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## DALIT HISTORY AND POWER POLITICS IN UTTAR PRADESH

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### Abstract:

*To anyone following Dalit history and politics in Uttar Pradesh, the past month should have presented an extraordinary challenge. Consider three images from this time. First, of an earnest Rahul Gandhi stopping over for meals at Dalit bastis as part of his party's strategy to wrest back the Dalit vote from Chief Minister Mayawati. Second, of a six-year-old Dalit girl being hurled into a fire in Mathura; the latest in a pattern of daily assaults on the community. And third, of the Bahujan Samaj Party's five of five, punch-packed performance in the April 2008 by-elections — a dazzling first-anniversary reiteration of power and strength by Team Maya.*

### KEY WORDS:

Dalit History , Power Politics , social commentary , power and strength .

### INTRODUCTION

Which of these contradictory narratives comes closest to telling us the real story in U.P.? Not the first, because wretched as their lives may be, Dalits of 2008 are unlikely to embrace a politics centred on a larges dispensing patron. The second and third are both today's truths, except that they are diametrically opposite truths. One is a searing social commentary. The other is a powerful political statement. One is a horrible, shameful reminder of the continuing savagery against a historically disadvantaged community. The other is the triumph of the same community's strategically brilliant politics.

The physical oppression of Dalits has made the Congress blind to the community's political awakening. At the other end of the spectrum, Ms Mayawati speaks the language of power and politics without sufficient attention to the social problem: that one year after she took office, Dalits continue to be assaulted and humiliated in her State is a paradox magnified by the community's unswerving faith in her.

The new, assertive—Dalit is not even-a factor in Congress calculation. At a recent press meet, party spokesperson Manish Tiwari dismissed the suggestion that rather than push Mr. Gandhi the Congress could groom leaders from among Dalits in U.P.: “We are an egalitarian party that does not believe in community, caste or region-specific leadership.” In another age, when the Congress was all there was, with its rivals but a blip on the political radar, and its voters tied to its apron strings, such lofty claims would have been understandable. Caste, identity and social mobility were expectedly anathema to a mostly family-run party that offered benign and undifferentiated protection to anyone under its overarching suzerainty.

Even as late as the 1990s, the Congress was unable to distinguish between caste as an oppressive social practice and caste as subaltern aspiration. Rajiv Gandhi's much-quoted “caste is cancer” speech, made in the Mandal aftermath, underscores the point. The comment was unexceptional. Yet in the context of O13C empowerment, it implied a clinging to entrenched power inequalities.

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## DALIT HISTORY AND POWER POLITICS IN UTTAR PRADESH

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Of the political parties, the Congress has been the worst affected by the post-Mandal caste dynamics. Yet 18 years after Mandal, the party is still to grasp the essence of that explosion: That once freed, power has a compulsive urge to move lower and lower down the social ladder.

The party's confusion can be seen in its response to Ms Mayawati and the larger Dalit question. Towards the Dalit people, its approach is top-down like a royal conferring rewards. Towards Ms Mayawati, it adopted an arrogance comically out of step with its own standing in the State. Take the party's claim that Ms Mayawati has been unnerved by Mr. Gandhi's forays into her territory. There is no sight more difficult to imagine than the feisty Mayawati shivering at the sight of the young Gandhi. She, the author of an audacious vote strategy that gave U.P. its first majority government in 17 years. And he, an impetuous youth leader from a party with all of 22 seats in the Assembly.

For all its disavowal of caste-based leadership, the Congress forgets one small detail. The party leadership in much of north India is drawn from the forward castes. In U.P., where it must enlarge its base or perish, its decision-making machinery is overwhelmingly Brahmin. So is its Central leadership from that State.

The Congress and the BSP make for a study in contrasts, A Bahujan party with a core Dalit vote, the BSP jumped through hoops to get the 'upper' castes on its side — and did this from a Dalit perspective, without sacrificing its own claim to leadership of the new vote combine.

The Congress did give the impression of moving towards more progressive politics when, in 2004, it went against its grain to strike up savvy alliances. But while it moved externally to win friends, it has been unwilling to shed old shibboleths or carry out internal reform as is evident from its patronizing approach to Dalits in U.P.

Like his father, Rahul appears well-meaning. He disdains flattery and has wisely refused to be cast as Prime Minister-apparent. Yet because he is trapped in the image of family heir, his manner unavoidably becomes that of a regal overlord. On his stopovers in Dalit bastis in U.P., the Gandhi son cut out the frills and tried hard to appear unassuming — but only to attract greater attention for the “ennobling” qualities. In any event, fleeting visits that involve sharing a meal and lending a sympathetic ear to complaints recall princely magnanimity more than camaraderie between equals.

A good half-a-century separates today's assertive Dalit politics from the post-Independence stress on inter-dining and intermingling, and the changed attitude becomes apparent in conversations with Dalit politicians. As Virchandra Paswan, a Rashtriya Janata Dal MP, “We are not in need of is gods who will give us darshan.”

The Congress' transformation from a catch-all party that commanded the bulk of the Dalit vote to a bankrupt has-been says it all. In the 1984 Lok Sabha election, the Congress won 83 of 85 seats from U.P. for an incredible vote share of 51 per cent. It followed this up with a 269 of 425 seats victory (39 per cent vote share) in the 1985 Assembly election. The BSP was not even in the frame then. Two decades later, in 2004, the Congress was down to nine Lok Sabha seats for a vote share of 12.04 per cent, going further downhill with only 22 of 403 seats and a vote share of 8.61 per cent in the 2007 Assembly election.

That this period has marked the ascendance of the BSP and Ms Mayawati is not a coincidence. The Congress' Dalit vote bank deserted it because it spoke to the community from the pulpit, offering it sops arid handouts in place of a share in the power structure which Kanshi Ram and Ms Mayawati astutely fulfilled.

Forget the Congress, even the more pragmatic BJP has not fully understood the force of this phenomenon. When recently, Mahendra Singh Tikait rained casteist abuse on Ms Mayawati, both parties sided with the farmer leader in an attempt to slight her.

The signal this sends out to Dalits cannot do any good to either party. Just where the two parties stand in respect of Dalits was brought out in a survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies immediately following the 2007 Assembly election. Of Dalit Jatavs, 85 per cent supported the BSP as against two per cent for the Congress and three per cent for the BJP. Of other Dalits, 54 per cent supported the BSP as against 5 per cent for the Congress and 11 per cent for the BJP. The BSP polled nearly as many Brahmin votes as the Congress and outperformed the latter among other 'upper' castes. In the year since, the BSP has further tightened its grip on U.P. with a five of five clean sweep of the recently held Assembly and Lok Sabha by-elections. In four seats, the Congress and the BJP candidates lost their security deposits.

The Maya juggernaut is not about to be stopped by the Congress and the BJP. If she falls, she will do so for her own follies, among them the failure to address the physical suffering of a community that made the Maya

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