk heroes: Eklavya stadium in Agra, Ambedkar park in Lucknow, and new districts such as Gautam Buddha Nagar, and Sant Ravidas Nagar are some prominent examples. BSP has used the folklores already existing among the Dalits for its own electoral gain. Thus we see that folklores present in a fluid state are given concrete form in the shape of books which flow back to common people. This process, as mentioned earlier, is most tangible in the form of the rise of BSP. This nowhere implies that BSP is the sole criterion for understanding Dalit assertion in UP. Publication of booklets, rise of BSP and growing Dalit assertiveness due to changing political economy all happened together.

The stories, histories and myths present in the booklets are not in a frozen manner. We see that the stories are coming from the folk history and going back to people. In between there is the process of politicization as the contents of the booklets serve a political purpose. The purpose is to make Dalits aware of the brutal history which they have undergone, that they are people of this land, that their present misfortune can be alleviated if they can envision a future where they are actors not the passive subjects of caste based practices. This formation of a Dalit public is a major accomplishment of the Dalit movement in UP (Narayan, 2011). It would be an exaggeration to claim that it all was achieved solely by the circulation of booklets. A number of other factors, as briefly mentioned

above, have played important roles. The paper, however, just focuses on an entity which was tangible and involved ethnography of things possible.

## DEMOCRACY, DEVELOPMENT AND DALIT ASSERTION

We thus see that in case of the Dalit assertion in UP, booklets have played an important role. By focusing on booklets and following its trajectory I have tried to explore few important facets of the Dalit assertion. A long stay in the field provides the researchers with the eye to follow important strands in any social situation. The study started with a small village and followed the path wherever the booklets went. By following booklets, I was unfolding the path which Dalit movement in UP has taken. Hence, the nearby villages and important cities were covered in the process since a multi-sited ethnography helps us study a phenomenon more deeply (Marcus, 1995). Wherever the booklet went, it became my field site, to borrow a term from Eva Maria Hardtmann (2009).

Another point, which I have tried to put forward, is the role of knowledge and the transformation it brings. We have seen how several myths or histories taken from the folk tradition and given a book form started to influence people. The folk tradition was fractured and unevenly shared by people who knew it as their history, but realised it as a tool for their empowerment only through the intervention of activists, intellectuals and leaders. Thus the presence of myths among the common people could not produce a Dalit public till it was given a book form and used by leaders to propagate the idea of Dalit assertion. It is here that we see that 'knowledge' is always in the making and has transformative effects on the people when backed by authority.

Lastly, the action of BSP and other forms of Dalit movement is not merely for upward mobility but equally for bring in civility. Dalit movement is against Sanskritisation and hence eating of both beef and pork is cherished. It also accepts women choosing their own husbands across castes and religions. Accepting non-Hindu religions like Buddhism, Christianity and Sikhism is preferred. Thus, Dalit movement is not merely anti caste, it is equally in favour of multi-religious society. Pluralism is a value in Dalit movement as/like it is in any functioning democracy. We see that Dalit movement is demanding substantive form of democracy above formal democracy. It is a demand to make India move ahead in time, a developed India. These are whispers made by those booklets.

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