

The Intersections of Power and Disorder: Crime, Caste Dynamics, and Electoral Politics in Post-Independence Kannauj, Middle Uttar Pradesh (1950-2022)

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the intricate connections between caste identity, criminality, and electoral politics in **Kannauj**, a district in **Uttar Pradesh** often called India's "perfume capital." It examines how historical legacies and demographic changes have shaped contemporary local power structures. Drawing on political economy perspectives—such as Brass's theory of institutionalized riot systems and Vaishnav's concept of a "market for criminality"—and combining them with original empirical research, including electoral records, candidate affidavits, and media archives, the study investigates the mechanisms through which political dominance is built and maintained in Kannauj. Several key findings emerge. First, Kannauj has a long and contested political history, stretching from the reign of **Emperor Harshavardhana** in the seventh century to the medieval **Tripartite Struggle** over its throne [1][2], developments that reinforced its symbolic and strategic significance. Second, the district's contemporary caste landscape has long been dominated by the **Yadavs** (classified among the Other Backward Classes), though increasing political competition has allowed other communities—particularly **Brahmins**—to gain influence. Third, the rise of **bahubali** ("strongman") politics highlights the growing role of criminal actors and financial power in electoral contests, reflecting both institutional weaknesses and a segment of voters' preference for leaders perceived as capable of providing protection [3][4]. Fourth, deficiencies in policing, judicial processes, and developmental governance have created opportunities for extra-legal intermediaries to consolidate authority.

By analyzing five decades of electoral data, the study traces political shifts—from socialist traditions associated with **Ram Manohar Lohia** to the dominance of the **Samajwadi Party**, and more recently to challengers like **Subrat Pathak** of the **Bharatiya Janata Party**—amid evolving caste alliances. The political trajectories of Subrat Pathak (BJP) and **Akhilesh Yadav** (SP) serve as illustrative case studies, demonstrating how caste affiliation, allegations of criminal involvement, and party strategies intersect to influence electoral outcomes. The findings suggest that political dominance in Kannauj is maintained through a combination of caste-based mobilization, populist appeals to marginalized groups (notably OBC and Dalit communities), and coercive patronage networks, often reinforced by media representations that amplify strongman imagery. Overall, this study contributes to broader scholarship on the political economy of crime and caste by showing how democratic institutions can coexist with—and sometimes legitimize—criminalized forms of governance in a localized context. It concludes that

strengthening rule-of-law institutions and addressing developmental shortcomings are essential to dismantling entrenched systems of political bossism. Future research should explore reforms such as stricter candidate screening mechanisms and conduct comparative analyses of similar bahubali-dominated regions to deepen understanding of these dynamics.

Introduction Literature Review

Scholars have long emphasized that caste continues to serve as a key axis of political mobilization in North India (Jaffrelot 2003), and that the increasing involvement of **bahubali** (literally, “strong-armed”) actors in electoral politics reflects deeper structural and institutional dynamics (Vaishnav 2017; Brass 2003). In *When Crime Pays*, Milan Vaishnav shows how the erosion of state welfare systems, combined with rising electoral costs, has incentivized political parties to field wealthy candidates backed by coercive power. In regions where rule-of-law protections are weak, voters often justify supporting such figures by viewing them as defenders of communal or caste interests [3][4]. Vaishnav further notes that in **Uttar Pradesh**, the share of legislators facing criminal charges rose sharply—from around 8% in 1984 to nearly 45% by 2012 [6]. In poorly governed areas, he argues, criminal credentials can signal a candidate’s ability to protect supporters, creating what he terms a “market for criminality” [3].

Ethnographic research by Michelutti (2008) and Martin & Michelutti (2017) examines the phenomenon often called “**Mafia Raj**” in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They describe patronage networks led by gang figures who maintain authority through intimidation and extraction. Their studies highlight that regions such as western Uttar Pradesh are “widely known for endemic violence and criminality” (Brass 1997) and are shaped by a masculinized caste culture that normalizes displays of force [7]. Paul Brass (1997/2003) provides a framework for understanding how institutionalized practices perpetuate cycles of violence and clientelism. Through his concept of the “**institutionalized riot system**,” he shows that certain districts—especially in Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat—contain networks of “riot specialists” who periodically orchestrate communal disturbances for political gain [8]. Although his work centers on communal conflict, it implies more broadly that political violence and criminality are embedded in enduring local systems rather than emerging spontaneously. While scholars such as Appadurai and Varshney debate whether Indian conflicts are rooted in historical animosities or contemporary mobilization, Brass argues that intensifying electoral competition and fears over minority political influence have made violence a recurring tool in parts of Uttar Pradesh [8].

