

The Elephant that stopped Marching: Ideology, Organisation, and the Electoral Unravelling of the Bahujan Samaj Party

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Abstract

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was, for roughly two decades, the most compelling evidence available that a party built by and for India's most stigmatised communities could actually win power rather than merely protest against its absence. Founded in 1984 by Kanshi Ram out of a decade of cadre-building among Dalit government employees, the party moved from splinter status to an outright majority in Uttar Pradesh in 2007. Then came the reversal period. Between 2012 and 2024 the BSP lost office, lost its legislative presence, lost most of its second-rung leadership, and lost roughly two-thirds of its Uttar Pradesh vote share, finishing the 2024 general election without a single seat and with under ten per cent of the vote in its home state. This article examines that trajectory as a problem in the political sociology of ethnic parties rather than as a story of individual failure. Drawing on election data, survey evidence and the scholarly literature on Dalit politics in north India, the argument advanced here is that the decline followed from a set of linked processes: an ideological repertoire that had been built for mobilisation and was never fully rebuilt for governance; the substitution of symbolic recognition for material delivery at precisely the moment when younger Dalit voters began demanding both; the hollowing out of an intermediate cadre layer through centralisation, ticket-selling, and the personalisation of authority; and the arrival of a competitor, the Bharatiya Janata Party, whose combination of welfare targeting, sub-caste micro-management, and Hindu majoritarian framing attacked the BSP's coalition at its weakest joints. None of these alone would have been fatal. Together, and in sequence, they were. The article closes by considering what the BSP's marginalisation implies for the wider question of whether identity-based mobilisation has exhausted itself in India, and suggests that the answer is more ambiguous than the seat tallies imply.

Keywords: Bahujan Samaj Party, Dalit politics, Uttar Pradesh, ethnic parties, electoral decline, Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, party organisation

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I. Introduction

There is a photograph from May 2007 that gets reproduced in almost every election which Bahujan Samaj Party contests in Uttar Pradesh. Mayawati is standing before an enormous crowd in Lucknow, having just delivered something that most people in Indian politics had assumed was structurally impossible: a single-party majority in Uttar Pradesh, won by a party whose founding premise was that the country's caste hierarchy could be inverted through the ballot. The BSP seized 206 of 403 seats and 30.4 per cent of the vote in the election. Scholars and critics described it as the completion of a democratic revolution that Ambedkar had begun and that the Constitution had only formally promised (Pai, 2002; Jaffrelot, 2003). Seventeen years later, in June 2024, the same party finished third in every one of the eighty Lok Sabha constituencies in that state. It won nothing. Its vote share in Uttar Pradesh had fallen to roughly 9.4 per cent, less than a third of the 2007 figure, and it had already been reduced to a single seat in the 2022 state assembly. Whatever else this is, it is not an ordinary electoral fluctuation. Parties lose elections all the time; what happened to the BSP looks more like the dismantling of a social base. Explaining that dismantling is harder than it first appears, and the difficulty is worth stating plainly at the outset. The obvious answer, that the BJP simply out-competed everyone in north India after 2014, explains too much and too little at once. Too much, because the Samajwadi Party faced the same juggernaut and retained a substantial vote, actually improving its position in 2024. Too little, because the BSP's slide began in 2012, two years before Narendra Modi's national ascent, and because vote share declines of this magnitude among a group as socially distinct and residentially concentrated as the Jatavs of western Uttar Pradesh do not usually happen through generalised national swing alone. Something happened inside the BSP's relationship with its own constituency, and that something requires a more careful reconstruction than the standard commentary offers.

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This article proceeds on the assumption that the BSP is best understood as what Kanchan Chandra (2004) called a patronage-based ethnic party, one whose viability rests on its ability to credibly promise members of a specified ethnic category that their numbers will be converted into access to state resources. Parties of this kind, on Chandra's account, succeed when the ethnic category is large enough to win under the relevant electoral rules and when the party's internal structure gives ambitious members of that category a visible ladder to climb. The interesting implication, and the one that organises the analysis below, is that such parties are vulnerable on two fronts simultaneously. They can fail because the category stops cohering, and they can fail because the ladder stops working. The argument here is that the BSP suffered both failures at once, and that the second may have caused the first. The focus of this article chiefly falls heavily on Uttar Pradesh, which is where the BSP won power, where its organisation was densest, and where its collapse has been most complete. This is a defensible narrowing rather than a neutral one, and it does carry costs. The party retained a modest presence in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana through the 2010s, and it won a single seat in Bihar in both 2020 and 2025, which suggests that the story outside Uttar Pradesh is one of persistent marginality rather than dramatic collapse. Still, the BSP without Uttar Pradesh is a fundamentally different object, and any account of its decline that treats the state as merely one case among several would be missing the point. Second, this article deliberately avoids the moralising register that surrounds writing on Mayawati. There is a large journalistic literature that explains the BSP's decline through her personal failings, her alleged corruption, her reclusiveness, her fondness for statuary. Some of these criticisms have force, and the section on leadership takes them seriously. But biography is a weak explanatory instrument for structural change, and an analysis that ends with a leader's personality tends to obscure the institutional conditions that let a personality matter so much in the first place. The more useful question is not why Mayawati behaved as she did, but why a party organisation that had once been genuinely federal and cadre-driven came to have no mechanism for correcting her. The elephant is the BSP's electoral symbol, chosen partly because it was recognisable to illiterate voters and partly because of its association with strength and, in some Buddhist iconography, with the Buddha's conception. Kanshi Ram used to describe the party's growth in terms of movement, of a caravan that had to keep going, and he was fond of saying that the elephant walks slowly but arrives. The metaphor has aged into something melancholier. The party did not so much collapse as stop moving, and the difference between those two things matters for anyone thinking about whether it might move again. The article is organised into five substantive discussions. The first reviews the existing literature on Dalit mobilisation and ethnic party decline, identifying what that literature explains well and what it leaves open. The second reconstructs the party's inception, its institutional history, and the ideological synthesis Kanshi Ram built out of Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar. The third examines the drift of core Dalit voters away from identity-based mobilisation, giving particular attention to the generational and sub-caste dimensions of that drift. The fourth turns to leadership and organisation, arguing that the personalisation of the party after 2006 destroyed the very mechanism that had made identity mobilisation effective. The fifth situates the BSP within the changed competitive dynamics of north Indian politics after 2014 and traces the mechanics of its electoral marginalisation.

