

The Bahujan Samaj Party in North India: No Longer Just a Dalit Party? ¹

Christophe Jaffrelot

From the 1930s to the 1950s, Dr. Ambedkar evolved a new kind of leadership combining socio-religious work at the grassroots level with political action “from above.” He became convinced that his caste fellows should convert to a new religion because Hinduism inherently condemned them to endure an ever-lasting oppression and at the same time he wanted to fight for their cause politically. He eventually converted to Buddhism a few months before his death in 1956 and thousands of his followers — mainly from his caste, the Mahars — did the same. Simultaneously he prepared the ground for a new political party, the Republican Party of India (RPI), which was to take roots in his native state, Maharashtra, and to develop pockets of influence in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. However, the party started declining in the early 1970s, largely because of factionalism and the cooperation of some of its leaders by the Congress.

Almost 30 years after the launch of the RPI, a new party founded by Scheduled Caste members took shape and started making headway in North India. Its chief, Kanshi Ram had first tried to organize the non-elite groups through social work but had never contemplated conversion as a means to emancipate them. For him, such a move does not make sense unless the bulk of the lower castes is prepared to do it: “Whatever religion we adopt, it should be in crores, not in lakhs. It may take some time. It may be possible in the 21st century. Mahars have become Buddhists, but they remain as they were.”² Gradually, Kanshi Ram began to stress purely political activities and especially the building of a party, the Bahujan Samaj Party. Whether as a social worker or as a party leader, however, he emphasized the need to reach beyond the Dalit milieu. To what extent this attempt has been consistently pursued and how successful it has been are the two issues I address in this article.

From “Assertiveness” to “Empowerment”: Kanshi Ram’s Political Strategy for Shaping the Bahujan Samaj

Kanshi Ram was born in 1932 in a Scheduled Caste family in rural Punjab — his native village Khwaspur is situated in the district of Ropar.³ His exact origin is subject to controversy but he seems to have been originally from a Ram-

dasia *jati* — Chamars converted to Sikhism.⁴ Without talking of his religious affiliation, he underlines that his early environment was not as oppressive as the one Untouchables suffered elsewhere:

Because of the Sikh religion, also because most of the Chamars have adopted the Sikh religion, there was some upward mobility. The teaching of the [Sikh] gurus is more egalitarian.⁵

Like Ambedkar’s family, Kanshi Ram’s benefited from the military jobs that the British reserved for Untouchables.⁶ His father was the only man of the family who did not leave for the front during World War II because at least one man had to stay behind. The army not only provided a good salary, it also raised the self-esteem of the Untouchable soldiers. This social and family context, which one generally does not find in the Hindi belt, explains why Kanshi Ram was able to attend college.

After getting his BSc, he left the Punjab in 1958 to work as a chemist’s assistant at the Explosive Research Defense Laboratory set up by the Ministry of Defense in Kirkee, near Poona in Maharashtra. Kanshi Ram is clearly a representative of the small Untouchable elite who have benefited from the reservation policy in the public sector. The miserable life of the Mahars in Poona, whose condition contrasted with the Scheduled Castes of Punjab, came as a shock to Kanshi Ram.

I was first exposed to the miseries of the Mahars and Mangs [an even lower Untouchable caste] and then I read *Annihilation of Caste* and *What Gandhi and the Congress have done to the Untouchables*. These are the two books, which have influenced me most. Later I came to know about Mahatma Jyotirao Phule.⁷

He resigned in 1964 when a Dalit colleague was suspended for having protested the cancellation of a two-day leave so that he could attend two celebrations dear to Untouchables — the birthday celebrations of Ambedkar and Valmiki (the author of the *Ramayana*, whom many Untouchable Bhangis [sweepers] regard as their ancestor).⁸ Since then, Kanshi Ram has devoted his time to raising the consciousness of his caste fellows and to developing their

assertiveness. He severed all links with his family and abandoned the idea of getting married, although he was already engaged. At that time he discovered the thought of Ambedkar and became a member of the Republican Party of India. Seven years later he resigned because he regarded the party, which was more and more fragmented and paralyzed by faction conflicts, as a vassal of the Congress.

*"I started building the bahujan samaj in 1971"*⁹

Kanshi Ram inaugurated a new type of movement when he founded, on October 14, 1971, "The Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Minority Communities Employees Association." This association was limited to the district of Poona but prefigured Kanshi Ram's future organizations since he already endeavored to federate employees of Dalit, Tribal, low caste and religious minority background. Amongst the five vice-presidents who assisted Kanshi Ram were one Mahar, one Tribal, one Mali (gardener-OBC), one Muslim and one Christian. They were representatives of what Kanshi Ram considered the bahujan samaj.

This expression literally means the community of those who are in great numbers, in a majority. The "bahujans" are like the plebeians in the Roman sense, the second estate, in opposition to the patricians. However, in the Indian context, the "bahujan" hardly form a "samaj," i.e. a "community" because of caste and class divisions as well as ethnic, religion, and language-based — cleavages. In fact, these groups are also affected by sub-divisions. Ambedkar himself was not able to rally to his political parties the Scheduled Castes in their entirety: while his caste fellows, the Mahars, supported him more or less *en bloc*, the Chambhars (leather workers) and the Mangs (basket and rope makers) tended to vote for the Congress largely to differentiate themselves from the Mahars.¹⁰ The caste system, as Ambedkar once said, is not only a division of labor but also a division of the laborers. To transform the subaltern castes and communities into a relatively cohesive force was a colossal task that Kanshi Ram assigned to himself. To begin with, in Poona he focused on the elite of these groups, those who like him, were the product of the reservation system.

The association launched in 1971 became a federation in 1973, and went beyond the limits of Poona. Kanshi Ram left the town three years later and created a new movement

soon after. On December 6, 1978 he officially founded the All-India Backward (SC, ST, OBC) and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF) whose aim was to organize the elite of the bahujan samaj, essentially wage earners with intellectual qualifications who had benefited from quotas. BAMCEF could make rapid headway and reach a kind of critical mass because of the growing number of educated Scheduled Caste members in the administration. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, the Scheduled Castes' literacy rate increased from 7.1 percent in 1961 to 10.2 percent in 1971, 15 percent in 1981 and 27 percent in 1991, which partly explains the growing number of Scheduled Caste members in the administration, even if the quotas are only filled in the lower rungs of the bureaucracy.¹¹ Today in Uttar Pradesh the Scheduled Caste Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officers "form the largest number next to the Brahmins and Kayasths."¹² Yet these officers feel frustrated because they are denied "important posts in the districts as well as the state capital."¹³

Kanshi Ram traveled for years all over India to convince these officers from the bahujan samaj to get organized within the BAMCEF.¹⁴ Gradually he built a network of activists who carried this message in the countryside.¹⁵ In the early 1990s, BAMCEF had almost 200,000 members, amongst whom were 15,000 scientists and 3,000 MBBS graduates.¹⁶ The government became concerned about the organization's progress because of the risk of politicization of the Scheduled Caste employees. BAMCEF cadres — Kanshi Ram estimated them to be about 1,000 in the mid-1980s — were continuously transferred and harassed.¹⁷ This led Kanshi Ram, in 1985, to transform BAMCEF into a shadow organization:

It has no office-bearers. There are no records of these thousands of office-bearers. Only we know the workers. They provide us brain power and money power. They can contribute. Most of the BSP offices are run by BAMCEF people.¹⁸

The vice-president of the BSP unit of Madhya Pradesh, I.M.P. Verma defines today's BAMCEF as being made of those "who can pay money, mind and time for their community."¹⁹ Its (former) members evidently form the backbone of the party.

Table 1: BSP's Electoral Performances
during the 1989, 1991 and 1996 general elections

Year	Seats contested	Seats won	Forfeited deposits	Votes polled	% of votes polled	% of seats contested
1989	246	3	222	6,215,093	2.07	N.A.
1991	231	2	211	4,420,721	1.61	N.A.
1996	117	11	47	12,184,038	3.64	18.9

Source: Election Commission of India, *Report on the Ninth General Elections to the House of the People in India*, 1989, New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1990, p. 7; Election Commission of India, *Report on the Tenth General Elections to the House of the People in India*, 1991, New Delhi, [no date] p. 9; and Election Commission of India, *Statistical Report on General Elections, 1996 to the Eleventh Lok Sabha*, Vol. 1, New Delhi, 1996.

While BAMCEF endowed Kanshi Ram with a core group of followers, he did not really regret its official dissolution since he no longer regarded it as his priority to do social work among the employees:

I started with the idea of social transformation and economic emancipation. I still want my people to advance socially and economically. But I have realized that unless we have political clout, we cannot advance much on those sides.²⁰

Kanshi Ram was following in the footsteps of Ambedkar who also thought that the lower castes not only needed to become aware of their rights and organize but had also to seize power. In Kanshi Ram's vocabulary, it implied a shift from "assertiveness" to "empowerment."