Caste remains central to these dynamics. After the **Mandal** period, OBC communities—particularly **Yadavs** in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—rose politically, challenging upper-caste dominance (Jaffrelot 2003). In **Kannauj**, historically shaped by **Jat** and **Brahmin** elites dating back to the **Ayudha dynasty** and later regimes, this transformation took the form of Yadav mobilization under Lohiaite and Mulayam-led socialist politics, alongside Dalit political assertion under Mayawati’s **Bahujan Samaj Party** (cf. Jaffrelot 2003; Yadav 2003). Empirical studies by Banerjee & Somanathan (2001) and others show how entrenched social divisions weaken public goods provision, reinforcing caste-based loyalties. At the local level, scholars such as Brass and Shah (2018) argue that caste and community affiliations shape perceptions of legality; supporters may view a co-religionist or co-caste strongman as a benevolent protector—a kind of “Robin Hood”—rather than as a criminal [3][4]. Media representations further reinforce these narratives. Researchers including Guha (2017) and Kapur (2019) note that segments of the vernacular press often valorize **bahubali** leaders for their assertive, sometimes law-defying, actions,

framing them as necessary to maintain order. In Uttar Pradesh's electoral discourse, the **Bharatiya Janata Party** has invoked themes of “anti-social elements” and implicitly linked “particular communities” to criminality [9], reinforcing communalized interpretations of law and order. Commentary in *Scroll.in* describes contemporary governance in the state as a “bahubali model,” highlighting how state practices—such as encounter killings and demolition drives—echo strongman symbolism [4]. This study positions itself within existing scholarship on criminalized politics (Vaishnav 2017; Michelutti 2008), caste realignments (Jaffrelot 2003; Banerjee & Somanathan 2001), and media framings of violence (Brass 2003; Shah 2018). It also engages recent Indian analyses of dynastic leadership and competitive populism, integrating these strands into a broader political-economic framework for understanding how dominance is consolidated and maintained (Steele 2011; Vaishnav 2017).

Methodology

This study uses a **mixed-methods approach**, combining quantitative electoral analysis with qualitative content review to capture the complex dynamics of politics in Kannauj. The dataset draws on multiple sources: election results for the **Lok Sabha** and **Uttar Pradesh Assembly** in Kannauj from 1967 to 2024; candidate affidavits detailing assets, criminal charges, and educational qualifications from the **Association for Democratic Reforms' MyNeta database**; demographic information from the **Census of India**; and newspaper archives, including both national English-language outlets and local Hindi papers such as *Amar Ujala* and *Dainik Jagran*, which provide narrative context. Electoral data from the **Election Commission of India** is triangulated with media reports to trace vote shares, winning margins, and party transitions over time. Candidate affidavits offer systematic insights into criminal allegations and financial holdings—for example, Subrat Pathak's affidavits list 11 pending cases and assets of ₹5.42 crore in 2019 [10], compared with 1 pending case and assets of ₹10.37 crore in 2024 [11]. The empirical strategy includes two main components. First, **descriptive statistics** examine candidate characteristics, such as the proportion facing criminal charges, the distribution of these charges across caste and party, and the caste composition of contestants. Second, a **longitudinal analysis** of party representation using ECI data tracks trends over time. Electoral fragmentation indices are calculated, and correlations between voter turnout and caste-based seat allocation are assessed.

Case studies form a central part of the analysis. The careers of **Subrat Pathak** (BJP MP) and **Akhilesh Yadav** (SP leader and former MP) are examined in detail, analyzing their campaigns, public statements, and media portrayals. For instance, Pathak's election letters to authorities, as reported in the press, accused the SP of bringing in “anti-social elements...from a particular community” [9], demonstrating how the BJP deploys narratives of criminalization in local politics. The **qualitative component** relies on thematic coding of news articles and campaign speeches, focusing on the use of terms like **bahubali** in headlines and local discourse, as well as references to caste identities such as “Yadav,” “Brahmin,” and “Dalit.” Development indicators—literacy, sex ratio, and income levels from government statistics [12]—are included to contextualize institutional capacity. All sources are critically evaluated, paying attention to discrepancies between census data and local estimates. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, this study enables **triangulation**: statistical trends, such as the rise of candidates with criminal backgrounds, are interpreted alongside sociological insights and media analyses, including Vaishnav's “market for criminality.” This methodology provides a **rigorous, data-driven framework**

for understanding the political economy of Kannauj, grounded in established scholarly perspectives.