Scholarship on the BSP has passed through three broad phases, and the shape of that scholarship matters because it partly determines what questions about the decline get asked. The first phase, running from the late 1980s to about 2002, was preoccupied with the sheer novelty of what was happening. Writers were trying to establish that a genuine political transformation was underway and that it was not reducible to the older idiom of Congress patronage. Sudha Pai's *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution* (2002) remains the anchoring text of this period. Pai argued that the BSP represented a shift from a politics of dependent incorporation, in which Dalits voted for Congress candidates chosen by dominant-caste power brokers, to a politics of autonomous assertion in which Dalits organised their own party, chose their own candidates, and set their own agenda. The framing was normative as well as descriptive; the democratic revolution was described as unfinished precisely because assertion had not yet translated into structural change in landholding, employment, or everyday social relations. Christophe Jaffrelot's *India's Silent Revolution* (2003) placed the BSP within a longer arc of lower-caste political ascent that ran from the Mandal Commission's implementation through the fragmentation of the Congress system. Jaffrelot's contribution was comparative and periodising rather than ethnographic; he was interested in why north India's plebeian upsurge took a different institutional form from the Dravidian movement's in Tamil Nadu or the non-Brahmin movement's in Maharashtra. Ian Duncan (1999) had earlier provided a valuable corrective to the more celebratory readings by showing, through fieldwork in rural Uttar Pradesh, how thin the BSP's organisational presence often was at the village level even where its vote was overwhelming. Duncan's observation deserves more attention than it has received; it suggests that the organisational weakness usually dated to the Mayawati era may have been present, in embryo, much earlier. Kanchan Chandra's *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed* (2004) belongs to this phase chronologically but is analytically distinct, and it has aged better than most. Chandra's argument was that ethnic parties in patronage democracies succeed not because voters are gripped by primordial attachment but because voters make reasonable inferences about the likelihood of receiving benefits from co-ethnic officeholders, and because ambitious elites make reasonable calculations about where their careers can advance. The crucial variable is intra-party competitiveness: parties that hold internal contests, or that at least

maintain visible and predictable promotion channels, retain talented elites; parties that centralise nominations lose them. Chandra's earlier study of Hoshiarpur (2000) showed the mechanism working in Punjab, where the BSP's rise correlated with the closure of advancement opportunities for Dalits inside Congress. The relevance of this framework to the BSP's later trajectory is direct, and it is somewhat surprising that more of the recent literature has not returned to it.

The second phase, roughly 2002 to 2014, was dominated by the question of coalition-building and, after 2007, by the question of governance. A. K. Verma's (2007) analysis of the sarvajan strategy as a "sandwich coalition" was influential and, in retrospect, prescient about the strategy's instability. Verma noted that by placing Brahmins and Dalits at the two ends of the ritual hierarchy and squeezing the intermediate castes politically, the BSP had constructed something arithmetically clever but sociologically fragile, since it depended on the continued unavailability of an alternative for the Brahmin voter. Badri Narayan's work through this period, particularly *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India* (2011), examined the cultural infrastructure of BSP mobilisation: the recovery and reinvention of Dalit heroes, the circulation of pamphlets and popular booklets, the construction of a counter-history that gave sub-caste communities their own martyrs and myths. Narayan's insight, which the party itself seems to have partly forgotten, was that the BSP's cultural work was disaggregated by sub-caste, and that this disaggregation was what allowed a genuinely Bahujan coalition to form rather than a merely Jatav one. Nicolas Jaoul (2006) approached the same terrain through the politics of statuary, showing how Ambedkar statues functioned as claims on public space that provoked, and were meant to provoke, dominant-caste reaction. Manuela Ciotti's *Retro-modern India* (2010) offered an ethnographic account of Chamar self-fashioning in eastern Uttar Pradesh that complicated the assumption of a unified Dalit political subject. Ramnarayan Rawat's *Reconsidering Untouchability* (2011) went further back, arguing that the Chamar identity itself was substantially a colonial construction that obscured a more varied occupational history, which has some bearing on how solid the "core Dalit vote" ever really was. The third phase, from 2014 onward saw very few and fragmented works on the politics of BSP. Much of the best analysis has appeared as survey-based commentary rather than monographs, particularly through the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll series, which remains the single most valuable evidentiary resource for tracking Dalit voting behaviour across the period. Oliver Heath's (2015) work on the 2014 swing established the scale of the BJP's penetration into non-elite Hindu constituencies. Christophe Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers (2020) have examined whether India has entered a fourth party system organised around BJP dominance, with implications for the survival prospects of state-level ethnic parties. Pradeep Chhibber and Rahul Verma's *Ideology and Identity* (2018) challenged the conventional wisdom that Indian voters are ideologically indifferent, arguing that positions on statism and on the recognition of group difference structure Indian party competition more than commonly assumed, which if correct means that the BSP's ideological drift after 2007 was more electorally consequential than a purely clientelist model would predict. Two other bodies of work deserve mention because they bear directly on the argument developed here. The first is the literature on the BJP's outreach to non-dominant subaltern communities. Tariq Thachil's *Elite Parties, Poor Voters* (2014) demonstrated that the BJP's Sangh Parivar affiliates delivered social services in ways that recruited poor voters without requiring the party to dilute its upper-caste programmatic commitments. Badri Narayan's *Fascinating Hindutva* (2009) documented the parallel cultural strategy, the appropriation of local Dalit heroes into a Hindu nationalist narrative frame. Read together, these accounts describe a competitor doing to the BSP exactly what the BSP had done to Congress two decades earlier, and doing it with far greater resources. The second is comparative work on Dalit political mobilisation outside Uttar Pradesh. Hugo Gorringer's *Panthers in Parliament* (2017) on the Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi in Tamil Nadu and Suryakant Waghmore's *Civility against Caste* (2013) on western India both suggest that Dalit parties in states with prior histories of non-Brahmin mobilisation face different constraints and opportunities than those in the Hindi belt. Amit Ahuja's *Mobilizing the Marginalized* (2019) advances the provocative thesis that a strong prior social movement can actually impede subsequent electoral consolidation, because movement-organised communities develop the capacity to bargain across parties rather than committing to one. If Ahuja is right, then Uttar Pradesh's relatively weak pre-BSP Dalit movement infrastructure helps explain both the party's early electoral success and its later inability to survive electoral failure, since there was little movement organisation left standing when the party's electoral fortunes turned. The reminiscent reading on BSP opens up couple of research gaps which is addressed in this paper. First and foremost is the party's organisation is unsettled and disconcerted. Almost every account acknowledges that the BSP suffered organisational decay, ideological dilution, and competitive displacement. Very few specify how these relate. Did the party lose votes and therefore lose cadre, or lose cadre and therefore lose votes? The distinction is not academic, since it determines whether the decline is reversible through a favourable competitive environment or requires organisational reconstruction that the party may no longer be capable of. Second, there is remarkably little systematic work on the internal composition of the BSP's own leadership over time, which is where a Chandra-style argument would need its evidence. Anecdotal reporting on ticket sales and defections is abundant; careful tracking of who held which position and for how long is not. Third, the literature has not adequately theorised what happens to identity-based mobilisation when the identity in question becomes internally stratified. The rise of a Dalit middle class,

concentrated overwhelmingly among Jatavs and Mahars, alongside continued destitution among Valmikis, Musahars, and other communities, means that the category the BSP addresses is no longer socially homogeneous in the way it was in 1984. Gopal Guru (2001) raised this problem early in the context of Dalit-Bahujan political discourse, and Anand Teltumbde (2017) has pressed it hard from a materialist direction, arguing that identity politics has functioned to produce a small beneficiary stratum while leaving the structural conditions of caste largely untouched. Whether one accepts Teltumbde's conclusion or not, the empirical premise is difficult to dispute, and it bears heavily on the question of why the BSP's appeal narrowed.

