

# Reconfiguration of Identity Politics in Uttar Pradesh: An Electoral Analysis of Caste Dynamics in 2012, 2017 And 2022 Assembly Elections

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## Abstract:

Identity politics, centered on caste-based mobilization and representation, has dominated Uttar Pradesh's electoral landscape since the 1990s, with parties like Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party building their success on explicit caste alignments. However, conventional wisdom suggests that the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) sweeping victories in Uttar Pradesh's 2017 and 2022 assembly elections marked the decline of such identity politics and the rise of issue-based voting. This paper challenges this narrative by analyzing caste-based ticket distribution patterns across three assembly elections (2012, 2017, and 2022) for the BJP, Samajwadi Party (SP), and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). Using secondary data from Lokniti and the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, we demonstrate that the BJP has not weakened identity politics but strategically reconfigured it. Our analysis reveals that the BJP maintains upper-caste dominance (43-48% ticket allocation despite 20% population share) while systematically targeting non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Scheduled Castes, deliberately avoiding direct competition with SP and BSP for their core vote banks. This strategic caste diversification, combined with broader Hindutva mobilization, has enabled BJP to build a new social coalition without abandoning identity politics. The findings suggest that caste remains central to electoral strategy in Uttar Pradesh, albeit in reconfigured forms that challenge traditional party-caste alignments.

**Keywords:** Electoral Geography, Identity Politics, Caste, Political Geography, Uttar Pradesh Assembly Election

## INTRODUCTION:

Identity politics has been the defining feature of electoral competition in Uttar Pradesh since the 1990s, fundamentally reshaping the state's political landscape. The mobilization of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) following the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations, the rise of Dalit assertion through the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and the consolidation of upper-caste support behind the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) transformed Uttar Pradesh from a Congress-dominated state into a fragmented, multi-party system organized primarily along caste lines (Jaffrelot, 2003; Kumar, 2018). For nearly three decades, electoral success in India's most politically significant state depended on parties' ability to mobilize specific caste constituencies and construct viable social coalitions from these mobilized groups.

For decades, Uttar Pradesh has been synonymous with what many scholars consider both the promises and pathologies of India's democracy: intense political competition alongside fragmentation, caste-

entrenched politics, the criminalization of the political class, persistent poverty, and episodes of communal violence (Kudaisya, 2006; Chandra, 2004). Many of the stereotypes associated with Indian politics at large derive from depictions of Uttar Pradesh politics, a state that weighs considerably on national politics owing to its demographic strength (accounting for nearly 17% of India's population), its substantial representation in national assemblies (80 Lok Sabha seats), and its historical role as the cradle of India's independence movement (Hasan, 1998).

Throughout the 1990s, Uttar Pradesh embodied chronic political instability that also marked national politics during this period. In less than ten years, four state elections were held. Eight governments unsuccessfully attempted to rule the state, at times in coalitions or as minority governments. President's rule had to be declared on three occasions due to hung verdicts or the inability of political leaders to form stable coalitions or govern together. This period was also marked by a context of socio-political violence, economic slowdown, and a sharp reduction in public expenditure (Singh, 2009; Drèze and Sen, 2013). During this tumultuous period, Uttar Pradesh also slid to the lowest ranks in India on virtually all human development indicators, including infant and child mortality rates, sex ratio, literacy rates, and poverty reduction (Mehrotra, 2011).

This uncertain time in Uttar Pradesh's politics is also precisely when identity politics took deep root in the state. The early 1990s represented a turning point in North Indian politics, marked by the rise of backward caste political forces riding on demands for reservations in public employment and higher education for OBCs, the ascension of the BSP born from Kanshi Ram's mobilization of Dalit civil servants, and the rise of the BJP as a Hindu nationalist party that rode a wave of religious mobilization culminating in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 in Ayodhya (Jaffrelot, 2003; Verniers, 2016). Political scientists characterized this transformation as the "second democratic upsurge" (Yadav, 1996) or the "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot, 2003), emphasizing the political empowerment of previously marginalized social groups through electoral representation.

However, since 2014, and particularly after BJP's landslide victories in the 2017 and 2022 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, a new narrative has emerged in both popular discourse and academic analysis. This narrative contends that BJP's success signals the decline or even the end of identity politics in Uttar Pradesh (Kumar and Iyer, 2019). Political commentators have argued that voters are increasingly motivated by development issues, governance performance, and welfare delivery rather than caste identities (Palshikar, 2019). The BJP's ability to win across diverse social groups, transcending its traditional upper-caste base, has been interpreted as evidence of the maturation of India's electorate beyond ascriptive identities toward issue-based voting (Verma, 2007; Sinha, 2019).

This paper challenges this "end of identity politics" narrative through systematic empirical analysis of caste-based ticket distribution strategies across three consecutive assembly elections (2012, 2017, and 2022). We argue that the BJP has not weakened or transcended identity politics but has strategically reconfigured it in ways that differ from the traditional Yadav-Muslim-Dalit versus upper-caste binary that dominated the 1990s and 2000s.

## Literature Review

The transformation of Uttar Pradesh's political landscape in the early 1990s has been extensively documented as a shift from Congress dominance toward multi-party competition organized primarily along caste lines. Kothari (1990) characterized this transformation as a "great secular upsurge," emphasizing how previously marginalized social groups gained political voice through electoral

mobilization. Yadav (1996) subsequently termed it the "second democratic upsurge," arguing that the expansion of political participation to lower castes represented a deepening of Indian democracy rather than its degeneration. This transformation manifested through the rise of explicitly caste-based parties. Jaffrelot (2003) in his seminal work "India's Silent Revolution" documented how the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under Mayawati successfully mobilized Scheduled Castes, particularly the numerically dominant Jatav sub-caste, into a formidable political force. Similarly, the Samajwadi Party (SP) consolidated its support base among Yadavs and Muslims, creating what Jaffrelot and Verniers (2012) termed an "MY" (Muslim-Yadav) coalition. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), while projecting a pan-Hindu identity, drew its core support from upper castes- Brahmins, Rajputs, and Banias, who felt threatened by OBC and Dalit assertion (Jaffrelot, 1996).

