

# From Bahujan to Hinduja?: BJP's Reconfiguration of Marginalised Castes in Uttar Pradesh

Amit Kumar Yadav

PhD Scholar at Centre for Comparative Politics and Political Theory,  
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi- 110067.

Email: amitku81\_isp[at]jnu.ac.in

ORCID ID: 0009-0007-8427-9131

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=rzm-MpcAAAAJ&hl=en>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amit-Yadav-166>

**Abstract:** *This paper examines the transformation of caste politics in Uttar Pradesh between 2014 and 2024, focusing on the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) strategic mobilisation of marginalised castes, particularly Dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Historically rooted in upper-caste Hindu support, the BJP's political resurgence in UP marks a significant departure from traditional caste alignments dominated by regional parties like the BSP and SP. Through a combination of welfare schemes, symbolic inclusion, ideological narratives rooted in Hindutva, and strategic alliances with smaller caste-based parties, the BJP has successfully reconfigured caste coalitions without alienating its core vote base. This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining discourse analysis, interviews, and quantitative survey data to understand the mechanisms, motivations, and consequences of this shift. By critically engaging with the works of Christophe Jaffrelot, Suhas Palshikar, and Yogendra Yadav, the paper interrogates the implications of this realignment for democratic representation, political agency of subaltern castes, and the future of caste as a mobilizing identity in Indian politics. The findings reveal not just an electoral strategy but a deeper socio-political restructuring with long-term consequences for caste-based assertion and democratic participation.*

**Keywords:** Caste Politics; BJP; Dalits; OBCs; Hindutva; Electoral Strategy; Subaltern; Democracy; Identity Politics; Welfare Schemes; Caste Realignment; Mandal Politics

## 1. Introduction

Caste in Indian society has long been one of the most enduring and influential institutions shaping politics. Far from being a relic of the past, caste plays a central role in determining social hierarchy, access to resources, and political behavior in modern India. Caste, once seen as a rigid social system, transformed into a tool for political mobilization in post-independence India. Political parties began utilizing caste to build alliances, secure votes, and enhance their political influence, shifting caste from a social to a political force. Contrary to the belief that caste impeded modernization, caste evolved into a flexible mechanism that adapted to and facilitated democratic processes. By politicizing caste, marginalized communities gained political representation and actively participated in India's democratic transformation. Caste-based identities became a significant asset for political mobilization, with parties and candidates appealing to caste affiliations for support. This shift redefined caste, transforming it from a social hierarchy into a tool for political negotiation and empowerment. Ambedkar considered caste a deep-rooted social evil and advocated political mobilization of **Depressed Classes** to eliminate it through legal and social reforms, while Lohia advocated political mobilization of marginalized castes, which he called **Pichhde** (Dalits, OBCs and all women), to challenge the dominance of the Congress. Kanshi Ram formed the **Bahujan Samaj** to politically mobilize SCs, STs, OBCs and religious minorities.

In the context of Indian politics, caste identities have historically been mobilized as key determinants of electoral strategies, alliances, and outcomes. This is particularly evident in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's most populous state, where a complex web of caste dynamics has determined the

rise and fall of political parties for decades. From caste-based political assertions in the 1990s to the more recent narratives of development and identity politics in the post-Mandal era, Uttar Pradesh stands as a microcosm for understanding the interrelationships of caste politics and democracy in India. Since nineties, parties such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) have long dominated UP's political landscape by building coalitions based on caste-based identities, successfully mobilising marginalised communities, particularly Dalits (SCs) and other backward classes (OBCs), giving them a sense of political empowerment and representation. However, the re-emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the dominant political force in UP since 2014 has fundamentally changed this dynamic because K. Chhibber and Irfan Nooruddin argue that "**political parties are not prisoners of the past**".

