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Chandrashekhar Azad and Dalit Politics in Uttar Pradesh

By: Sudha Pai

The Azad Samaj Party represents both a crisis following the fracturing of the Dalit movement and a possible future regeneration under a new Ambedkarite organisation.

The victory of Chandrashekhar Azad, a young Jatav leader and head of the Azad Samaj party (Kanshi Ram), in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, signals a significant shift in Dalit votes. In a four-cornered contest between the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the INDIA block, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Azad in the Nagina reserved constituency in western Uttar Pradesh, it was expected that Dalit vote would be divided to BJP's advantage.¹ But Azad won **handsomely**, securing over 50% of the vote. His victory owed to support from the Dalits, constituting a fifth of the constituency, and the Muslims, who make up over 40% of the population.

While the mood in western UP in 2024 was against the BJP, does the victory of Azad indicate a new phase in Dalit politics in the making?

The Dalit voting pattern has been highly volatile since 2000. In the 2002 and 2007 assembly elections, Dalits supported the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the BSP, respectively. In 2014 a considerable section of the smaller, poorer non-Jatavs supported the BJP in the general elections. Consequently, the BSP has experienced a swift decline and an existential crisis. The party's unravelling has resulted in the formation of numerous groups, broadly in two ideological camps: Ambedkarite or pro-BSP and Hindutvawadi or pro-BJP. In the former, several small, sub-regional fragments emerged across the state, led by former BSP members, each claiming to be the 'authentic' Ambedkarite party.

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Azad himself was never a member of the BSP. The Azad Samaj Party's political rise represented an independent effort by an upwardly mobile, educated and ambitious leader to appeal to a younger generation. Yet, while Dalit assertion remains strong in UP, given the fragmentation of the Dalit movement along class, ideological, and sub-regional lines and the presence of a hegemonic right-wing party in the state, building a new Dalit movement and party will be challenging.

Treading familiar ground

Azad's rise was not sudden. As early as 2013, he – like Kanshi Ram and Mayawati in the 1980s – cycled from village to village to deal with atrocities, harness Dalit anger and assertion, and spread the ideas of Ambedkar (Pai and Kumar 2023). Azad had then just returned to his native village Chhutmalpur, largely a Dalit village, in Saharanpur district, after a degree in law, with the “**urge to do something**”.

In a **profile published in 2016**, Azad recounted how, growing up he had not experienced open discrimination, but was aware of its existence. In college, he had joined the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. But he left it soon, as he found that whenever a Muslim-Dalit clash took place, the ABVP was there, but when the violence was by upper-castes against Dalits, it disappeared. This led him to read about the life and ideas of Ambedkar.

His return to his village was timely. Following the victory of the BJP in 2014, the upper castes, particularly the Thakurs of the region, were emboldened to harass Dalits. Azad formed the Bhim Army to fight caste atrocities. Azad **declared** “The aim of the Bhim Army is to make west Uttar Pradesh atrocity-free in one year.” The agitations forced the otherwise reluctant police to arrive and start enquiries into cases of atrocities. While many Dalits realized that this would not help build a movement, they were **happy** to see a Dalit organisation standing up to the police.

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Azad, with his strong build and his upwardly twirled moustache – both signs of defiance against the upper castes – immediately resonated with the educated and politically assertive Dalits of Chhutmalpur. His adoption of the name Ravan reflected a cultural counter to the BJP’s use of the god Ram as a political symbol. His vision was summed up in a poster in his apartment with Ambedkar’s words: “Go write on the walls that you are the rulers of this nation” (Gorringer and Waghmore 2019).

The Bhim Army soon had [over 20,000 followers](#) in the Saharanpur region. It held a number of aggressive protests, including at a junior college in August 2015, where Dalit students were forced to sweep classrooms and allowed to drink water only after Thakur students did, and a [massive rally](#) against atrocities by Thakurs at Saharanpur in April 2017 which was followed by large-scale protest at Jantar Mantar, Delhi. There was a confrontation in Gharkoli village over a signboard “The Great Chamar Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar Gram Gharkoli Welcomes you” put up by Dalit youth of the village, which they refused to remove despite threats by the Thakurs. Gatheda village saw protests where a statue of Dalit saint Ravidas in a temple had been smeared with black paint. Other incidents were action against the removal of a Dalit groom from his horse by Thakurs and an agitation in February 2020 against the [demolition of a temple](#) dedicated to Sant Ravidas in Tughlaqabad, Delhi. Several such incidents made Azad well-known.

A new leadership style

A feature of this new leadership, not evident in the narrower canvas of traditional Dalit parties, was that while focusing on Dalit needs/desires, the Bhim Army [linked them to issues of national significance](#). It supporting protests against the Citizen (Amendment) Act and the National Register of Citizens, upholding the secular fabric of the state – witnessed in Azad’s “dramatic appearance” and reading of the Preamble of the Constitution at the Jama Masjid in Delhi – and supporting protests at Shaheen Bagh and by farmers against the unpopular 2020 farm laws. The Bhim Army tried to register a pan-India presence by supporting Dalit agitations at Una, Bhima Koregaon and elsewhere, alongside Dalit organisations led by Jignesh Mevani and Prakash Ambedkar. These protests helped in broadening Azad’s appeal amongst Muslims, Jats, and some OBC groups, all important players in the Nagina constituency.

