



Oddly enough In Uttar Pradesh, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party are in an alliance that defies history and local allegiances **RAJEEV BHATT**

STATES OF MATTER

Local to national

New alliances, however bizarre, will be forged as old ones fray in the months leading to the 2019 general elections



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All democracy is local. Elected bodies at the national level could potentially chart an autonomous course, but their effectiveness would have to be built on the solidarities of local politics.

New friendships will be forged as old ones fray in the months leading to the 2019 general election to the Lok Sabha. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's operating style is a calculated snub of older notions – that shared political power is the best cement for friendships. With his preference to bond through strategies of “shock and awe” rather than the soft power of ideas, he seems prepared for a contest of one against all.

Meanwhile, every seeming absurdity is being strutted out, as opposition strategies are shaped by both local power struggles and larger compulsions. Driven to the wall by an aggressive Trinamool Congress that has basically swept away the ground under its feet, the CPI(M) in West Bengal has made common cause with bitter enemy BJP, to maintain some manner of a toehold in local bodies.

That local effort at political entrepreneurship has drawn the strong censure of the CPI(M) national leadership. The BJP, though, has remained rather quiet, undoubtedly seeing in the alliance an opportunity to devour its opponent in the not-too-distant future.

West Bengal's assertion of the local has very dim prospect of influencing the national. There are other instances where national agendas are driving alliances, even if their prospects of surviving local realities are uncertain. In Telangana, the youngest state of the Indian Union, the Congress has forged an alliance with the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), to confront the powerful regional incumbent in power. Just next door, in Andhra Pradesh, the

TDP and the Congress will confront each other in all ferocity.

Does Telangana point towards an ideology-free future? Or does it offer a foretaste of new coalitions at the local level? The TDP was formed in 1982 on the promise of giving voice to political constituencies whose aspirations had been unleashed but never quite fulfilled within the Congress. Through its entire career, the TDP has remained a key player in anti-Congress politics, first as part of the “third force” and then as an ally of the BJP. Its pivot towards an alliance with the only constant foe it has had, will be closely watched for signs of how deep it percolates into the fabric of the local.

In distant Uttar Pradesh, long-estranged partners, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP), are in an alliance that defies history and local allegiances. Two successive elections – to the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabha – that the BJP swept with 40 per cent of the popular vote and over three-fourths the seats, pose an existential crisis for both the SP and the BSP. The only earlier occasion the two parties have been in alliance was a similar juncture of seemingly impregnable BJP strength.

The SP-BSP alliance, with the former being decidedly the senior partner, had halted the BJP push for hegemony in Uttar Pradesh in 1993, in the first state assembly election after the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Riding the momentum of the coalitions it had assembled out of the wreckage of the collapsing “Congress system”, the BJP then looked unstoppable. An unlikely alliance of backward classes that had remained outside

the Congress fold and Dalits who were then breaking out of it, halted the BJP juggernaut at just the time it seemed most threatening.

The alliance lasted less than two years, foundering on ground realities after the SP allegedly rigged elections to local bodies in its favour, excluding its state-level ally from what it regarded a rightful share. The BSP then went into two briefly lived phases of uneasy cohabitation with the BJP, which never succeeded in regaining power on its own till the dramatic sweep of 2017.

The SP and BSP had taken alternate turns at power before then, going beyond traditional constituencies. But they proved unable to retain newly forged loyalties through established processes of power and patronage. That was the opportunity for the BJP to reinvent itself as the vehicle of a new variant of “subaltern Hindutva”.

The cement that unites the disparate BJP social coalition is what the political scientist Sudha Pai has called “everyday communalism”. Rather than the performative spectacle of the communal riot, “everyday communalism” is expressed in numerous acts that collectively create the disenfranchisement of the state's and, beyond that, the country's largest minority faith.

Countermeasures running from the local to the national will be part of the strategy of the political opposition as it heads into the 2019 general election. How far this contest will manage to contain the violence that lurks just beneath the surface remains to be seen.

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