

Electoral Strategy of the Bahujan Samaj Party in the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections

Ravinder Kumar¹ and Virender²

¹ Research Scholar, Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

² Research Scholar, Centre for the Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policy, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the BSP's electoral strategy in the forthcoming general elections 2019. As it is well established that in the parliamentary democracy the first past the post system i.e. relative votes secured are the marker of electoral victory, hence to address contemporary political realities the political parties change their strategies time to time. Major shift in the electoral strategies of the BSP are witnessed like pre-poll alliances, organizational changes, use of social media, etc. Since it had suffered major and unprecedented set back in the past elections in 2014 and 2017; it has now fundamentally changed its very strategy of fighting elections on its own strength along with various other strategies. The multilateral electoral strategy of the BSP is - projecting Mayawati as 'PM candidate' for 2019 elections and making her as a candidate in parliamentary election; social engineering of alliances particularly SC-ST, SC-OBC, and SC-OBC-minority or 'Dalit-Bahujan' alliance in different states viz. Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Punjab; and most importantly in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh; isolation of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh; anti-BJP, anti-Congress strategy to gain from disillusionment of the electorate with the BJP and the Congress and to form an anti-BJP and anti-congress front or third front to present third alternative before Indian people; exposing the anti-dalit and anti-reservation stand of the BJP; entry in the social media domain (Mayawati's twitter account); increasingly giving more responsibility to youth in the organization, etc. Political scientists regarded this pre-poll alliance shift as a radical shift post volatile years of 1990's. The strategic isolation of the Congress from 'Mahagathbandhan' in politically critical Uttar Pradesh is a deliberate and well thought-out 'tactical' strategy for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, despite its

good show and government formation in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh assembly elections and in spite of entry of Priyanka Gandhi in the party, to disturb or weaken the 'swarna' or 'upper caste vote bank' of the BJP. The article argues that consolidation of dalit-Bahujan votes and avoiding fragmentation of anti-BJP votes is the core electoral strategy of the Bahujan Samaj Party. The paper also examines why the BSP is compelled to adopt such strategy and its challenges and implications in the electoral politics of the state and in the national politics. It concludes that the strategy of the BSP is carefully thought out however not sure shot for success as a number of variables determines electoral victory in highly competitive Indian politics.

Key words: Electoral politics, Mahagathbandhan, Strategic isolation, Social engineering, Dalit-Bahujan, Bahujan front politics

1. Introduction

Election being the hallmark of democracy is a mechanism by which people choose their representatives at regular intervals and change them if they wish to do so. Hence, change and retention of incumbent government is visible post-elections. Regular elections are seen as democracy at work, however in broader aspects proper functioning of the constitutional and statutory institutions, pro-people bureaucratic machinery, effective media, enlightened citizenry, etc. are included in it (democracy). When one talk of election and electoral politics one thing that automatically comes in mind the meaning and relevance of it. Electoral politics deals with the ideas and actions behind the process of choosing by vote (elections) among candidates to govern the state. Electoral politics is a vital part of the democratic functioning of the state. Being important components

of democracy, all the political parties employ different electoral strategies to gain the confidence of the electorate and win political power to implement its agenda. The game plan of every political party is unique though they may have some common elements viz. making alliances, exposing past and present misdeeds or corruption of rivals, attacking the top leadership, arousing aspirations among voters through manifesto, promises and taking their issues, consolidating its vote bank, etc.

2. Electoral strategy of the BSP: The multidimensional electoral strategy of the BSP is:

2.1 . Projecting Mayawati as 'PM candidate' for 2019 elections and making her a candidate in the Lok Sabha elections – This projecting provides the worker and supporter of the party provide a morale boost and motivation to work hard for the party. Many leaders like H.D. Deve Gowda, Ajit Jogi, Rajkumar Saini accepted Mayawati as a prime ministerial candidate for their alliance and other leaders like Akhilesh tough not openly accepted but said UP will give a new prime minister in 2019. Other leaders may join the bandwagon if none of the BJP and the congress gets more than at least 160 seats and Mayawati has more than 30 seats, it seems hypothetical but all know that politics is the game of n number of possibilities. Therefore, to unite dalit votes and to energise cadre and organisation Mayawati's PM candidature may prove beneficial to the party.