From Cadre to Cabinet: Inception, History, and the Ideological Architecture of the BSP

The BSP did not begin as a party rather it began as a payroll deduction. That sounds flippant, but the detail is genuinely important to understanding what followed. Kanshi Ram, a Ramdasia Sikh from Ropar district in Punjab who had joined the Explosives Research and Development Laboratory in Pune as a junior scientist, spent the late 1960s and early 1970s organising fellow Scheduled Caste and Backward Class government employees around a simple proposition: that those who had benefited from reservation owed a portion of their salary and their spare time to those who had not. The All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation, BAMCEF, formally launched in 1978, was built on this idea. Its members contributed money and, more valuably, weekends. They organised study circles, distributed literature, and quietly built a network of politically conscious lower-caste professionals across north India who had jobs, education, and, crucially, no dependence on dominant-caste landlords for their livelihood (Narayan, 2014; Jaffrelot, 2003). This was a deliberate inversion of how Indian parties usually recruit. Most build outward from notables who bring their followings with them. Kanshi Ram built inward from individuals who had already achieved a measure of economic independence and then deployed them as organisers. The advantage was autonomy; a Dalit schoolteacher or railway clerk could not be economically punished for political activity the way a landless labourer could. The cost, which took two decades to become visible, was that the party's organisational spine ran through a stratum that was itself a product of reservation, and therefore concentrated among the sub-castes that had benefited most from it. There were two organisations which were formed before the party. Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti, or DS-4, was formed in 1981 as an agitational front, since BAMCEF's employee membership legally constrained overt political activity. The Bahujan Samaj Party was founded on 14 April 1984, Ambedkar's birth anniversary, and the choice of date was neither incidental nor merely symbolic. It announced a lineage claim.

The ideological synthesis

The BSP's ideology has often been described, somewhat lazily, as Ambedkarite. It is more accurate to call it a synthesis, and the components were assembled with a specific political purpose. From Jyotirao Phule came the foundational move: the reframing of caste not as a religious or ritual matter but as a system of conquest and exploitation in which a small Brahmin-Baniya-Thakur elite had subjugated an indigenous majority. Phule's *Gulamgiri* provided the vocabulary of *bahujan*, the many, against a manufactured minority of the privileged. This is where the party's name comes from, and the framing did enormous political work, because it converted a stigmatised minority identity into a numerically dominant one. Dalits alone constituted around 21 per cent of Uttar Pradesh's population. Dalits, Other Backward Classes, and religious minorities together constituted something closer to 85 per cent. Kanshi Ram's much-repeated formulation that the Bahujan Samaj comprised 85 per cent of the population and the ruling elite only 15 was empirically loose but strategically brilliant. It told the most despised people in the social order that they belonged to a majority. From Ambedkar came the constitutional and institutional programme: the insistence that political power was the master key, that social reform without the capture of state institutions would remain hostage to the goodwill of the privileged, and that the annihilation of caste required attacking its religious sanction rather than merely its economic effects (Ambedkar, 1936/2014). Kanshi Ram was, however, selective. Ambedkar's constitutionalism was retained; his moral and philosophical radicalism, particularly the later engagement with Buddhism as a comprehensive ethical alternative, was retained ceremonially but subordinated to electoral calculation. Mayawati's own conversion announcements and mass conversion events have been episodic and instrumental rather than programmatically central, and the contrast with Ambedkar's own 1956 conversion at Nagpur is instructive. From Periyar came the anti-Brahminical cultural militancy, the willingness to attack religious authority directly and with deliberate offensiveness. Early BSP slogans were coarse and confrontational by design. The most notorious, which paired a reference to Tilak, Taraju and Talwar with an instruction to strike them with shoes, was not a lapse of discipline but a mobilisational device. It performed a reversal of the humiliation that structures caste, and for people accustomed to daily deference the performance mattered enormously. Jaoul's (2006) work on the politics of Ambedkar statues describes the same logic in spatial form. To these three, Kanshi Ram added his own distinctive contribution, and it is the one least often credited. *The Chamcha Age* (1982) was an attack not on the upper castes but on Dalits who had achieved position within mainstream parties. Kanshi Ram's argument was that reserved constituencies and nominated positions had produced a class of Dalit leaders whose careers depended on upper-caste patrons, who therefore

could not represent Dalit interests, and who actively obstructed autonomous organisation because it threatened their intermediary role. The term *chamcha*, spoon or stooge, was applied to Jagjivan Ram and, by extension, to the entire tradition of Dalit accommodation within Congress. The polemic served a clear organisational function: it made loyalty to the BSP itself the test of authenticity, and it delegitimised exit. This mattered later, in ways Kanshi Ram probably did not anticipate, because it built into the party's founding ideology a justification for treating internal dissent as betrayal. There is a genuine tension in this ideological package that the party never resolved and that becomes important for the decline. Phule's bahun framing is expansive and majoritarian; it asks Dalits to see themselves as part of a broad exploited majority. Ambedkar's framing, particularly in *Annihilation of Caste*, is more sceptical about such coalitions, since he understood that the intermediate castes were often the immediate agents of Dalit oppression at the village level. Kanshi Ram held these together through sequencing: build the Dalit base first, then expand outward. Mayawati inherited the tension without the sequencing logic, and after 2007 the expansion went in a direction Kanshi Ram had never contemplated, toward the very castes the ideology had been constructed against.