Hasan (1998) demonstrated how this caste-based fragmentation fundamentally altered patterns of political competition, transforming Uttar Pradesh from a one-party dominant system into a volatile multi-party arena where no single party could easily secure a majority. Singh (2009) documented the political instability of this period, noting eight different governments between 1989 and 1999, multiple instances of President's rule, and frequent defections and coalition realignments driven by caste calculations. Scholars also documented how this identity politics had profound policy implications. Chandra (2004) argued that ethnic parties succeed by promising patronage targeted specifically to their ethnic constituencies, creating systems of "ethnic head counts" where development benefits flow disproportionately to ruling parties' core caste groups. Jeffrey (2001) analyzed how this dynamic played out in Uttar Pradesh, with different governments prioritizing different caste groups in appointments, contracts, and welfare schemes.

While this body of literature establishes identity politics as central to Uttar Pradesh's electoral landscape through the 1990s and 2000s, it largely ends its analytical focus before BJP's recent electoral dominance. The BJP's sweeping victories in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections (winning 71 of 80 seats in UP) and the 2017 and 2022 assembly elections have generated intense scholarly debate about the fate of identity politics, with two competing narratives emerging. One influential interpretation argues that BJP's success represents a fundamental shift away from caste-based voting toward issue-based electoral competition. Verma (2007) observed even before BJP's recent dominance that parties increasingly needed to mobilize beyond their traditional caste bases, interpreting this as evidence of the electorate's maturation. Kumar and Iyer (2019) analyzed the 2017 assembly elections and concluded that voters increasingly prioritized development, governance, and welfare delivery over caste identities. Palshikar (2019) went further, arguing that BJP has achieved a form of "hegemony" that transcends traditional identity politics by successfully constructing a pan-Hindu identity that subsumes caste divisions.

This perspective emphasizes BJP's ability to win support across diverse social groups. Studies document that in 2017 and 2022, BJP secured substantial vote shares not only from upper castes (its traditional base) but also from OBCs, Scheduled Castes, and even some Muslim voters (Alam, 2019). Post-poll surveys show BJP winning approximately 44% of OBC votes and 34% of SC votes in 2017, far exceeding its traditional upper-caste constituency (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2017). This cross-caste appeal, these scholars argue, indicates that voters are responding to BJP's governance performance, nationalist messaging, and welfare schemes rather than narrow caste appeals. Sinha (2019) and Nayak (2020) attribute BJP's success to its effective welfare delivery, particularly schemes targeting women, farmers, and the poor regardless of caste. They argue that programs like free ration distribution, housing schemes, and direct benefit transfers have created a new basis for electoral support that cuts across traditional caste lines. Similarly,

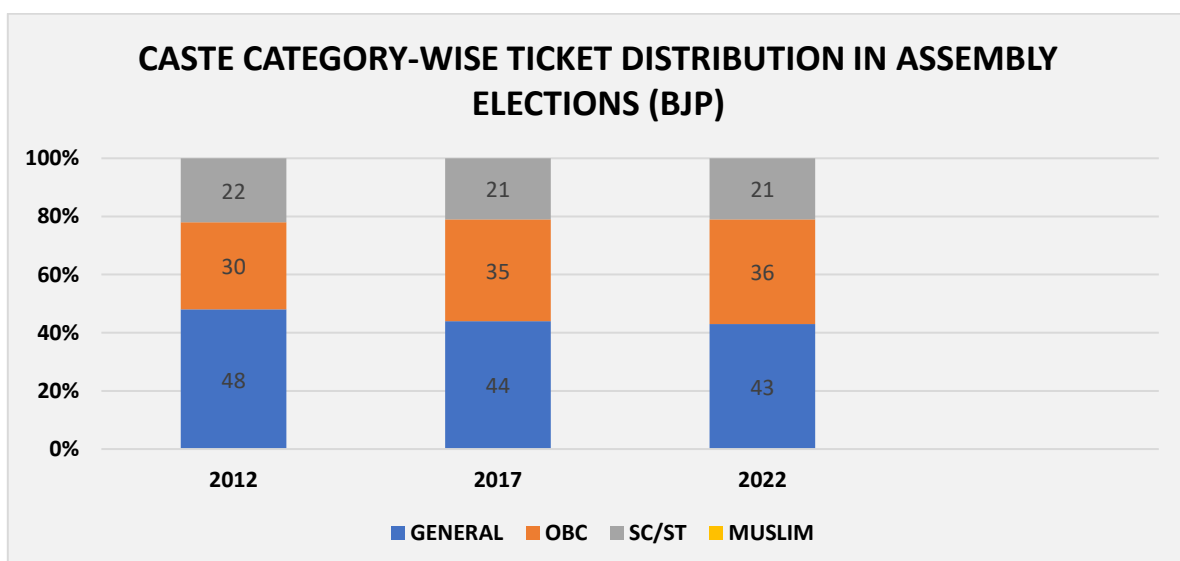
Kumar (2021) emphasizes BJP's effective use of Hindu nationalism, particularly after the Ram Mandir movement's revival, as creating a unifying identity that transcends caste divisions.

