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Uttar Pradesh Elections 2022: Samajwadi Party's Struggles with its Social Image



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Social identification theory notes that the social image of political parties is a relevant indicator of how individuals perceive political formations. Developed in the context of American scholarship, scholars noted that individuals identify political parties with different social groups, and if they can associate themselves with these groups, an enduring attachment is developed with these parties. This approach explains how self-perceived membership in social groups affects social perceptions and attitudes. Scholars argue that individuals attempt to project greater differences between the in-group which they are part of and the relevant out-group. Such differences may be perceived, more than what exists in reality. In the context of politics, this may lead to perceiving strong social differences between the party you are attached to and the party, which is the opponent.

Social Images allow political parties to have a durable social base, that can act as a cushion even in adversarial circumstances. One reason for the explosion that Congress has faced in recent times is the lack of a social anchoring of the party, leading to no electoral cushion, and heavy electoral defeats. However, an enduring social image can also act as an obstacle to widening the support base. The obstacles faced by the Samajwadi Party are an example in that direction. Formed in the 1990s, in the wake of Mandal agitation and *Ram Janmabhoomi* agitation, as a successor of Bhartiya Lok Dal and the socialist parties in Uttar Pradesh, the SP could easily cultivate its association with two prominent communities in Uttar Pradesh- the Yadavs and Muslims. Apart from the KHAM (Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi, Muslim) formula associated with the Congress in Gujarat during the 1980s, it is doubtful if any social imagery

has been widely discussed in Indian politics. The alignment of these two prominent communities with the SP meant that the SP always had an electoral cushion to fall back upon. Precisely for this reason, the party continues to be relevant in the politics of UP, unlike the Congress and the BSP. However, the party has also failed to mobilize voters beyond these two categories, because of this very close association of Muslims and Yadavs with the party. In the fragmentary political space of the 1990s, this was not a hindrance for the SP to capture power. With no political formation able to garner more than 35 per cent of the votes, durable support from these two categories was sufficient for SP to intermittently hold power in UP. During the only instance when the party won a single majority in UP in 2012, it got only 29

per cent of the total vote share, yet again propelled by the support received from the Muslim-Yadav (MY) combination. In fact, it would also seem that the party was not interested to cultivate a support base beyond these categories. For example, Mulayam Singh would be one of the few politicians to speak against the promotion of Dalit bureaucrats in Lok Sabha. This and similar rhetorical outbursts cemented the social image of the SP.

However, the rise of the BJP and consolidation of non-Yadav OBCs and upper castes behind BJP meant that the social image of the SP, although still providing for an electoral cushion, is no more sufficient to win elections. It would seem that non-attempts by the SP in the 1990s to become a true Mandal party, and thereby catering to the interests of all OBCs, has come back to bite it. Even after the debacle in 2014, the party did not wake up to this reality. Rather, it relied on alliances, which also proved insufficient. Unlike the MY combination of SP, the BJP cultivated multiple social imageries. For the upper-castes, the BJP was the traditional choice, closely supportive of their symbolism and ideology. For someone who is closely identified as a Hindu, the BJP is the automatic electoral choice. For lower OBCs and lower SCs, their exclusion from the mainstream was partially addressed by the BJP, resulting in the manifestation of yet another social image for the BJP. Moreover, for any Hindu harboring antagonistic feelings towards the Muslim 'other', the BJP becomes an obvious choice. For the SP, there has been nothing apart from the MY combination. However, the sheer strength of these two categories would also mean that the SP remained as the principal opposition against the BJP in UP.

In the run-up to UP elections 2022, it would seem that finally, after years of slothful approach, the SP was about to address its social image problem. It is not accidental that almost all the BJP leaders who shifted to SP in the run-up to the election were from the non-Yadav OBC communities. Considering the ideological adherence of the upper-castes towards the BJP, it is understandable that the SP attempted to poach the non-Yadav OBC base of the BJP. However, despite conscious attempts at altering the social imagery, social images that are the culmination of a long-drawn political articulation, would take time to dwindle. This becomes evident if one analyses the social alignment of the 2022 UP elections. According to the CSDS (Centre for Study of Developing Societies) post-poll data, while there has been increasing support for SP among non-OBC voters, it has rarely crossed 25 per cent of the community votes. The vast majority, therefore, continued to vote for the BJP. This along with the near-total consolidation of upper castes behind the BJP resulted in yet another Saffron victory. One can only imagine how the results would have been if the SP was pro-active since 2017 in addressing its social image problem, rather than waking up to it six months before the election. Maybe a closer fight? One can only speculate.

Nevertheless, since attempts to broaden its social image have been initiated, it is possible that in the future the SP would pose greater electoral challenges against the BJP. However, it is difficult to cultivate social images merely through macro-level rhetoric. Complimentary initiatives have to be taken at the grassroots. The perception of the Yadav community, a dominant agrarian community, among other communities will also have to change through conscious attempts. Moreover, political articulation would also have to go beyond caste rhetoric and address material issues considering the class background of lower OBCs. If such efforts are made, not only can the SP shed its social image problem, it can also potentially bear electoral fruits in the future.