The institutional trajectory

The party's electoral history can be segregated into four fairly sparkling periods. The first, from 1984 to 1993, was one of accumulation without power. The BSP won two Lok Sabha seats in 1989 and 12 Uttar Pradesh assembly seats in the same year, on around 9 per cent of the state vote. These are small numbers, but Kanshi Ram treated early defeats as investments, arguing that each contested election consolidated the base and taught cadres their craft. He was explicit that the party would lose repeatedly before it won, and he was right. The second period, 1993 to 2002, was the era of coalition experiments and instability. The 1993 alliance with Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party, formed in response to the post-Babri political situation, produced a government and the slogan about the sky and the earth turning that captured the improbability of a Dalit-Yadav combination. It lasted eighteen months and ended in the Guest House incident of 2 June 1995, when SP workers attacked Mayawati at the State Guest House in Lucknow. That episode permanently poisoned relations between the two parties and became a foundational memory for BSP cadres. What followed was a sequence of short-lived arrangements with the BJP in 1995, 1997, and 2002, each of which gave Mayawati the chief ministership and each of which ended in acrimony. These arrangements were defended internally as tactical, and they were, but they carried a significant ideological cost: a party built on anti-Brahminism was repeatedly governing with the party of Brahmin and Bania interests. The *chamcha* critique became harder to sustain when the party's own leader was taking oath with BJP support. The third period, 2002 to 2012, encompasses both the party's greatest achievement and the beginnings of its unravelling. The 2007 campaign is the pivot. Its architecture, associated particularly with Satish Chandra Mishra, involved the systematic recruitment of Brahmins through *bhaichara* committees, brotherhood committees, that held meetings in which Dalit and Brahmin party workers were introduced to one another and a shared grievance against Yadav dominance was cultivated. The party fielded 86 Brahmin candidates. The slogan shifted from the shoe-beating register to *Haathi nahin Ganesh hai, Brahma Vishnu Mahesh hai*, which reinterpreted the party symbol through Hindu iconography, a move of extraordinary ideological audacity given the party's Periyarite inheritance. The term *sarvajan*, all people, replaced *bahujan* in official rhetoric. It worked, and it worked spectacularly. The BSP won 206 seats. Verma (2007) analysed the result as the construction of a sandwich coalition, with the party's Dalit base and its new upper-caste recruits pressing the intermediate castes from both sides. Yet the same analysis identified the vulnerability: the Brahmin vote had come to the BSP because the BJP was, at that moment, organisationally moribund in Uttar Pradesh and offered no credible route to power. The moment it revived, that vote had somewhere else to go, and it went. Retrospective survey evidence suggests upper-caste support for the BSP fell sharply as early as 2009 and had substantially evaporated by 2014. The fourth period, from 2012 to the present, is the subject of the remainder of this article. The bare figures: 80 seats and 25.9 per cent in the 2012 assembly election; zero Lok Sabha seats and 19.8 per cent state vote share in 2014; 19 assembly seats and 22.2 per cent in 2017; ten Lok Sabha seats and 19.4 per cent in 2019, achieved through an alliance with the Samajwadi Party that Mayawati abandoned within weeks of the result; one assembly seat and 12.9 per cent in 2022; and zero Lok Sabha seats with roughly 9.4 per cent in 2024. Two features of this sequence deserve emphasis before the analysis proceeds. First, the decline is not monotonic in vote share terms until 2019; between 2014 and 2017 the party actually improved its percentage while collapsing in seats, which is the classic signature of a geographically dispersed vote in a first-past-the-post system. A party polling 22 per cent evenly across 403 constituencies wins almost nothing when two competitors poll 40 and 30. Second, the truly catastrophic falls come after 2019, which is to say after the failed alliance and after the party's core constituency had watched it win ten seats and then immediately squander the arrangement that produced them. The sequencing suggests that voter abandonment followed rather than preceded the party's demonstrated inability to convert votes into power, which is what Chandra's framework would predict.

The Loosening of the Core: Why Dalit Voters Moved Away from Identity Mobilisation

The most striking single fact about the BSP's decline is that it lost a large share of the constituency that defined it. Lokniti-CSDS post-poll data indicate that Jatav support for the BSP, which had exceeded four in five Jatav voters in 2007 and remained around 70 per cent through 2014 and 2017, fell to roughly 65 per cent in 2019 and then to something closer to half or below by 2024, with a substantial portion moving to the BJP and a smaller but meaningful portion to the Samajwadi Party and the Azad Samaj Party. Among non-Jatav Dalits the shift was earlier and sharper; by 2017 the BJP was already winning a plurality of Pasi, Kori, Valmiki, and Dhobi votes in Uttar Pradesh, and by 2022 the margin had widened. To understand the loosening of core voters from BSP, it requires disentangling several processes that are frequently collapsed together.

The sub-caste problem

The category "Dalit" contains, in Uttar Pradesh alone, some sixty-six notified communities with sharply different histories, occupations, and levels of access to state benefits. Jatavs, or Chamars, constitute roughly 54 per cent of the state's Scheduled Caste population and have historically been the community best positioned to benefit from reservation, partly because of a nineteenth and twentieth-century history of occupational mobility through the leather trade and partly because of earlier engagement with the Adi Hindu and Ambedkarite movements (Rawat, 2011; Narayan, 2011). Pasis, the second-largest group, have a distinct history connected to toddy-tapping and to the Adi Hindu movement, and a separate hero tradition centred on figures such as Suheldev and Maharaja Bijli Pasi. Valmiki, associated with sanitation work, occupy the lowest position within the Dalit hierarchy and have historically had the weakest access to education and public employment. Kanshi Ram understood this granularity well and worked with it. Badri Narayan (2011) documents in detail how the BSP's cultural apparatus produced sub-caste-specific pamphlets, celebrated sub-caste heroes, and organised community-specific commemorations. The party's early candidate selection also reflected deliberate spreading across Dalit sub-castes as well as across OBC communities. That work substantially stopped. As the party moved toward the *sarvajan* strategy and then toward increasingly centralised candidate selection, the disaggregated cultural mobilisation withered, while the visible face of the party, its leadership, its Rajya Sabha nominees, its district office-bearers, remained overwhelmingly Jatav. The consequence, well documented in ethnographic work and in the party's own internal complaints, was that non-Jatav Dalits came to perceive the BSP as a Jatav party that solicited their votes without offering them representation. The perception was not entirely fair, but perceptions of representational exclusion do not require accuracy to be politically effective. The BJP, meanwhile, did precisely what the BSP had stopped doing. Narayan's *Fascinating Hindutva* (2009) documented the Sangh Parivar's cultivation of non-Jatav Dalit hero traditions from the early 2000s onward: the elevation of Suheldev as a Pasi warrior-king who defeated a Muslim invader, which simultaneously honoured a Dalit community and inserted it into a Hindu nationalist narrative; the recovery of Jhalkari Bai as a Kori heroine of 1857. Combined with candidate selection that consciously prioritised non-Jatav Dalits, and with organisational work by the Samajik Samrasta Manch, this constituted a targeted assault on the BSP's weakest flank. Thachil's (2014) account of service provision as a recruitment mechanism describes the material complement to this symbolic strategy. There is a certain irony here that is worth registering. The BSP lost non-Jatav Dalits partly because it became too much a party of Dalit identity in the narrow sense, and lost the capacity to manage the internal differentiation that any broad subaltern coalition requires. Identity mobilisation, on this reading, did not fail because identity ceased to matter. It failed because the party mobilised the wrong level of identity.