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However, Azad’s image as a Dalit youth icon [widened](#) the divide between his organisation and the BSP’s cadres in Saharanpur city, a traditional BSP bastion with leaders trained by Kanshi Ram, as found by the scholar Sajjan Kumar during his fieldwork there in 2017. While the old guard appreciated Azad’s action and leadership, they were wary of his criticism of the BSP and plans of entry into electoral politics. In Jatav Nagar in Saharanpur, BSP cadres described Azad as a popularity-driven leader who lacked an institutional mode of Ambedkarite politics. To them, the Dalit discourse under the BSP meant strategies for capturing state power, but through democratic means. Any attempt to break away from this shared responsibility, they felt, was tantamount to an irresponsible mode of politics that would only weaken the Dalit discourse already under strain on account of the ascendancy of Hindutva. Facing criticism, Azad initially tried to move close to the BSP, but was rebuffed by Mayawati who viewed him as a rival.

Azad has refrained from criticizing Mayawati personally and claimed to be carrying forward the party/movement built by her. Yet he has been critical of the BSP for its votes in Parliament in favour of EWS reservations, removal of Article 370 and the CAA. For him these decisions were tantamount to “murdering” the Constitution and weakening the Bahujan movement.

Azad’s campaign in Nagina adopted a door-to-door campaign method, which, together with his earlier efforts to prevent atrocities and social activism, worked well.

The Azad Samaj Party was formed in [2020](#) to contest elections. Based on Ambedkar’s ideas, it took over Kanshi Ram’s ideological proposition, bahujan hitaya, bahujan sukhaya. In early contests, it performed poorly in Parliament and legislative by-polls but won some zila parishad seats in western Uttar Pradesh, which helped build a support base. Plans to contest the 2022 assembly election jointly with the Samajwadi Party broke down over seat allocation. The experience made Azad [remark](#) that the SP chief “Akhilesh Yadav does not want Dalits in this alliance, he just wants the Dalit vote bank.” When he decided to contest against chief minister Yogi Adityanath in Gorakhpur, it was obvious that he would not win. But the contest brought Azad considerable media attention and his rallies motivated the Dalits of the region.

Prior to the 2024 election the INDIA bloc invited Azad to join it. But, negotiations broke down in February itself, as the SP was unwilling to commit to the his desire to contest from Nagina. Irked by the SP’s silence, Azad decided to go it [alone](#). As his

party had limited resources, instead of large expensive rallies, Azad's campaign in Nagina adopted a door-to-door campaign method, which, together with his earlier efforts to prevent atrocities and social activism, worked well, as by 2024 he was well-known in the region. (Another candidate stood from Domariganj, but lost.)

Given the unhappiness amongst Dalits during the general elections, if Azad had joined the INDIA bloc, it might have gained more Dalit votes. Realising this, Akhilesh Yadav of the SP hailed his win as "a victory for the pichada (oppressed), Dalit, and alpsankhyak (minorities)." Azad was more circumspect. Aware of the attempt by the SP to occupy the space vacated by Mayawati, he has held that he had no friends or enemies: his fight was to save the Constitution and stop atrocities against Dalits.

A crisis, and an opportunity?

When the Bhim Army was formed in 2013, the scholar Suryakant Waghmore [argued](#) that the organisation would have to decide whether to take the "electoral leap or continue as social radicals". Back then, with Mayawati as a formidable "opponent" it remained to be seen "which Bhim army" would take the movement forward.

The Bhim Army has built a space for itself fighting atrocities. Its survival and transformation from a resistance group against caste discrimination to a political party signals, [it has been argued](#), the reinvigoration of the Dalit movement.

Unlike Kanshi Ram, who dispensed of the BAMCEF on formation of the BSP, Azad plans to retain the Bhim Army to focus on social activism, particularly education. It runs over 350 free schools for Bahun children in [Saharanpur](#), [Meerut](#), [Shamli](#) and [Muzaffarnagar](#). To address agrarian distress and the lack of non-agricultural employment that had created considerable frustration among Dalit youth, Azad has organised numerous cycle yatras and readings of Ambedkar's ideas to instill confidence in them.

The Bhim Army has units in Delhi and many states, including Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Odisha. It intends to bring onto a common platform the many spontaneous Dalit organisations that have emerged across the country. Party activists [claim to have received](#) a positive response from some states, and there is enthusiasm that with hard work, a strong party and movement can emerge.

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Azad has, within a short period, successfully harnessed Dalit anger against atrocities, disappointment with both the BSP and the BJP's inability to fulfil promises and prevent caste crimes. Moving beyond Dalit issues he has entered national politics, to uphold the Indian Constitution and its values. However, the Azad Samaj Party has little organisational strength and resources, geographically limited to western Uttar Pradesh, with narrow support largely from Jatavs. It will be difficult for the party to successfully fight electoral politics across UP given the forces ranged against it.

In the current political environment in UP, Dalits face the onslaught of a right-wing, Hindu majoritarian party, an upper-caste society and authoritarian government. The Azad Samaj Party is a force against upper caste domination and failure of the state to protect the life and property of Dalits. But it will require hard work and many struggles to fight atrocities, build a new movement that unites all sections of Dalits, fulfil their aspirations, and tackle the divisive politics of the BJP

The Azad Samaj Party represents both a crisis following the fracturing of the Dalit movement and a possible future regeneration under a new Ambedkarite organisation with the strong Dalit assertion on the ground. It remains to be seen how effectively Azad can capitalise on his 2024 win to fill the space left by the BSP.

Sudha Pai was a professor of political science at Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Footnotes:

1 Nagina, though a reserved seat, was not a bastion of any party or stronghold of the Dalits. In 1989, Mayawati had won from the adjoining Bijnor constituency, part of which now falls in Nagina, following delimitation in 2008. In the 2009 national election, Nagina was won by the SP and in 2014 by the BJP. In 2019, the BSP won obtaining 568,378 votes, the BJP came second losing by a margin of 166,832 votes.