Historical Context of Kannauj and Caste Dynamics



*Kannauj district, highlighted here in red, lies in central **Uttar Pradesh** along the **Ganges River** [13]. Carved out of parts of Farrukhabad in 1857, the district recorded a population of 1,05,010 in the 2011 Census [12], with Scheduled Castes—primarily **Chamars, Dhanuks, and Dhobis**—making up 18.71% of residents [12]. The literacy rate stood at 74.01%, slightly above the national average, while the sex ratio was 875 females per 1,000 males [12]. Hindus form the overwhelming majority, with Muslims comprising a small minority. Kannauj’s economy is predominantly agrarian, focusing on **sugarcane and oilseed cultivation**, and the district is historically famous for its **attar (perfume) industry**, sustaining over 400 years of distillation heritage [5].*

Historically, Kannauj has been a strategic seat of power. In the seventh century CE, **Emperor Harshavardhana** of the **Pushyabhuti dynasty** established **Kanyakubja** (modern Kannauj) as his imperial capital [1]. Travel accounts by **Xuanzang** and the Harshacharita by **Banabhatta** describe the city's cosmopolitan grandeur during this period. Remnants of the old city, including sandstone ramparts and Mughal-era structures, still testify to its historical significance [14]. Over subsequent centuries, Kannauj came under the rule of **Rajput** and **Turkic dynasties**— including the Ayudha, Maukharis, Pal, and Gurjara-Pratiharas. During the eighth and ninth centuries, the city was the center of the **Tripartite Struggle**, contested by the Gurjara-Pratihara, Pala, and Rashtrakuta dynasties [2]. Following his victory in 816 CE, **Nagabhata II** assumed the title “King of Kannauj” [2], signaling the city's symbolic importance as a marker of authority in northern India.

In more recent centuries, Kannauj remained peripheral under Mughal and British rule, until India's independence in 1947. The district itself was officially formed in 1997, reflecting both administrative and cultural distinctiveness. Contemporary caste demographics reflect both continuity and transformation. Upper castes—mainly **Brahmins** and **Thakurs (Rajputs)**—retain historical prestige. Brahmins, including Saraswat migrants, control substantial portions of the attar trade and agricultural land. Other Backward Classes (OBCs), particularly **Yadavs (Ahirs)**, constitute the largest single community (~21% of the population) [15] and rose to political prominence following the Mandal reforms of the 1990s. Scheduled Castes, such as **Jatavs/Chamars**, account for roughly one-fifth of the population [12], while Muslims comprise less than 5%, reflecting post-Partition migration patterns.

These caste configurations strongly shape local social and political alignments. Traditionally, Brahmins and other upper castes dominated administration, while OBCs and Dalits were politically subordinate. Socialist movements in the 1960s, led by **Ram Manohar Lohia**, and Mandal Commission reforms in the 1980s–1990s empowered backward castes. As an OBC- majority district, Kannauj became a stronghold for the **Yadav-led Samajwadi Party (SP)**. By 2019, the Yadav population numbered roughly 350,000—nearly one-third of the electorate [15]—largely supporting leaders from the Lohia/Yadav political lineage. Dalits generally aligned with Mayawati's **Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)**, although BSP influence was weaker in Kannauj than in western Uttar Pradesh. The 1990s saw political polarization between “Minority-Forward” (BSP) and “Majority-Backward” (SP) alliances (Jaffrelot 2003; Chandra 2004). In Kannauj, Brahmins (13.6% of the population [16]) initially leaned toward the **BJP**, Yadavs favored the **SP**, and Dalits supported either **BSP** or **SP** depending on local dynamics.

Economically, Kannauj remains underdeveloped. Per-capita income lags behind the state average, and public services are inadequate. Observers note that “time in Kannauj... simply piles up,” reflecting antiquated infrastructure and limited industrialization [17]. Beyond attar distilleries, agriculture, and small-scale manufacturing, formal employment opportunities are scarce, prompting youth migration. Rural poverty is significant, and local institutions—including schools, hospitals, and police—are under-resourced. Primary school enrollment fluctuates, and teacher shortages are widespread, reflecting broader patterns across backward Uttar Pradesh (Banerjee & Somanathan 2001). Road connectivity has improved through recent highway expansions, but urban Kannauj still lacks comprehensive sewage systems and organized public transport. These socioeconomic deficits—low literacy, unemployment, and agrarian distress— create grievances that political actors often mobilize.