The generational break

A second process, harder to measure but probably more consequential in the long run, concerns generational change. A Dalit voter who was thirty years old in 1993 had grown up in a village where the possibility of a Dalit chief minister was not merely improbable but genuinely unimaginable, where humiliation was routine and unpunished, and where the state was experienced almost entirely through the mediation of dominant-caste intermediaries. For that voter, Mayawati's ascent was not a policy outcome. It was an ontological event. The dignity dividend, as it might be called, was enormous, and it purchased extraordinary loyalty. Survey and ethnographic work from the period consistently reports Dalit respondents describing what mattered as the ability to sit, to speak, to be addressed properly, to not be made to wait. A Dalit voter who was thirty in 2024 has a different baseline. That person has lived their entire adult life in a state where Mayawati has been chief minister four times, where Ambedkar statues stand in every district town, where a Dalit has been President of India twice, and where the symbolic battle for recognition has been, if not won, then substantially advanced. Recognition that has been achieved stops functioning as a mobilising promise. What that voter wants is closer to what any lower-income young Indian wants: employment, a functioning school, a loan that can start a business, a house, a toilet, electricity, and protection from the everyday violence that remains a fact of Dalit life. Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery's (2008) study of educated unemployment in Uttar Pradesh captured this emergent frustration a decade before it became electorally decisive. The BSP had almost nothing to offer this voter. Its language remained the language

of the 1990s. Its principal governance achievement in the eyes of the wider public, and often in its own presentation of itself, was the construction of memorial parks in Lucknow and Noida, which consumed thousands of crores and which the party defended as the assertion of Dalit presence in public space. The defence has real intellectual content; Jaoul's work makes clear that such monuments are genuine political acts and not vanity. But there is a difference between erecting a statue in 1995, when the act is transgressive and costly, and erecting a memorial complex in 2010 while unemployment among young Dalits is climbing. The first is mobilisation. The second, to many of the very people it was built for, looked like substitution. Chhibber and Verma's (2018) argument becomes relevant here. If Indian voters do respond to programmatic positions on statism and recognition, then a party that offers recognition without redistribution is competing on only one of two dimensions, and it is competing on the dimension where its product is most easily imitated. The BJP could and did offer symbolic recognition to Dalits at low cost, through Ambedkar commemorations, Presidential appointments, and the naming of schemes. What it added was a targeted welfare architecture with individually verifiable benefits: cooking gas connections, housing units, toilets, direct transfers, free foodgrain distribution that expanded dramatically after 2020. Deshpande, Tillin, and Kailash (2019) found that beneficiary status correlated significantly with BJP support in 2019. Whatever one thinks of the political economy of such schemes, they are legible to the recipient in a way that a memorial park is not.

The failure to institutionalise between elections

A third process concerns the absence of the party from the everyday life of its constituency. BAMCEF had been a genuine social organisation. It ran study circles, provided a professional network, gave members a reason to identify with the movement in the fifty months between elections. Almost none of this survived. The BSP after 2007 was an electoral machine that activated during campaigns and largely disappeared afterward. It ran no service wing, no youth organisation of any consequence, no legal aid network for atrocity cases, no cultural front comparable to what the Sangh Parivar maintains. The vacuum this created was filled, and the filling was politically significant. In western Uttar Pradesh, Chandrashekhar Azad's Bhim Army, founded in 2015 in Saharanpur, built precisely the kind of everyday presence the BSP had abandoned: free schools, legal support after caste atrocities, physical presence at flashpoints, an aggressive and youthful public style. Its appeal was concentrated among exactly the demographic the BSP was losing, young, educated or semi-educated, mobile Dalits with smartphones and grievances. Mayawati's response, to publicly denounce Azad as a BJP agent and to refuse any accommodation, was in keeping with the *chamcha* logic of the party's founding ideology but was politically self-defeating. The Azad Samaj Party's subsequent electoral performance has been modest; its 2024 Nagina victory gave it a single Lok Sabha seat. But its significance is less in the votes it has taken than in what it demonstrated: that Dalit political energy in Uttar Pradesh had not disappeared, it had simply stopped flowing through the BSP. The atrocity dimension deserves separate mention. National Crime Records Bureau data show crimes against Scheduled Castes rising through the 2010s, with Uttar Pradesh consistently among the states reporting the highest absolute numbers. High-profile cases, the 2017 Saharanpur violence, the 2020 Hathras case, generated enormous mobilisation, and the BSP's response in each instance was cautious and largely confined to press statements. For a party whose original claim was that it alone would defend Dalit dignity, this was damaging in a way that a lost seat is not. Voters can forgive a party for losing. Forgiving it for being absent is harder.

What this does and does not show

It would be too quick to conclude that identity-based mobilisation has simply exhausted itself. Several considerations complicate that reading. The Dalit vote did not become caste-neutral; it redistributed to other parties that also made explicit caste-based appeals, including the BJP with its non-Jatav Dalit outreach and the Samajwadi Party with its PDA formulation in 2024. The 2024 general election also saw a widely-reported mobilisation around the claim that a large BJP majority would allow constitutional amendment and the removal of reservation, which is about as identity-salient an issue as Indian politics contains, and which appears to have moved Dalit voters toward the Samajwadi Party and Congress in significant numbers. The category continues to structure voting; what has changed is that no single party now holds a monopoly on representing it. Nor is it obvious that material demands have displaced identity demands rather than fused with them. The demand for a caste census, which gathered force between 2021 and 2024, is simultaneously an identity claim and a redistributive one. Younger Dalit voters appear to want recognition and delivery together, and to punish parties that offer only one. The BSP's difficulty may be less that it chose identity over development than that it stopped being credible on either.

Leadership and Organisation: The Costs of a Party with One Supremo

The BSP's organisational difficulties are usually narrated as a list of Mayawati's decisions, and the list is real enough. What that narration misses is the structural logic connecting the decisions, and the fact that the structure was in place before she inherited it.

An inheritance with a flaw in it

Kanshi Ram built a cadre organisation, but he built it around himself. There was no party congress, no election for the presidency, no formal mechanism for policy formation, no internal faction with a recognised right to disagree. Authority flowed from the founder's personal prestige and from the moral standing conferred by decades of ascetic organising. This worked while he was active because his judgement was generally sound and because his own legitimacy was unquestionable. But it meant that when he anointed Mayawati as successor in the mid-1990s, and particularly after his 2003 illness removed him from active politics until his death in 2006, the party had no institutional means of generating alternative leadership or of constraining the leader it had. Duncan's (1999) fieldwork had already noted the thinness of formal structures at the local level even during the growth phase. The BSP was, from early on, a movement with an organisational culture of discipline and obedience rather than a party with rules. The *chamcha* doctrine compounded this. If Dalit leaders who accommodate outside patrons are stooges, and if the test of authenticity is undivided loyalty to the autonomous Dalit party, then internal criticism becomes structurally indistinguishable from betrayal. A doctrine designed to prevent co-optation by Congress ended up functioning as a prohibition on internal dissent.

