

# THE FIGHT FOR THE OBC VOTE

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March 23, 2023 12:15 am | Updated 02:28 am IST

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Samajwadi party leader Swami Prasad Maurya addressing a press conference in Lucknow. | Photo Credit: SANDEEP SAXENA

Like musicians, politicians, every five years, write a new composition with the same set of notes. As the countdown to the 2024 Lok Sabha polls begins, the two poles in Uttar Pradesh politics have once again started serenading the Other Backward Classes (OBC) voters who will decide the outcome of 80 seats. In 2014 and 2019, the BJP won 71 and 62 of these seats, respectively, by evoking the Hindu identity of the non-Yadav OBCs and Most Backward Castes (MBCs), who together constitute around 40% of the State's population.

In its new composition, the Samajwadi Party (SP)'s 62-member national executive list is dominated by OBCs and Dalits. The party has cut down on the Yadav family chorus, muted the secular tune, and reworked the original Mandal raga by placing Dalits, non-Yadav OBCs and MBCs at the centre. Simultaneously, by raising the demand for a caste census in the State, the SP's message to the OBCs is that they are being used for votes by the BJP while being denied power and the fruits of social justice mandated by the Constitution. The government's privatisation push, it says, will lead to a drought in government jobs and make reservation redundant.

This new tune was recently tested when SP chief Akhilesh Yadav walked the fine line on the Ramcharitmanas episode. The party's non-Yadav OBC face, Swami Prasad Maurya, who switched to the SP from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) before the 2022 Assembly polls, demanded deletion of certain portions of the Hindu text as he found them insulting to Dalits, OBCs and tribal people. It seemed no coincidence that the controversy erupted days after the BJP-led Union government conferred the Padma Vibhushan on SP founder Mulayam Singh posthumously.

During this episode, Mr. Yadav dodged the anti-Hindu charge foisted on him by the BJP and looked to carve a pro-Dalit image while consolidating his OBC base. When the U.P. Police registered an FIR against Mr. Maurya for allegedly outraging religious feelings, Mr. Yadav elevated him to the post of general secretary. When Mr. Yadav was allegedly shown black flags at a temple after Mr. Maurya's comment, he asked whether he was not being allowed to enter because he is "also a Shudra." Posters were then put up at the SP office that read, "*Garv se kaho hum shudra hain* (Say with pride that we are shudras)". Though sociologists say that today's OBCs are the same as shudras classified in the varna system, in everyday life, the

Yadavs, Jats, Mauryas and Kushwahas use the term for MBCs such as the Mallahas, Koeris, and Rajbhars who are closer to Dalits in the social order. By invoking the term 'shudra' for himself and seeking answers on the subject from the Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who also holds a religious position, Mr. Yadav is attempting a new social cohesion for the party.

In the run-up to the 2022 elections, in the Yadav strongholds of Firozabad and beyond, Dalits spoke of bad memories of SP rule. The SP, which has a socialist image, is now trying to infuse that with an Ambedkarite flavour. By doing so, Mr. Yadav is not only addressing the past, but also hitting at the BJP's blend of Mandal (caste) and Kamandal (Hindutva) politics. The party was quick to expel two upper caste members who spoke against Mr. Maurya.

Meanwhile, the BJP realises this change in tactic. In the Assembly, Mr. Adityanath said that shudras represent the working class and not any particular caste. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat said in Nagpur that Hindu texts come from an oral tradition and need to be reviewed since misinformation has been slipped into them by certain vested interests. Earlier in Mumbai, he said that the caste system was not ordained by gods but by pandits. The RSS later clarified that he meant intellectuals and not Brahmins, but the message had reached the desired constituency.

BJP leaders such as Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya and State president Bhupendra Chaudhary have not been able to match the charisma of former Chief Minister and BJP's OBC face Kalyan Singh. This gives regional satraps such as Mr. Maurya, Shivpal Singh, and Jayant Singh space to negotiate terms of deliverables with pressure groups. The Opposition is busy projecting the current dispensation as the Thakur-Brahmin sarkar. Perhaps this is why the BJP is reaching out to the OBCs with renewed vigour; it knows that caste aspirations have not been obliterated by Hindutva and the Opposition is not falling for the secular-communal debate.

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