Historically identified as a party aligned with upper caste Hindus, the BJP's ability to move beyond its traditional upper caste vote base and attract marginalised castes has become a hallmark of its political strategy. This shift raises important questions about the nature of caste politics in contemporary India and the BJP's role in reshaping it. The period between 2014 and 2024 is a significant decade in the political history of UP as it has seen three Lok Sabha and two State Assembly elections during which the BJP not only won an unprecedented electoral mandate but also reconfigured traditional caste alliances in ways that were shaped in a newer form. At the core of this shift is the BJP's ability to craft a political narrative that has attracted least beneficent Dalits and OBCs communities without compromising its core upper caste support base. The BJP adopted a multi-pronged approach during this period that included welfare policies, symbolic gestures of representation, a broad ideological

Volume 14 Issue 7, July 2025

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

[www.ijsr.net](http://www.ijsr.net)



narrative centred around Hindutva and nationalism. The inclusion of leaders from marginalised communities, alliances with smaller caste-based parties, the promise of socio-economic upliftment and targeted welfare schemes played a key role in changing the political behaviour of these groups. This restructuring of caste politics in UP by the BJP is not just an electoral event but a significant socio-political shift. By incorporating marginalised castes into its fold, the BJP has not only challenged the traditional caste calculus of regional parties but also redefined the terms of caste-based political mobilisation. The implications of this shift extend beyond electoral outcomes, raising important questions about the sustainability of caste as a political identity.

Christophe Jaffrelot emphasizes that caste remains a deeply entrenched social structure in India, shaping access to resources, education, and political representation. In India, the persistence of caste-based inequalities ensures its continued relevance as a tool for political mobilization, Gilles Verniers argues that caste-based parties like the BSP and SP have institutionalized caste as a political identity by framing it as a basis for social justice, ensuring its resilience in the political sphere, Yogendra Yadav notes that despite shifts in voter behavior, caste remains a key determinant of political alliances and voting patterns in Uttar Pradesh, as it reflects real socioeconomic hierarchies that parties can mobilize. The agency of marginalised groups within this new framework, and the broader implications for India's democratic institutions. This study aims to trace the strategies employed by the BJP to mobilise marginalised castes in UP from 2014 to 2024 and analyse the socio-political consequences of this shift.

This study attempts to address several key questions such as what specific strategies did the BJP adopt to connect with marginalised castes in UP, these strategies change traditional caste alignments and voter behaviour, broader implications of these changes for the future of caste-based politics and democratic representation in India. By situating the BJP's mobilisation efforts in the broader context of caste politics in India, this research seeks to contribute to the growing scholarship on the intersection of caste, identity and democracy. The restructuring of caste politics in UP offers a unique lens through which to understand the emerging dynamics of political strategy and social identity in contemporary India. In doing so, this study not only sheds light on an important aspect of Indian politics but also seeks to make critical interventions about the role of caste in shaping the country's democratic future.

## 2. Methodology

In this study I used the following methods. The research is exploratory in nature, employing a mixed methodology that combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative research methods will include an extensive literature review, focusing on the discourse analysis of academic works, political manifestos, and reports from major political parties such as the BJP, BSP, and SP. This will also involve examining campaign speeches, media narratives, and party documents from 2014 to 2024 to understand the framing of caste-related issues. Focus group discussions conducted with leaders and activists from marginalised caste

communities in their natural settings, utilising purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify key voices and perspectives. Additionally, unstructured interviews will be carried out with BJP leaders, grassroots workers, and organisational heads working for the emancipation of marginalised castes to gain insight into their strategies and experiences. The quantitative research methods involve a cross-sectional survey study targeting individuals from different caste groups within marginalised communities across all 80 Lok Sabha and 403 Vidhan Sabha constituencies of Uttar Pradesh. Structured qualitative questionnaires used to collect primary data on perceptions of political representation, welfare policies, and shifts in voting behaviour. Moreover, electoral data from the Election Commission of India and other credible sources analysed to identify voting patterns and caste-based trends, using statistical tools for deeper insights. This mixed-method approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of the BJP's mobilisation strategies and their impact on marginalised castes in Uttar Pradesh.