The centralisation of nomination

The single most consequential organisational change was the transformation of candidate selection into a centralised and, according to persistent and widely-reported allegations, monetised process. The mechanism matters. In a patronage-based ethnic party, as Chandra (2004) argued, the ticket is the currency. Ambitious individuals invest years of unpaid work in a party because a ticket, and through it access to office, is the eventual payoff. Where that payoff is allocated according to visible criteria, work at the base has an expected return and the party sustains a cadre. Where the ticket is allocated by a single person according to opaque criteria, and where a candidate's capacity to finance the campaign and contribute to the party becomes a decisive consideration, the expected return on organisational work approaches zero. The BSP's shift in this direction was gradual and was defended on rational grounds. The party had no corporate funding, no trade union base, no wealthy diaspora. Kanshi Ram himself had raised money through membership fees and small contributions and had always insisted on financial self-reliance. Charging candidates was, in a sense, an extension of that principle. But there is a difference between a candidate contributing to the party and a candidature being effectively purchased, and the party crossed it. By the 2010s the BSP was routinely nominating individuals with no organisational history, including a substantial number of upper-caste and Muslim candidates recruited for their local financial and social weight, in constituencies where long-serving Dalit cadres had expected consideration. The effects compounded. First, cadre demoralisation and attrition, since the ladder had visibly stopped working. Second, adverse selection among candidates, since those willing to pay for tickets were disproportionately those who saw politics as an investment rather than a vocation, and who defected the moment the party's prospects declined. Third, a loss of the party's distinctive advantage in mobilisation, because purchased candidates brought money but not the ideological commitment that had allowed BSP workers to campaign in hostile villages. The 2024 Lok Sabha nominations illustrate the outcome. The BSP contested seventy-nine of eighty seats in Uttar Pradesh and fielded twenty Muslim candidates, twenty-three OBC candidates, eighteen upper-caste candidates, and seventeen Dalits on reserved seats. A party founded to secure Dalit representation nominated Dalits almost exclusively where the law required it. Whatever the tactical reasoning about splitting opposition Muslim votes, the signal sent to the party's own base was not subtle.

Exit as a chronic condition

The list of significant leaders who left the BSP over two decades reads like a catalogue of the party's organisational history. Raj Bahadur, Barkhu Ram Verma, Sone Lal Patel, who founded the Apna Dal in 1995 and whose Kurmi base subsequently allied with the BJP, R. K. Chaudhary, Jang Bahadur Patel, Swami Prasad Maurya, who left in 2016 alleging ticket sales and joined the BJP, taking substantial Maurya-Kushwaha support with him, Brajesh Pathak, Naseemuddin Siddiqui, once the party's principal Muslim face, expelled in 2017, Dara Singh Chauhan, Babu Singh Kushwaha, Jugul Kishore, and Ramveer Upadhyay. After 2019, nine of the ten BSP members elected to the Lok Sabha through the SP alliance either left or were effectively sidelined, with Danish Ali expelled in 2023 and subsequently contesting on a Congress ticket, and Ritesh Pandey and Girish Chandra departing in 2024. The individual episodes have individual causes. The pattern does not. What the pattern indicates is that the BSP offered no viable career for a politician who was not Mayawati, and that in a competitive multi-party environment such politicians will exit, taking with them precisely the intermediate-caste and non-Jatav connections that made the party's coalition possible. Chandra's framework predicts this outcome directly. Ethnic parties that fail to maintain internal competitiveness lose their elites; when elites exit, the informational basis of ethnic voting weakens, because voters lose the visible co-ethnic representatives from whom they infer future benefits; and the party's vote follows.

The dynastic turn and its instability

The succession question has been handled in a manner that has, if anything, accelerated the loss of confidence. Mayawati's brother Anand Kumar was made national vice-president. His son Akash Anand, a young leader educated abroad and introduced to the party at a 2017 Saharanpur rally, was appointed national coordinator and then, in December 2023, publicly designated Mayawati's political successor. The move was defensible on generational grounds; the party badly needed a face capable of speaking to voters under thirty. It sat awkwardly, however, with the party's founding critique of dynastic and patronage politics, and it invited exactly the attack that competitors made. What followed was worse than either the appointment or the criticism. In May 2024, during the Lok Sabha campaign, Mayawati removed Akash Anand from both positions, describing him as insufficiently mature; the immediate trigger was an aggressive speech in Sitapur that had drawn an FIR. In June 2024, weeks after the party's zero-seat result, he was reinstated to both roles. In March 2025 he was expelled from all party posts altogether, alongside his father-in-law Ashok Siddharth. In April 2025, following a series of public apologies in which he described Mayawati as his sole political guru and disavowed advice from relatives, he was readmitted, and in May 2025 he was appointed to a newly created position of chief national coordinator, ranked second in the party, though Mayawati simultaneously announced that she would name no successor and would continue to lead. Four reversals in eighteen months. Even setting aside the merits of any individual decision, the sequence communicated something corrosive to workers, donors, and voters alike: that the party's leadership arrangements were unpredictable, that they turned on personal rather than political considerations, and that no position within the organisation was secure. Party functionaries quoted after the 2024 result explicitly identified the mid-campaign removal as a factor in the collapse, which may be self-serving but is not implausible, since it deprived the campaign of its only mobile campaigner during the final phases.

Communication, visibility, and the media environment

A further organisational deficit concerns the party's relationship to contemporary political communication. Mayawati's public style has, since roughly 2012, been characterised by infrequent rallies, a preference for written statements read out at press conferences where questions are not taken, and an increasing reliance on social media posts issued in her own name. Whatever the reasons, and personal security considerations are among them, the effect in an environment transformed by cheap data and vernacular video content has been severe. The BJP's Uttar Pradesh operation maintains an extensive WhatsApp and social media apparatus reaching down to booth level. The Samajwadi Party rebuilt a comparable capacity after 2017. The BSP has essentially not competed on this terrain. This matters more for the BSP than it would for a party with an intact organisation, because media presence substitutes to some degree for organisational presence. A party that is neither in the village nor on the phone is, for practical purposes, not present at all. The rise of independent Ambedkarite content creators, and of the Bhim Army's own considerable digital footprint, indicates that Dalit political audiences online are large and engaged. They are simply not being addressed by the BSP. The BSP's organisational retreat is not decay but survival under conditions of extreme hostility. Mayawati has faced investigations relating to disproportionate assets and the Taj Corridor case for over two decades. A party without corporate funding, facing an opponent with unmatched financial and institutional resources, in an environment where investigative agencies have been widely alleged to operate selectively against opposition figures, may reasonably conclude that a low-conflict posture is prudent. Some observers have interpreted the BSP's parliamentary conduct, its refusal to join the INDIA alliance, and its restraint on confrontational issues as evidence of accommodation under pressure rather than of ideological drift. The asymmetry of resources and legal exposure in contemporary Indian politics is real, and analyses that treat every opposition decision as free choice are naive. But the argument cannot carry the full weight placed on it. It does not explain the ticket allocation practices, which predate the current national dispensation. It does not explain the failure to build a service or legal-aid wing, which requires no confrontation with anyone. It does not explain the succession reversals. And it does not explain why the Samajwadi Party, facing comparable pressure, chose a different posture and recovered. Constraint shapes the range of available strategies. It does not select among them.

