



Twists and turns
Akhilesh Yadav (left) and Mayawati (right) invested much of their political capital and credibility in joining forces again but, in the end, all bets went wrong. RAJEEV BHATT

STATES OF MATTER

Caste politics, the family way

Growing cynicism about hereditary privileges along with the fission and fusion of political parties driven by contingent interests has altered voting patterns



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It was an alliance expected to halt the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) juggernaut dead in its tracks. Between 2002 and 2017, the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had alternated in power with convincing electoral victories to the Uttar Pradesh State Assembly. It seemed that both parties had reliable social strata to tap into, sufficient to shut out of reckoning the BJP and its distinctive upper caste appeal.

All these calculations were upended in the UP Assembly election of 2017, when both SP and BSP were swept aside by a tidal wave, a repeat and then some more, of the BJP's Lok Sabha triumph of 2014. Minds were focused after the twin debacles. Reaching back to a quarter-century-old precedent, the SP and BSP joined forces yet again, seeking to reprise a famous victory from a time when the BJP seemed just as unstoppable.

Though that experiment was short-lived and soon broke up in acrimony, Akhilesh Yadav of the SP and Mayawati of the BSP invested much of their political capital and credibility in the mission of revival. They also pulled in Ajit Singh's Rashtriya Lok Dal, which has a presence, though diminishing, in UP's western districts. In arithmetical terms, a consolidation of the three parties' votes from 2014 should have put the "Grand Alliance" ahead of the BJP in over half of UP's Lok Sabha constituencies.

The vote count proved all bets wrong and disastrously so. The alliance won 38.9 per cent of votes cast across the state, substantially lower than the cumulative 43 per cent secured by the three parties fighting separately in 2014. And much of the potential gain from this modest consolidation of votes was neutralised by a surge in support for the BJP, which won almost 50 per cent of total votes.

Evidently the hard-sought harmony on the ground, which permitted some measure of vote transfer between alliance partners, was

just not enough. The social bases of the SP and BSP had remained stagnant over the years and all their efforts at consolidation were overwhelmed by a shock-and-awe campaign that took the contest far beyond traditional voter allegiances.

The recriminations began soon afterwards. Mayawati announced her decision to turn the page on the alliance strategy and go her own way. Yet, her judgement that the SP base was resistant towards her candidates may be erroneous, coloured by the bitterness of defeat.

Polling data show that in Bijnor and Nagina, both seats won by the BSP, its 2019 vote share is almost exactly an arithmetical sum of the alliance partners' shares from 2014. In Agra, a reserved seat the BSP contested, it seems to have garnered the SP share from 2014, though this was insufficient against the BJP's solid vote share of well over 50 per cent.

In Firozabad, Badaun and Kannauj, all Yadav strongholds held by members of Akhilesh's family, the SP vote share stagnated between 2014 and 2019. The BSP vote, well over the double-digit threshold in 2014, seems to have transferred to the BJP, enabling it to eke out narrow wins.

To the degree that additive arithmetic worked, it was more than neutralised by the hyper-nationalism the BJP leadership injected into the campaign. Alongside the military machismo that, for all its dubious claims, was embellished and amplified through social media activism, there were the unobtrusive overtures towards a supposed moral majority with claims superior to the disruptive minorities.

Early in the life of independent India, BR Ambedkar was ignored when he warned that caste would continue being an active agency in politics. In 1957, when the sociologist MN

Srinivas drew attention to the persistence of caste, he was received with incredulity. Later scholarship, notably by the University of Chicago scholars Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, spoke of how "associations of caste" had been transformed, under the Constitution, into "caste associations" playing the game of competitive politics.

The Rudolphs identified a significant transition in leadership cultures. "Leadership in the caste association", was "no longer in the hands of those qualified by heredity". Rather, it had passed into the hands of individuals best able to "articulate and represent the purposes of the caste association".

In 2012, with over half a century having passed, the Rudolphs offered retrospection and a look ahead in a symposium organised by the journal *Pacific Affairs*. Caste associations had brought the underprivileged "a place at the table and social respect". Yet, looking ahead, it was clear that the goals of caste politics had "shifted from group welfare and social betterment to the self-serving politics of benefits and patronage".

Growing cynicism about the hereditary privileges embedded in the fission and fusion of political parties responding to contingent interests, has undermined older voting loyalties. This mood has fused with the aspirations unleashed by changing demographics. Yet, the new consolidation under restored upper caste hegemony isolates and disempowers India's minority faiths. And the durability of the new consolidation, as economic climes turn ineluctable, is another matter. Rumours about the death of caste, it may well emerge, are highly exaggerated.

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