

Elections and Ethnic Politics in India
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By Vivek Prahladan

Are parties converging in Uttar Pradesh?

In the next few days, polling is to begin in Uttar Pradesh, the state where coalition politics first began with the rise of Chaudhari Charan Singh in the 1960s, who went on to become the fifth Prime Minister of India. Uttar Pradesh has provided India with eight Prime Ministers. It also saw the emergence of ethnic politics and challenged the secular notion of the inclusive nationalism of Congress.

Politics in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state with more than 200 million people, has always had a disproportionate impact on the collective understanding of the country's politics. However, the 2012 assembly elections are poised to become the most significant in India's post-reform period. That is because the contest between regional parties such as Samajwadi Parti and Bahujan Samaj and national ones such as INC-Congress and Bhartiya Janata Party till now have been restricted to ethnic politics on one hand and the politics of development on the other. Now they appear to be moving into each other's space.

The regional parties might be characterized as campaigning on the politics of 'belonging' -- identity -- and national ones on the politics of 'belongings' -- aspiration towards a universal welfare state. These two genres of political practice are increasingly getting conflated within the contest between the regional parties and the nationalist ones. The regional parties are rationalizing their approach to ethnic politics and the national ones are simultaneously rationalizing their economic agenda to include appeals to specific ethnic groups.

Is this another first for Uttar Pradesh as it witnesses a possible paradigm shift in the way politics is practiced in India?

In the emerging electoral narratives, the idea of reservations - quotas and affirmative action as well as the parties' approach to caste constituencies -- has become the subject of experimental interpretation within the framework of the party manifestos and election campaigning. As a newcomer to the quota debate, Congress has had to overcome its ideological content inhibitions of ethnic constructs such as caste and community and to accept the principle of reservation for minorities.

Ever since the committee appointed by Manmohan Singh in 2005 and headed by former Chief Justice Rajinder Sachar to report on the socioeconomic and educational status of India's Muslims delivered its findings, Congress has been tentatively leaning in favor of reservations for minorities as evidenced by such reservation in the Lokpal, or citizens' ombudsman bill and in its Uttar Pradesh election campaigns.

The ethnically-challenged nationalist parties are diversifying their approach to include explicit appeals to particular castes and communities within the logic of their economic programs. Initiatives such as the pending food security bill and the weavers' economic package are the freights which deliver the commitment of the Indian National Congress to an inclusive welfare state. Aspiring to break into the constituencies of the BSP and SP,

the BJP has assumed a posture of lateral split between its nationalist content and its intent to establish regional and ethnic authenticity reconciled in its vision document as a 'new Swadeshi paradigm of development.'

The document is discreetly titled '*Hamare Sapnon Ka Uttar Pradesh*' (Uttar Pradesh of Our Dreams) a deliberate ideological vagueness that allows the BJP to woo OBC (literally, "other backward classes") voters while at the same time avoiding being explicit on caste.

In Uttar Pradesh, a prominent BSP slogan for campaigning has been *jiski jitani bhagedari, uski utani hissedari* (share according to participation). BSP's offer to extend reservations to upper castes cannot be delinked from their cultural projects such as the Dalit Prerna Sthal with strong Buddhist symbolisms attached to such projects. These projects are meant to secure an emotional identity for Dalits that goes beyond caste and seeks to re-interpret this identity in terms of Buddhist cultural community. A cultural community is more like an ideological community rather than a religious community with explicit Buddhist practices.

Extending quotas to upper castes would mean, for BSP, reservations for lower castes would cease to be the pre-eminent political framework for its ideology of caste. BSP is asking a new question from its core constituency; moving away from the old question of 'What do you want?' to 'What do you want to be?'

By offering quotas to the prospective constituency of the poor among the upper caste voters, Chief Minister Mayawati, who represents the state's poorest caste, the Dalits, is simultaneously posing an inverse question to them, where reservations is the answer to the question 'What do you want?' Her party, the BSP, is juxtaposing two visions to two different constituencies. It is approaching its traditional constituency of lower castes through a language of 'belonging,' a cultural/emotional category. On the other hand, its engagement with the prospective constituency of the poor among the upper castes is the language of 'belongings,' an economic category.

The regional parties such as the BSP and SP came into existence and operate within the framework of regional perspectives and have rigorously steered clear of ideologies of nationalism. The BSP in particular is aspiring to rationalize its approach to castes in general and its particular engagement with upper castes. Regional 'identitarian' parties, especially the BSP, with a history of caste mobilization, are attempting to include upper caste constituencies within this framework. Inversely, In that identitarian sense, these are parties with organic links to their social contingencies anchored in the regional political landscape.

A potentially new political space is emerging in the state, with parallel tendencies. The regional parties, in order to expand their core constituencies, are compelled to revise their electoral intent in economic terms. This trend in assembly elections has disturbed and reconfigured the traditional caste categories which, in elections, could form economic constituencies. This re-configuration can be referenced to the outcome of assembly election in neighboring Bihar in 2011. Here, the Janata Dal United, with its agenda of 'Development with Justice,' was able to break the monolithic cultural enclosure of caste and re-cast it with the language of welfare and development issues i.e. 'belongings'.

Janata Dal weaved the Dalit lower castes into an extra-constitutional welfare category of 'Mahadalits' and thus made ethnic appeals to the lower caste voters within their development agenda.

In order to expand its core constituency to include the poor among the upper castes, BSP, as indicated by its ticket announcement, has decided upon its own version of reconstituting itself as a party of all castes and yet retaining an explicit undertaking to traditional categories of caste and reservations. At the same time, inversely, the national parties, in the face of declining vote share, are under pressure to intervene into the regional space dominated by regional parties. The outcome of these elections will, no doubt, create a fresh round of intellectual debate on the increasingly linked politics of belonging and belongings.

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