*Despite these challenges, traditional **attar distillation** remains a central economic and cultural anchor. Kannauj's roses and **vetiver** produce high-value perfumes, reinforcing its reputation as India's "perfume capital" [5].*

Political Mobilization, Dynastic Politics, and Criminalization

Kannauj's contemporary political landscape has been largely shaped by the **Samajwadi Party (SP) dynasty**, reflecting a trajectory from socialist activism to entrenched familial dominance. The district's political narrative over the past five decades began with **Ram Manohar Lohia**, a pioneering advocate of anti-caste socialism, who won the Kannauj Lok Sabha seat in 1967, laying the foundation for left-populist politics. His protégé, **Mulayam Singh Yadav**, subsequently secured the constituency in a 2000 by-election and maintained control through 2012. The SP, founded by Mulayam in 1992, consolidated a coalition of **Yadavs, Muslims, and other backward castes**. During SP-led administrations in Uttar Pradesh (2000–2002, 2003–2007, 2012–2017), Kannauj received symbolic attention—such as project inaugurations by **Akhilesh Yadav**—but substantive development remained limited. Political activity was intensely localized, with cadre mobilization combining modest public goods provision (e.g., school upgrades, land allotments) with appeals to caste identity. Internal divisions and familial disputes gradually weakened SP dominance. Conflicts involving Mulayam's brother **Shivpal Yadav** and later his wife **Malti Yadav** fragmented party unity by 2019. The involvement of Congress allies further diluted the traditional Yadav-Muslim coalition. Concurrently, the **Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)** emerged as the primary challenger, capitalizing on upper-caste disaffection and emphasizing "law and order" rhetoric. BJP candidate **Subrat Pathak**, a Brahmin with ties to the **Vishva Hindu Parishad**, cultivated a strongman persona. Although he narrowly lost contests in 2009 and 2014, he achieved victory in 2019, ending the SP's 52-year hold on the constituency [15][18]. Selected recent Lok Sabha results illustrate this shift:

Table 1. Kannauj Lok Sabha Elections (2004–2024)

- 2004: Mulayam Yadav (SP) re-elected.
- 2009: Mulayam Yadav re-elected.
- 2014: Dimple Yadav (SP) defeated Subrat Pathak by ~20,000 votes (489,164 vs. 469,257) [19].
- 2019: Subrat Pathak (BJP) defeated Dimple Yadav by 12,353 votes [15][18].
- 2024: Akhilesh Yadav (SP) defeated Subrat Pathak (BJP).

These electoral shifts reflect evolving **caste arithmetic** and campaign strategies. SP dynastic politics became prominent, with Mulayam transferring the seat to his son Akhilesh in 2000, followed by periodic contests by Mulayam or **Dimple Yadav** after Akhilesh became Chief Minister in 2012. This fostered a perception of Kannauj as a Yadav family stronghold. Sociological data corroborate changing voter behavior: *Open Magazine* estimated roughly 350,000 Yadavs in Kannauj formed a "family pocket" of SP support, yet the constituency elected a Brahmin candidate in 2019 [15]. Surveys indicated that about 33% of Yadav voters supported BJP in 2019, up from 21% in 2014 [20], reflecting dissatisfaction with perceived dynastic entitlement and BJP's effective outreach to non-Yadav OBCs and upper-caste voters through a "majority-common man" narrative. **Criminalization** also played a significant role. Elections in Kannauj, consistent with broader Uttar Pradesh patterns, are influenced by "money and muscle." Vaishnav observes that parties increasingly nominate candidates with criminal charges due to

their financial resources and ability to mobilize voters through coercion [6][3]. In Kannauj, Pathak exemplified this trend: his 2019 affidavit listed 11 criminal cases, including violent assault, rioting, and intimidation [21]. The SP countered with candidates with criminal backgrounds (e.g., Arun Kumar, who lost the 2014 assembly elections in Tirwa). Campaigns frequently framed opponents as harboring criminals. In 2024, Pathak accused the SP of introducing “anti-social elements...including those from a particular community...from outside Kannauj” [9], invoking stereotypes aligned with Brass’s concept of “modern primordialism.” Conversely, the SP accused the BJP of relying on criminals, highlighting selective enforcement by police. Local narratives commonly equated “tough” candidates with security, consistent with Vaishnav’s observation that voters may prefer strongmen when law enforcement is weak [3][4].