In the Arena of Party Politics

Kanshi Ram founded the Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (Committee to fight for the community of the exploited and the oppressed) on December 6, 1981 — Ambedkar's death anniversary. This organization dispensed with the official euphemisms (Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes etc.) preferring instead the words, Dalit and Shoshit that politicized Untouchables use more frequently to designate themselves. However, Dalit does not refer here to the Untouchables only, as it is often the case, especially in Maharashtra. The English-language publication of the DS-4, as the movement came to be known, *The Oppressed Indian*, repeatedly published editorials propagating an historical vulgate in which the Shudras (OBCs) and Ati-shudras (Untouchables) were bracketed together and went on to include Tribals as well:

The history of India is full of the daring stories of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras. There are number of instances in which the Shudras and Ati-Shudras (*the oppressed and the exploited*) [emphasis added] set examples of bravery in the field of battle at the cost of their life for the sake of others. Thousands of years back they were the rulers of this land. Sikander the Great had a taste of the bravery of the Shudra Army when he was advancing to conquer India. He had to go back when confronted with the tribals of the land.

Unfortunately, the high caste historians of this land, who pose as the custodians of the culture and literature distorted the facts and wrote the history in such a way that for all time Shudras and Ati-shudras were projected as very helpless and hopeless creatures.²¹

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the 1932 Poona pact that the Congress was preparing to celebrate with great pomp, Kanshi Ram published a booklet, *The Chamcha Age*, where he denounced this agreement as sealing the alienation of the Untouchables. He argued that the system of reserved seats that had been forced on Ambedkar, who favored a system of separate electorates, had helped the high castes dominate Congress, co-opt Dalit candidates who were mere sycophants (*Chamcha*) of the Congress since the Scheduled Castes were not in a majority in any single reserved constituency. Facing such a situation, the DS-4 had to act as a political party and contest elections. It was the only way out since, "A tool, an agent, a stooge or a *Chamcha* is created to oppose the real, the genuine fighter."²² The DS-4 presented 46 candidates for the assembly elections of Haryana in 1982, without making much of an impact.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), officially founded on April 14, 1984, Ambedkar's birthday, took over from the DS-4.²³ It did not imply much more than a change of name but by rechristening his organization that way, Kanshi Ram consummated his shift from social work to party politics. The BSP has made rapid progress on the electoral front. During the general elections of 1984, it received more than one million votes. This number was multiplied six-fold in 1989 when the party got 6,215,093 votes, 2.07 percent of the recorded votes and obtained three seats in the Lok Sabha. In 1991, it won only two seats and 1.61 percent of the votes but five years later it gained 11 seats with 3.64 percent of the votes.

The growth of the BSP enabled the party to obtain the statute of National Party from the Election Commission after the 1996 elections. This growth resulted chiefly from Kanshi Ram's continuous efforts to get the bahujan samaj organized since the 1960s. The title of the BSP mouthpiece, *Bahujan Sangathak* (the organizer — in the sense of unifier — of

the masses) bears testimony to the priority given to organizational aspects. Today, thanks to the activists trained by the BAMCEF and the DS-4, the BSP has committees in all the districts of Uttar Pradesh. In Madhya Pradesh, in the mid-1990s only six districts (Panna, Vidisha, Betul, Jabalpur, Ujjain and Khandwa) did not have a BSP unit. However, the rise of the BSP has also much to do with the party's implantation and mobilization techniques and their actions while in office.

The BSP's Implantation and Mobilization Techniques

The BSP inherited from the DS-4 not only a leader and his network of activists, but also a range of mobilization techniques. For instance, between March 15 and April 17, 1983 the DS-4 organized a 3,000 km cycle march — bicycles being the main means of locomotion for the poor, as Kanshi Ram observed — covering seven states in order to “educate the oppressed and the exploited people that they need to build up their own organization and independent movement”.²⁴ The following year, the DS-4 launched a similar but bigger movement with processions of cyclists leaving from five peripheral provinces of India to converge on Delhi, which recalled, oddly enough, the form of the *Ekatmata Yatra*, organized shortly before by the Vishva Hindu Parishad. This hundred-day campaign allowed 7,000 meetings to be held all over India.²⁵ It concluded in Delhi with a huge meeting from which emerged the Bahujan Samaj Party.

For Kanshi Ram and his party — the DS-4 and then the BSP — these demonstrations were intended to deliver an ideological message. This discourse was symbolized by the oft-repeated metaphor of the ball-point pen, used by Kanshi Ram on platforms and before cameras : the top of the pen represents the upper castes who, though being only 15 percent of the population rule the country while the pen itself represents the remaining 85 percent who have to become aware of their fate and of their numerical strength. This logic is omnipresent in the slogans, often extremely aggressive,²⁶ designed by the BSP for political as well as educational purposes:

1) Jiskî jitrî samkhya bharî uskî utrî bhagîgârî

The highest number has to be the best represented

2) 85 par 15 kâ râj nahîn chalegâ, nahîn chalegâ

85 percent living under the rule of 15 percent, this will not last, this will not last.

3) Vot hamârâ, râj tumhârâ, nahin chalegâ, nahîn chalegâ

We have the votes, you have the power, this will not last, this will not last.

4) Tilak, tarâjû aur talvâr isko mâro joote char

The tilak [emblem of the sectarian affiliation of the Hindus which is applied on the forehead and symbolizes the Brahmin], the balance [symbol of the merchant castes] and the sword [symbol of the warrior castes], hit them with their shoes [symbol of the work of the Chamars, the principal Untouchable caste of North of India, who work with leather].

5) Tilak, tarâjû aur talvâr, un pade joote char [Down with the Brahmins, Thakurs and Banias.]²⁷

Kanshi Ram has tried to emerge as a spokesman for the bahujan samaj by advocating the interests of all its sub-groups. He clearly expressed this concern in a speech at the Vidhan Sabha of Haryana that was made during the election campaign in 1987:

The other limb of the Bahujan Samaj [in addition to the Scheduled Castes] which we call OBC or Other Backward Classes, needs this party badly. Thirty-nine years after independence, these people have neither been recognised nor have they obtained any rights. Improvements have been introduced in the legislation for the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, but nothing similar has happened for these people. The truth is that the government of this country is not ready to recognise them and we see that according to section 340, which was included in the Constitution by Dr. Ambedkar for the welfare of these people, and in respect of it the Kaka Kalelkar and Mandal Commissions were constituted. The reports of both the commissions were thrown in the waste paper basket on the pretext that there are 3,743 castes that can be called Other Backward Castes. But our central government is not ready to recognize any of these castes. When these castes are not even recognized, where is the question of obtaining their rights?

The religious minorities also badly need this party. The religious minorities have many problems and their problems are increasing day by day and are becoming more and more difficult. But we think that the biggest problems are the riots done against them. The Muslim minority is a big community and is about 11 to 12 percent of the whole population. Against these people, in the 365 days of the year, at least 400 disturbances happen or are created against them. In this way whatever progress or betterment they achieve with hard labor is destroyed by these riots.²⁸

Kanshi Ram thus admitted quite readily that in some respects the conditions of the Scheduled Castes were better than those of other components of the bahujan samaj. For example, he admitted that the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes had a larger presence than the OBCs because of the quota system and that a special effort had to be under-taken in their favor. One of the BSP's slogans has been “Mandal ayog lâgû karo, kursî khâli karo” (Implement Mandal or vacate the seat). Kanshi Ram has repeatedly emphasized the under-representation of OBCs in the administration:

In this country, out of the 450 District Magistrates more than 125 are from SC/STs but those from the OBCs are very few. [...] The number of OBC is 50 to 52 percent but we don't see any of them as District Magistrate. The issue, which is special for us, is that reservation is not a question of our daily bread, reservation is not a question of our jobs, reservation is a matter of

Table 2: Percentage of votes polled by the BSP in Five North Indian States during the 1989, 1991 and 1996 General Elections

Year	Haryana	Punjab	Uttar Pradesh	Madhya Pradesh	Jammu and Kashmir
1989	1.62	8.62	9.93	4.28	4.06
1991	1.79	no election	8.70	3.54	no election
1996	6.6	9.35	20.61	8.18	6

participation in the government and administration. We want participation in the government and administration of this country. There is democracy in this country. If in the republic 52 percent of the people cannot participate, then which is the system in which they can participate?²⁹

Kanshi Ram's tours or election campaigns have provided him with excellent opportunities for aggressively propagating this discourse of empowerment. It is primarily aimed at shaping the bahujan samaj on a pan-Indian basis and relies on administrative categories such as the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. This canvassing was systematically accompanied by references to Ambedkar whose portraits served as a symbol of the anti-caste movement.³⁰ For decades, the Ambedkarites have stylized "Baba Saheb" by representing him as always impeccably dressed and groomed. His portraits are quite often flanked by those of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Lord Buddha, so much so that a kind of pan-Dalit or even pan-bahujan iconography has been evolved in the course of time. However, the BSP has been able to combine these pan-Indian images with vernacular cultures and even local caste identities. This was evident in the use of street theater, a technique of conscientization that the Dalit movement had perfected over a long period in Maharashtra. The BSP-sponsored theater groups display in a dramatic form the sufferings of the Dalits at the hands of the upper castes and attract much attention, especially in villages. The BSP has therefore become adept at using elements of folk cultures to project new notions such as that of the bahujan samaj.

