

## **The Mayawati Factor**

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**The first biography of Mayawati, the contemporary dalit leader, breaks the silence of the Indian elites on a political phenomenon of unusual magnitude. Unfortunately this book's account of the developments that this politician represents has many biases.**

Book reviewed: Ajoy Bose, <i>Behenji: A Political Biography of Mayawati</i> , New Delhi, Penguin India, 2008, 277 pages.
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The Bahujan Samaj Party's rise to political power in Uttar Pradesh has been widely acknowledged as one of the major political events of independent India. It also represents (along with the electoral victories of the ANC in South Africa and Evo Morales in Bolivia) one of the world's rare instances where a political party that openly champions the claims of stigmatized and excluded groups achieves power by playing the game of representative democracy.

The "untouchables" (dalits') rise to power in December 1993 was interpreted by all commentators, foreign as well as Indian, as a significant event, especially since observers had ignored the relatively discreet and subterranean growth of this movement, and had underestimated its magnitude. The stakes were high: with one sixth of the national population, the state of Uttar Pradesh elects one sixth of the members of the Indian Parliament. Beyond the electoral impact, the politicization of caste from below created a political upheaval in the widest sense. After having dropped the Congress party for whom they traditionally voted since independence, dalit voters provoked the downfall of the Hindu nationalists thanks to their political alliance with the Muslims and the Other Backward Castes. By appropriating the dalit electorate (22% of the population), the BSP has thus become a major political force

whose endorsement has become the best guarantee of getting into power for other parties in search for alliances. The leader of this party, Miss Mayawati, currently embodies this new dalit power with an acute sense of political strategy and effectiveness.

Of course this is not the first time – as a matter of fact, it is the fourth time – that an office of Chief Minister has been held by a dalit in India. However, it is the first time a Dalit *woman* has held this office – thus again accentuating the contrast between the social background and the post occupied. But it is rather her belonging to the movement for dalit emancipation that makes this event unprecedented. Previous dalit Chief Ministers had come from parties dominated by traditional elites and thus only replicated at a higher institutional level, the paradigm of weak representation that the institutional arrangement of reserved seats produced at the level of elected assemblies.

### **The End of a Taboo**

Interestingly, it was not until 2008 that an established English publisher (Penguin India) published a biography of the new strong woman of Uttar Pradesh, who by that time had already led four governments. Thus this controversial figure representing the least legitimate sections of society reached the shelves of posh bookshops in the big cities, nearly fifteen years after the democratic thunderbolt struck India in December 1993. At first glance this book could be a sign that the Indian intelligentsia has at last decided to recognize an emancipation movement, which has been treated with contempt and suspicion ever since the conflict between the Dalit leader Ambedkar and Gandhi took place in the 1930s (and ended in the compromise of positive discrimination). Despite the awkwardness that she poses for the intelligentsia that hails from the traditional elite castes, Mayawati embodies the arrogance of an emerging dalit power that has become politically unavoidable and needs to be composed with. Neither patronage nor populism nor corruption is lacking in politics deployed by Mayawati, who has learned to make use of the crude reality of power practices in India rather than to pretend to clean it up, while at the same time claiming to devote the power that she thus achieved to the benefit of the most disadvantaged.

### **“Dignifying” the Detested Representative of the Oppressed**

Although the BSP has not succeeded in breaking out of Uttar Pradesh, in terms of electoral percentages it has now become the largest party in the state. Mayawati, emerging from the activist ranks of this party that was founded by dalit petty government servants in

1984, first became Member of Parliament in 1989, before holding the office of Chief Minister in 1995. Her spectacular rise in the public sphere was immediately “welcomed” by media attacks on her language and her lack of refinement; on her pro-dalit policies, as she was accused of being a “casteist” Chief Minister; and some cases of corruption that provided her opponents with new arguments. Obviously, this political success, unprecedented in the history of the dalit movement, has been possible only by paying the price of weighty concessions to realpolitik, at the expense of the idealistic expectations of the activist base. The latter were the first ones to accept difficult political choices – such as allying with Hindu nationalists in 1995, and giving up the original anti-brahmin ideology in order to garner support from brahmin voters during the elections of 2007. (In India one speaks of electoral clienteles, or “vote banks.”)

Ajoy Bose notes the incomprehension that his project met within his own intellectual circles: “there were those who were appalled that I had chosen to dignify with a biography ‘such a crude, corrupt and completely unscrupulous politician’ – a perception of the dalit firebrand shared by a very large section of the chattering classes till very recently” (pp. 1-2). This perception has begun to change, the author says, since Mayawati has started to attract attention as a political success story and a possible candidate for Prime Minister. What does this book tell us about this partial reconciliation of the enlightened public sphere? Should we see in it a happy (albeit late) acceptance of dalit emancipation? A compromise of a more pragmatical nature with the power that it represents? Or rather, the celebration by a brahmin progressive author of the Dalit party’s renunciation to its previous anti-brahmin radicalism? When examined critically, this journalistic work clearly displays the ambiguities of India’s progressive intelligentsia, who are rather uncomfortable when it comes to the subject of caste and the dalits.