Changing Dynamics and the Mechanics of Electoral Marginalisation

The reconstruction of the north Indian party system

Uttar Pradesh's party system between 1993 and 2012 was genuinely quadrangular in vote terms and effectively bipolar in outcome, with the BSP and SP alternating in office and the BJP and Congress reduced to substantial but non-competitive vote shares. Under those conditions the BSP's roughly one-quarter of the electorate, efficiently distributed and supplemented by a swing component, was enough to win. The system that emerged after 2014 is different in kind, not merely in degree. Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) describe it as a new dominant-party configuration in which the BJP occupies the position Congress held before 1989, though with a substantially different social and ideological basis. Within Uttar Pradesh the practical consequence is that the effective number of competitive parties has fallen to roughly two, and the BSP is not one of them. There were

primarily two mechanisms which drove this consolidation. The first is the BJP's construction of a non-Yadav OBC and non-Jatav Dalit coalition, assembled through candidate selection, alliances with caste-specific parties such as Apna Dal (Sonelal) and the Nishad Party, targeted welfare delivery, and a Hindu consolidation narrative that framed the SP as a party of Muslim appeasement and Yadav dominance (Pai & Kumar, 2018; Narayan, 2021). This coalition was, in structure, remarkably similar to the BSP's original Bahujan project, assembled by a party of the opposite ideological pole. The second is the corresponding consolidation of Muslim voters behind the Samajwadi Party as the most viable anti-BJP vehicle, which stripped the BSP of the Muslim support it had drawn in 2007 and, critically, made the BSP's own Muslim candidates function as spoilers rather than as winners. Once bipolarity sets in, the arithmetic turns brutally against a third party. Strategic voting logic in first-past-the-post systems pushes voters toward the two contenders with a realistic chance, and the effect is self-reinforcing: as the BSP's seat tally falls, voters who might sympathise with it conclude that a vote for it is wasted, which reduces its tally further. In 2022, the party won a single seat, Rasra in Ballia, while polling 12.9 per cent. In 2024 it won nothing while polling 9.4 per cent in the state and roughly 2 per cent nationally.

The spoiler trap

A particular difficulty of the BSP's current position deserves separate treatment because it may be the most damaging thing about it. A third party with a residual but geographically dispersed vote does not merely fail to win. It changes who else wins. Analysis of the 2024 results in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh indicated that BSP candidates polled enough in a number of constituencies to plausibly alter outcomes, generally to the disadvantage of the INDIA bloc. In Madhya Pradesh the party's vote share rose from 2.38 per cent in 2019 to 3.28 per cent in 2024, with candidates in Morena and Satna polling well over a lakh of votes each in seats the BJP won by smaller margins than the reported analysis of vote splitting suggests would have obtained otherwise. The consequence is reputational as much as arithmetical. A party accused of splitting the anti-incumbent vote acquires a label, and the label is corrosive precisely among the voters most motivated by opposition to the incumbent. The persistent charge, made by the Samajwadi Party, by Congress, and by Chandrashekhar Azad, that the BSP now functions as the BJP's B-team, cannot be verified as an account of intention, and Mayawati has rejected it forcefully. But it does not need to be true to be effective. Once a section of Dalit voters concludes that voting BSP helps the BJP, the party's vote becomes self-liquidating. Mayawati's strategic responses have not eased this either. The decision to contest the 2024 Lok Sabha election alone, rejecting repeated Congress overtures to join the INDIA bloc, was defended on the grounds that alliances had historically transferred BSP votes to partners without reciprocal transfer, an argument with genuine empirical support from 2019, when SP-to-BSP transfer was more efficient than the reverse. Yet the alternative chosen produced zero seats and accelerated the flight of voters toward parties that could actually defeat the BJP. The 2019 alliance had produced ten seats and was abandoned within weeks of the count, which suggests a pattern in which the party is unable to sustain the coalitional arrangements that its own arithmetic requires.

The delimitation and demographic dimension

There are suggestively structural factors that are often less discussed which supposedly work against the BSP. The first concerns reserved constituencies. Uttar Pradesh has eighty-six reserved assembly seats and seventeen reserved Lok Sabha seats. Conventional wisdom long held that these were natural BSP territory. In practice, reserved constituencies have never been the party's strongest, because the Dalit population in any given seat rarely exceeds a quarter of the electorate and the winning candidate must therefore secure substantial non-Dalit support. The BJP has won overwhelming majorities of reserved seats in 2017, 2019, and 2022 precisely because non-Dalit voters in these constituencies vote on the same considerations as everywhere else. Ambedkar's original scepticism about joint electorates, expressed in his opposition to the Poona Pact arrangement, has proved uncomfortably durable, and the point is now more relevant to the BSP's difficulties than the party can comfortably acknowledge. The second concerns urbanisation and migration. Dalit populations in Uttar Pradesh have become considerably more mobile, with substantial seasonal and long-term migration to Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, and Gujarat. Migration weakens the local social networks through which the BSP's word-of-mouth mobilisation historically worked, and it exposes migrants to different political environments and different informational sources. The party has made no visible effort to organise among migrant Dalit workers, which is a striking omission for an organisation founded among mobile government employees. The picture outside the party's home state is one of continuous marginality rather than collapse, and it complicates any simple narrative. The BSP has for decades polled between 2 and 8 per cent in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, and Bihar, occasionally winning a handful of seats and occasionally holding the balance in a hung assembly. It won two Madhya Pradesh assembly seats in 2018 and six Rajasthan seats in 2018, all six of whom defected to Congress; the same thing had happened after 2008. It won one Bihar seat in 2020, Ramgarh, whose winner promptly joined the JD(U), and one in 2025. In Punjab, where Kanshi Ram's own political career began and where the Scheduled Caste population share is the highest in India at around 32 per cent, the party has never established the base its

demographics would suggest, a puzzle that Chandra (2000) began to address and that remains under-explained; the presence of a strong Dera-based religious infrastructure, the Sikh political framework, and the absence of an untouchability idiom comparable to the Hindi belt's are all plausibly relevant. Two patterns emerge from this record. First, the BSP's presence outside Uttar Pradesh has always been essentially derivative of its Uttar Pradesh strength, both in resources and in credibility, which means the state's collapse propagates outward. Second, the party's inability to retain elected representatives in states where it wins a few seats is a direct function of the organisational problems described earlier: a legislator with no career prospects inside the party and no ideological socialisation has every reason to sell their mandate. The retention of national party status has become a conscious question. The Election Commission's criteria require, among alternative routes, a 6 per cent vote share in four states plus four Lok Sabha seats, or 2 per cent of Lok Sabha seats from three states, or recognition as a state party in four states. Following 2024, with roughly 2 per cent of the national vote and no Lok Sabha seats, the party's position depends on state-level recognitions that are themselves eroding. Losing the status would cost the party its reserved symbol across states, free broadcast time, and a range of procedural advantages, and the reputational effect on an organisation already perceived as declining would be considerable. The next Uttar Pradesh assembly election, due in early 2027, is the litmus test the party cannot avoid. Several considerations bear on it, and honest assessment requires acknowledging that they point in different directions. Against the party: the base has fragmented, the organisation is thin, the leadership question is unresolved, and the competitive logic of bipolarity is now entrenched. The Samajwadi Party's PDA formulation explicitly targets Dalit voters, and its 2024 performance gave it credibility as the anti-BJP vehicle. The Azad Samaj Party competes for the same young Dalit constituency with more energy and less baggage. For the party, and these should not be dismissed too readily: a residual vote of around 9 per cent concentrated among Jatavs in western Uttar Pradesh remains substantial in absolute terms, roughly a crore voters, and such loyal cores have historically proven capable of reactivation. The party retains its symbol, its name recognition, and a memory of governance that is more favourably regarded in some Dalit communities than the national commentary suggests, particularly regarding law and order in the 2007 to 2012 period. Mayawati remains, whatever her recent record, the only Dalit politician in India who has actually run a large state. And the historical record contains at least one relevant precedent: parties written off in Indian politics have recovered when the competitive environment shifted, as the BJP itself did after 1984 and the Samajwadi Party did after 2017 and 2022. The most defensible prediction is probably the least satisfying one. The BSP is unlikely to collapse entirely in the near term, because its core vote is socially anchored rather than merely partisan, and equally unlikely to recover office, because recovery would require organisational reconstruction that the present leadership structure appears incapable of undertaking. Prolonged marginality, with the party surviving as a spoiler and a symbol, is the outcome the current trajectory points toward.

