

The Message from Uttar Pradesh

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Defying all predictions of yet another hung house, the UP elections have delivered a decisive verdict. After fourteen years of coalition rule, Uttar Pradesh has again enabled one single party to form government on its own and that single party is none other than Mayawati's BSP. The SP has predictably emerged as the runner-up, but it is way behind the BSP. The 'resurgent' BJP with all its aggressive communal propaganda has been stalled quite spectacularly by the UP electorate – the party has not even fifty seats in its kitty. And the 'rejuvenated' Congress powered by Rahul Gandhi's much-publicised 'road shows' and 'grandmother's tales' from the days of Bangladesh war has suffered yet more losses; the party spokesmen however tell us that it would have been decimated without the rescue operation led by Rahul Gandhi.

Media analysts may once again describe the poll outcome in terms of the so-called anti-incumbency factor. But anti-incumbency will be too general and too mild a term to capture the popular anger against a government that talked of 'samajwad' (socialism) only to hand over all power and resources to a corporate coterie. In public perception Mulayam Singh's government had become synonymous with a reign of growing crime and loot, terror and repression, and yet this Amar-Sahara-Ambani show was sought to be marketed as the grand metamorphosis of Uttar Pradesh into a great and glorious Uttam Pradesh! If the May 2004 verdict against the NDA reflected the anger of India suffering at the directors of the India shining show, May 2007 has brought home the anger of the UP electorate against the unmitigated lies of Uttam Pradesh and corporate socialism!

The new winning combination of Mayawati has not emerged overnight. She has been working in this direction for quite some time. In fact, the alliances forged earlier with the BJP had reflected the same direction, but a BSP-BJP alliance was always circumscribed by the ideological-political domination of the BJP and proved uneasy and short-lived on both occasions. Mayawati therefore embarked on her latest mission to internalise the alliance within the framework of the BSP. Her new slogans and new overtures were all designed to attain this objective and the election results tell us that they have worked wonders, at least for the time being. The so-called dalit-brahmin alliance has succeeded in attracting large sections of smaller backward castes, other upper castes and the Muslim community as well, and the tilt can be seen easily in terms of votes as well as seats.

Political commentators have begun describing this as the mellowing and maturing of Mayawati, and as the victory of an inclusivist approach in dalit politics with possible ramifications in national politics. Mayawati is being lauded for reinventing the old pre-Mandal Congress equation with a new rainbow coalition. The focus has thus once again turned on individual style and social engineering with little or no reference to the social and political context that has made this new social coalition possible. The results from UP bear a significant resemblance to the change witnessed by Bihar in 2005 except that the dalit factor does not operate in Bihar on the lines of the BSP and the BJP finds a place in the Bihar scheme of things. Both UP and Bihar tell us that while the Congress remains marginalised, the momentum unleashed by the Mandal-Kamandal waves is now being overtaken by a new economic and political reality.

The JD (later RJD) in Bihar and the SP in UP had emerged primarily by riding on the Mandal wave, but they consolidated themselves by positioning themselves against the ascendant and aggressive BJP. But unmitigated misappropriation of public funds and criminalisation of politics became the hallmarks of their new-found political domination, and the vast majority of dalits and MBCs felt

alienated and excluded in every sphere. Meanwhile, the chickens of the neo-liberal economic policies have all come home to roost – acute poverty and unemployment, and in many cases starvation and suicides have become the order of the day. The deepening agrarian crisis and the blatant state-sponsored corporate campaign to usurp all resources including fertile agricultural land have begun pushing rural India to the brink of new uncertainties.

It is this stark economic reality and not the politics of so-called ‘secular front’ that had scripted the BJP’s spectacular fall in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. And with the BJP’s decline and the rise of basic issues, we see a new dynamism and fluidity in the political situation. The ruling classes are trying to contain this growing social churning and mass unrest within the framework of so-called ‘development’ and ‘governance’. These have been Nitish Kumar’s slogans to power in Bihar and Mayawati too is moving in this direction. Some commentators have compared Mayawati’s current rise to the arrival of Lalu Prasad in Bihar in the early 1990s. Back then, Lalu Prasad was a largely unknown quantity with a brand new rhetoric of social justice. Mayawati, by contrast, has already travelled the distance from bahun to sarvajan.

Uttar Pradesh has once again compelled sociologists and political analysts to acknowledge the dynamism of ‘castes’. Caste may be a reality in India, but it clearly does not operate in a fixed and traditional manner. Every time the pundits expect castes to behave in a certain pre-determined pattern of ‘identity politics’, they spring a new surprise by throwing up new equations. New signs of fluidity and realignment nullify the predictions of fragmentation and regimentation. This is how class polarises and transcends castes. There is absolutely no point in either lauding or blaming Mayawati for rewriting caste equations – what remains to be done is to enable the people to grasp the class character of her politics. The BSP is one party that never declares its policies, but all its policies will now anyway be revealed in practice – and that is the basis on which the people will now judge the BSP.

P.S.

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