However, a smaller body of literature challenges this "end of identity politics" thesis, though without fully theorizing how BJP has reconfigured caste mobilization. Verniers (2016) in his dissertation on the localization of caste politics after Mandal and Mandir, argued that caste remains the fundamental grammar of political competition but operates through increasingly localized and diversified forms. Jaffrelot (2019) cautioned against overstating the decline of caste, noting that BJP's success relies heavily on consolidating upper-caste support while fragmenting OBC and SC votes across multiple parties. Hasan and Sridharan (2018) observed that while BJP projects a pan-Hindu identity at the symbolic level, its actual coalition-building strategies remain deeply caste-conscious. They noted BJP's strategic alliances with caste-specific parties like Apna Dal (representing Kurmi OBCs) and its differential treatment of OBC sub-castes. However, their analysis remained largely descriptive without systematically examining the mechanisms through which BJP reconfigures caste politics. Ruparelia (2015) theorized that contemporary Indian politics is characterized not by the decline of identity politics but by what she terms "divided we govern", strategies through which dominant parties fragment opposition identities while consolidating their own coalitions. However, this framework was developed primarily to explain national-level politics and has not been systematically applied to analyze state-level caste dynamics in Uttar Pradesh.

**Analysis:**

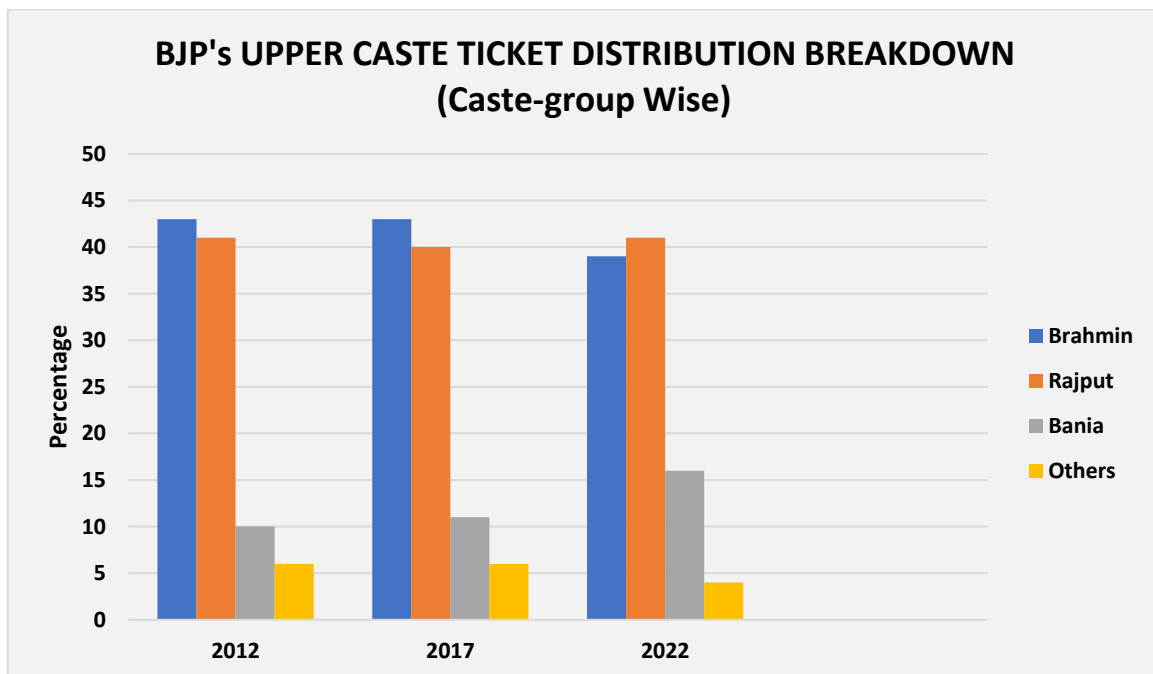
The analysis of ticket distribution patterns across three assembly elections (2012, 2017, and 2022) reveals that caste remains the fundamental organizing principle of electoral strategy in Uttar Pradesh. However, the manner in which caste operates has been strategically reconfigured by BJP, challenging simplistic narratives of identity politics decline (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2020).

The most striking pattern in BJP's ticket distribution across all three elections is the party's consistent over-representation of upper-caste candidates. Despite upper castes constituting approximately 20-21% of Uttar Pradesh's population, BJP allocated 48% of its tickets to upper-caste candidates in 2012, 44% in 2017, and 43% in 2022 (Lokniti-CSDS, 2012; 2017; 2022). This represents more than double the proportional representation that upper castes would receive under demographic parity.