### Reconfiguration of Marginalised Castes:

This paper explores the key academic works and theories that have informed the understanding of caste-based political mobilisation, with a focus on the role of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in reconfiguring caste politics in Uttar Pradesh between 2014 and 2024. The relationship between caste and politics in India has been long-established, but its evolution in post-independence India has been multifaceted. The early years of independent India saw the Congress Party attempting to balance the demands of social justice with its vision of national integration. This was most visibly manifest in the formulation of affirmative action policies, such as reservations for Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs). However, caste-based inequalities continued to persist, especially in rural areas, where caste hierarchies remained entrenched. In the 1980s and 1990s, caste-based politics underwent a dramatic transformation, with regional parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) emerging as dominant political forces in states like Uttar Pradesh.

The Mandal Commission Report of 1990 and the subsequent implementation of OBC reservations under Prime Minister V.P. Singh played a significant role in reshaping the political landscape. Scholars such as (Chandra, 2004) and (Jaffrelot, 2003) have argued that the Mandal Commission's recommendations enabled the rise of lower-caste politics, giving voice to OBCs and Dalits who had historically been excluded from the political process. (Yadav and Palshikar, 2006) further elucidate the role of these parties in channelling the demands of marginalised communities, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, where the BSP's Dalit-centric ideology and the SP's OBC-based mobilisation strategies became key to electoral success. The BJP, initially viewed as an upper-caste Hindu party aligned with the ideals of Hindutva, had limited success in Uttar Pradesh in its early years. However, the rise of BJP as a dominant political force in the 2010s signaled a shift in Indian politics. Several scholars, such as (Kohli, 2012), have analysed the BJP's initial reliance on Hindu nationalist sentiment, focusing on its appeal to urban, middle-class voters and upper-caste Hindus. The party's performance



in states like Gujarat and its early attempts at national consolidation were framed largely within the context of Hindutva and its opposition to minority communities.

However, the emergence of the Modi phenomenon in 2014, with his appeal as a leader who could represent the aspirations of the "common man," dramatically altered the political calculus. This transformation was not limited to traditional upper-caste supporters, but rather extended to marginalised groups, especially Dalits and OBCs. The work of Jaffrelot (2003) suggests that the BJP's ability to engage with these communities was based on a combination of strategic political manoeuvring and the development of welfare policies aimed at improving their socio-economic conditions. The BJP's political strategy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been characterised by a focus on economic development, national security, and cultural nationalism. However, its increasing success in Uttar Pradesh has been attributed to its ability to appeal to marginalised caste groups through targeted welfare schemes and the integration of marginalised caste leaders within the party fold. Scholars such as (Sharma, 2017) and (Rath, 2021) have explored how the BJP's welfare schemes, such as the Ujjwala Yojana (providing free LPG connections to poor households), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (housing for the poor), and Jan Dhan Yojana (financial inclusion), have gained traction among Dalits, OBCs, and other marginalised groups in Uttar Pradesh. (Gupta, 2000) notes that these schemes were positioned as a departure from the traditional caste-based entitlements provided by regional parties like the BSP, whose welfare policies had historically been seen as catering only to Dalits. By emphasising universal development while also targeting the marginalised, the BJP has been able to project itself as a party that addresses the aspirations of all sections of society, thereby expanding its base among the backward castes. Furthermore, the symbolic representation of marginalised castes within the BJP has been a crucial factor in reconfiguring caste politics. Leaders like Kameshwar Yadav and Ram Naresh Yadav have emerged as influential figures within the party, challenging the longstanding perception that the BJP was solely a party of the upper castes. The integration of Dalit and OBC leaders into the BJP's fold, along with its emphasis on a "unified Hindu identity," has allowed the party to build a coalition that transcends traditional caste divisions. Verma (2020) argues that the BJP's strategy was one of "inclusiveness," wherein marginalised castes were represented at the leadership level, while still maintaining control over the party's core ideology of Hindutva.

