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Tracing the Evolution of Dalit Consciousness under Hindutva Politics: A Comparative Study of Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat

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Abstract:
The state of Gujarat described as "Laboratory of Today's India" by Jaffrelot presents an intriguing puzzle wherein it has championed economic liberalization while simultaneously witnessing the rise of political illiberalism. Despite its historical association with entrepreneurial success and economic modernization, developmentalism and secularism have receded. Rather being a constitutionally secular state, its subjective practicality gave rise to right wing politics. Consequently, the state's trajectory does not fit neatly into a single theoretical framework, exhibiting elements of discursive power, institutional autonomy, and embeddedness in political economy which requires an understanding of the historical, socio-economic, and ideological factors that facilitated the rise of right-wing politics in Gujarat and its impact on marginalized communities, particularly Dalits. For this undertaking, the article pivots around two watershed events of 1985 Riots and 2016 Una Flogging Incident.

Keywords: Gujarat, Dalit Consciousness, Hinduisation of Politics, 1985 Riots, 2016 Una Flogging Incident

Introduction

Since the 1990s, Gujarat has emerged as a significant case study in the transformation of Indian Politics, particularly, when it became a stronghold of right-wing ideologies and an economic development model for the nation. Ghanshyam Shah posits that Gujarat has served as a bastion of right-wing politics since this period, a view echoed by Christophe Jaffrelot who describes the state as 'a laboratory of right-wing politics.' This shift, however, has deep historical roots tied to the dominance of Congress Party till the 1980s, the entrepreneurial ethos of the state and a strong commitment to Gujarati asmita or Gujarati pride which inadvertently laid the groundwork for the rise of saffron politics. This entrepreneurial orientation of Gujarat, shaped by its geographical location of close proximity to the sea and the historical importance given to commerce profoundly influenced its society (Tambs-Lyche and Sud 2016, p. 272) and resulted in emergence of development as a unifier by offering a broad common ground across class and castes (Jaffrelot 2024). Moreover, Jaffrelot argues that congress leaders such as Sardar Patel, K.M. Munshi, Gulzarilal Nanda and Morarji Desai, steeped in Hindu traditionalism, fostered an environment conducive to Hindu nationalist sentiments rather than promoting a secular framework. Even Mahatma Gandhi, while advocating social reform, articulated a discourse conducive to traditional Hindu nationalists. These ideological affinities with some features of the Sangh Parivar helped the Hindu nationalist to develop their network in Gujarat from 1950s to the 1970s and to polarise the state along communal lines at the expense

of secularism. A culmination of the the decline of Congress rule and capture of power by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) firmly attributed to dual narrative of development and Hindutva supported by smaller but essential constructs of security and identity intertwined with Gujarat asmita or pride manifested as the 1985 riots which transformed the political landscape of Gujarat.

The state of Gujarat furthermore also presents a unique entanglement of caste landscape with politics which in Rajni Kothari's framework may be termed a symbiotic relationship with its reflections getting captured in how caste identities have been mobilized for electoral gains. Kothari's framework as explicated in his seminal work 'Caste in Indian Politics' (1973), explains why the relationship between political parties and caste in Gujarat is deeply intertwined whereby caste instead of being a mere social identity serves a strategic political instrument, actively shaped by parties to consolidate support base, establish vote banks, manage tensions, and construct narratives. In his prior work, 'Politics in India', Kothari's observation, that 'caste provides an organisational network of participation, an idiom of articulation and a structure of leadership and recruitment', applies markedly to caste dynamics of Gujarat whereby various groups consistently strive towards mobilisation and organisation for political assertion, demonstrating the effective adaptation of caste as a potent political resource in the modern social milieu. The potential of this mobilisation instrument becomes frequently visible whenever any caste group initiates a movement or organisation for the purposes of recognition, representation and redistribution as happened in case of Dalit group, which started asserting itself substantially in the wake of 2016 Una Flogging incident. This was an event which marked, in Badri Narayan's words, awakening of a new Dalit political consciousness in Gujarat. This watershed moment propelled a major shift in Gujarat politics that had hitherto been defined by an absence of independent and unified Dalit political consciousness. In the post-Una period, Dalit politics transformed itself from being a fragmented, externally-led, passive force to a unified, independent, and active force within Gujarat's politics.

The article centered around these two events of 1985 Riots and 2016 Una Flogging incident attempts to understand not only the absence of a strong and decisive dalit consciousness in Gujarat but also the rise of right-wing politics by investigating a series of questions: what are the historical and socio-economic conditions that facilitated the rise of the BJP in Gujarat? What were the political responses to affirmative action policies, particularly in the context of the Bakshi Commission? What was the impact of right-wing political dominance on Dalit consciousness and mobilization, with a focus on incidents such as the 1985 Riots, Una flogging and the Dalit Asmita Yatra?

In Gujarat, Vanyas (merchant castes), instead of comprising only 3% of the total population, remained predominant because of their prestige and influence resulting from their economic position. Brahmins comprising 4.1% over-represented among professionals, politicians and in bureaucracy. Unlike other states, Rajputs (4.9%) in Gujarat were not an assertive force. Patidars (12.3%), a dominant caste of farmers which benefited from the changes brought in the agricultural sector such as land reform and green revolution, became a dominant force in Gujarat politics. As Ghanshyam Shah pointed out that "the Patidars followed many of the cultural practices of the Vanyas and consequently elevated their position from the middle to high caste".