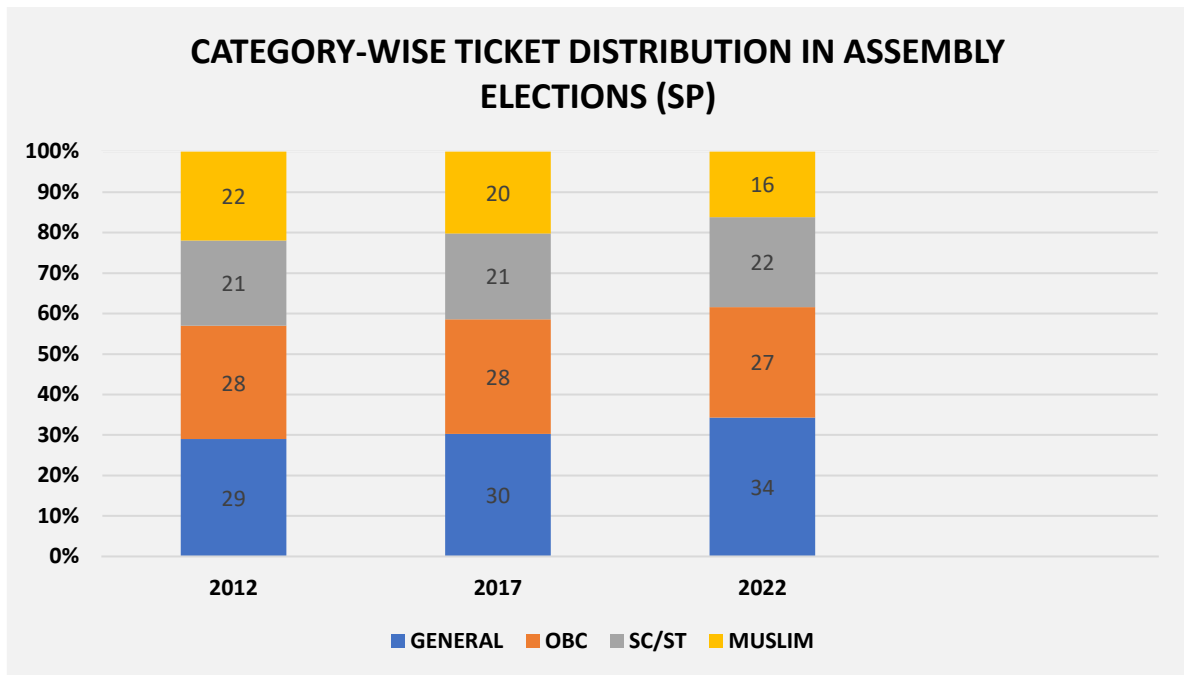
Data Source: Lokniti and CSDS

This pattern demonstrates that even as BJP expanded its electoral base and achieved landslide victories in 2017 and 2022, the party maintained its structural identity as an upper-caste dominated organization (Jaffrelot, 1996; 2021). The slight decline in upper-caste ticket share from 48% in 2012 to 43% in 2022 might initially appear to support arguments about BJP moving beyond its traditional base (Kumar and Iyer, 2019). However, this interpretation would be misleading. The decline of five percentage points occurred while BJP's total seats won increased from 47 in 2012 to 312 in 2017 and 255 in 2022 (Election Commission of India, 2012; 2017; 2022). In absolute terms, the number of upper-caste candidates fielded and elected increased substantially. More importantly, the decline reflects strategic expansion into other caste categories rather than a dilution of upper-caste influence within the party (Jaffrelot and Tillin, 2017). Upper castes remain BJP's organizational and ideological core, providing the party's leadership structure, policy direction, and symbolic representation of the Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath (a Rajput-Thakur) exemplifies this continued upper-caste dominance at the apex of state power (Verniers, 2019).



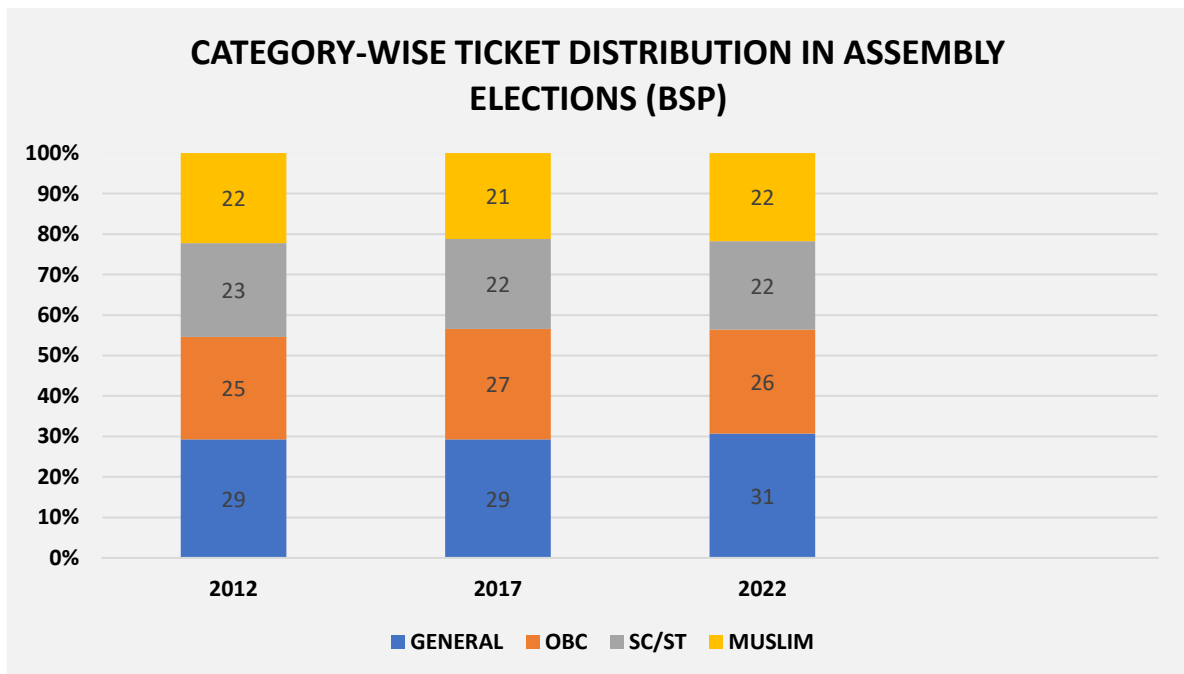
**Data Source: Lokniti and CSDS**

Within the upper-caste category, BJP's ticket distribution reveals further strategic patterns. Brahmins and Rajputs dominate BJP's upper-caste representation, consistently receiving the lion's share of tickets within this category across all three elections (Lokniti-CSDS, 2012; 2017; 2022). This internal distribution reflects both demographic realities, Brahmins and Rajputs are the two largest upper-caste groups in UP and symbolic politics. Brahmins represent cultural and ritual authority in the Hindu social hierarchy, while Rajputs embody martial valor and Kshatriya tradition (Jaffrelot, 1996). By privileging these two groups, BJP signals its connection to both intellectual-spiritual and warrior dimensions of Hindu nationalism (Hansen, 1999). The smaller representation of Banias and other upper castes like Kayasthas reflects their smaller population base, but also BJP's calculated distribution to maintain intra-upper-caste balance.