One of the main problems of this book comes from the lack of first-hand investigation into the dalit community, and the BSP itself. Journalistic authority too often becomes a substitute for understanding from the bottom, so the reader misses the context needed to understand the Mayawati political phenomenon, apart from some psychological reflections that feed into, without ever trying to surpass, the stereotype of a paranoid personality. Thus, relying on Mayawati’s long (2000 pages!) autobiography published in Hindi, Bose finds the origin of her political ambition in a desire for revenge against a father who neglected his daughters. This does not begin to explain how her authoritarianism could be a political

method or even a strategy for leading a party in an exclusively male political world, full of violence, bullying, factionalism and other scurvy ways.

### **Explaining Mayawati's Popularity**

Once in office, Mayawati's strong command over administrative power has made it possible to overcome much of the inertia related to the dominant castes' control of the local state apparatus. The result has sometimes proved to be spectacular, as in the symbolically very important arrest of Raju Bhayya, a notorious criminal from the martial thakur caste and a Hindu Nationalist Party elected official, who maintained the population under a reign of terror. The local experiences of the Mayawati regime can therefore explain her popularity among the dalits and the poor in general, for whom she embodies the passage to modern politics. We learn from Bose that 77% of dalits voted for Mayawati in 2007, while among the other communities, depending on the class position of the voters, she got between 15% and 41%. For the poor in general and more particularly for the dalits, the government, under Mayawati, became a support for the first time, especially in the many rural conflicts where the attitude of the police and local authorities plays a crucial role. However, although Bose supplies a key for understanding the popularity of this party, he does not provide a satisfactory account of the BSP vote. He obviously does not realize how much the subaltern classes have been politicized. Instead, he speaks of "the childlike faith that dalits, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, have shown in Mayawati,"<sup>1</sup> and "the dalits' tendency to place their faith in their revered icon," thus emphasizing the emotional aspect and dalits' sentimental identification with their "Behenji" (respected sister).

Although this emotional attachment certainly exists, this account fails to explain its underlying rationality. The hitherto unquestioning loyalty demonstrated by her constituents stems from political wisdom, rather than mere political infantilism. The political maturity of the BSP electorate consists of supporting this party *despite* its flaws. For the BSP in power has brought unprecedented progress, especially the symbolic politics of honouring the heroes of dalit emancipation in the public common space, targeted development programs and social assistance that have largely benefited the poor in general and dalits in particular, the increased accessibility of local governments, and the possibility of being supported by them while

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<sup>1</sup> "As a matter of fact, the childlike faith that dalits, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, have shown in Mayawati has allowed her the freedom to practise the art of realpolitik more than any other political leader in the history of independent India." (p. 5)

facing powerful oppressors. Nevertheless, people's loyalty to Mayawati should not – as unfortunately it does in this book – prevent us from taking seriously the criticism of her that is harboured by these same people – including many of the grassroots activists who account for the early electoral success of the BSP and who have not failed to notice how authoritarianism and venality have marginalized them within the party. In short, it is not possible to understand the success of the BSP without considering the political maturation of the most disadvantaged people, both as a cause and a result of its emergence.

### **The Frustrated Democratic Aspirations behind the Powerful Woman**

The historical reality is that at its outset the BSP gave rise to democratic aspirations, which consisted not only in reaching power democratically, but also, and more idealistically, in nurturing a new, more democratic concept of political power. The creation of a new political elite through the promotion of local activists promised to renew the relationship between the governed and their representatives. Obviously, a political biography does not easily lend itself to highlighting these deeper political aspects, which require the points of view of the nameless actors involved in such a broad mobilization.

For example, Bose completely ignores the period of agitation that preceded the launch of the BSP, in the early 1980s, under the leadership of Dalit Shoshit Sangharsh Samiti (Struggle Committee of the Dalits and the Oppressed). Similarly, the BAMCEF, an organization of dalit officials founded by Kanshi Ram (the charismatic leader and founder of the BSP, himself a former dalit government employee), is only touched on in passing, as a not very relevant form of idealistic sectarianism that Mayawati dismissed in favour a more politician-centred strategy for the development of the party. Yet the whole movement depended on this powerful informal network, for its financing and for its acceptance within dalit circles. Without that preparatory work, the BSP could not have taken off. So Bose gives us only a partial picture of the party's history, which he unduly reduces to a pragmatic, politician-centred organization designed to seize power. His idyllic vision of the relationship of the dalits to this political development nevertheless stands far removed from a much more ambivalent popular view. Among Dalits and especially the early activists, the sense of achievement is mixed with bitterness and a sense of betrayal of the democratic ideals inspired by the movement. So the celebration of Indian democracy that he engages in seems quite out of step with the reality lived by the movement's actors, since the methods for achieving power contradicted the party base's aspirations. Thus, although Mayawati came from that base, once in office, in reaction

to some outbursts by the base, she was the first to silence and often humiliatingly suppress her co-partisans' aspirations for internal democracy, in favour of an authoritarian practise of power.