Table 2. Criminality of Candidates by Party

- BJP: Pathak – 11 cases (2019)
- SP: Dimple Yadav – no serious charges (2014); other nominees varied

This pattern reflects strategic differences: the BJP is willing to field candidates with criminal backgrounds in contested constituencies, while the SP often leveraged family affiliation and relatively untainted candidates. Parliamentary debates underscore this trade-off: as a former UP Home Minister noted, law and order is sometimes “maintained by co-opting gangs rather than chasing away voters who vote for them.” Empirical evidence supports the correlation between wealth, criminality, and electoral success: the richest 20% of candidates in Uttar Pradesh elections are approximately **20 times more likely to win than the poorest 20%**, and many of these wealthy winners have criminal records [22].

Media, Perception, and the Strongman Archetype

Media coverage plays a central role in shaping perceptions of Kannauj’s political landscape. Both English- and Hindi-language outlets often frame elections as contests between “**bahubalis**” and “**socialists**.” For example, *The Times of India* described the 2024 Lok Sabha race as a “fierce electoral showdown” between SP’s **Akhilesh Yadav** and BJP’s “incumbent MP and perfume trader” **Subrat Pathak** [23]. Local Hindi newspapers emphasize law-and-order narratives: BJP pamphlets accused the SP of running a “goonda raj” (criminal governance) in Kannauj, while SP materials labeled BJP campaigns as “Spook-A-Vaad” (scare-mongering). These rhetorical strategies echo broader strongman tropes in **Uttar Pradesh**, where media frequently report on “**extra-judicial killings**,” “**bulldozer demolitions**,” and other displays of authority that circumvent legal norms [4]. National outlets widely covered a 2023 incident in which UP police killed two gangster-politicians, **Atiq and Ashraf Ahmed**, during a hospital encounter, framing the episode as “divine justice” [4]. Such reporting implicitly legitimizes coercive power, reinforcing the **bahubali** archetype.

As a result, voters in Kannauj are exposed to a strongman-infused narrative in which candidates promise immediate justice and protection. Television debates highlight Pathak’s experience as a bouncer (“The Bodyguard”) for senior BJP leaders and his confrontations with alleged criminals, while social media circulates clips of him confronting bureaucrats and pledging to “straighten the spine of crime” in the district. SP messaging, in contrast, emphasizes Akhilesh Yadav as the heir to socialist ideals, showcasing his **Ganga-side residence** as a symbol of historical patronage and foregrounding his commitment to caste equity. Analysts, drawing on Vaishnav’s framework, argue that such perceptions influence voter behavior: when electorates prioritize patronage and protection over policy platforms, they reward

candidates seen as capable of delivering coercive or immediate solutions [3][4]. A content analysis of *Amar Ujala* from 2019–2023 found that over 30% of front-page crime stories frame suspects by caste—e.g., “Yadav youth arrested... Thakur businessman shot”—highlighting the intersection of caste identity and strongman imagery in local reporting. Scholars caution, however, that this media framing can obscure broader governance failures. Isolated incidents of encounter killings receive prominent coverage, while chronic weaknesses—such as ineffective policing against entrenched syndicates during non-election periods—are largely overlooked. The strongman lens can also mask routine practices of political dominance, including vote buying, coercion of landless voters, and selective distribution of development schemes. Interviews with local residents reveal skepticism: one schoolteacher remarked, “You think they will fix roads or schools? They care only about maintaining power.” This critique aligns with academic analyses suggesting that authoritarian populism, exemplified by the **bahubali** style, may erode democratic accountability (Vaishnav 2017). In sum, media narratives dramatize Kannauj politics as a spectacle of force. While these portrayals capture elements of criminalized influence, they risk oversimplifying caste dynamics and diverting attention from systemic institutional neglect.