**Data Source: Lokniti and CSDS**

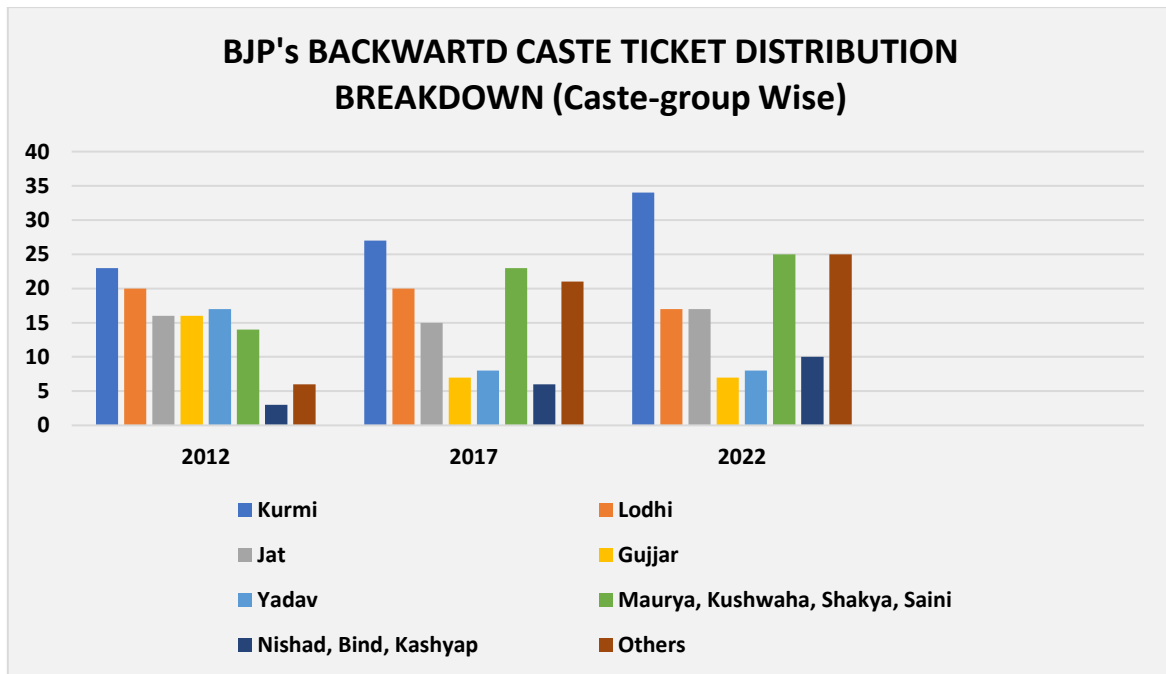
Comparing BJP's upper-caste representation with SP and BSP reveals the distinctiveness of BJP's strategy. SP allocated 29% (2012), 30% (2017), and 34% (2022) of its tickets to upper castes, substantially lower than BJP but still above the 20% population share (Lokniti-CSDS, 2012; 2017; 2022).



**Data Source: Lokniti and CSDS**

BSP's upper-caste representation remained stable at 29% (2012), 29% (2017), and 31% (2022). Both SP and BSP thus also over-represent upper castes, though less dramatically than BJP. This pattern suggests that upper-caste candidates possess advantages in electoral competition. Things like, access to resources, education, political networks etc., all parties acknowledge in ticket distribution (Vaishnav, 2017; Chandra, 2004). However, BJP's much higher upper-caste representation demonstrates a strategic choice to make

upper castes the party's structural foundation, a choice neither SP nor BSP makes to the same degree. The maintenance of upper-caste dominance has profound implications for understanding BJP's electoral strategy. It reveals that BJP's expansion into OBC and SC constituencies does not come at the expense of its traditional base. Rather, BJP has managed to expand its coalition while keeping its core constituency disproportionately empowered within party structures (Jaffrelot, 2021). This pattern contradicts the "end of identity politics" narrative, which assumes that cross-caste electoral appeal requires proportionate representation across castes (Palshikar, 2019). BJP demonstrates that a party can win votes across caste lines while maintaining internal structural dominance by a particular caste category, a strategy that can be termed "hierarchical expansion" rather than "egalitarian inclusion." This hierarchical expansion becomes even more evident when examining how BJP navigates the complex terrain of Other Backward Classes, where the party has developed a sophisticated strategy of caste differentiation and targeted mobilization.