2.2. BSP's social engineering of alliances or mutually beneficial inter-caste alliances - Particularly the SC-ST, SC-OBC, and SC-OBC-minority or '*Dalit-Bahujan*' alliance in different states are formed. For example, pre-poll pact with Ajit Jogi's the Janta Congress Chhattisgarh (JCC) in Chhattisgarh, with Raj Kumar Saini's the Loktantra Suraksha Party (LSP) in Haryana, forming the Punjab Democratic Front (PDA) in Punjab; and most importantly with the Samajwadi Party (SP) in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Uttarakhand, and talks are underway in Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Since caste, religion, region and other factors affects the electoral outcome. Caste is a stark reality of Indian society, it predominantly influence the whole electoral process rather social, economic and political process in India. Caste Politics or Identity Politics plays vital role in defining and setting agenda in elections, for example the issue of reservation, the backlog, the atrocities against the dalit or SCs and STs, etc are crucial factors which determines the course of politics and win and loss in

the elections. The numerical strength of SCs, STs and OBCs plus minority in India becomes 85 percent of India's population, and in democracy, numbers matter the most. Hence, to leverage the numerical majority pre-poll alliances are made, designed and redesigned, the same strategy is adopted by the BSP as it is well established that patronage and ethnic head counts are responsible for the BSP's electoral success¹. To avoid the fragmentation of anti-BJP voter alliance will hold a key component to defeat the BJP. Add up votes of SP-BSP-RLD would surpass the votes secured by the BJP. If we examine the previous Lok Sabha elections 2014 the BJP had 42.2 percent vote share and the SP and BSP had 22.2 and 19.6 percent respectively. The BJP won 71 seats and SP and BSP won 5 and zero respectively. With simple arithmetic of SP-BSP collective vote it would have won 41 and the BJP 37. And if 9 percent vote swing against the BJP happens in the coming election in favour of the Mahagathbandhan it would win 65 seats and the BJP 12, asserted psephologist Yogendra Yadav². Hence consolidation of dalit-Bahujan votes and avoiding fragmentation of anti-BJP votes is the core electoral strategy of the Bahujan Samaj Party.

2.3. Anti-BJP and anti-Congress strategy - To gain from disillusionment of the electorate with the BJP and the Congress and to form an anti-BJP and anti-congress front or third front to present third alternative before Indian people. The BSP strategy is to exposing the anti-dalit and anti-reservation stand of the BJP and congress. As in the BSP leader's speeches and arguments the congress's rule hadn't provided people the basic needs of life, and their corruption has led the Dalit-Bahujan people under poverty, ignorance and life of humiliation. Both political parties are heavily condemned by BSP leaders for pro-rich and pro-elite orientation and anti-poor and anti-dalit orientation. It is claimed that the BJP marches ahead of the congress in exploiting the masses and looting the public money. They are more dangerous than congress as they polarize society on the communal basis. Mayawati, Kashiram in the past³, openly called the BJP – *nagnath* and the congress – *sanpnath* and both didn't and don't act in the interests of the downtrodden/dalits. The BSP is trying to harness the disillusionment of people with both the parties in the upcoming general elections.

2.4. Strategic isolation of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh - Congress is only a marginal player in Uttar Pradesh and also not to forget that Congress is not in the same condition as in 2009⁴. Their organization is weak though attempt has been made to revive the party by introducing Priyanka Gandhi as General Secretary and making in-charge of the eastern UP. It is said form the congress that front

foot playing or aggressive electoral campaign will be Also, to disturb or weaken the 'swarna' or 'upper caste vote bank' of the BJP, since the congress party generally got more votes of the *swarnas* than other community in UP. This divides the upper caste votes between the congress and the BJP which otherwise would solely shift towards the BJP if the congress would have been the part of Mahagathbandhan. It is strategic in a sense that the SP-BSP alliance has left two seats Raebareli and Amethi is left for the congress where no candidate will be fielded by the SP-BSP alliance to support the top leadership of the congress, hence they not to entangle in Uttar Pradesh. Priyanka's entry may disturb the Brahmin vote bank of the BJP and the muslim vote bank of the Mahagathbandhan, however, whom it hurt the more, the more beneficial for the other but not to the congress as it would need at least 40 percentage of votes to win Lok Sabha elections this time in UP, since largely two corner contest in almost 70 seats as the Congress have pocket of regional influence though a number of disgruntled SP-BSP leaders joined it after being denied Lok Sabha ticket. The dent of upper caste votes in the BJP, if happens, will probably blossom the prospect of the Mahagathbandhan and a heavy loss to the BJP.