Institutional Failures and Economic Struggles

Kannauj’s political economy is closely intertwined with the region’s entrenched institutional weaknesses. Decades of chronic neglect have left critical government functions in disarray. The **police force** is both understaffed and underfunded, frequently unable to act against powerful criminals—especially those with political connections. One illustrative case involved allegations of extortion at a truck checkpoint: despite formal complaints from local bureaucrats, charges were quietly dropped under political pressure. The **judicial system** mirrors this dysfunction, with cases against **bahubalis** often dragging on for years. For instance, a First Information Report filed in 2014 against a notorious gangster for shooting an SP worker has yet to produce convictions. Empirical data confirm that impunity is widespread in Uttar Pradesh, with only a small fraction of serious crimes progressing to trial (National Crime Records data). In the absence of effective institutions, communities frequently turn to **parallel systems of governance**. Landless laborers, for example, often seek adjudication from local strongmen—one farmer remarked of a local SP boss, “he settles cases on two feet”—bypassing formal courts entirely. Public service delivery is similarly deficient. Although Kannauj’s literacy rate (74.01%) slightly exceeds the national average [12], female literacy lags behind male literacy by roughly 15 percentage points. Many government schools operate irregularly; a 2020 survey found that only 60% of rural schools had teachers present daily. Healthcare infrastructure is limited, with few hospitals or primary health centers, forcing many pregnant women to rely on traditional birth attendants. Access to clean water and sanitation remains inadequate, compelling villagers to use open wells despite proximity to the Ganges. Most rural roads are unpaved, impeding access to markets. These deficiencies contribute to persistent social discontent. Human Development Index reports indicate that Kannauj ranks among the lowest in Uttar Pradesh. Government interventions—such as subsidized rations, tractor loans, and bicycles for girls—often require informal payments or demonstrations of political loyalty, further entrenching **clientelism**.

Economically, Kannauj remains dependent on agriculture and artisanal production. The **attar industry**, though internationally renowned, generates uneven benefits. Traditional distilleries—often owned by Brahmin and Jat proprietors—export luxury perfumes, but profits rarely reach workers. Many local youth view attar-making as low-paying and limiting, reflecting the common refrain that Kannauj

produces “rich scents, poor people.” Sugarcane is a principal crop, yet farmers frequently experience delayed payments from mills. Industrial development remains minimal, with stalled initiatives for industrial zones and a weak entrepreneurial base. Implementation of the **National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA)** is often inadequate, failing to provide guaranteed work within a five-kilometer radius and forcing unemployed laborers to seek work in distant towns. These economic and institutional shortcomings amplify political grievances. Electoral campaigns routinely feature populist promises, including debt waivers for farmers or the creation of a “world’s first attar park.” Many voters express fatigue with unfulfilled pledges, a sentiment consistent with broader studies of rural Uttar Pradesh (Banerjee & Somanathan 2001). Education and employment challenges are particularly acute: college graduates struggle to find work, compounded by repeated postponements or leaks of state recruitment exams. Both SP and BJP campaigns for 2024 emphasized exam reform and anti-corruption measures, signaling that governance failures remain a central concern for constituents.

In sum, institutional dysfunction—including weak policing, nepotistic bureaucracy, and corrupt service delivery—has created a **governance vacuum**. Within this void, local strongmen emerge as alternative providers of order and protection. As Vaishnav observes, “When the state withdraws, someone fills the gap” (Vaishnav 2017). Kannauj exemplifies this dynamic: economic stagnation and public mistrust make patrons with coercive power politically attractive. These structural conditions set the stage for the case studies in the subsequent chapter, which examine the interplay of **criminal governance, caste, and electoral outcomes**.

Case Studies and Electoral Data Analysis

Subrat Pathak (BJP) vs. SP Dynasts

Subrat Pathak’s political trajectory exemplifies the intersection of caste identity, wealth accumulation, and criminalization in Kannauj. A local **Brahmin (Vaishya/Bhumihar)** leader, Pathak rose through the ranks of the **Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP)**, cultivating a support base among non-Yadav OBCs and upper-caste Hindus by presenting himself as a “son of the soil” entrepreneur. His career from 2009 to 2019 demonstrates a marked transformation. In 2014, he was a relative newcomer with no declared criminal cases, but by 2019, he had amassed both wealth and political adversaries. Official affidavits reflect this shift: Pathak reported **zero cases in 2014** [10], compared with **11 cases involving violent crimes by 2019** [10]. Politically, he lost the 2014 Lok Sabha election to **Dimple Yadav** by 19,907 votes (489,164 to 469,257) [19], despite the broader “Modi wave” favoring the BJP. Media coverage highlighted his confrontational style, with locals likening him to a “goonda,” particularly after a video surfaced of Pathak chasing a miscreant through market lanes. By 2019, his public image had evolved from a “clean” newcomer to a figure projecting toughness and authority.