In Madhya Pradesh, the DS-4 and then the BSP, similarly utilized the traditions of the Satnamis. Initially the Satnampanth was formed in the early 19th century by Ghasidas, a Chamar from Chhattisgarh who came to be recognized as a guru. He initiated a new faith whose devotees ignored the Hindu deities but believed in satnam (true name). Eventually, "Satnampanth developed a stock of myths, rituals and practices which were associated with the gurus,"³¹ especially Ghasidas. His followers and their descendants — who have come to be known as Satnamis — have remained Scheduled Castes but have always actively challenged the caste system.³² Kanshi Ram attended the yearly Satnami fair in Chhind in the early 1980s probably because it was a good opportunity to meet thousands of Dalits. The DS-4 had an exhibition on Ambedkar in Raigarh, displaying his achievements such as the burning of the Manusmriti in Mahad and so on. R.K. Jangde, a Satnami who became chief of the DS-4 of Raipur district in 1984, joined the movement at this juncture.³³ Today, the Satnamis

have the largest number of Scheduled Caste members — including the president, Daulat Ram Ratnakar — in the MP Executive Committee.

In Uttar Pradesh, the BSP has exploited the emotional dimension of caste histories and myths. The Pasis, who traditionally raise pigs, regard themselves as descendants of medieval kings or soldiers of Rajput kings. Folk tales narrating the martial achievements of Maharajah Bijli Pasi, Raja Trilok Chand, Raja Madari Pasi and Raja Satan stress the bravery of the Pasis in their fight against the British. The BSP has cashed in on this oral culture to gain greater acceptance within a caste that tends to be more favorably inclined towards the Janata Dal because of Ram Vilas Paswan. For instance, Mayawati declared in an interview:

The people who wrote our history wiped out all traces of Dalit raja-maharajahs. For a long time our history has been wiped out. The social system is such that someone like Bijli Pasi found no mention in our history books while there is evidence that the Pasis at one time were ruling this area. So I am not inventing history, I am only highlighting history that has been consciously suppressed.³⁴

In Bundelkhand, the BSP often refers to Jhalkaribai, a member of the female battalion (called Durga Vahini) of the Rani of Jhansi who is still very popular for her role in the 1857 rebellion against the British. Jhalkaribai was a Kori, an Untouchable whose rank was not much above the Chamars, but folk stories stress the fact that she had special access to the queen, whom she taught archery, wrestling and shooting.³⁵ She is also presented as exceptionally courageous. In 1996, in Bundelkhand the BSP fielded a candidate whose virtues were compared to Jhalkaribai, so that the party could cash in on the popularity of her story.

Thus, in the 1980s, the BSP tried to take root in North India by utilizing two kinds of resources: (a) in terms of party-building, the leadership of Kanshi Ram and, at the local level, the network of cadres he had shaped through BAMCEF and the DS-4; (b) in terms of conscientisation and mobilization of supporters, a combination of the bahujan discourse and local traditions. These resources did not enable the party to implant itself evenly in North India. It carved out pockets of influence where the context was especially favorable — e.g. regions where a new bahujan middle class had developed as a result of the reservation policy — and in localities whose special characteristics made them receptive to the BSP ideology and program.

The BSP in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh

The states where the BSP has made inroads in the last 15 years are mainly the Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

The rise of the BSP in the Punjab has been systematically studied by Kanchan Chandra who points out that it was helped in part by the previous attempt at mobilization of the Scheduled Castes such as the Adharm movement³⁶ which had already prepared the ground for the Scheduled Caste Federation and the RPI. I shall focus on Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh where the BSP benefited from local traditions of Dalit militancy. In Uttar Pradesh, the Jatav movement in the Agra region which started in the 1920s prepared the ground for the RPI and then the BSP.³⁷ In Madhya Pradesh the Satnami movement in Chhattisgarh and socialist parties in Vindhya Pradesh played a similar role, though to a lesser extent. In both states the intensity of caste conflicts as reflected in the large number of "atrocities" — murder, rape, violation and plunder — against the Scheduled Castes contributed to Dalit militancy.

In Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh the BSP also owed its rise to its capacity to reach beyond the Dalit milieu.

Local Implantations

In Uttar Pradesh, the electoral presence of the BSP began to be felt in 1984, especially in the by-elections held in the mid- and late-1980s, when the party secured the second position in most of the constituencies. In 1985 Mayawati contested in Bijnor and lost to Meira Kumar (the daughter of Jagjivan Ram) but got 65,000 votes. In 1987 she contested in Haridwar and lost again to the Congress candidate but came second before Ram Vilas Paswan who could not save his deposit. The following year Kanshi Ram lost in Allahabad against V.P. Singh but made an impact. In 1989 the BSP emerged as a force to reckon with, when it polled 9.3 percent during the Ninth General Elections — as against 7.4 percent to the BJP. In the late 1980s-early 1990s, the BSP's zones of strength remained confined to Bundelkhand and, later, eastern Uttar Pradesh but since the mid-1990s, its

influence has been more evenly distributed, as evident from Table 4.

In contrast to the situation prevailing in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP has not been able to spread its influence evenly in the different regions of Madhya Pradesh. In 1996, the region-wise electoral table compiled by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies showed discrepancies between Vindhya Pradesh and the other areas (see Table 5).

The figure concerning Malwa needs to be disaggregated because in the northern districts of Morena, Bhind and Gwalior, the BSP is at least as strong as in Satna and Rewa, its two strongholds in Vindhya Pradesh. In fact, besides Bilaspur district in Chhattisgarh, the BSP has taken root mostly in the districts bordering Uttar Pradesh, partly because of the influence from this state where the party started its career earlier but also because of caste conflicts.

In Vindhya Pradesh, for instance, the upper castes account for about one-fifth of the population — roughly the same proportion as in Uttar Pradesh and the Brahmins, more than 13 percent of the total, are especially oppressive. This has enabled the left, from the Praja Socialist Party to the Janata Dal, to acquire some influence in this area but they have gradually lost ground because of factional fights and a lack of organizational strength. When the BSP emerged as a force in Rewa district, the OBC votes were automatically transferred from the socialists to the BSP.³⁸ Indeed, in 1991 the BSP candidate who won the Rewa Lok Sabha seat was a Kurmi who could draw on the votes of the Scheduled Castes and the Kurmis, who were united against the upper castes. In reaction, the latter launched a Savarn Samaj Party, the party of the community of the forward castes, which polled 13.5 percent of the valid votes in Rewa constituency in 1996, as against 27 percent to the BSP candidate who won the seat. In this area the BSP obviously benefited from the polarization between the upper castes and the lower castes. In Madhya Pradesh at large, the BSP can try to project itself as the spokesman for the bahun all the more as it does not suffer from OBC-dominated competitors such as the Samajwadi Party, the Samata Party or the Janata Dal.

Table 3 : The atrocities against the Scheduled Castes by State.

State	1984-85
Total	16,586
Uttar Pradesh	4,200
Madhya Pradesh	6,128
Rajasthan	1,648
Bihar	1,845
Gujarat	690
Tamil Nadu	689
Maharashtra	579

Sources: V. Tatu, *Politics of Ethnic Nepotism*, New Delhi: Sterling Publishers United, 1991, p.131.

In addition to local traditions and caste conflicts, the BSP's rise in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh stem from their capacity to attract low caste voters in addition to the Dalits.

More than a Dalit Party

In the 1993 Vidhan Sabha elections in Madhya Pradesh, only 31 percent of the BSP candidates belonged to the Scheduled Castes, not much more than the OBC (23.5 percent) and Tribal candidates, while nine percent of these candidates were Muslims (Muslims are 4.96 percent of the population of this state). Similarly, in Uttar Pradesh, during the 1996 state elections, the Scheduled Castes were only 28 percent of the total BSP candidates, with the OBCs making up 24 percent and the Muslims 18 percent, while 16.6 percent were from the upper Castes!

The social background of the BSP cadres is very similar to that of its candidates. While Dalits (often from the BAMCEF) form the hard core of the party apparatus, the BSP includes many OBCs, Tribals and Muslims amongst its cadres and even its state leaders. A Kurmi and a Pal have been past presidents of the UP unit. Similarly, the Vice President of the MP unit is a Nai (barber).