2.5. Entry in the social media domain - Mayawati's twitter account⁵ – for direct political communication and to counter its rivals. There is huge role of social media in election campaigning and a tool to connect its electorate and vote bank directly with authentic information, high speed and at mass level. Emergence of this understanding in the BSP is result of continuous pressure from its supporters who have a long pending demand and also due to negative role of mainstream media on party's growth. As one knows that in the age of ICT, social media has emerged a powerful tool to inform, educate and enlighten people, the BSP is not willing to leave behind to leverage the social media platforms like twitter, whatsapp and web portals.

6. More responsibility to youth – The BSP is increasingly giving more responsibility to youth in the organization. This is indicated by its leadership's decision to allot 50 percent of organizational posts to the youth workers⁶. This shift reflects that it is now focusing on youth which is more assertive, educated and sharp minded than the previous generation. A committee of 23 active youths at every booth is formed to have a sharp eye on each booth in Uttar Pradesh and other electorally significant regions. This strategy derives its reasoning owing to huge influx of the first time voters every five year and Indian youth particularly more active in elections and huge impact on election results.

3. The compelling reasons for the strategy

3.1. The biggest reason is winnability and to defeat the BJP: The politics is nothing without realistic character. In Indian parliamentary democracy, the electoral politics is the game of the first-past-the-post system wherein the candidate who receives the most votes wins. Winnability determines the present and future strategies of any political party. Political power is captured by winning the elections and elections are won by accepting the ground realities and then formulating strategies to fail counter strategies of competing political parties. The strategy of pre-poll alliance in the different states is a step in that direction. Moreover, the vote share of the most formidable BJP is far ahead of the SP and BSP individual vote share. They can't win elections by contesting separately in most seats. As in the 2014 elections the BJP vote share was 42.3 and SP-BSP was 41.8. In addition to that RLD is also the part of alliance. Hence it will form a formidable alliance against the BJP and the tally 71 of BJP may drastically reduce to 12 if 9 percent vote swing happens in favour of the alliance.

3.2. The declining performance and pressure of workers: Electoral failure or defeat demotivates workers; electoral success or win motivate them. An energetic and motivated cadre/worker is vital factor for party's future prospects. The continuous and humiliating defeats of the BSP raised many questions on party's strategy and leadership. Subsequently, the party's think tank decided to forge an alliance with likeminded parties in different states after rethinking of fighting election on own strength in the changing times. Even the BSP was ready to enter into alliance with the Congress in 2018 assembly elections of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. However it was explicitly said by Mayawati that pre-poll alliance with congress would be possible to defeat the BJP only if the Congress party offers respectable number of seats to the BSP. That didn't happen and both entered electoral battle separately and the Congress just toppled the BJP in Madhya Pradesh in a faceoff but didn't get the majority and in Rajasthan it was just one mark short of majority. The pressure exerted by BSP's workers laid the path of pre-poll alliances in various states, successful in some and not in others. Similar case occurred with the party's and Mayawati's presence on the social media domain as the youth supporter wanted a direct, speedier and original communication with the top leadership.

3.3. Rise of Hindutva Political Regime and Hindutvaisation of dalits: The guise of glorifying Hindu Dharma for retaining Dalits in the Hindu fold. How that has been done vis-à-vis dalits is through practising the *Containment policy* or the managerial

approach of traditional politics wr.t. Dalits as indicated by Pratap Bhanu Mehta⁷. Extended patronage to the Dalits in the form of welfare policies, reservations and by accommodating prominent Dalit figures and local leaders or co-option of leaders by the established political parties like the Congress

3.4. Survival at stake: The rival political parties particularly the BJP and the Congress are accusing the BSP getting into the alliances in different states to survive itself in the political arena. However this hypothesis of survival at stake has some truth but is immature and has no buyer except the elite media and rivals. The hypothesis seems immature, fictitious and biased as it not based on relevant facts and the other main reason is despite debacle of 2014 general elections and 2017 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, the 2018 assembly elections of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh it won 10 seats which is greater than the 2013 election (8 seats) results in the same states and the combined vote share remain intact similar to the previous election. Even in the debacle of Uttar Pradesh its core voter i.e. dalit voter had not swayed despite all attempts by its rival the BJP and Congress. Yet having said that threats are visible since, multiple and continuous defeats demoralise and demotivate party cadre in addition to erosion in credibility and question mark on the capability of its leader. That ultimately put in danger the political party's existence if timely diagnose and treatment of ailment of defeat is not undertaken.