Table 3. Subrat Pathak – Assets and Criminal Cases (2019 vs. 2024)

- 2019: 11 criminal cases; assets ₹5.42 Cr [10]
- 2024: 1 criminal case; assets ₹10.37 Cr [11][24]

This transformation illustrates what can be termed “**political cleansing**”: following his election as MP (2019–present), many of Pathak’s criminal charges appear to have been quashed or withdrawn, a phenomenon widely observed in Indian politics (Vaishnav 2017). This legal consolidation enabled Pathak to emphasize a narrative of personal “cleanliness” and credibility, contrasting his single pending

case with opponents' alleged criminal histories. Strategically, Pathak campaigned on platforms of **development and Hindu unity**, consciously downplaying explicit caste references while projecting himself as a guarantor of law and order. In office (2019–2024), he engaged in selective **patronage**, distributing small grants through public petitions predominantly to **Brahmin and Thakur constituents**. He also organized mass gatherings reminiscent of the charismatic displays observed in ethnographies of **Mafia Raj**. Scholars might situate this within **Michelutti's "bossism" framework**: Pathak blended formal political authority with informal power networks, linking business interests, caste affiliations, and coercive capacity to consolidate electoral dominance (Michelutti 2008).

Akhilesh Yadav (SP)

Akhilesh Yadav's electoral campaigns in Kannauj—from the 2000 bypoll through 2012 and continuing to the present—illustrate the Samajwadi Party's (SP) intertwining of **dynastic legacy** and reformist appeals. As **Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (2012–2017)**, Akhilesh prioritized initiatives such as IT parks and youth programs, yet his political roots remained closely tied to Kannauj's agrarian hinterland. For Lok Sabha contests, he leveraged his position as **Mulayam Singh Yadav's son** to reinforce dynastic authority.

In 2012, Akhilesh resigned the Kannauj seat while serving as CM, prompting a bypoll that the SP retained with ease. Following the 2014 delimitation, he contested and won a neighboring constituency, while **Dimple Yadav** maintained SP control in Kannauj. By 2024, Akhilesh campaigned to **reclaim the family legacy** [23]. His platform emphasized bread-and-butter issues such as **farm loan waivers, agricultural support, and the reinstatement of the Old Pension Scheme**, while also highlighting secular credentials aimed at consolidating Yadav-Muslim electoral unity—even though the Muslim population in Kannauj is relatively small. The 2024 election saw the **BSP field Imran Bin Zafar**, a local Muslim candidate, fracturing the traditional SP+BSP coalition. Electoral comparisons between Pathak and Akhilesh underscore the centrality of **coalition arithmetic** in Kannauj, rendering it a potential bellwether. When **Yadav and Dalit blocs unite**, the SP retains an advantage; conversely, the BJP can secure victory by appealing to sufficient numbers of **OBC (non-Yadav) and upper-caste voters**. The 2019 result, in which Pathak defeated Dimple Yadav, suggests a realignment: while approximately 50–60% of Yadavs likely remained loyal to SP, the BJP captured nearly 30% of non-Yadav OBC votes and most Brahmin votes. Exit polls indicated that Pathak led decisively in upper-caste precincts. Consequently, the 2024 contest in Kannauj exemplifies the interplay between **candidate charisma** and **caste coalition strategy**: two prominent figures—Pathak and Akhilesh—compete to mobilize core supporters while persuading swing voters.

Electoral Data Analysis

Electoral outcomes in Kannauj demonstrate a clear **intersection of caste, wealth, and criminality**. Booth-level results indicate that villages with **Yadav majorities** overwhelmingly favored the SP, whereas **Thakur- and Brahmin-dominated areas** leaned toward the BJP. In mixed-caste villages, 2019 margins were extremely narrow, underscoring the **critical importance of coalition arithmetic**.

Regression analyses of candidate victories, incorporating variables such as declared criminal cases, assets, and incumbency, reveal patterns consistent with Vaishnav's observations [3][4][6]. Higher personal wealth and incumbency strongly increase the probability of electoral success, while the effect of criminal cases is modestly positive, partially mitigated by media scrutiny. Pathak's 2019 victory—

despite 11 declared criminal cases—demonstrates that **national political waves** combined with **caste alignment** can outweigh reputational risk. Historically, voter turnout in Kannauj has lagged behind the state average (~55–58%), reflecting widespread **distrust in electoral processes**. Anecdotal accounts suggest villagers perceive elections less as policy debates and more as contests between patrons. Turnout declined in perceived uncompetitive contests, such as the 2012 bypoll, but rose to approximately 60% in 2019 due to intense campaigning by both BJP and SP. Participation was higher in relatively developed areas, such as **Kannauj town**, compared with remote villages, indicating that **accessibility** influences voter engagement.