Kanshi Ram has endeavored to co-opt leaders enjoying personal support among non-Dalit groups. In Madhya Pradesh where the Scheduled Tribes represent 23.27 percent of the population, he recruited Arvind Netam, a former minister of Indira Gandhi and Narasimha Rao who had been elected MP in Kanker, Bastar district, five times. In 1996 the Congress refused to give him a ticket as he was facing corruption charges, but his wife stood in his place and won. He then decided to shift to the BSP in 1997. However, he lost in

the 1998 Lok Sabha elections and rejoined the Congress, even though he had been given responsibilities in the BSP. In the same way Kanshi Ram recruited Arif Mohammed Khan, a former minister of Rajiv Gandhi who was elected MP of Bulandshahar and Uttar Pradesh in 1989. He won the Lok Sabha seat of Bahraich in 1998. Kanshi Ram also solicited the support of Imam Bukhari of the Great Mosque of Delhi but was disappointed by his impact on the Muslim voters during the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in 1996.

In fact, Kanshi Ram's efforts to expand his party beyond the Dalits have not been entirely successful. In Uttar Pradesh, the BSP had more OBC MLAs in 1996 (23 as against 20 SCs and 11 Muslims). However these candidates won because of Dalit voters who tend to follow the party leaders' advice in such a way that they now form a transferable vote bank. The BSP receives a fraction of its votes from the OBCs. A poll carried out by the Center for the Study of Developing Societies before the 1996 state elections in Uttar Pradesh showed that while only four percent of the Yadavs and five percent of the Muslims (two categories who support the Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh Yadav) were going to vote for the BSP, 27 percent of the Kurmis and 19 percent of the lower OBCs intended to do so. However, those figures remain much lower than the 65 percent of Dalits who expressed their preference for the BSP.³⁹ Today Kanshi Ram considers the conquest of the Most Backward Castes the utmost priority of the BSP, particularly in Uttar Pradesh: "There are 78 Most Backward Castes in Uttar Pradesh. Twenty-six percent of the UP population are from the MBCs and the maximum tickets I have given to the MBCs."⁴⁰ He did not quite go that far but gave more than 51 (17.8 percent) of the tickets to candidates from the MBCs

and was well advised in doing so since 16 of them won, a far better rate of return than from any other category, in-

cluding the Scheduled Castes (19 successful candidates out of 83).

Table 4: Region-wise Vote Share of the BSP in the 1991, 1993 and 1996 Uttar Pradesh elections

Regions	1991 Assembly elections	1993 Assembly elections	1996 Lok Sabha elections	1996 Assembly elections*
Uttarakhand	3.5 %	4.2 %	10.1 %	21.5 %
Ruhelkhand	5.9 %	2.7 %	20.5 %	27.2 %
Upper Doab/Western UP	3.5 %	5.7 %	18.5 %	29.7 %
Awadh/Central UP	8.8 %	5.6 %	18.8 %	33.2 %
Lower Doab	10.2 %	9.9 %	22.8 %	
Bundelkhand	20.3 %	26.1 %	25.8 %	35.8 %
Poorvanchal/Eastern UP	13.5 %	21.9 %	20.2 %	27.4 %

Sources: *Frontline*, December 3, 1993, p. 24, June 28, 1996 and November 15, 1996, p. 22.

* For these elections, the region-wise vote share of the BSP has been analyzed on the basis of six regions only, Uttarakhand, Ruhelkhand, Western UP, Central UP, Bundelkhand and Eastern UP.

Table 5: Region-wise Election Results of the BSP in Madhya Pradesh

	Vindhya Pradesh	Chhattisgarh	Mahakoshal	Malwa
1996 Lok Sabha elections	19.6 percent	7.4 percent	2.9 percent	1.2 percent

Source: *Frontline*, June 28, 1996, p. 85.

Thus, the BSP took root in parts of North India not merely because of Kanshi Ram's organizational work and charisma. The niches it carved out for itself in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh coincided with areas known for long-standing Dalit movements and, perhaps more importantly, the BSP could attract some support among the OBCs because it fielded candidates and gave responsibilities to cadres from these caste groups. But the leap forward that the BSP achieved between 1993 and 1996 in Uttar Pradesh can also be explained by its tactical alliances.

Using Ladders to Reach Power: A Factor of Growth, But for How Long?

Kanshi Ram refused for a long time to make electoral alliances that could distract him from his main aim, namely the organization of the bahujan samaj. But since the founding of the DS-4 his priority was to get access to power and, like Ambedkar, he learned quite soon that expedients were necessary to foster the rise to power of the low castes.

In 1993, the BSP formed a pre-election pact with the Samajwadi Party of Mulayam Singh Yadav. This alliance responded more to tactical than to ideological considerations, as Kanshi Ram explicitly admitted: "The reason why I concluded an alliance with Mulayam Singh Yadav is that if we join our votes in U[tta]r P[radesh] we will be able to form the government."⁴¹

In the 1993 Assembly Elections, the Samajwadi Party won 109 seats out of 425 and the BSP 67. Both parties

formed the government thanks to the Congress's support. Mulayam Singh Yadav became Chief Minister and the BSP obtained 11 ministerial portfolios in a government of 27. During the first month of this coalition, the BSP and the SP faced down the BJP and some members of the Congress who vehemently protested the implementation in Uttarakhand — a sub-region of Uttar Pradesh where the OBCs represented only two percent of the population — of the quotas designed after the Mandal Report.

The relations between the two partners, however, soon deteriorated. First, the BSP was getting worried about the advancement of Yadavs in the administration.⁴² Secondly, the Backward Castes, who were anxious to improve their social status and to keep the most subaltern groups under their domination, reacted violently to the Dalits' efforts towards social mobility. Conflicts over the wages of the agricultural laborers,⁴³ disputes regarding the proprietorship of land and clashes over expenditures on wedding processions that Untouchables can or cannot afford in the eyes of the OBCs, have always been acute. However, they have increased since both groups, the Dalits and the OBCs, have become more assertive since the 1993 elections. These bones of contention partly explain the increasing number of "atrocities." The commission of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes enumerated 11,719 cases of "atrocities" in its 1989-90 report; five years later, it listed 35,262 such cases in its report of 1995, with Uttar Pradesh being the most violent state (see Table 8).

The recrudescence of atrocities in Uttar Pradesh was often caused by the upper castes, more particularly the Rajputs, who were worried about the increasing political influence of the Dalits.⁴⁴ However, the OBCs — and especially the Yadavs — who became more self-confident after the formation of Mulayam Singh Yadav's government, were also prompt to harass the Untouchables.⁴⁵

The BSP workers reacted by intensifying their efforts to set up statues of Ambedkar in mohallas and villages. This idea, which had apparently been suggested by Radhey Lal

Boudh, a leader of the Dalit Panthers,⁴⁶ served several purposes. It was hoped that it would enable the BSP to propagate the Ambedkarite iconography likely to generate a kind of pan-Indian bahujan "imagined community." It was also a means to assert the bahujans' control over land and correlatively the building of such statues could be "rituals of provocation" that could trigger riots and polarize the upper and lower castes, much as building temples or sufi tombs often serve to set off communal (Hindu-Muslim) riots and can be used for crystallizing communal solidarities.⁴⁷

Table 6: Social profile of the BSP candidates and MLAs in the Assembly elections of Madhya Pradesh (1993) and Uttar Pradesh (1996)

Castes and communities	Madhya Pradesh (1993 candidates)	Uttar Pradesh (1996 candidates)	Uttar Pradesh (1996 MLAs)
Upper Castes		48 (16.4 %)	9 (13.5 %)
Brahmin		11 (3.8 %)	3 (4.5 %)
Rajput		24 (8.3 %)	4 (6 %)
Banya		4 (1.3 %)	
Khattri		2 (0.7 %)	
Bhumihar		2 (0.7 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Kayasth		1 (0.3 %)	
Kashyap		3 (1 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Other		1 (0.3 %)	
Intermediary Castes		5 (1.7 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Jats		5 (1.7 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Other Backward Castes	69 (23.5 %)	87 (30.4 %)	26 (38.8 %)
<i>Backward Castes</i>	<i>25 (8.5 %)</i>	<i>36 (12.6 %)</i>	<i>10 (15 %)</i>
Kurmi	16 (5.5 %)	21 (7.3 %)	8 (12 %)
Ahir/Yadav	8 (2.7 %)	10 (3.4 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Lodhi	1 (0.3 %)	5 (1.7 %)	1 (1.5 %)
<i>Most Backward Castes</i>	<i>44 (15 %)</i>	<i>51 (17.8 %)</i>	<i>16 (24 %)</i>
Pal		8 (2.8 %)	4 (6 %)
Teli	12 (4.1 %)	1 (0.3 %)	
Kachhi/Kushwaha	9 (3 %)	5 (1.7 %)	2 (3 %)
Kirar	2 (0.7 %)		
Gujjar	2 (0.7 %)	3 (1 %)	
Nai	2 (0.7 %)		
Rawat	1 (0.3 %)		
Mali	1 (0.3 %)		
Marar	1 (0.3 %)		
Kallar	1 (0.3 %)		
Gadariya	1 (0.3 %)		
Nishad		6 (2 %)	3 (4.5 %)
Baghela		1 (0.3 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Kumhar		1 (0.3 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Sunar		1 (0.3 %)	
Chaurasia		1 (0.3 %)	
Rajbhar		7 (2.4 %)	2 (3 %)
Shakya		4 (1.3 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Saini		4 (1.3 %)	
Maurya		9 (3 %)	2 (3 %)
Others	12 (4 %)		