4. Challenges

In electoral politics electoral win is not an easy task to accomplish since highly competitive politics is the hallmark of Indian elections. The caste conscious voting though a reality in India, but many other factors like resource, perception of leader, development, candidate, religion, media, etc. are also important which affects election ends. Even if pre-poll alliances are there but electoral strategy if not well thought out and carefully implemented the proposed gains vary and may even drastically away from expected. The same is true with the BSP as the BJP, Congress and other regional parties are trying hard to fail its master plan. Some of the important challenges before the BSP strategists are as under:

One, arithmetic is right but chemistry in question: precondition for alliance to work is chemistry between the workers or cadre of the party. In other words For example, Misra⁸ in '*Limits of OBC-Dalit Politics*' highlighted the contradictions and antagonisms of OBC and dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh and asserted that caste rigidity in UP become a roadblock to OBC-dalit politics. In 1993 the SP-BSP pre-poll alliance though managed to

form the state government but it didn't last long and the BSP withdrawn support to Mulayam's government. Hence there is no guarantee of long term political relations since caste mentality prevalent in UP with may detract alliance to go long or even function. However its short-term mutual benefit will surely be cashed by both the parties. In 2019 the time has changed a lot and the dynamics of politics, players has changed, role reversal taking place but certainly chemistry of alliance leaders and workers is looking optimistic and amicable. The mingling of workers and party cadre is uphill task for both the BSP and SP. The bitter history and in the caste rigid Uttar Pradesh society vote transfer capacity to each other is also vital to beat and conquer the BJP, particularly true for the SP supporters as the BSP's ability is well known for its vote transfer capacity but not true with the SP.

Two, expansion of the social base: the main reason for the BSP's limited success outside Uttar Pradesh. The alleged tag of dalits' party by the rival political parties is formidable question to counter particularly beyond Uttar Pradesh. Christophe Jaffrelot⁹ had well argued that the BSP is no longer a dalit party in Uttar Pradesh in 1998, however it is still a dalit based political party outside Uttar Pradesh amply reflected in party's vote share and support base in other states of India.

Three, leadership vacuum in the states other than Uttar Pradesh: No national level leader is clearly visible or present in BSP except the party supremo Mayawati herself, this fact undermine its expansion and electoral success as well as non-creation of second rug of leadership.

Four, the unfavorable media: the elite character of media and corporatisation of media generally portray the BSP and its leaders with bad, ridiculed and prejudiced mindset. The Brahmanism or the upper caste dominance in media especially in the TV broadcasting and print media (newspapers, magazines etc) most of the time go against the interest of the BSP as it sensationalise and scandalize the BSP party and its leaders. A section of media has been operating propaganda against the BSP alleged by its leaders. Kanshi Ram and Mayawati¹⁰ openly criticized media and called it '*manuwadi*' media in his/her speeches and campaign rallies to highlight the character of media in India. To the BSP, the relevant question is how to deal with media which are characterized as an agent of playing politics of information, having elitist character; however, with BSP's presence in social media domain that handicap would somewhat relieved, and also the party is educating the masses to be aware and vigil of the media.

5. Implications of the BSP electoral strategy and Indian politics

First, pan India non-BJP, non-Congress alliance:

An anti-BJP, anti-Congress politics may emerge in the time to come. A new era in Indian politics wherein the regional political parties collaborate with each other to defeat both the BJP and the Congress provided the pre-poll alliances of the BSP bring fruit. Thus political parties especially those having non-upper caste leadership would unite on pan India basis to counter both the mainstream political parties.

