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Article

Bahujan Politics and Post-Kanshiram Socio-Political Organisations

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Abstract:

Indian politics has been significantly shaped by caste and identity-based movements, with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's legacy continuing to influence Dalit politics long after his death. Kanshiram, a pivotal figure in the post-independence period, carried forward Ambedkar's vision through various socio-political organisations such as BAMCEF, DS4, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Kanshiram's approach to Bahujan politics redefined social justice by focusing on caste identity and unity among Dalits, OBCs, and other marginalised communities. The emergence of the BSP, once a powerful force in Uttar Pradesh, marked a transformative phase in Indian politics, but internal fragmentation within the party led to its decline after 2012. This decline has given rise to several post-Kanshiram political organisations and movements across India, each attempting to reclaim and evolve his legacy. These include Waman Meshram's BAMCEF and Bahujan Mukti Party (BMP), Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA), Shravan Kumar Nirala's Ambedkar Jan Morcha (AJM), and Chandrashekhar Azad's Bhim Army and Azad Samaj Party (ASP-K). This paper critically examines these new socio-political formations, assessing whether they can provide viable political alternatives for the Bahujan communities or whether they represent a fragmentation of the movement. By exploring their ideological differences, organisational strategies, and electoral impact, the paper seeks to understand the future trajectory of Bahujan politics in India and the potential for unity or further division within the movement for social justice.

Keywords: Kanshiram, Bahujan Politics, Caste, BSP, Dalit Organisations

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been two strategic and popular states of India for Dalit politics, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. Maharashtra from the time of Jyotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar has set the stage for Dalit politics for the entire country, while Uttar Pradesh became the most successful state for the transformed version of Ambedkar's politics through the BSP of Kanshiram and Mayawati. However, Dr Ambedkar's Republican Party of India (RPI) also got unexpected success in Uttar Pradesh under its leader B P Maurya. Once, the BSP was the most successful Dalit and Bahujan party in both the states. Moreover, the RPI, whose internal conflicts and fragmentism forced Kanshiram to form another alternative organisation, is still alive in Maharashtra as a debris of its original organisation. On the other hand, the BSP has also faced defection of its trustees and fragmentation since the early 2000s. This fragmentation started with the bifurcation of the BAMCEF just after the formation of the BSP.

The decline of the BSP after the 2012 Uttar Pradesh assembly election and internal leadership crises have led to a significant transformation in Bahujan politics in India in general and Uttar Pradesh in particular. This downfall of the BSP and fragmentation of the Bahujan movement have given rise to several social and political organisations which are attempting to reclaim Ambedkarite and Kanshiram's legacy. Organisations such as Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) of Prakash Yashwant Ambedkar and Bahujan Mukti Party (BMP) of Waman Meshram are in Maharashtra. Also in Maharashtra there are at least four different BAMCEFs claiming to represent Bahujans. However, Waman Meshram's BAMCEF is little influential and known in different regions of the country due to its social media activism. In Uttar Pradesh there are several organisations and political parties, such as the Ambedkar Jan Morcha

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(AJM) of Shravan Kumar Nirala, BMP of Daddu Prasad and Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) of Bhim Army chief Chandrashekhar Azad. At the national level, there are two organisations which are popular among Bahujan communities: the first is Waman Meshram's BAMCEF, which is a bifurcated half of Kanshiram's BAMCEF with its political wing, the Bahujan Mukti Party, and second is the Bhim Army along with the Azad Samaj Party. However, others are known in their respective regions only.

This paper critically examines the emergence and objectives of these post-Kanshiram Bahujan formations. It investigates whether they can serve as viable political alternatives for marginalised communities or whether the splintering of the movement has only weakened Dalit and Bahujan political agency. Furthermore, it asks whether the legacy of Kanshiram can evolve through these new leaders or if Bahujan politics is on the verge of decline. Ultimately, the paper seeks to assess whether these decentralised efforts represent a phase of political renewal or symptomatic fragmentation in the larger struggle for social justice in India.

2. POST-KANSHIRAM ORGANISATIONS IN MAHARASHTRA

2.1. BAMCEF and BMP

Waman Meshram, a staunch Ambedkarite and social activist, has played a vital role in reviving and expanding the legacy of BAMCEF and establishing the Bahujan Mukti Party (BMP) as a political counterpart, along with hundreds of offshoot organisations representing particular communities of the Bahujans. BAMCEF was originally founded by Kanshiram in the 1970s as a non-political organisation aimed at uniting educated employees from marginalised communities – Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and religious minorities- for the purpose of social change and ideological awareness. After Kanshiram transitioned to active politics with the formation of the BSP, BAMCEF split into two factions. One faction remained with Kanshiram and worked as a shadow organisation for the BSP, while the other was headed by D K Khaparde; later on, this also bifurcated, and one of the factions was taken over by Waman Meshram. Under Meshram's leadership, BAMCEF reoriented itself as an ideological movement focused on educating the Bahujan Samaj about systemic caste oppression, Brahminism, and the constitutional means of liberation. Meshram rejects short-term political opportunism, emphasising the need for long-term structural change. His speeches and campaigns highlight the importance of history, self-respect, and unity among oppressed communities.1