A major aspect of the BJP's success in reconfiguring caste politics in Uttar Pradesh is the party's ability to merge caste-based mobilisation with the broader ideological framework of Hindutva and Nationalism. (Kumar, 2019) contends that the BJP has successfully fused caste-based appeals with a narrative of cultural nationalism, thereby creating a sense of unity among Hindus of all castes. This "unification" of marginalised castes under the banner of Hindutva has allowed the BJP to overcome traditional caste-based divisions, promoting a collective Hindu identity over individual caste identities. The party's promotion of religious symbols, temples and the reverence for Hindu icons resonates strongly with lower-caste voters, who may have previously

felt alienated by the caste-based politics of regional parties. This strategy has been particularly effective in Uttar Pradesh, where the Ayodhya Ram Mandir movement, the BJP's focus on cow protection, and the party's alignment with Hindu religious institutions have further reinforced its appeal among marginalised communities. Scholars such as (Rath, 2021) argue that Hindutva, in this sense, provides a platform for the BJP to consolidate its support among lower-caste Hindus, many of whom had been politically excluded or marginalised by the dominant regional caste parties. The success of the BJP in Uttar Pradesh is also reflected in the shifting electoral patterns.

The party's rise in the state, from a marginal player to the dominant force, has been marked by significant changes in voting behaviour among Dalits, OBCs, and other marginalised communities (Yadav, 2020) and (Sharma, 2017) have provided extensive analyses of voting patterns, showing how the BJP has attracted significant portions of the Dalit and OBC vote, particularly in the 2014 and 2019 elections. This shift in allegiance is attributed not only to the BJP's welfare schemes but also to its skillful electoral campaigning, which emphasised issues of national importance, security, and development. At the same time, the decline of traditional caste-based parties like the BSP, which had long been a dominant force in Uttar Pradesh's Dalit politics, is indicative of a broader shift in the political landscape (Chandra, 2004). observes that while caste-based parties continue to hold relevance, their inability to adapt to the changing socio-political realities of marginalised communities, coupled with their failure to deliver tangible socio-economic benefits, has made them vulnerable to BJP's appeal. The increasing support for the BJP in UP signals a redefinition of caste-based loyalties, from the regional parties to a more centralised political order that transcends traditional caste lines. While there is a growing body of research on caste-based politics in India, the BJP's reconfiguration of caste politics in Uttar Pradesh remains underexplored, particularly in terms of its long-term socio-political implications. Scholars such as (Kohli, 2012) and (Jaffrelot, 2021) have highlighted the potential consequences of the BJP's caste mobilisation strategy for Indian democracy. The potential rise of a new form of caste-based coalition politics, integrated with a Hindu nationalist identity, has the capacity to reshape Indian politics in ways that extend beyond Uttar Pradesh. This literature review demonstrates that while caste politics has evolved significantly in Uttar Pradesh, much remains to be understood about how the BJP's approach has altered traditional caste dynamics and the long-term consequences of these changes. Future research must delve deeper into the sustainability of this transformation and the impact it will have on the future of caste-based political mobilisation, social justice, and democratic representation in India.

### 3. Conclusion

The empirical and theoretical exploration undertaken in this paper delineates a paradigmatic shift in the modalities of caste-based political mobilisation in Uttar Pradesh, wherein the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has transcended its erstwhile Brahminical and upper-caste ideological moorings to orchestrate a recalibrated, pan-Hindu political imaginary.



This transformation, encapsulated in the conceptual movement from *Bahujan* to *Hindujan*, signals a strategic subsumption of caste identities into a broader cultural nationalism grounded in the idioms of Hindutva. The BJP's mobilisation of Dalits and OBCs, while outwardly inclusive, must be understood as a hegemonic incorporation that reframes subaltern political agency within a homogenised ethno-religious framework. The incorporation of marginalised castes is neither merely symbolic nor entirely emancipatory; rather, it constitutes a complex assemblage of targeted welfare delivery, discursive Hinduisation, and representational co-optation. The party's success in reconstituting caste coalitions without destabilising its core elite support base illustrates a nuanced form of caste instrumentalism that is both pragmatic and ideological. By deploying the rhetoric of universal development while simultaneously invoking cultural majoritarianism, the BJP has inaugurated a new mode of political interpellation, one that dissolves caste antagonisms into a putative Hindu unity.