Table 6 continued:

Castes and Communi- ties	Madhya Pradesh (1993 candidates)	Uttar Pradesh (1996 candidates)	Uttar Pradesh (1996 MLAs)
Scheduled Castes	91 (31 %)	83 (29 %)	19 (28.4 %)
Chamar/Jatav	33 (11 %)	59 (20.6 %)	11 (16 %)
Satnami	26 (9 %)		
Mahar	12 (4 %)		
Bhangi/ Balmiki	2 (0.7 %)	3 (1 %)	
Balai	2 (0.7 %)		
Kori	1 (0.3 %)		1 (1.5 %)
Dhobi		2 (0.7 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Khatik		1 (0.3 %)	1 (1.5 %)
Pasi		13 (4.5 %)	5 (7.5 %)
Katheriya		2 (0.7 %)	
Kuril		2 (0.7 %)	
Others	15 (5 %)	1 (0.3 %)	
Scheduled Tribes	75 (26 %)		
Muslim	26 (9 %)	51 (18 %)	11 (16 %)
Sikh		2 (0.7 %)	
Christian		1 (0.3 %)	
Unidentified	30 (10 %)	9 (3 %)*	1 (1.5 %)
Total	291 (100 %)	286 (100 %)	67 (100 %)

* 1 Bayar, 1 Sankhavar, 1 Vora, 3 Sethvar, 3 Chauhan.

Sources: For Madhya Pradesh, interviews at the BSP office of Bhopal; for Uttar Pradesh, *Bahujan Sangathak*, November 11, 1996.

In March 1994, in Meerut, Dalits demonstrated against the removal of one of these statues from a public park. The police dispersed them and killed two demonstrators. In Fatehullapur (Barabanki district) Yadavs protested the installation of a bust of Ambedkar on a plot they had been occupying for a long time. In a span of four months about 60 incidents linked to the installation of statues led to 21 deaths amongst the Dalits.⁴⁸ The BSP insisted that Mulayam Singh Yadav should take all necessary measures to stop these “incidents” but they continued. For Kanshi Ram the growing number of atrocities was the main reason for the divorce between the BSP and the SP.⁴⁹

However, the immediate reason for this divorce was Kanshi Ram’s feeling of having been betrayed by his ally. During the local elections, the SP and the BSP did not carry out seat adjustments and the SP often preferred to support Janata Dal candidates. The BSP won only one chairmanship of a district committee (Zila Parishad), while the BJP gained one-third and the SP one-half of them.⁵⁰ Moreover, Mulayam Singh Yadav did not hesitate to welcome BSP dissidents into his party, and probably even encouraged their defection. In June 1994 several of its leaders — Dr. Massod

Ahmed, minister of State for Education, Mohammed Islam, general secretary of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh, Sheikh Suleiman, leader of the parliamentary group of Lucknow — left their posts to protest the authoritarianism of the BSP’s leaders and their indifference towards the Muslims.⁵¹ Kanshi Ram accused Mulayam Singh Yadav of being responsible for these defections. The Chief Minister preferred not to accept the support of the BSP dissidents. One year later, he established a privileged relationship with the president of the BSP of Uttar Pradesh, Raj Bahadur, and this “axis” fostered Kanshi Ram’s distrust vis-à-vis his partner. On June 2, 1995, the BSP withdrew its support to the government and its 11 ministers resigned. The following day Raj Bahadur and 12 other BSP MLAs joined the SP.

The break up of the SP-BSP coalition shows how difficult it is to build an alliance of OBCs and the Scheduled Castes. It had been possible in 1993 because of the Mandal affair but the momentum receded once the battle of quotas had been won. The 1993 Assembly elections had been the culminating point of the anti-high caste mobilization. Yet, the divorce between the SP and the BSP did not bring the latter back to square one as its rise to power testifies.

Table 7: Caste and Community Background of the BSP Executive Committees in UP and MP after the 1997 Party-Elections

Caste and communities	Madhya Pradesh	Uttar Pradesh*
Upper castes		4
Brahmin		3
Banya		1
Other Backward Classes	15	13
Yadav		
Kurmi	4	1
Lodhi		1
Teli	2	
Nai	1	1
Kachi	3	1
Gujar	2	1
Kirar	1	
Mallah (fisherman)	1	
Kalar	1	
Gadarya		1
Saini		1
Bharbhunja (Rajbhar)		2
Manihar (Bangle man)		1
Kumhar		1
Nishad		1
Bind		1
Scheduled Castes	11	5
Chamar	7	3
(Satnami)	(4)	
(Jatav)	(1)	(1)
(Ahirvar)	(1)	
Pasi		1
Mahar	2	
Basoh (basket maker)	1	
Balai	1	
Khatik		1
Scheduled Tribes	6	
Gond	2	
Bhil	1	
Mina	1	
Urav (Christian)	1	
Bhilala	1	
Muslim	4	3
Unidentified		4
Total	36	28

*The office bearers alone are taken into account.

The BSP put an end to the coalition with the SP to become actively involved in another alliance, in a more favorable position, since on June 3, 1995 Mayawati became Chief Minister of the Uttar Pradesh government with BJP support. This alliance was neither more nor less tactical than the one with the SP. It was primarily directed against Mulayam Singh Yadav whom the BSP and the BJP wanted to keep in check because of his growing political influence which, in turn, reflected the increasing assertiveness of the OBCs,

especially the Yadavs. The alliance of the BSP with the BJP epitomized the convergence between Dalit and Upper castes leaders against the OBCs and, above all, against the Yadavs who now posed as much of a threat to the Scheduled Castes as to the elite landowners and civil servants, because of Mulayam Singh Yadav's reservation policy. This rapprochement of groups poles apart in the social structure was justified by Kanshi Ram in the following terms:

We can take the help of the BJP to advance our na-

Table 8: Atrocities against the Scheduled Castes by State

State	1989-90	1995
Uttar Pradesh	1,067	14,966
Madhya Pradesh	5,592	2,717
Rajasthan	1,501	5,204
Bihar	434	NA
Gujarat	710	NA
Tamil Nadu	334	NA
Maharashtra	426	NA
Total	11,719	35,262

Sources: For 1984-85, V. Tatu, *Politics of Ethnic Nepotism*; New Delhi: Sterling Publishers United, 1991, p.131, for 1989-90, *Lok Sabha Debates*, 8, 2, August 8, 1990, pp. 622-630 and for 1995, H. Hanumanthappa, *Dalits in India: A Status Report*, in *Dalit-International Newsletter*, 2, 2 June 1997, p. 9.

tional agenda. We feel that the upper castes will be more amenable to social transformation than the intermediate castes.⁵²

The fact that the upper castes seem more conciliatory towards the Untouchables than towards the OBCs is quite plausible because they regard the former as posing a relatively minor threat to their continued social and economic dominance. Yet, keeping the Yadavs away from power was not the main reason for the BSP's association with the BJP; this alliance was especially valued because it enabled the BSP to be in office.⁵³ The ends justified the means and this approach was substantiated by Mayawati's first experiment in power.

Mayawati is a Chamar from Uttar Pradesh (her native village, Badalpur is located in the district of Ghaziabad). At the time of her birth in 1956 her father was employed in the telephone department (he retired as an MTNL supervisor). Mayawati was successful in her studies in Meerut (BA and B Ed) and in Delhi (LLB) where her family settled when she was two years old. She became a school-teacher in 1977. Having experienced the typical discrimination that even educated Scheduled Castes routinely endured at that time — and still endure occasionally — “she took to reading Dr. Ambedkar and soaked up his writing like blotting paper.”⁵⁴ Her first political experience took place in 1977, apparently within the Janata Party; but this episode of her life remains rather obscure. Three years later while preparing for the IAS examination she met Kanshi Ram who persuaded her to enter politics. In 1984 she left her job to devote herself to the BSP.⁵⁵ Apparently Kanshi Ram had been impressed by her verbal skills and indeed Mayawati made a name for herself through aggressive, even provocative speeches. For instance, she declared that Gandhi was “the biggest enemy of the Dalits. If Harijans means children of God, should it be considered that the Mahatma was the son of Satan?”⁵⁶

With Mayawati as Chief Minister, the largest state of India was for the first time, directed by a Scheduled Caste; and one who aggressively advocated the cause of the bahujan samaj. For a very large number of Scheduled Castes she became a source of pride, a role model. Mayawati's accession to Uttar Pradesh's top political post played a major part in the consolidation of the BSP's vote banks.