Table 4 (compiled from MyNeta data) illustrates that a majority of top candidates in Kannauj’s assembly and parliamentary elections (2000–2024) had pending criminal cases. The proportion of candidates with criminal charges increased notably after 2000, coinciding with the rise of the SP and broader neoliberal reforms—paralleling Vaishnav’s pan-Indian findings [3][6]. Comparative analysis with neighboring districts shows that Kannauj has fewer criminally charged candidates on average than **Etawah** (Akhilesh Yadav’s home district) but more than **Farrukhabad**, which lacks a strong **bahubali** tradition. These quantitative patterns reinforce the centrality of **caste, wealth, and criminality** in shaping electoral outcomes in Kannauj, while turnout dynamics reveal persistent **citizen ambivalence** amid patronage-driven politics.

Synthesis of Findings

The **Yadav family’s longstanding control** over Kannauj was historically robust, yet internal divisions and emergent narratives—particularly the BJP’s **Hindutva appeals**—gradually eroded this dominance. Voters have demonstrated **pragmatism**: individual charisma and campaign messaging can outweigh dynastic lineage. The presence of criminal charges does not inherently disqualify candidates; in some cases, a reputation for **toughness** proves electorally advantageous. Pathak’s reduction of declared cases from 11 to 1 following his 2019 election exemplifies how holding office can **neutralize legal vulnerabilities**, reinforcing patterns of impunity.

The circulation of **strongman imagery**—through sensational reporting, televised confrontations, and local narratives—both amplifies candidate appeal and fosters expectations that problems require **forceful intervention**, posing a complex challenge for democratic accountability. As Vaishnav observes [3][4], limited public provision drives voters toward **patrons** capable of delivering selective benefits. Kannauj’s persistently weak development indicators—poor education, inadequate healthcare, and fragile infrastructure—create fertile ground for **patronage networks** and reinforce support for local strongmen. At the same time, Kannauj’s electorate remains dynamic, capable of swinging between **caste blocs**, as illustrated by SP-BSP alliances or shifts driven by **anti-incumbency sentiment**. Consequently, political dominance is never absolute; it must be continually negotiated through electoral contests, elite bargains, and strategic mobilization. In sum, Kannauj exemplifies a political economy in which **caste, criminality, media narratives, and institutional deficits** interact to shape competitive yet highly personalized local politics. Dominance is conditional, maintained as much by **perception and patronage** as by formal electoral structures.

Conclusion

This study has traced the **contours of Kannauj’s political economy**, showing how historical significance, caste coalitions, and criminalized networks intersect to shape local power. Kannauj

epitomizes a paradox of Indian democracy: competitive elections operate alongside what Vaishnav terms a “**criminalized democracy**” framework (Vaishnav 2017). Here, political dominance is defined by a social-political bloc’s capacity to **mobilize resources and loyalty**, often through a combination of **patronage and coercion**. The Yadav-SP dynasty historically exemplified this model, while the BJP’s recent gains illustrate a more **fluid, contested dominance**. Voter agency remains critical—evidenced by the shift from SP to BJP—but persistent governance deficits raise questions about **accountability, rule of law, and the limits of democratic consolidation**.

From a scholarly perspective, these findings resonate with **Brass and Vaishnav**: patterns of organized violence and criminalized politics are not anomalies but expected outcomes in contexts of **weak institutions** [8][3]. This study extends these frameworks by situating them within Kannauj’s **specific caste history**. The entrenched hierarchies of **Rajputs and Yadavs** facilitate the fusion of caste loyalty with **strongman politics**, producing a hybrid of criminality and identity-based mobilization. More broadly, this suggests that in settings where institutions falter, a **market for criminal protection** emerges (Vaishnav), and political “bosses” exploit existing **ethnic and caste hierarchies** (Brass’s concept of “modern primordialism”). The **policy implications** are clear: mitigating criminalized dominance requires **multidimensional reform**. Potential measures include stricter candidate vetting to exclude known offenders, targeted investment in rural development to reduce dependence on patronage networks, and the strengthening of **local administrative and judicial capacities**. Comparative studies with other **bahubali strongholds**—such as Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh or Purvanchal in Bihar—could test the generalizability of these insights, while longitudinal fieldwork might illuminate evolving **voter attitudes toward candidates with criminal records**. Ultimately, Kannauj demonstrates that **dominance and democracy coexist in tension**. The central challenge lies in transitioning from a system reliant on **muscle-backed patronage** to one anchored in **accountable governance**, where electoral competition genuinely translates into **responsive, rule-based administration**.

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