**Data Source: Lokniti and CSDS**

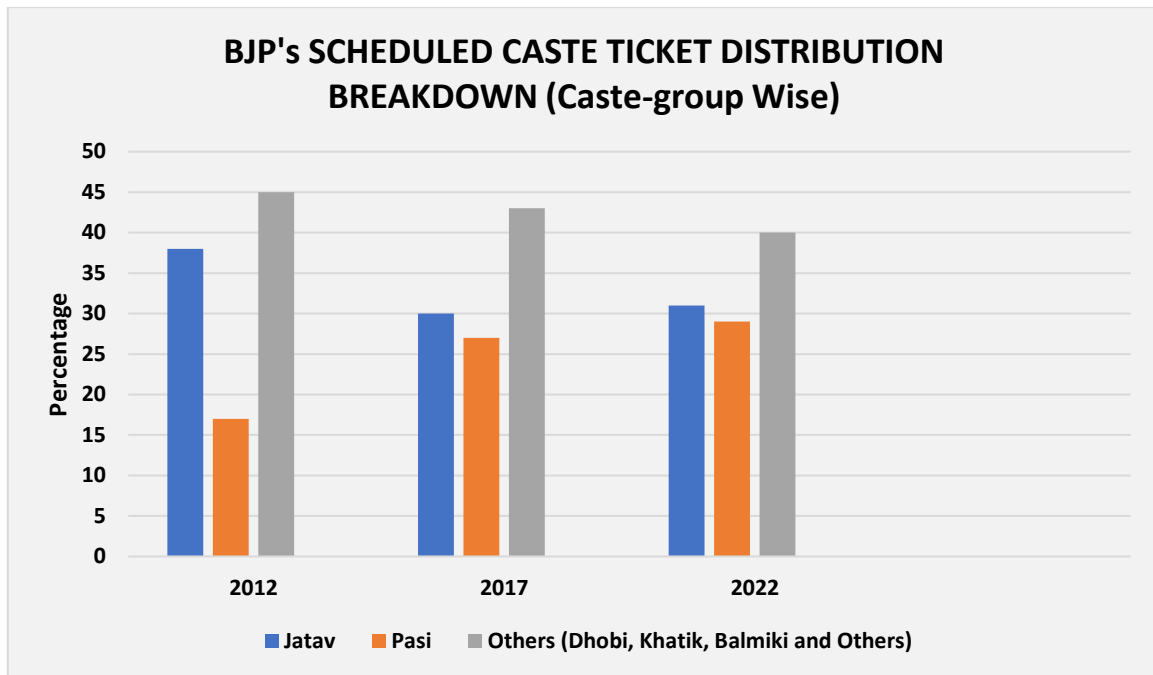
BJP's OBC ticket distribution reveals a pattern of strategic targeting that deliberately avoids direct competition with SP while aggressively recruiting from marginalized sub-castes. Overall, BJP allocated 30% (2012), 35% (2017), and 36% (2022) of its tickets to OBC candidates (Lokniti-CSDS, 2012; 2017; 2022). While this represents under-representation relative to OBCs' 40-41% population share (Mandal Commission, 1980), the more significant pattern emerges when we disaggregate within the OBC category. Yadavs, constituting approximately 8-9% of UP's population, receive minimal representation in BJP's ticket distribution across all three elections. This is not an oversight but a deliberate strategic choice. SP has successfully consolidated Yadav political consciousness, with Yadavs forming the party's organizational backbone and core vote bank (Jaffrelot, 2003; Hasan, 1998). Rather than attempting to break SP's Yadav monopoly, BJP concedes Yadav representation to SP and focuses on mobilizing non-Yadav OBCs who might feel marginalized within SP's Yadav-dominated structure (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2012).

The castes BJP targets within OBCs reveal this strategy clearly. Kurmis, a cultivator caste concentrated in eastern UP, receive substantial and increasing representation: their ticket share grew from 2012 to 2022 as

BJP recognized their political potential. BJP's alliance with Apna Dal, a Kurmi-led party, institutionalizes this strategy at the coalition level, with Apna Dal receiving a seat-sharing arrangement that ensures Kurmi representation in constituencies where BJP does not field Kurmi candidates directly (Bose, 2013; Kumar, 2017). Similarly, Lodhi-Rajputs, a caste with intermediate ritual status and landed economic position, receive significant BJP representation. Maurya-Kushwaha-Shakya castes, traditionally engaged in vegetable cultivation and market gardening, also receive increasing attention from BJP across the three elections (Lokniti-CSDS, 2017; 2022). Most significantly, Nishad-Bind-Kashyap communities, fishing and boating castes concentrated along UP's rivers have become major BJP targets, with the party allying with the Nishad Party to ensure their political mobilization (Sharma, 2019; India Today, 2022).

The pattern of diversification within BJP's OBC ticket distribution is equally revealing. In 2012, BJP's OBC tickets were concentrated among a few castes. By 2017 and 2022, the distribution became more diverse, with numerous smaller OBC groups receiving representation (Lokniti-CSDS, 2017; 2022). This diversification serves multiple strategic purposes. First, it prevents any single non-Yadav OBC caste from dominating BJP's OBC representation, avoiding the risk that BJP becomes identified with one OBC group to the exclusion of others. Second, it signals to multiple OBC communities that BJP offers representational opportunities, creating competition among non-Yadav OBCs for BJP's favor (Heath and Ziegfeld, 2018). Third, it fragments potential opposition unity among OBCs. When SP attempts to expand beyond its Yadav core, it faces the challenge that many non-Yadav OBCs already feel represented by BJP and resist integration into an SP coalition they perceive as Yadav-dominated (Verniers, 2016). Post-election survey data from CSDS confirms the electoral effectiveness of this strategy. In both 2017 and 2022, BJP secured approximately 44% of non-Yadav OBC votes, while SP won commanding majorities among Yadavs but performed poorly among non-Yadav OBCs (Lokniti-CSDS Post-Poll Survey, 2017; 2022). This voting pattern directly reflects the ticket distribution strategy: BJP's selective inclusion of non-Yadav OBCs through ticket distribution translates into electoral support from these communities.

