

Can the Congress Win Over UP's Dalits?

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The immediate mission of the Congress and its general secretary, Rahul Gandhi, in Uttar Pradesh is to regain the party's original support base that remained intact even as late as 1989 – of the brahmins, Muslims and dalits. With the inability to wean away Jatav voters among dalits from the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Congress is trying its “best” to win support from other dalit communities, predominantly the Pasis.

On 14 April this year party general secretary Rahul Gandhi launched the Congress' biggest campaign to revive itself since 1989. The date was carefully chosen, Ambedkar Jayanti, because he is trying to win over dalit votes in Uttar Pradesh (UP). In 1989 the Congress' support base in UP was made up of a rainbow coalition of brahmins, Muslims and dalits. The Congress has to woo these communities again to regain power in UP.

The brahmin community took to the now ruling Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in small numbers in the 2007 Vidhan Sabha election primarily because there was no strong brahmin leader after Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Atal Behari Vajpayee became politically inactive. Brahmins see in Rahul Gandhi a potential “brahmin” leader. The UP Congress president, legislative leader and Youth Congress president in the state are all from the brahmin community.

Muslim support is no longer enchained to the Samajwadi Party (SP) because their bete noire, the BJP, is powerless these days in both the centre and the state. As a result the Muslim vote is being fought for, as a three-way contest between BSP, SP and Congress. BSP head and Chief Minister Mayawati's stratagem is to therefore change her party's core support base constructed out of the “brahmin-dalit” alliance into a Muslim-dalit alliance.

The dalits, wooed away en masse by the Kanshi Ram-Mayawati duo of the BSP for years, would be the hardest to win back for the Congress. In fact, a year ago the very idea would have sounded ludicrous. But today, Mayawati's angry reaction to the Congress' bid to woo dalits is indication that the Congress may be winning over dalits. How is this happening?

There are 66 dalit castes in UP. Together they make up 21% of UP's population. According to the 2001 Census, among these communities, Jatavs – formerly known as the Chamar community – alone constitute

56% of the scheduled caste (SC) population. The Pasis constitute 16% while the third rung, comprising Dhobis, Koris and Balmikis, another 15%. The fourth rung, comprising Gonds, Dhanuks, and Khatiks constitute about 5%.

It was easy for the BSP to win over the Jatavs – Mayawati belongs to this community – but other dalits would have to be wooed by them as well. For that the BSP, in its formative and later stages in UP, organised social movements to bring different dalit castes together, regardless of the hierarchies and prejudices within them. The biggest achievement on this front was to unite Pasis with Jatavs within the party structure.

The Pasis are concentrated mainly in the Awadh region of central UP. Traditionally, Pasis have been perceived as being lathi-wielding guards of zamindars. The Jatavs would often be at the receiving end of that lathi. The Pasis have willy-nilly aligned themselves with the BSP but they always feel like second-class citizens of a Jatav movement. Some Pasis vote for the SP and BJP too, but most find themselves even more neglected there.

Wooing Other Dalits

If at all the Congress can win dalit votes, it cannot be those of Jatavs who are wedded to the BSP like horse and carriage. But the Congress has some hope of winning over non-Jatav dalit votes, especially those of Pasis. There were indications of this in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. According to Lokniti-CSDS data, the Congress won 4% of Jatav votes (as opposed to 2% in 2007), whereas it improved its non-Jatav tally from 5% to 16%.

Addressing the Congress' student wing National Students' Union of India (NSUI) workers at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) on 30 September 2009, Rahul Gandhi said he goes to meet poor people and it is the media that labels them dalits or adivasis. A week later he repeated this in Thiruvananthapuram: “I ask my office to arrange for my visit to a poor man's home in the poorest village. You see him as a dalit. I see him as a poor person.”

So by his own admission these visits – which have included dining and staying overnight at dalits' houses – are pre-arranged.

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On 15 March 2008, Rahul Gandhi visited a dalit family in Tawah village whose five members had been killed by dacoits. They were Jatavs. Next month, Rahul Gandhi visited Ghisauli village in Jhansi, and when told by dalits that fleeting visits did not help, he returned a week later and took a delegation of 300 dalits to the district commissioner to demand fair wages under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). The dalits were Jatavs, known there as "ahirwal". After the event, the dalits he met, including Shanti Devi whom he had a meal with, told reporters they would still vote for Mayawati, and were shown worshipping a photo of the chief minister on tv. There is no separating Jatavs from Mayawati and her party.

Soon thereafter, on 17 May 2008, Rahul Gandhi took the residents of Banpurwa village by surprise and went straight to a meeting of a women's self-help group that provides microfinance under a scheme named after Rajiv Gandhi. Rahul chatted there for two hours and then asked one of them for dinner. Her name? Rekha Pasi.