To complement BAMCEF's non-political role, Meshram launched the Bahujan Mukti Party, which provides a political platform for the same ideological goals. Unlike conventional parties, BMP contests elections not solely to gain power but to spread political awareness and challenge the hegemony of dominant caste-based parties. Through grassroots mobilisation, cadre-building, and nationwide awareness tours, Meshram envisions an awakened, organised, and politically assertive Bahujan movement capable of transforming Indian democracy from below.2 Together, BAMCEF and BMP under Waman Meshram aim to fulfil Dr B.R. Ambedkar's mission of annihilating caste and establishing genuine social justice, not only through elections but also through deep ideological transformation of society.

2.2. The Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA)

The Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA), led by Prakash Ambedkar in alliance with Asaduddin Owaisi's All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM), emerged as a significant political experiment in Maharashtra's complex caste and community politics. Rooted in the Phule-Ambedkarite tradition, VBA attempts to consolidate the voices of the 'vanchit' (deprived)-primarily Dalits, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Muslims – who have long been marginalised both socially and politically despite the state's vibrant history of social justice movements (Waghmore, 2019).

Historically, Bahujan movements in Maharashtra have struggled electorally, mainly due to two reasons: the co-optation of their discourse by mainstream parties like Congress and BJP and the political compromises of Bahujan leaders seeking space within those very parties. In this backdrop, VBA's formation was seen as a move toward reclaiming political autonomy. Prakash Ambedkar, leveraging both grassroots mobilisation and symbolic inheritance of Babasaheb Ambedkar's legacy, presented VBA as a credible alternative committed to social justice and secularism (Farooquee, 2019).

During the 2019 Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, the VBA contested all 48 parliamentary seats in Maharashtra and 235 assembly constituencies. Though it failed to win a seat, it significantly impacted electoral outcomes in at least 25 constituencies by splitting the anti-BJP vote, especially affecting Congress-NCP prospects (Bose, 2019). This influence highlighted its potential to disrupt Maharashtra's two-party dominance and laid the foundation for future relevance. If sustained, VBA could usher in a new era of caste-conscious, constitution-driven politics – realising Kanshiram's dream of empowered Bahujan rule, or hou shakat aahey ("it is possible") (Waghmore, 2019).

1 Derived from a conversation with Waman Meshram and his addressing at public gathering of Bahujan Mukti Morcha at Khobragade Hall in Nagpur, October 2023.

2 Anil Nagre, a member of BAMCEF and its other offshoot organisations such as Bahujan Mukti Morch and Bahujan Mukti Party and Hemlata Patil, state president of Bahujan Mukti Parti (Mahila Aghadi), Maharashtra. Hemlata Patil is a former member of the BSP from Nagpur, she was sacked from her position by Mayawati during a gathering in Mumbai in 1988. After about a decade later she joined Waman Meshram's BAMCEF when she did not get any response from the BSP and its members.

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3. POST-KANSHIRAM ORGANISATIONS IN UTTAR PRADESH

3.1. Ambedkar Jan Morcha of Shravan Kumar Nirala

Shravan Kumar Nirala's political journey highlights the rise of the Ambedkar Jan Morcha (AJM) as a post-BSP organisation dedicated to reviving Dalit politics in Purvanchal. Born into an educated Dalit family, Nirala's early exposure to Dalit politics and activism began during his student years at Gorakhpur University, where he organised initiatives to support Dalit students and raised awareness on issues like reservations. His commitment led to a prominent role in the BSP, where he served as a zonal coordinator for several key districts and became a trusted aide of Mayawati (Pai & Kumar, 2023, pp. 164-65). However, after the BSP's constant decline post-2012, Nirala observed a shift in the party's culture, marked by corruption, ticket-selling, and Mayawati's increasing reclusiveness. In 2019, Nirala resigned from the BSP after being sidelined for wealthier candidates despite his long-standing service. Shortly after, he founded the AJM with his associates to address the failures of the BSP and promote Ambedkarite ideals (Pai & Kumar, 2023, p. 166).