### **A Debilitating Image of the Subaltern Classes**

By preferring to ignore these internal criticisms by disappointed BSP members, which he inappropriately equates to a kind of worldly elitism coming from a few dalit intellectuals, Bose betrays his own misunderstanding of this movement, which in fact has inspired a number of political and intellectual vocations, even among the most disadvantaged. According to him, "dalits... could not care less about theoretical constructs on how Mayawati should deliver them from exploitation and deprivation. They are just grateful." (p. 247) That judgement seems very questionable. Instead, in absence of empirical evidence, such a level of assurance shows that knowledge of the basic realities of the country has not really progressed since December 1993, when the political experts were all flabbergasted at the result of the elections. This book sadly demonstrates that what should have been a lesson to political experts did not produce any real change in the way that they perceive the politicization of the subaltern classes.

Ignorance of these ground realities is also reflected in the way the dalits are caricatured as "living like animals" (p. 244). Mayawati herself is depicted as having had a "meteoric rise almost out of nowhere,"<sup>2</sup> following a pathway of miracles from which she could pick up certain "survival skills, sharpened in the inner recesses of Delhi's urban jungle, [which] were to serve her well in her political career" (p. 18). The miserable image of the underclass ("the cramped squalor of her childhood surroundings," p. 18), which feeds into the miracle narrative, ignores the collective dynamics of social mobility through education in Ambedkarite circles. Mayawati, the daughter of a petty government employee, is part of this milieu that benefitted from the quotas in education and public employment. She did not come "out of nowhere," in spite of having spent her childhood in a poor district of the capital. However exceptional her political rise to the top of the BSP and Uttar Pradesh politics, her trajectory, which first took her into employment as a primary teacher and then pointed her in the direction of the higher echelons of civil service (after meeting Kanshi Ram, she opted instead for fulltime activism), could make use of the educational efforts of previous

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<sup>2</sup> "Mayawati's meteoric rise almost out of nowhere is also a great tribute to the democratic process in this country." (p. 11)

generations. In this, Mayawati is also representative of the BAMCEF generation of Dalit government employees. Therefore, to present dalits' political success as a miracle of Indian democracy is a twofold error, erasing at the same time dalits' efforts directed towards education and professional achievement, and the impact of their emancipation movement, which is organically linked to these efforts.

The class stereotypes that inform this dramaturgy go hand in hand with a valorization of two prominent sections of the urban middle class: brahmins (the priestly caste), but also, to a lesser extent, banias (the commercial caste), with their alleged pacifism. The so-called tolerance of these two castes, is created at the expense of "the depredations of thakurs, yadavs, and other marauding castes" (p. 235), that is to say, of other high and middle castes claiming the martial legacy of kshatryas, and to whom anti-dalit violence is attributed (notwithstanding the fact that the worst massacres of dalits were committed in Bihar in the 1990s by the Ranvir Sena, a militia of landowners who claim to be brahmins).

The electoral alliance between dalits and brahmins advocated by the BSP during the 2007 elections offers a happy ending to the narrative, that is to say, the end of anti-brahmanism. Bose celebrates the beginning of a new accord of the extremes, reminiscent of the Congress era's politics of patronage, except reversed: "In the past a brahmin-run Congress extended patronage to scheduled castes promising them protection and prosperity; now a party ruled by a dalit's daughter could offer similar sanctuary to brahmins looking for a political patron" (p. 176). Yet, once again, the new social idyll depicted by the author seems largely disconnected from the reality on the ground, where such alliances are pragmatic and temporary, and their breakups can lead to resentment and violence against dalits.

While it bears witness to an effort by the Indian intelligentsia to acknowledge the new realities of power relations, this journalistic book still remains dependent on a vision that is both elitist and superficial, that ignores the realities on the ground, and that fails to question its own class and caste prejudices. The author's indulgence of Mayawati, of her corruption, of her personality cult and of her opportunism (except when he criticizes her alliance with Hindu nationalists), is especially paradoxical in the light of the severe criticisms that the dalit movement itself has formulated against her. By failing to take these arguments seriously, the author seems insensitive to the idealism on which dalits have based their new pride, rooted in the assumption that they have a historic role to play in the creation of a more democratic

society. Instead Bose seems to assume that ideals are not in competence of the dalits, revealing an underlying neo-brahminic thought world where the very idea of associating dalits with values remains unconceivable. This becomes manifest when he writes that for dalits who have studied in mediocre universities, Mayawati offers a much more accessible model than the Ambedkar, a figure who stands for excellence and impeccable morality. Is Mayawati being thus packaged for the urban middle class as an acceptable dalit leader precisely because her faults and her renunciation to ideals make it possible to bring her in line with social stereotypes? Rather than being a pretext to chauvinistically praise the wonders of Indian democracy, the experience of dalit power merits deeper reflection on the structural difficulties that the politics of the underprivileged runs up against, in India as elsewhere.

Previously first published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr) 19 January 2011.

Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net) 1 November 2011.

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