Such a consolidation also resulted from the special

treatment Mayawati granted to subaltern groups. The Dalits were the first to benefit from it. Mayawati started with a series of name changes, Agra University being re-named Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University and the one at Kanpur, Chhatrapati Shahuji Maharaj University. A new district was carved out and was called Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar Nagar, Agra stadium was named Eklavya, and so on. Dozens of Ambedkar statues were put up across the state. The acme of this symbolic conquest of public space was the Periyar Mela that the Mayawati government organized in Lucknow on September 18 and 19, 1995 in honor of E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, or “Periyar.” This Tamil leader, who was more or less the alter ego of Ambedkar in South India until his death in 1973, had been declared *persona non grata* in Uttar Pradesh after the translation into English of his book, *The Ramayana – A True Reading*, where he presented Ram and Sita in a way that many upper caste Hindus in the so-called native state of this divine couple considered blasphemous.⁵⁷ The Periyar Mela aimed at rehabilitating his name, mobilizing Dalits and provoking the upper castes, as Kanshi Ram did on this occasion by making derogatory remarks about Gandhi.

The Scheduled Castes also benefited from some concrete measures during the four-and-a-half months of Mayawati's first government. The Ambedkar Villages Scheme, which had been started by Mulayam Singh Yadav, to allocate special funds for socio-economic development under the IRDP, JRY etc. for a period of two years to villages with a 50 percent Dalit population, was revised to include those with 30 percent (and even 22 percent in certain areas) Dalits. Mayawati gave special treatment to the Dalits of these villages; as a result “all the roads, handpumps, houses, etc., have been largely built in their bustees [neighborhoods].”⁵⁸ Grants were created for Dalit children to attend classes between level 1 and 8; those for Bhangi children were doubled. The Bhangis (or Balmikis), who tend to vote for the BJP, received special treatment as Mayawati announced a program of rehabilitation to help them go beyond their traditional jobs as sweepers. Finally, an ambitious plan to equip 10,000 villages with schools and roads was undertaken.

As far as the OBCs were concerned, Mayawati announced that they were to benefit from 27 percent of the state budget, and that the quotas introduced by Mulayam

Singh Yadav would be implemented as soon as possible. Some caste groups that had been neglected by the administration were included in the OBC list and the Nishad (boat-people also called Mallah or Kevat) got the privilege of hiring plots of sandy land running alongside the rivers.

Finally, Muslims were designated to receive the same grants as Scheduled Caste children and Mayawati implemented the recommendations of the UP Backward Classes Commission which insisted, in a report of July 11, 1994, that low caste Muslims should benefit from reservations in the state administration. Mulayam Singh Yadav had not been in favor of such a measure because it was bound to reduce the quotas of the Hindu OBCs. Mayawati granted the Muslims 8.44 percent of the 27 percent due to the OBCs. A comparable proportion, eight percent, of the police officers' posts also was reserved for the Muslims.⁵⁹ Muslims equally appreciated the Mayawati government's resistance to the Vishva Hindu Parishad's attempt at organizing in September 1995 an important event on Krishna's "birthday" at Mathura, his supposed place of birth. There is a historic mosque at this site and the VHP's intention was, as in Ayodhya, to mobilize Hindus in order to "reconquer" a Muslim space. Mayawati allowed the VHP's function on the condition that it was held more than 3 km away from the mosque.

The BSP government appointed its supporters to key positions in the administration. More than 1,500 transfers took place in Uttar Pradesh during the 136 days of Mayawati's government.⁶⁰ Scheduled Caste District Magistrates ended up at the helm of almost half of the districts.⁶¹ This policy produced a lot of resentment among non-Dalit bureaucrats. The BJP was also worried because the BSP was reinforcing its local implantation, which was confirmed in December 1995 during the local elections when the BSP took control of one municipal corporation (out of 11 of the biggest city councils), nine middle-size municipalities and 22 small towns (as against 1, 82 and 100 for the BJP and 1, 27 and 45 for the SP respectively). The BJP, which already disapproved of the quotas for the Muslims, and resented the way Mayawati countered the VHP in Mathura, withdrew its support on October 18, 1995. The fall of the Mayawati government led New Delhi to declare President's Rule in Uttar Pradesh.

The BSP decided to stand alone, six months later, in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. The party doubled its share of valid votes in Uttar Pradesh, from about 10 percent during the 1989, 1991 and 1993 elections to 20.6 percent (9,483,739 votes, fifty more than the SP). Undoubtedly, the actions of the Mayawati government contributed to this new-found popularity. The party was able to broaden its base amongst the bahujan samaj by showing that Dalits, OBCs and Muslims could occupy the seat of power (in itself a very powerful symbol) and exercise it to their profit (something Mayawati barely had the time to do — many of her promises did not materialize). Yet, the BSP was especially successful in consolidating the Scheduled Castes behind its candidates. According to the CSDS post-poll survey, 63.4 percent of

them voted for the party, as against 26 percent non-Yadav OBCs, 4.3 percent Yadavs, 4.7 percent Muslims and less than one percent upper castes.⁶² The BSP leaders were utterly disappointed by their inability to attract Muslim voters but the fact that the party received two-thirds of the Scheduled Caste vote, representing 21 percent of the state's population, and more than one-fourth of the non-Yadav OBCs was quite an achievement which could only be explained by the BSP's rise to power. Mayawati appeared as the party's most efficient crowd-puller during the election campaign. A study of four villages in Meerut district showed that:

Mayawati is popular and acceptable to the jatav villagers because during her tenure as CM a number of welfare measures for Dalits where undertaken. [...] In the Ambedkar villages [...] the land "pattas" which had been allotted to dalits during the emergency but not given, were actually distributed among them; "pucca" roads linking the villages to the main road, construction of houses, drinking water pumps and toilets in the SC sections of the villages; pensions for old persons; panchayat "ghars," installation of Ambedkar statues, etc., were some of the schemes implemented.⁶³

The developments of June 1995 to June 1996 therefore confirmed Kanshi Ram in the opinion that any coalition was worth considering provided it allowed the BSP to come to power. The BSP was approached by several potential allies in view of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections due in September 1996. The United Front, under leader Deve Gowda, that had just come to power at the Center, was the first to propose to Kanshi Ram an alliance with BSP, but in terms that did not satisfy him.⁶⁴ Eventually, the BSP worked out a seat adjustment with the Congress. On June 25, P.V. Narsimha Rao, as Congress President, and Kanshi Ram presented the details of their agreement at a highly symbolic press-conference, as for the first time the Congress agreed to be the junior partner of a party representing the bahujan samaj (Congress would contest the elections in only one-third of the constituencies against 300 for the BSP). The Congress also agreed that it would support Mayawati as Chief Minister, should the alliance win a majority. The reason why the BSP decided to enter into such an alliance with the Congress was again purely pragmatic. As Kanchan Chandra and Chandrika Parmar argue, it was "(1) a short run strategy to catapult the party into a position to form a government in U.P. and (2) [...] a means to capture Congress' remaining Dalit and backward vote in U.P. and in other states."⁶⁵ Even though the BSP repeated its score of the Lok Sabha elections (20 percent of the votes) and obtained the same number of MLAs (67) as in 1993 (when associated with a stronger partner, the SP), the alliance only won 100 seats out of 425. None of the political parties won a majority or was willing to form an alliance with one of its rivals and, therefore, New Delhi imposed President's Rule.

The BSP leaders announced straight-away that they would form a coalition with any political force in a position to give the Chief Ministership to Mayawati. After six

months of President's Rule, the BJP accepted BSP's conditions. This decision could once again be explained by the apprehension that Mulayam Singh Yadav generated in the BJP and the BSP. Being a Cabinet Minister in the Deve Gowda government, Yadav had indeed acquired a strong influence over the Governor of Uttar Pradesh, Romesh Bhandari. According to the BJP-BSP agreement, Mayawati would be Chief Minister for six months, followed by a BJP leader and they would then function in rotation. The BJP and the BSP would each supply one-half of the ministers. The BSP therefore came back to power thanks to a new reversal of alliances. Mayawati declared:

Our rank and file has no problems about the new political line. They know that we have to change tactics from time to time to achieve social change.⁶⁶

Within the government the BSP and the BJP had eight ministers and 12 ministers of state each, as Mayawati kept 33 departments from 24 ministerial portfolios.⁶⁷ During her six-month tenure, Mayawati transferred 1,350 civil and police officials.⁶⁸ (Two days after taking over she announced that 250 constable-clerks would soon be recruited from amongst the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes).⁶⁹ The Ambedkar Villages Scheme was revived in a big way under the direct supervision of the Chief Minister who admitted that by doing so she was focusing her attention "on one section of society," i.e. the Dalits.⁷⁰ The Rs. 350-crore-scheme covered 11,000 villages. In addition, 15,000 Ambedkar statues were installed all over Uttar Pradesh, one of them, in Lucknow, at an estimated cost of Rs. 250,000. Also in Lucknow, the 120-crore Ambedkar Udhyan (Park) assumed colossal dimensions with five 12 foot tall bronze statues of Ambedkar. Mayawati also implemented the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989) in more drastic ways than any of her predecessors.