The AJM focuses on grassroots mobilisation, spreading awareness of Ambedkar and Kanshiram's ideas, and addressing issues like Dalit atrocities, reservation, and backlog recruitment. It also emphasises unity among marginalised groups and moves away from the BSP's perceived prioritisation of power and money. By targeting students and youth, the AJM aims to rebuild Bahujan solidarity and acts as a pressure group for Dalit interests, offering a new vision for Ambedkarite politics in Uttar Pradesh (Pai & Kumar, 2023, pp. 167-68). However, AJM's activities are restricted to only social activities, and it does not seem to find any political space in these years. Also, it is not very popular across the country due to its regional nature. Hence, it should expand its social base to other regions and gradually start political mobilisation as well.

3.2. Bahujan Mukti Party of Daddu Prasad

Daddu Prasad, a former BSP leader and associate of Kanshiram, formed the Bahujan Mukti Party in 2016 after being expelled from the BSP. Hailing from a poor Dalit family in Banda, Prasad's political journey was shaped by his experiences of social discrimination and his deep admiration for Kanshiram and Dr Ambedkar. He joined the BSP in 1993 and quickly rose through the ranks, serving as a three-time MLA and a minister in Mayawati's cabinet between 2007 and 2012 (Pai & Kumar, 2023, pp. 168-69).

After the BSP's 2012 defeat, Prasad grew disillusioned with Mayawati's leadership, accusing her of compromising party values and selling election tickets for money. Expelled in 2015, Prasad alleged Kanshiram had been mistreated by Mayawati during his illness. He founded the Bahujan Mukti Party in 2016, emphasising Ambedkarite principles, but rejoined the BSP in 2017, only to leave again in 2019 following the BJP's massive victory. Prasad subsequently launched the Samajik Parivartan Mission, shifting focus from electoral politics to grassroots social movements. Rejecting mainstream media, which he views as upper caste-dominated, his organisation works to empower Dalits and Adivasis through education and awareness. For Prasad, lasting social change, not electoral wins, is the ultimate goal (Pai & Kumar, 2023, pp. 166-70).

Daddu Prasad himself admitted that forming multiple organisations is not a solution for current Bahujan politics; it will divert and split Bahujan voters. Therefore, it is a need of the time that we all should contribute to one organisation which can become a viable alternative for Bahujans.3 Hence, Daddu Prasad should also expand BMP's activities to other regions of the state and should try to build it as a socio-political alternative for the Bahujans.

3.3. Chandrashekhar Azad, Bhim Army and Azad Samaj Party-Kanshiram (ASP-KR)

Chandrashekhar Azad has emerged as a significant figure in Dalit identity assertion, symbolising this movement with the blue scarf, much like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's blue suit. A Dalit leader from Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Azad gained national prominence following his organisation of the 'Dalit Maha Panchayat' in response to the Saharanpur violence of 2017. His organisation, Bhim Army, co-founded with Satish Kumar and Vijay Ratna Singh in 2015, expanded to over 40 districts after these events. Azad described the Bhim Army's mission as protecting Dalit dignity, stating, "An army's job is to protect its citizens" (Pandey, 2019).

The Bhim Army has played a transformative role in Dalit education, establishing after-schools for Dalit children called Bhim Army Pathshala, later growing to nearly 400 such pathshalas across Uttar Pradesh. These schools, supported by community contributions, provide stationery and textbooks and aim to empower Dalit youth through education, fostering leadership and addressing systemic discrimination in classrooms. This initiative mirrors the grassroots strategies of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, aiming to nurture future leaders within the community (Kumar, 2018). Azad's political activism extends beyond education. In 2019, he actively opposed Prime Minister Narendra Modi, accusing him of being anti-Dalit.

Moreover, when the Ravidas temple on August 10 was demolished by DDA on orders of the Supreme Court, Azad took it to a national debate. Azad mobilised support for rebuilding the Ravidas temple in Tughlakabad, Delhi, after its demolition by the Delhi Development Authority under Supreme Court orders. Tens of thousands participated in the protest, chanting 'Mandir wahin banaaenge and demanding the temple's reconstruction at its original site. Despite accusations from Bahujan Samaj Party leader Mayawati that Azad was affiliated with the Bharatiya Janata Party, BSP supporters joined the protests, emphasising the

3 Derived from a personal conversation with Daddu Prasad and his addressing at '*Chintan Shivir'* on "*Samajik-sanskritik, Rajnaitik, Arthik evem Samvaidhanik Maulik Adhikaron ki Prapti hetu*", Agra, Uttar Pradesh, 1st March, 2025.

social, rather than political, nature of the cause (Sharma & Kaushal, 2019). During the protest, Delhi Police detained Bhim Army chief Chandrashekhar Azad and 50 other protesters (India Today, 2019).