Second, 'Bahujan Front Politics' at the state and national level: Whether these alliances are a short lived phenomenon or stay long in politics is a million dollar question as politics is the game of opportunity, opportunism prevails, and in politics there is no permanent friend and foe. Having said that such type of alliance politics have tendency which could give birth to 'Bahujan Front Politics' in the different states of India wherever dalit and backward caste based political parties have electoral presence, significant or less significant. The reasoning behind this lies in the fact, one, congress' reluctance to defeat the BJP by allying with smaller political parties where the Congress is strong or main player in electoral politics – simply not leaving any room for smaller political parties to grow and to make a formidable alliance against the BJP, that means either BJP or Congress in a position to form the government and no space for others. For example recent elections of Uttarakhand, Gujrat, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, etc. the congress party didn't go for alliance with any smaller political party at the state level. Two, disenchantment of political parties who once in an alliance either with the BJP or the Congress. For instance, in Uttar Pradesh the Samajwadi party separate apart with the Congress after colossal loss in the 2017 UP elections.

Third, possible emergence of the BSP as dominant force in the national politics: Mayawati could become the first dalit to be the prime minister of India if the BSP-SP-RLD alliance's super performance in Uttar Pradesh of which immense possibility is very practical. The opinion polls have indicated the comprehensive victory of the 'Mahagathbandhan' in Uttar Pradesh and particularly of the BSP as majority of the western UP seats and 'Dalit-Muslim factor' seats allocated to it and may goes in its favour after seat sharing. However the congress' strong Muslim candidates could probably harms the prospects of Mahagathbandhan, and that

Four, dehindutvaisation of SCs, STs and OBCs: BSP declare its ideology as Ambedkarism and call itself as a movement of social change. The dalit identity and its consciousness are directly equals to dalit assertion claimed Sudha Pai¹¹. And identity

assertion replicates in political consequences. However the whole hypothesis rest on the success of pre-poll alliances of the BSP.

Five, if failure of its strategy and party's probable disintegration: A repetitive defeat mars future growth in general. In politics, repetitive failure brings division.

6. Conclusion:

The main rival political parties like the BJP and the Congress would call its (BSP) strategy as a strategy for existential survival, particularly by the BJP. These political parties try to convince people not to waste their vote by voting for the BSP. Though BSP's success and future prospects are a function of formation of pan-India anti-BJP, anti-Congress alliance and winning the trust of disillusioned electorates to the BJP and the Congress, yet presenting itself as alternative at the centre is an uphill task before the party. The strategy of the BSP for the forthcoming general election seems carefully thought out and well planned; however, in electoral politics nothing is final until last vote is counted.

References

- [1] Chandra, Kanchan. *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Heads Count in India*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, (2004).
- [2] Yadav, Yogendra *Numbers don't lie: Why SP-BSP alliance can defeat BJP's legendary poll arithmetic*, (16 January, 2019).
<https://theprint.in/opinion/numbers-dont-lie-whysp-bsp-alliance-can-defeat-bjps-legendary-poll-arithmetic/178442/>
- [3] Singh, Satnam, *Bahujan Masiha Kanshi Ram ke Rajnitik Bhashan*. Vol.2, Delhi, India: Samyak Prakashan, (2012).
- [4] Jafri Alim Abdul, *Here is Why Congress was Kept Out of SP-BSP Alliance*, (13 January 2019).
<https://www.newslick.in/here-why-congress-was-kept-out-sp-bsp-alliance>
- [5] India Today, *Mayawati joins Twitter before Lok Sabha elections, says will use it to interact with the supporters*, (05 February 2019).
<https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/loksabha-2019/story/mayawati-joins-twitter-bsp-49168-2019-02-06>.
- [6] Verma, Lalmani. *BSP target: 50 per cent posts to be filled by youth*. (21 May, 2018).

- <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/bsp-target-50-per-cent-posts-to-be-filled-by-youths-5184769>,
- [7] Mehta, Bhanu Pratap (24 January, 2018). *The new Dalit challenge*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-new-dalit-challenge-jigneshmevani-dalit-politics-haryana-rape-5036645>
- [8] Misra, Amaresh, *Limits of OBC-Dalit Politics*. EPW, 30(23), 1355-1357, (1995).
- [9] Jaffrelot, Christophe *The Bahujan Samaj Party in North India: No Longer Just a Dalit Party?* Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 18(1), (1998).
- [10] Dusadh, H.L., *Samajik Parivartan aur BSP*. Delhi, India: Samyak Prakashan, (2012).
- [11] Pai, Sudha. *Dalit Assertion*. Oxford India Short Introductions, New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, (2013).