This pattern of targeting non-dominant sub-castes within broader administrative categories extends beyond OBCs to BJP's approach toward Scheduled Castes, where the party replicates its OBC strategy with remarkable consistency. BJP's Scheduled Caste ticket distribution reveals a strategy parallel to its OBC approach: avoiding direct competition for BSP's core Jatav constituency while targeting non-Jatav SC sub-castes. SC seats constitute approximately 21% of assembly constituencies through constitutional reservation, requiring all parties to field SC candidates in these constituencies. However, parties retain discretion about which SC sub-castes to field, creating space for strategic caste targeting within the SC category (Jensenius, 2015). Jatavs (also called Chamars), constituting approximately 54-56% of UP's total SC population, dominate SC political consciousness and have been BSP's foundational constituency since Kanshi Ram's mobilization in the 1980s (Jaffrelot, 2003; Pai, 2002). BSP's identity as a Jatav-led party remains strong, with Jatavs occupying dominant positions in BSP's organizational structure and receiving privileged access to party tickets (Chandra, 2004; Jaffrelot, 1998). Rather than attempting to break BSP's Jatav dominance, BJP pursues a strategy parallel to its OBC approach: concede Jatav representation to BSP while targeting non-Jatav SCs who might feel marginalized within BSP's Jatav-dominated structure. BJP's SC ticket distribution reveals this strategic choice clearly. Despite Jatavs constituting over half the SC population, they receive proportionally fewer BJP tickets than their demographic weight would warrant (Lokniti-CSDS, 2012; 2017; 2022). In contrast, Pasis, the second-largest SC group, concentrated in eastern UP and traditionally engaged in toddy-tapping receive representation nearly equal to Jatavs despite constituting a much smaller population share.



**Data Source: Lokniti and CSDS**

This over-representation of Pasis relative to their demographic weight signals BJP's strategy of offering non-Jatav SCs opportunities that BSP does not provide (Jaffrelot and Kumar, 2019). The category "Other SCs" in BJP's distribution reveals further strategic targeting. This category includes numerous smaller SC groups, like Dhobis (washermen), Khatiks (butchers and tanners), Koris (weavers), Balmikis (sweepers), and many others. BJP's increasing representation of these diverse groups across the three elections demonstrates deliberate diversification strategy (Lokniti-CSDS, 2017; 2022). By spreading representation across multiple non-Jatav SC castes, BJP achieves several objectives: it prevents dependence on any single SC group, signals inclusiveness to multiple SC communities, and fragments potential SC unity under BSP's leadership. The electoral effectiveness of this strategy appears in post-election survey data. In 2017 and 2022, BJP secured over 50% of non-Jatav SC votes while BSP maintained dominance among Jatavs but performed poorly among non-Jatav SCs (Lokniti-CSDS Post-Poll Survey, 2017; 2022). This voting pattern directly reflects ticket distribution strategies: non-Jatav SCs, seeing representation opportunities in BJP and limited opportunities in BSP, increasingly support BJP electorally.

Analyzing SP and BSP ticket distribution patterns alongside BJP's reveals both commonalities and crucial differences in how parties navigate identity politics. All three parties over-represent certain caste groups, demonstrating that strategic caste mobilization remains universal in UP electoral politics (Chandra, 2004; Gowda and Sridharan, 2012). However, the specific patterns of over-representation and strategic targeting differ significantly across parties, reflecting their distinct social bases and strategic constraints. SP's ticket distribution reveals the party's dependence on and dominance by Yadavs. Across all three elections, Yadavs receive over 50% of SP's OBC tickets despite constituting less than 20% of OBCs (Lokniti-CSDS, 2012; 2017; 2022). This massive over-representation reflects both Yadav control of SP's organizational structure and the party's rational calculation that maintaining Yadav enthusiasm requires privileging them in representation (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2012). SP's second pillar, Muslim representation at approximately 20% across all three elections, reflects the party's MY (Muslim-Yadav) coalition strategy (Hasan, 1998; Jaffrelot, 2003). Notably, SP's Muslim representation roughly matches Muslims' population share, contrasting with the over-representation of Yadavs. This difference suggests SP treats Muslims as electoral

partners rather than as organizationally dominant within the party structure: Muslims provide votes, while Yadavs control organization and leadership (Verniers, 2016).

SP's challenge lies in expanding beyond its MY core without alienating these constituencies. In 2022, SP notably reduced Muslim ticket allocation to 16% while increasing upper-caste representation to 34%, apparently attempting to counter Hindu polarization by appearing less Muslim-friendly (India Today, 2022). However, this adjustment came too late and proved insufficient to overcome BJP's massive Hindu mobilization. SP's structural difficulty is that any significant rebalancing toward non-Yadav OBCs or upper castes risks Yadav alienation, yet maintaining Yadav dominance limits expansion potential (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2020). BJP exploits this structural trap by positioning itself as inclusive to the groups SP under-represents. BSP's ticket distribution reveals analogous patterns and dilemmas within the SC category. While BSP attempts broader social engineering, evident in its relatively balanced distribution across upper castes (29-31%), OBCs (27%), and SCs (22-23%), the party's core identity as representing Dalit empowerment, particularly Jatav empowerment, creates constraints (Pai, 2014). BSP's attempt in 2007 to construct a "rainbow coalition" by giving substantial tickets to Brahmins succeeded electorally in that election but proved unsustainable (Pai, 2013; Jaffrelot, 2011). By 2012, many Brahmin candidates and voters had abandoned BSP, revealing the fragility of cross-cutting coalitions that contradict parties' core identities (Verma, 2007). In 2017 and 2022, BSP returned to more conventional distribution patterns but suffered catastrophic defeats (19 seats in 2017, just 1 seat in 2022), suggesting that BSP's previous success depended on particular coalition configurations that BJP's rise has rendered unviable (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2020).

The consistent pattern across SP and BSP is that parties built on mobilizing specific caste constituencies struggle to expand without risking their core base's alienation (Chandra, 2004). This creates permanent strategic vulnerabilities that BJP exploits. BJP's advantage lies in reverse: its organizational dominance by upper castes is secure regardless of ticket distribution adjustments, allowing the party flexibility to diversify OBC and SC representation without risking upper-caste alienation (Jaffrelot, 2021). Upper castes recognize that even when BJP fields numerous OBC and SC candidates, party leadership and policy direction remain upper-caste dominated, maintaining their structural power. This asymmetry that BJP can expand without threatening its core while SP and BSP cannot, explains much of BJP's electoral dominance (Heath and Ziegfeld, 2018). The asymmetry becomes even more pronounced when considering BJP's approach to Muslim representation, which differs starkly from both SP and BSP and reveals another dimension of the party's identity reconfiguration strategy.