Azad's leadership marks a significant departure from the Bahujan Samaj Party's (BSP) established approach. The BSP, once dominant under Mayawati, has seen a decline in influence due to internal challenges and a perceived lack of political affirmation. For instance, Mayawati's muted responses to incidents like the Hathras gang rape and Lakhimpur Kheri violence have drawn criticism. While the BSP still commands loyalty among older Dalit voters who revere Kanshiram and Mayawati, younger Dalits demand more dynamic leadership – an expectation Azad seeks to fulfill (Nandan, 2022, pp. 1-2).

Azad's activism through the Bhim Army focuses on caste oppression and policies perceived as exclusionary under BJP rule, such as the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and farm laws. His grassroots activism, coupled with symbolic gestures like adopting the name 'Ravan' to challenge upper-caste narratives, has resonated with marginalised communities. His efforts to form the Samajik Parivartan Morcha, a coalition of 35 smaller parties, underscore his understanding of the need for unity among marginalised groups. However, building a robust political platform requires ideological clarity, grassroots networks, and strategic alliances (Nandan, 2022, pp. 2-4).

Azad has also emphasised cultural representation, leveraging street plays, folk performances, and symbols of Dalit pride to deepen his connection with grassroots communities. Encouraging greater political participation among Dalit women has been another priority, aiming to empower households and broaden the appeal of his Azad Samaj Party-Kanshiram (ASP-K). Despite limited electoral success, including his defeat against Yogi Adityanath in Gorakhpur, Azad's inclusive approach and confrontation of caste-based atrocities position him as a symbol of resistance and reform (Pai & Kumar, 2023).

In 2020, Azad launched the Azad Samaj Party (ASP) to provide a political alternative to Dalits while retaining the Bhim Army as a grassroots organisation. Despite its focus on education and caste justice, the ASP faced challenges in transitioning from social activism to electoral politics. The party's limited success in elections, including Azad's unsuccessful bid against Yogi Adityanath in Gorakhpur, highlighted the difficulties of carving a political niche in a state dominated by entrenched political forces (Pai & Kumar, 2023, p. 161).

Azad's activism has extended beyond caste issues to national matters, such as opposing the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and supporting protests at Shaheen Bagh. These efforts have earned him a diverse support base among students and activists across communities, showcasing his inclusive approach. However, the BA/ASP's influence remains largely confined to western UP, and its foray into electoral politics faces significant hurdles (Pai & Kumar, 2023, pp. 162-63).

Azad's efforts signify a new wave of assertive Dalit politics, emphasising socio-economic mobility and self-respect. By integrating Dalit educators, activists, and unions, Azad aims to create a broader political narrative. While his stature has yet to reach the heights of Kanshiram or Mayawati, his rise is timely and necessary for revamping Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh. His success depends on his ability to unify marginalised voices and construct a cohesive vision for Dalit empowerment (Nandan, 2022, p. 4; Pai & Kumar, 2023, pp. 163-64).

Table 1: *Aazad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram)'s statistics in Lok Sabha General Election, 2024*

LK 2024	Bihar	Haryana	M.P.	Maharashtra	Punjab	U.P.	Rajasthan	Chhattisgarh	Jharkhand	Delhi
Votes	13, 432	8,754	28,591	3,108	9,680	6,02,739	19,992	3,717	1161	646
Vote %age	0.03	0.07	0.08	0.01	0.07	0.69	0.06	0.02	0.01	0.01
Seats won	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0

Source: *ECI, Lok Sabha General Election, 2024 result*[4]

Although Chandrashekhar Azad's leadership exemplifies a multidimensional approach to Dalit empowerment, blending education, activism, and identity assertion to challenge systemic oppression and advocate for the rights of marginalised communities, it is too soon to predict that Azad is filling the vacated space caused by the BSP's decline. Except for Azad's own victory in the Lok Sabha general election 2024, as MP, ASP-KR has not reached the vote share which can predict its potential to replace the BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

4 https://www.eci.gov.in/general-election-to-loksabha-2024-statistical-reports accessed on 9th January, 2025.

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4. CONCLUSION

These emerging organisations reflect both continuity and rupture with the older Bahujan political tradition. While they share a commitment to Ambedkarite principles – social justice, education, and dignity for the marginalised – they differ in their strategies, structures, and constituencies. Some prioritise social reform and mass mobilisation over electoral politics, while others aim to contest elections and build alternative political platforms. Chandrashekhar Azad's blend of activism, symbolic leadership, and grassroots education has gained significant attention, especially among Dalit youth. However, his Azad Samaj Party, despite winning a single seat in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, remains electorally limited. Hence, these post-Kanshiram organisations contributed to the diversion of Bahujan voters and created chaos and confusion among them. Since none of these parties could assure political representation of these groups, this confusion benefitted the dominant parties, such as the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP).

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Author(s) Contribution

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