II. Conclusion

The Bahujan Samaj Party's decline has been narrated too often as a morality tale, and morality tales are poor analytical instruments. The account offered here has tried instead to specify mechanisms, and it may be useful to state the resulting argument in compressed form. The BSP was a patronage-based ethnic party whose viability depended on two things simultaneously: a credible claim to represent a large and cohering social category, and an internal structure that gave ambitious members of that category a reason to invest their careers in the party rather than elsewhere. Between roughly 1984 and 2007 both conditions held, and the party achieved something no comparable formation in independent India had managed. After 2007 both conditions failed, and they failed in a sequence that mattered. The failure began with organisation rather than with ideology or with the electorate. The centralisation of candidate selection, its monetisation, and the absence of any institutional mechanism for internal advancement destroyed the ladder that had held the coalition together. Elites exited, taking with them the sub-caste and OBC connections that had made a Bahujan coalition possible in the first place. As those connections disappeared, so did the party's capacity to address non-Jatav Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs in the disaggregated, community-specific idiom that Kanshi Ram had pioneered and that Badri Narayan documented. The party's public face narrowed to a single sub-caste even as its rhetoric continued to invoke a majority. Voters drew the obvious inference. Only then did the electorate begin to move, and it moved for reasons that were partly generational and partly competitive. A cohort of Dalit voters who had not experienced the pre-1993 order found symbolic recognition an insufficient offer, and encountered a competitor that could match the symbolism while adding legible material benefits and a targeted sub-caste outreach that the BSP had abandoned. The bipolarisation of Uttar Pradesh politics then converted a declining vote into a vanished seat tally, and the resulting spoiler dynamic made the remaining vote look self-defeating even to voters who retained sympathy for the party. The causal ordering suggested here, organisation first and electorate second, is offered with appropriate hesitation. The evidence for it is largely circumstantial, resting on the timing of major defections relative to vote share decline, on the pattern of non-Jatav loss preceding Jatav loss, and on the theoretical expectation derived from Chandra's framework. A properly specified test would require the kind of systematic data on internal party positions that does not currently exist, and constructing it would be a worthwhile project for future research. Several broader implications follow,

and they are worth separating from the specific case. The first concerns what the BSP's trajectory does and does not tell us about identity politics in India. The temptation is to read the decline as evidence that caste-based mobilisation has exhausted itself, that voters have moved on to development or to religion. This reading is too neat. Caste remains the organising fact of Indian electoral behaviour; what has changed is that the BJP has become significantly better at caste arithmetic than the parties that made caste explicit. Hindu consolidation, on close inspection, is not the abolition of caste politics but its subsumption within a hierarchy of identities in which caste-specific benefits are distributed under a majoritarian umbrella. The caste census demand, the continuing salience of reservation as an electoral issue, and the sharp Dalit response to perceived threats to the Constitution in 2024 all indicate that identity-based mobilisation remains available. What has ended is the BSP's monopoly on it. The second concerns the relationship between representation and delivery. Kanshi Ram's foundational insight was that political power is the master key, and the BSP's achievement in securing office for Dalits was substantial and should not be minimised by anyone reckoning with what preceded it. The difficulty is that the master key opened a door the party did not know what to do with. Four terms in office produced significant symbolic transformation, improved law and order by most contemporary accounts, and considerable transfers to individual beneficiaries and party functionaries, but little structural change in land, employment, education, or the everyday exposure of Dalits to violence. Teltumbde's (2017) critique, that identity-based politics has generated a beneficiary class while leaving the structural conditions of caste intact, is uncomfortable and is not fully answered by the BSP's record. Whether any party could have done substantially better within a single state's fiscal and constitutional constraints is a fair rejoinder, and the honest answer is that we do not know. The third concerns the fragility of personalised parties, which is not a problem confined to the BSP or to Dalit politics. A party whose authority derives entirely from a founder's charisma faces a succession crisis that no amount of electoral success can avert. India's party landscape is full of such organisations, and the BSP's experience suggests that the crisis arrives not at the moment of succession but well before it, as the leader's need to prevent rivals from emerging systematically destroys the middle layer on which the party depends. The public and repeated reversals over Akash Anand's position between 2023 and 2025 are the visible symptom of a problem that had been developing for fifteen years. There remains a question that this article can pose but not settle. Was the BSP's decline avoidable, or was it structurally overdetermined? The case for overdetermination is not weak. A party representing roughly a fifth of the electorate in a first-past-the-post system with two larger competitors faces arithmetic that no amount of organisational skill fully overcomes. The resource asymmetry facing an opposition party without corporate or institutional funding has grown severe. The BJP's combination of resources, organisational depth, and majoritarian framing has marginalised most regional formations in north India, not merely this one. A party that had maintained transparent nomination practices would have retained Swami Prasad Maurya, and with him a substantial share of Maurya-Kushwaha voters. A party that had continued sub-caste cultural work would have made the BJP's Suheldev strategy considerably more expensive. A party that had built a service and legal-aid wing would have occupied the space the Bhim Army filled. A party that had honoured its 2019 alliance would have entered 2022 with ten members of Parliament rather than with none and with a partner rather than an enemy. None of these individually saves the BSP; collectively they describe a plausible alternative in which the party remains a serious contender rather than a residual. The elephant, to return to the metaphor, was never fast. Kanshi Ram's whole theory of politics was that slowness was compatible with arrival, that a party that kept walking would eventually reach the destination however long it took. What happened after 2007 was not that the elephant was outrun. It was that it stopped, having arrived somewhere that looked like the destination and turning out not to be. Whether it can be made to move again is a question about organisation rather than about ideology, and the party's answer so far has been that the question does not need to be asked.

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