On 25 October 2008, Rahul Gandhi was denied permission to address students at a university in Kanpur. He went to rural schools where, he himself later said, he singled out the backbenchers, who were dalits, for interaction. Then in a speech he gave before the visit ended, he said, "People from different sections of the society are being exploited as votebanks. If the trend continues, it will become a major challenge for the country."

In January 2009, Rahul Gandhi accompanied the British foreign secretary to a dalit village in Amethi to show him the "strength" of India. In Simra village, he stayed the night (on mattresses provided by the Rajiv Gandhi Trust) in the house of Shivkumari Kori. She works as a manual labourer earning Rs 30-40 a day and belongs to the Kori dalit caste traditionally engaged in cloth-weaving.

Later that month, Sonia Gandhi visited her constituency, Rae Bareilly, where she went to the Mahe Fort and assured the locals that she will talk to the tourism minister to help develop it as a tourist spot. The fort was built by a Pasi ruler.

At some point Rahul Gandhi's "core team" decided to get a dalit member. He

was an Indian Institute of Management graduate who left his job abroad to return to UP politics. His job was to "analyse" Rae Bareilly and Amethi. His name was Ranjan Chaudhary, a Pasi from Mohanlalganj near Lucknow, and from where his sister Reena Chaudhary had been Lok Sabha member of Parliament in 1999 as a SP legislator but had lost the election on a Congress ticket in 2004. Denied a ticket in 2009, Ranjan left and joined the BJP. The Congress decided to support an independent candidate for the Mohanlalganj – R K Chaudhary, arguably the best known Pasi leader. The SP won the seat thanks to a division of Pasi votes. R K Chaudhary refuses to join the Congress because of his Ambedkarite outlook.

The Congress' dalit face in UP is Mayawati's former principal secretary and co-accused in the Taj corridor scam, P L Punia. When he won the Lok Sabha seat from Barabanki (a Pasi stronghold), Mayawati spent 30 minutes speaking against him in a post-election meeting addressing her party workers, and asked them if they knew that he was not from her caste. He was a Dhanuk from Haryana.

In September 2009, Rahul Gandhi kept his own party workers in the dark and reached a predominantly dalit village in Shravasti district and stayed overnight. His host? Chedi Pasi.

On 2 October 2009, the top six leaders of the UP Congress decided to mark Gandhi Jayanti by emulating Rahul Gandhi and went on to spend a night in a dalit


house in various parts of the state. Party workers arranged for cooks and plates, mosquito nets and mattresses. Congress legislative party leader Pramod Tiwari slept at a dalit gram pradhan's house in Pratapgarh. His name? Devaki Pasi. These night visits by the state leaders were meant to take place every month but nothing was heard again.

On 6 March 2010, Rahul Gandhi visited the victims of a temple stampede in Pratapgarh. He skipped the hospital and went to the villages whose residents had died. He even gave his mobile number to a survivor. His name? Radhey Shyam Pasi.

On 14 April 2010, Rahul Gandhi started a massive "rath yatra" programme as part of a push to rebuild the party cadre at all levels. While very few dalits thronged the Congress functions as it was Ambedkar Jayanti, Rahul Gandhi said in his speech, "This glorious state has suffered over the past two decades essentially on account of the politics of caste and religion".

Not an Easy Task

Winning over Pasis and other non-Jatav dalits may not be easy unless the Congress manages to get a major leader from those communities, but the task has been made somewhat easier by Mayawati's repeated announcement that her successor would be from her own Jatav caste. Taking away even a few of Mayawati's voters can make a huge difference in a multiparty electoral contest where, unlike 1989 or before,


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just 50,000 votes or so can win you an assembly seat.

In a sense, Rahul Gandhi is trying to do in 2012 exactly what Mayawati did in 2007. Just as winning over brahmins seemed impossible for her, winning over dalits seems impossible for him. Just as only a small section of brahmins came forward with the BSP (Kanyakubja brahmins, Satish Chandra Mishra's caste) only a small section of dalits may lean towards the Congress. Rahul Gandhi's dalit visits are just as highly publicised (the media is often

informed in advance) as Mayawati's "brahmin sammelans".

Perceptions are not only as important as reality but can shape reality. Voters, particularly fence-sitters, often make their choices depending on the perception of who is winning. It is the *hawa* – the direction of the wind, they are keen on gauging. Mayawati worked for two years, from 2005 to 2007, to create the perception that brahmins were moving to BSP in large numbers, and that helped her win over anti-incumbency votes from all sections. Similarly, Rahul Gandhi has

begun preparations for 2012 two years in advance by creating the impression that dalits are turning towards the Congress.

However, the difference is that unlike Mayawati, Rahul Gandhi is not openly holding caste gatherings. Unlike Nitish Kumar, he is not promising a "mahadalit" strategy. Doing so would mean alienating the urban youth gatherings in JNU and Thiruvananthapuram – audiences to whom Mayawati would not appeal at all. In the end, Rahul Gandhi's biggest advantage is the Congress Party's ability to be many things to many people, never mind the paradoxes.