One striking pattern across all three elections is BJP's complete or near-complete exclusion of Muslim candidates. While SP gives approximately 20% of tickets to Muslims and BSP gives approximately 5-6%, BJP fields virtually no Muslim candidates (Lokniti-CSDS, 2012; 2017; 2022). This exclusion is not incidental but strategic, reflecting BJP's calculation that Hindu consolidation requires visible differentiation from "Muslim-appeasing" parties (Jaffrelot, 2019; Hansen, 1999). By fielding no Muslim candidates, BJP signals to Hindu voters, across all Hindu castes that it represents Hindu interests exclusively, creating a unifying horizontal identity that cross-cuts vertical caste divisions (Jaffrelot, 1996). This exclusion strategy operates symbiotically with BJP's caste reconfiguration. By constructing a Hindu-Muslim binary, BJP provides ideological justification for why Yadav and non-Yadav OBCs, Jatav and non-Jatav SCs, and upper and lower castes should unite (Palshikar, 2019). The Muslim "other" becomes the external threat against which Hindu unity is mobilized, with caste differences characterized as internal Hindu variations that should not fragment Hindu solidarity (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 2021). This symbolic

framework of Hindutva as an umbrella identity encompassing all Hindu castes operates at the ideological level, while ticket distribution operates at the material level to construct actual social coalitions.

SP's contrasting inclusion of Muslim candidates creates electoral vulnerabilities BJP exploits. By giving 20% of tickets to Muslims, SP signals commitment to Muslim representation but simultaneously enables BJP to characterize SP as "Muslim-favoring" and insufficiently attentive to Hindu interests (Jaffrelot, 2019). This characterization becomes particularly powerful during periods of heightened communal tension, when Hindu voters across castes may prioritize religious over caste identity (Wilkinson, 2004). The 2017 and 2022 elections occurred in contexts of Ram Mandir mobilization and communal polarization that amplified the salience of Hindu-Muslim identity over intra-Hindu caste divisions, advantaging BJP's exclusionary strategy (Jaffrelot, 2021; Kumar, 2021). This interplay between Muslim exclusion and Hindu caste mobilization reveals the dialectical relationship between symbolic and material dimensions of BJP's identity politics, a relationship that explains how the party simultaneously maintains caste-based coalition building while projecting an image of caste transcendence.

BJP's success in reconfiguring identity politics operates through the dialectical relationship between symbolic politics and material distribution. At the symbolic level, BJP projects Hindu nationalism and Hindutva ideology that claims to transcend caste, emphasizing Hindu unity against Muslim and Western threats (Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996). This symbolic discourse appears anti-caste, criticizing Congress-era "casteism" and promising development for all Hindus regardless of caste (Palshikar, 2019). Political commentators focusing on this symbolic level conclude that BJP has moved beyond identity politics (Kumar and Iyer, 2019). However, at the material level, revealed through ticket distribution analysis, BJP's actual coalition-building strategy remains fundamentally caste-based, though reconfigured in innovative ways. BJP maintains upper-caste structural dominance while selectively incorporating non-dominant sub-castes from OBC and SC categories. This material reality of caste-conscious ticket distribution contradicts the symbolic discourse of caste transcendence, yet the contradiction proves productive for BJP electorally. The symbolic discourse attracts voters hoping for development and modernity beyond caste politics, while the material distribution ensures that diverse Hindu caste groups receive sufficient representation to feel stakeholder status in BJP's coalition.

### **Conclusion:**

This study demonstrates conclusively that BJP's electoral dominance in Uttar Pradesh has resulted not from the decline of identity politics but from its strategic reconfiguration. The empirical evidence from ticket distribution patterns across three assembly elections (2012, 2017, 2022) reveals BJP's sophisticated caste mobilization strategy: maintaining upper-caste structural dominance (43-48% of tickets despite 20% population share) while systematically targeting non-Yadav OBC and non-Jatav SC sub-castes. This reconfiguration fragments opposition coalitions while consolidating diverse Hindu castes under Hindutva's symbolic umbrella, enabling BJP to win cross-caste support without proportionate representation or power-sharing.

The findings challenge influential narratives claiming that BJP's success signals voters maturation beyond caste toward issue-based politics (Kumar and Iyer, 2019; Palshikar, 2019). While BJP's symbolic politics emphasizes development, governance, and Hindu nationalism, appearing to transcend caste, the party's actual coalition-building strategy, revealed through ticket distribution remains fundamentally organized around caste categories, though in reconfigured forms. BJP's innovation lies not in abandoning identity politics but in what we term "hierarchical expansion", broadening electoral appeal while maintaining

dominant-caste structural power. Opposition parties SP and BSP, trapped by dependence on core constituencies (Yadavs and Jatavs respectively), cannot expand without risking base alienation, creating permanent strategic vulnerabilities BJP exploits by positioning itself as inclusive to marginalized sub-castes within broader categories (Chandra, 2004; Heath and Ziegfeld, 2018).

This analysis contributes three crucial insights to scholarly understanding of contemporary Indian electoral politics. First, it provides systematic empirical evidence that caste remains the fundamental organizing principle of electoral strategy in Uttar Pradesh, operating through transformed mechanisms that aggregate previously under-mobilized sub-castes. Second, it demonstrates methodologically that ticket distribution analysis reveals party strategy in ways aggregate electoral data cannot capture, showing caste calculations underlying apparently post-caste electoral outcomes. Third, it reveals BJP's specific innovation: neither traditional upper-caste exclusivism nor genuine caste transcendence, but hierarchical expansion maintaining structural dominance while selectively incorporating subordinate groups.

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