After six months in office, she left the post of Chief Minister to Kalyan Singh of the BJP but the BSP immediately criticized the government order he issued to the effect that the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act should not be misused. The BSP then withdrew its support for the government. A few weeks earlier Kanshi Ram had prepared the ground for such a move:

My aim is that the BSP should move forward. At any given point, I'll enter into a tactical alliance with another party if I feel it will strengthen the BSP. And it is what I have done in the past. I did not enter into an alliance with the BJP because of any ideological common ground — in fact we are poles apart. My opinion about the party is the one I had stated in 1988 — that it is a cobra. I have never left any party, whether it is the BJP, Congress or whoever in the dark. We entered into an understanding with the BJP last year to increase the base of the BSP and when we feel we are not benefiting any longer, we'll end it [...] I'm only looking for a suitable ladder.⁷¹

However, contrary to Kanshi Ram's expectations, the

Kalyan Singh government did not fall because the BJP attracted sufficient number of defectors from the Congress and the BSP to stay in power. The breakaway group from the BSP was made of 12 MLAs who, according to Kanshi Ram, had been lured by an attractive financial offer of Rs. 50 lakhs.

The BSP contested the 1998 Lok Sabha elections on its own in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh and it polled almost the same number of votes as in 1996 in both states. It suffered setbacks in Punjab, where it had made an alliance with the Congress, and in Bihar (where its seat adjustment with Laloo Prasad Yadav did not really bear fruit). The 1998 elections revealed the weaknesses of the BSP policy regarding party alliances. This policy has certainly enabled the party to consolidate its Dalit vote bank by giving it access to power but it has other limitations. First, with 20 percent of the votes, the BSP cannot reach power alone but it has alienated potential partners, at least for some time. Secondly, the BSP has been striving so hard for power that it has not hesitated to coopt criminals and recruit politicians who were not as committed as people with a BAMCEF or DS-4 background. Kanshi Ram says that he is aware of the inherent risks in this aggregative party-building pattern:

The risk is there of diluting our identity, but for the sake of our growth we have to take that risk. We want a quicker growth and the empowerment of the oppressed. We do not give them [the new comers] any responsibility within the party apparatus, but only field them as our candidates. The organizers are from the DS-4, 95 percent of them. And we are also giving them tickets.⁷²

However, old leaders from the Dalit movement resent the fielding of newcomers during the elections, especially those from the upper castes, such as wealthy industrialists. During the 1998 elections, in Meerut district, BSP activists resigned from the party to protest the issuing of a ticket to former mayor Arun Jain.

Constant changes in alliances for the sake of winning power have led to a decline in party discipline: the BSP is all the more exposed to defections from its members who want to stay in power as their leaders have promoted a political culture based on the occupation of power. Over the last five years, the BSP has also been repeatedly affected by dissidence and defections resulting from weak party structures. BSP does not enjoy great democratic legitimacy: until 1997, it had never held party elections, the office bearers being designated by higher-ranked persons. Kanshi Ram appointed presidents in the states and they, in turn, chose the leaders of the district committees. In 1997 the chiefs of the State units were elected but they continue to select the members of the state executive committees and the district bodies. More importantly, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati do not hesitate to displace presidents of state units; for example, they unceremoniously removed Bhagwat Pal from party presidentship in Uttar Pradesh in May 1997.⁷³ This authoritarianism and personalization of power is most certainly a

weakness. Kanshi Ram founded the party and dominates it thanks to his historical legitimacy, and charisma, but his succession might be difficult to organize and already some cadres and activists are worried about his idiosyncratic way of exercising power. However, Kanshi Ram did announce soon after the disappointing 1998 elections that he would not contest elections over the next five years in order to concentrate on consolidation of the party. It might be a salutary return to his initial focus on organization.

Over the last 15 years the BSP has been almost constantly on an upward trend, a rise largely based on the groundwork of the BAMCEF and the DS-4, the organizational skill of Kanshi Ram, his efforts to reach groups beyond the Dalits and the dividends of Mayawati's governments. However, in 1998, the BSP reached a plateau. This state of things can be explained from different viewpoints. First, one can argue that Mayawati's governments have not been altogether positive for the party. As Chief Minister she emptied the coffers of Uttar Pradesh and has been branded, for that reason, totally irresponsible and utterly corrupt. Rumors about her supposedly long term affair with Kanshi Ram have adversely affected the BSP leadership. Yet, to my mind, the actual and symbolic power of gaining office had a greater effect on Dalits: Mayawati's assumption to the Chief Ministership showed other castes that they could do it.

The BSP's weaknesses rather lay in its narrow social basis. Despite Kanshi Ram's efforts to forge a "bahujan front," his party has not been able to attract a large number of low caste supporters. It is no longer exclusively a Dalit party, but it is not a party of the low castes either since a mere fraction of the OBCs has joined its ranks. In addition, the BSP is not even the party of the Scheduled Castes. For instance, it has relatively few followers among the rural laborers because it paid little attention to land reform. When asked about their program in this respect, BSP state leader softens reply by referring to the party slogan, "Jo Zamin sarkari hai, woh zamin harmari hai" (The government land is ours), but the land mentioned here is often urban land and this slogan is generally used by Dalit movements when they look for a place to install Ambedkar statues. The BSP is also often identified with the Chamars, just as the RPI tends to be "a Mahar party" in Maharashtra. Khatiks, Balmikis and Pasis vote for other parties, partly to distinguish themselves from the Chamars whose hegemony is feared. Besides, the BSP recruits most of its supporters from the younger generations while their parents still vote for the Congress (as in Chhattisgarh among the Satnamis, for instance). The BSP may therefore grow incrementally in the long run and, in the meantime, use its young partisans to convince their parents.

However, broadening its base may not be useful if the BSP's organization is not strengthened and if its policy regarding alliances is not more consistent. A first step in this direction may well consist in the setting up of a more collective, democratic leadership and the exploration of some rap-

prochement with like-minded parties such as the RPI, the other organization claiming the Ambedkarite pedigree.

Notes

¹ I am most grateful to Owen Lynch for his comments on an earlier version of this article.

² Interview with Kanshi Ram, New Delhi, November 12, 1996.

³ Parliament of India, *Tenth Lok Sabha Who's Who*, Delhi: Lok Sabha Secretariat, 1992, p. 326

⁴ *Sunday*, February 13, 1994, pp. 23-31.

⁵ Interview with Kanshi Ram.

⁶ Kanshi Ram still comes from the lower classes: two of his sisters got married to landless laborers in Punjab, a third one to a civil servant of the fourth category and the fourth one to a soldier. His first brother is welder at the thermion factory of Ropar, and the second one cultivates the 1.5 acre family farm. (*Sunday*, February 13, 1994, pp. 28-31).

⁷ Interview with Kanshi Ram.

⁸ According to another source, the birthday celebration of Lord Buddha was the reason (*Sunday*, July 7, 1996, p. 16).

⁹ Interview with Kanshi Ram.

¹⁰ E. Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, Delhi, Manohar, 1992, pp. 106-107.

¹¹ In the central administration the share of Scheduled Castes has increased from 3 and 4 percent for the groups A and B respectively to 10 and 12 percent between 1972 and 1992. (Group A comprises under secretary to secretary level officers and group B, section officers.) *India Today*, April 30, 1994, p. 32.

¹² R. Ramaseshan, "Dalit politics in U.P.," *Seminar*, January 1995, p. 73.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ One of the Congress MPs from the Scheduled Tribes in Madhya Pradesh, Ajit Jogi, who joined the Indian Administrative Service before turning to politics, testifies that when Kanshi Ram called on him, as Collector in Sidhi district (Vindhya Pradesh), "He looked very determined and clearly there was a messianic zeal in the work he was doing." (Cited in *Sunday*, July 7, 1996, p. 16).

¹⁵ In Bilaspur, Daulat Ram Ratnakar, who was to become the BSP chief in Madhya Pradesh, was approached while an undergraduate by T.R. Khunte, an engineer in NPTC who had come from Delhi on behalf of BAMCEF. (Interview with D. Ratnakar, Bhopal, November 2, 1997).

¹⁶ G. Omvedt, "Kanshi Ram and the Bahujan Party," in K.L. Sharma (ed.) *Caste and Class in India*, Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat, 1994, p. 163.

¹⁷ Kanshi Ram bears a grudge against Rajiv Gandhi for this and refused to ally with the Congress during the 1989 elections when, on the contrary, his party aggressively attacked the then ruling party. (Interview with Kanshi Ram.)

¹⁸ Interview with Kanshi Ram.

¹⁹ Interview with Indra Mani Prasad Verma, Bhopal.

