

The Dalit-Bahujan finally roars

A new anti-caste spectrum is emerging. And that promises to put social justice on the centre stage while signalling that BJP is not an alternative.

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[K. Kalyani](#)



Chandrashekhar Azad “Ravan” arrives in Parliament to complete registration as a newly elected MP of the 18th Lok Sabha, in New Delhi on June 7. | Photo Credit: ARUN SHARMA/PTI

The results of the Lok Sabha election reflect a paradigmatic shift as they reveal the caste churning that has happened on the Indian political landscape. Not only have the results unveiled new caste equations and alignments of the SC/ST/OBC/EBC/minorities, they are also significant in terms of arithmetic realignments and the emergence of new Dalit-Bahujan faces in the political spectrum. One thing is clear: this election, more than any other, has been about the *janta* (public) speaking out for their constitutional rights, rejecting the BJP’s narrative of Narendra Modi as *mahamanav* (being invincible). It has restored faith in democracy and reiterated that constitutionality can, and will, prevail.

It is interesting that this election witnessed a substantial rejection of the BJP in the Hindi belt. In the 131 reserved seats (Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), the BJP’s number has been reduced to 55 seats from the 77 it held. Even in unreserved seats, the BJP’s vote percentage has reduced substantially, especially among SC voters, followed by OBC voters and Muslims. A substantive number of Dalit-Bahujan voters have clearly signalled that the BJP is not an alternative for them.

Reasons for anger

The Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi (DBA) communities are an aspirational people who have dreams and a desire to be part of the state both in terms of opportunities and inclusive policies. The rampant failure of the government to hold fair examinations or provide job opportunities has affected the DBA communities the most. The widespread anger of the Dalit-Bahujan youth against the existing regime and their will to search for an alternative have clearly affected the BJP vote bank.

The shift away from the BJP, especially by Dalits, was also because they felt the Constitution was endangered. For the DBA communities, the Constitution holds a larger-than-life meaning. It ensures them the right to dignified living and guarantees them representation. Within the Dalit-Bahujan culture, the image of Babasaheb Ambedkar holding the Constitution in his hand is part of the everydayness of the Dalit-Bahujan life-world. The possibility suggested by the opposition of “*Samvidhan khatre mein hai* [The Constitution is in danger]” was not acceptable to the Dalit-Bahujan communities, who revere the Constitution as almost equivalent to Babasaheb Ambedkar.

The very narrative of the BJP’s “*Abki baar 400 paar*” did not go down well with Dalit-Bahujan communities. There was fear that such a brute majority would create a potential threat to the Constitution itself. Any amendments made to the Constitution without any checks and balances from a strong opposition would have clearly taken forward the BJP’s Hindutva agenda, which is in essence antithetical to the spirit of the Constitution. And without constitutional guarantees, the social position of Dalit-Bahujan communities stands to suffer drastically.

The shift of BSP voters

This election also marks a massive shift of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) vote base to the INDIA bloc. Given the continuing violence against Dalit-Bahujans, the perpetual silence of the BSP was no longer acceptable to the communities. Furthermore, BSP leader Mayawati’s sudden dismissal of the emerging youth leader Akash Anand, and the resignation of R.S. Praveen Kumar, created discomfort among the BSP’s core voters. It is significant to mention that Praveen Kumar, a former bureaucrat, has massive appeal among Dalit-Bahujan communities, and his resignation led to major vote share losses for the BSP. In this election, the BSP contested 488 seats and failed to win even one. Even its vote percentage in Uttar Pradesh fell from 19.42 per cent in 2019 to 9.39 per cent in 2024. The huge shrinkage in vote share clearly reflects Mayawati’s inability to contain even her core voters within the party.

The question one needs to investigate is whether the shrinkage of BSP politics has diminished Kanshi Ram’s Bahujan ideology. The answer is a firm No. Instead, a new wine is being filled in the old bottle. The Dalit-Bahujan-minorities votes shifting to the Samajwadi Party (SP) shows that anti-caste sentiments remain intact, but there is a

search for a new alternative that can uphold the concerns of the non-privileged communities. The impact of Akhilesh Yadav’s “Pichhda Dalit Alpsankhyak” (PDA) formula was magical. It shifted the narrative from TINA (there is no alternative) to Bahujan identity being relevant and a game-changer. Because of the BSP’s nonchalant and dubious posturing, even its core workers felt the need to stand united with the PDA plank.

In its current form, the BSP needs to work in an alliance to ensure its comeback. The party still has a dedicated cadre, which if channelled through the INDIA bloc, can be a game-changer. Interestingly, wherever the Congress-SP combine in Uttar Pradesh lost, it was because the core BSP cadre had failed to switch, and this added significantly to the advantage of the BJP.



Statue of B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Constitution, stands tall against a sun set in Hyderabad on May 29, 2024. | Photo Credit: MAHESH KUMAR A. /AP

Writing a new history

The massive win registered by Chandrashekhar Azad “Ravan” from Nagina is writing a new history in the Dalit-Bahujan political space. From leading the Bhim Army to becoming an MP, his rise clearly reiterates Kanshi Ram’s slogan “*Jo Bahujan ki baat karega, woh Dilli par raj karega* [those who stand for the Bahujan will rule Delhi]”. If there was anyone who stood up against Dalit atrocities on the ground, it was the Bhim Army under the leadership of Chandrashekhar. From Hathras to Jalore, he spoke out against the atrocities committed against Dalits. His support also came from the OBC factions because of his vocal stand for OBC reservation in Madhya Pradesh. There was

tremendous support for him from the minority communities who have witnessed horrific violence, particularly in Rajasthan. The idea of Bahujan, that is, the coming together of Dalit-Bahujan-minorities, has truly reshaped itself in the rise of this new leader.

While Chandrashekhar's Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) is yet to grow at an organisational level, it is heartening to see that the political vacuum that the BSP's loss created has now found a new face and a new political party. Even the SP and the Congress, which refused to include Chandrashekhar's party in the mahagathbandhan (grand alliance), will have to rethink their strategy and take emerging Dalit leaders like Chandrashekhar seriously instead of being arrogant and dismissive, as was seen in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election of 2022.

New hope in times of coalition politics

Modi 3.0 has come with new political bargains and the question of (anti)caste has been recentred. It will be interesting to see how in this freshly minted political landscape the big allies like the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), and the Telugu Desam Party play up their demands. While in Bihar, Nitish Kumar and the Rashtriya Janata Dal successfully pushed for the caste census, it will be interesting to see if the JD(U) is able to push Modi 3.0 towards a nationwide caste census.

Above all, the results of this election reflected a victory over panic, fear, and the misplaced agendas of the BJP. If Modi 3.0 wants to sail through, it cannot be on the same parameters of the past 10 years. Instead, Modi 3.0 will have to renegotiate its existence through the frameworks of a democratic polity and social justice.

Kanshi Ram imagined Bahujan politics as the rule of the numerical majority that has been historically minoritised. The results of this election are unique for how they have brought Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi-minorities together in a new political hope of social justice.

From Akhilesh's PDA to Tejashwi Yadav's M-Y-BAAP, the clear indicators are that without inclusivity, talk of any political mileage is misplaced. This election has shown a red flag to personality cults and reformulated the political edge around ideas of social justice and inclusivity of minoritised identities.

K. Kalyani is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Azim Premji University, Bangalore. The content and opinions expressed are that of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by/ do not necessarily reflect the views of Azim Premji University”

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