This reconfiguration bears profound implications for the future trajectory of caste as a category of political contestation. It raises critical questions about the resilience of social justice paradigms and the viability of subaltern autonomy within an increasingly centralised and ideologically synchronised political order. As such, the BJP's caste strategy in Uttar Pradesh should not be read merely as an electoral innovation but as a deeper structural rearticulation of the relationship between caste, identity, and state power in post-Mandal India. The durability of this hegemonic articulation and its capacity to withstand the contradictions inherent in caste hierarchies will decisively shape the contours of India's democratic ethos in the years to come.

## Reference

- [1] Jaffrelot, C. (2000). The rise of the other backward classes in the Hindi belt. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 59(1), 86-108.
- [2] Jaffrelot, C. (2003). *India's silent revolution: the rise of the lower castes in North India*. Orient Blackswan.
- [3] Jaffrelot, C. (2013). Caste and political parties in India: do Indians vote their caste—while casting their vote?. In *Routledge handbook of Indian politics* (pp. 107-118). Routledge.
- [4] Jaffrelot, C. (2016). The subordinate caste revolution. In *India Briefing* (pp. 121-158). Routledge.
- [5] Jaffrelot, C. (2019). Class and caste in the 2019 Indian election—Why have so many poor started voting for Modi?. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7(2), 149-160.
- [6] Gudavarthy, A. (2021). *India after Modi: Populism and the right*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- [7] Gudavarthy, A., & Vijay, G. (2020). Social policy and political mobilization in India: Producing hierarchical fraternity and polarized differences. *Development and change*, 51(2), 463-484.
- [8] Pai, S. (2019). Changing political preferences among Dalits in Uttar Pradesh in the 2000s: Shift from social justice to aspiration. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 5(1), 33-43.
- [9] Yadav, Y. (1999). Electoral politics in the time of change: India's third electoral system, 1989-99. *Economic and political weekly*, 2393-2399.
- [10] Verma, A. K. (2016). Third democratic upsurge in Uttar Pradesh. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44-49.
- [11] Pai, S. (2019). Changing political preferences among Dalits in Uttar Pradesh in the 2000s: Shift from social justice to aspiration. *Journal of Social Inclusion Studies*, 5(1), 33-43.
- [12] Verma, A. K. (2005). Backward caste politics in Uttar Pradesh. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3889-3892.
- [13] Kumar, A. (2019). "Reconfiguring Caste and Politics in Uttar Pradesh: The BJP's Strategy." *Indian Political Science Review*, 45(2), 213-234.
- [14] Anderson, E., & Jaffrelot, C. (2018). Hindu nationalism and the 'saffronisation of the public sphere': an interview with Christophe Jaffrelot. *Contemporary South Asia*, 26(4), 468-482.
- [15] Kothari, R. (Ed.). (1995). *Caste in Indian politics*. Orient Blackswan.
- [16] Verma, A. K. (2021). OBC leadership and electoral politics in Uttar Pradesh. In *The Routledge Handbook of the Other Backward Classes in India* (pp. 321-341). Routledge India.
- [17] Verma, A. K. (2014). Development and governance trump caste identities in Uttar Pradesh. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 89-94.
- [18] Kumar, S., & Gupta, P. (2021). The OBC vote in North India: Trends and patterns. In *The Routledge Handbook of the Other Backward Classes in India* (pp. 585-596). Routledge India.
- [19] Kumar, A. (2021). Mandal Commission and making of an OBC identity. In *The Routledge Handbook of the Other Backward Classes in India* (pp. 184-214). Routledge India.