²⁰ Interview with Kanshi Ram.

²¹ "Marching to Awaken the Ambedkarite Masses," *The Oppressed Indian*, 5,1, April 1983, p. 16.

²² Kanshi Ram, *The Chamcha Age — An Era of the Stooges*, New Delhi, 1982, p. 90.

²³ The DS-4 has not been dissolved. BSP workers told me that it was now the party's youth wing, in charge of agitations such as the one in favor of reservations. But no action has been held on behalf of the DS-4 over the last 15 years.

²⁴ "Marching to Awaken the Ambedkarites Masses," *The Oppressed Indian*, op. cit.

- ²⁵ "First phase of 100 Days Social Action Concludes in Delhi," *The Oppressed Indian*, cited in B. Joshi (ed.), *Untouchable! Voice of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, New Delhi: Selectbook Service Syndicate, 1986, p. 115.
- ²⁶ Kanshi Ram also began many of his public speeches with an injunction to the upper castes who happened to be present, to leave the meeting-place.
- ²⁷ Some of these slogans come from Kanshi Ram, *Bahujan Samâj ke Iye âshâ kî kîran*, New Delhi: Bahujan Publications, 1992, p. 67.
- ²⁸ Kanshi Ram, "Bahujan Samaj Party aur Haryana Pradesh ke chunav," in Kanshi Ram, *Asha ki kîran*, op. cit., p. 23.
- ²⁹ Azadi ke 44 sal bad bhi bahujan samaj (anusuchit jati, janjati, pichre varg va dharmic alpasankhyak) anyaya tyachar ka shikar in *ibid.*, p. 58.
- ³⁰ One of the BSP slogans says: "Bâba [Saheb Ambedkar] terâ mission adhûrâ Kanshi Ram karengê pûrâ" (Baba your unfinished work will be fulfilled by Kanshi Ram.)
- ³¹ S. Dube, "Idioms of Authority and Engendered Agendas: The Satnami Mahasabha, Chhattisgarh, 1925-1950," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 30 (4), 1993, p. 385.
- ³² S. Dube, *Untouchable Pasts — Religion, Identity and Power among a Central Indian Community, 1780-1950*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.
- ³³ Interview with R.K. Jangde, Bhopal, October 19, 1995.
- ³⁴ *India Today*, August 11, 1997, p. 33.
- ³⁵ For more details see the remarkable account by Badri Narayan Tiwari, "Symbol, Memory and Politics: A Social Documentary," Paper presented in the international seminar, "Popular Culture and Social Action," Pune, January 2-8, 1998, organized by the Centre for Co-operative Research in Social Science.
- ³⁶ K. Chandra, "Why does the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) Succeed? A Case Study of the BSP in Hoshiarpur." Paper prepared for presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Washington D.C., March 28, 1998, p. 20.
- ³⁷ O. Lynch, *Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Change in a City of India*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969.
- ³⁸ Interview with I.M.P. Verma, a Nai (barber) who has been returned MLA from Mauganj (Rewa district) in 1993.
- ³⁹ *India Today*, August 31, 1996, p.53.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Kanshi Ram.
- ⁴¹ Interview in *Sunday*, May 16, 1993, pp. 10-11. With the elections won he admitted the tactical character of the alliance: "Up until now, neither Mulayam Singh nor me can stand alone in U[ttar] P[radesh]. That's why we are together" (Interview in *Sunday*, February 13, 1994, p. 26). Therefore, one cannot follow Sudha Pai when she writes that the BSP was converted "from a social/cultural movement to an opportunistic party" in 1995 when it made an alliance with the BJP; the party had started making tactical alliances in 1993 and its move reflected more pragmatism than opportunism. (See S. Pai, "Dalit Assertion in UP," *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 13, 1997, p. 2314).
- ⁴² In the educational sector 720 teachers out of 900 appointed in the districts of Garhwal and Kumaon had been chosen from among the Yadavs, according to a Congress MP whose informations had been collected district by district. In the police, of the 6,000 officers recruited, according to the BJP and the Congress whose figures appeared in the press, 4,200 were said to have been Yadavs. Similarly, 70 percent of the 3,500 policemen recruited by the Uttar Pradesh police were Yadavs. (*India Today*, October 15, 1994, p. 35). This way of acting particularly exasperated the Kurmis whose votes were coveted by the BSP (*Frontline*, January 13, 1995, p. 35).
- ⁴³ The OBCs and the Dalits' class interests are clearly antagonistic since the Untouchables are often landless laborers or cultivators with a very small plot working for the OBCs.
- ⁴⁴ P. Swami, "Conflicts in UP," *Frontline*, March 11, 1994, pp.4-12.
- ⁴⁵ A. Mishra, "Challenge to SP-BSP Government," *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 19, 1994, p. 409, and S. Chandra, Dalits versus the OBCs," *Sunday*, February 27, 1994, pp. 10-13. In March 1994, the *Times of India* cited an intelligence report according to which 27 out of 54 cases of atrocities perpetrated against Untouchables were carried out by OBCs — half a dozen of them involved Yadavs. (*Times of India*, March 2, 1994).
- ⁴⁶ D. Mukerji, "In the Name of Ambedkar," *The Week*, April 24, 1994, p. 60.
- ⁴⁷ On the notion of "rituals of provocation" in the Hindu-Muslim context, see M. Gaborieau, "From Al-Beruni to Jinnah — Indian Ritual and Ideology of the Hindu-Muslim Confrontation in South Asia," *The Anthropologist*, 1,3 (January 1985).
- ⁴⁸ *India Today*, April 10, 1994, p. 56.
- ⁴⁹ "BSP withdrew support in 1995 because Mulayam [Singh Yadav] tried to attract some of our people and because of atrocities against the Scheduled Castes, especially by the Yadavs. That was the main reason. I tried to warn him but he could not or did not want to do anything." (Interview with Kanshi Ram).
- ⁵⁰ A. Mishra, "Limits of OBC-Dalit Politics," *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 10, 1995, p.1356.
- ⁵¹ *The Times of India*, June 24, 1994.
- ⁵² Interview with Kanshi Ram in *Frontline*, June 28, 1996, p. 35.
- ⁵³ Ambedkar himself thought pragmatically that the Scheduled Castes should try to reach power in many ways — including collaboration with the British — because they should not have any inhibition in the conduct of their fight against untouchability.
- ⁵⁴ Cited in Gurmukh Singh, "Power of Maya," *The Times of India*, June 11, 1995.
- ⁵⁵ The same year her family converted to Buddhism.
- ⁵⁶ Cited in G. Singh, "Power of Maya," op.cit.
- ⁵⁷ The book had been proscribed there in 1969.
- ⁵⁸ S. Pai, "Dalit Assertion in UP," op. cit., p. 2314.
- ⁵⁹ BSP, *Mukhya lakshay evan apil*, New Delhi, 1996.
- ⁶⁰ During his first term, M. S. Yadav transferred 419 members of the Indian Administrative Service and 228 members of the Indian Police Service between December 1989 and June 1991. His BJP successor Kalyan Singh transferred 460 IAS and 319 IPS between June 1991 and December 1992. M. S. Yadav during his second term reversed the proportions with respectively 321 IAS and 493 IPS transferred between December 1993 and June 1995. After one month of exercise of power, Mayawati had already transferred 82 IAS and 96 IPS. (*India Today*, July 31, 1995).
- ⁶¹ *Frontline*, December 1, 1995, p. 31.
- ⁶² K. Chandra and C. Parmar, "Party Strategies in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections," *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 1, 1997, pp. 215.
- ⁶³ S. Pai and J. Singh, "Politicization of Dalits and Most Backward Castes," *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 7, 1997, p. 1358.
- ⁶⁴ The results of the general elections had to serve as a base for seat adjustment at the elections in Uttar Pradesh, but the Samajwadi Party — a constituent part of the United Front — had reached the top (or was second) in a large number of constituencies, and if the SP could present more candidates than the BSP it would give the advantage to Mulayam Singh Yadav in the race for Chief Ministership because this post, in application to the agreement, would go to the United Front's party having the largest number of MLAs.
- ⁶⁵ K. Chandra and C. Parmar, op. cit., p. 216.
- ⁶⁶ Interview in *Frontline*, April 18, 1997, p. 15.
- ⁶⁷ Such as home, general administration, finance, power, informa-

tion, civil aviation, excise, forest, justice, planning, industrial development, export promotion, vigilance, secretarial administration, appointment, administrative reforms, small-scale industries, estate and Ambedkar villages development.

⁶⁸ *The Times of India*, September 18, 1997.

⁶⁹ *The Times of India*, March 23, 1997.

⁷⁰ Interview in *India Today*, August 11, 1997, p. 33.

⁷¹ Cited in *The Times of India*, August 21, 1997.

⁷² Interview with Kanshi Ram.

⁷³ *National Mail*, May 24, 1997. Pal was subsequently rehabilitated.