(Shah Polarised Communities). They are further subdivided into Leuva Patels and Kadva Patels. They were with the Congress till the 1980s but now belong to the BJP fold mainly. They demanded an OBC status in 2015. Backward caste total comprises 40% of the Gujarat population but mainly dominated by the Kolis caste. Both caste- Rajput and Koli-have interacted closely, often sharing claims to Kshatriya's status within the tradition of Hindu Varna. Jeffrelot argues that political calculations therefore have social

implications and several taboos were abolished. Rajput and Kolis of the Kshatriyas Sabha could eat and marry together. Other Backward castes are the Thakors, the Patanvadias and the Baretyas. Schedule Caste comprising 7.2% of the population still face discrimination with little political consciousness though recently they have resorted to increasing assertion while Schedule Tribes with 17.7%. dominate the eastern tribal belt and are socially and economically marginalized.

Since Independence, Congress has been considered as an upper caste party comprising Brahmins, Vanyas and Patidars. After 1967 split most of these upper caste leaders joined Congress(O) and Congress(R), thus, reoriented its political strategy toward Kshatriyas and promised to appoint a commission to look into the social-economic problems of the Backward Classes of Gujarat if voted into power. Consequently, in addition to other national factors such as the India-Pak war and the emerging popularity of Indira Gandhi as Iron Lady, helped Congress(R) to sweep Gujarat politics by winning 140 seats out of 168 while Congress(O) restricted to 16 only. After this Jaffrelot argues the face of Gujarat politics changes completely. While the percentage of upper castes and Patidars remained almost the same among its MLAs (19.3%), those of the low castes including the Kshatriyas rose from 11.9% to 19.3%. The Patidars signifies the fundamental shift in Gujarat Politics deserted Indira Gandhi's Congress. It was the result of Congress appointment of state's first Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission in 1972 under the chairmanship of A.R. Baxi. In 1976, after Mrs. Gandhi's Congress staged a comeback in Gujarat in the context of the Emergency, Madhavsinh Solanki, a low caste Rajput from the Kshatriya group became chief minister. Solanki promised to implement the recommendation of the Baxi Commission regarding reservations for the Other Backward Classes (OBC), mainly comprising Kshatriyas in Gujarat. The commission recommended that 10% of the positions in technical colleges be reserved for the OBCs. Four months after Solanki had formed his first government, Congress lost elections in the state in 1977. But he established a formidable social coalition incorporating Kshatriyas, Harijan, Adivasis and Muslims. Caste dynamic in Gujarat Politics under the Congress Party (1961-1995)

The political developments of Gujarat in the decades of 60s and the early 70s were shaped by the clash between Indira Gandhi and Morarji Desai on the national political scene. After the split of the Congress into Congress (R) and Congress (O, it was the Congress (R) that secured 139 out of 168 seats as against the 16 seats of Congress (O) in the Gujarat 1972 assembly elections. This election initiated a pivotal chapter of caste politics in Gujarat in two important ways. First, the older support or social base of the Congress that was predominantly upper caste in nature (as prior to the 1972 split of the Congress, it drew considerable support from the emergent Brahmins and Baniyas) lost its power quotient in the newly established powerful Congress (R). Second, the numerically dominant caste and other groups in Gujarat began to play a greater role in forming the party's new social base. This new base comprised the Kshatriya, a combination of higher caste Rajputs and Darbars, as well as Kolis, Baniyas and Bhils that constituted numerically significant 30 percent of the population.

Notably, the rise of the significant Patidar or Patel community overshadowed the upper caste clout. Nonetheless, a relative political stability remained till the party ran into new problems when the newly elected Brahmin leader Ghanshyam Oza was handpicked as the Chief Minister by Indira Gandhi. Afterwards the Patidar community under the leadership of Chimanbhai Patel achieved a new power status in Gujarat politics. The situation that ensued coincided with the Navnirman Movement that further troubled the party and its leadership. This movement was launched over the issue of rising food prices (following the monsoon failure in 1972). The movement soon gathered an all-India status as it directly challenged Indira Gandhi's position at the national level. This tumultuous phase was settled when it found

a stable voter base in what is called the KHAM coalition.

KHAM Strategy and the 1985 Riots

The birth of the KHAM coalition can be traced back to one of the meetings organised by the Gujarat Khedut Ane Vikas Parishad (Society for the development of farmers and farmland) in the 1970s (Sud, 2012 27). It was Jinabhai Darji, the then Gujarat Pradesh Congress President, who along with Madhavsinh Solanki, pioneered this formula. The simple logic behind was to target the four major groups namely, Kshatriyas (40%), Harijans (7%), Adivasis (14%) and Muslims (8.3%) that constituted 69.3% of the state's population.

This electoral formula also strived to include within itself the backward communities identified in the Bakshi Commission of Gujarat (1976) as the OBCs. With this the Congress party, for the first time, provided a space for socio-political mobility for the backward as well as Muslim minorities. This paved the way for its victory in the 1980 elections as out of the 111 KHAM candidates put up by the Congress for the 182 seats, 96 got elected. With this immense success of the KHAM strategy, Madhavsinh Solanki, who hailed from the Kshatriya community, was sworn in as Gujarat's CM. This successful electoral strategy maintained its momentum in 1985, when Madhavsinh Solanki retained his CM post.

Christophe Jaffrelot notes, in his 'India's Silent Revolution', that KHAM was a "social engineering experiment" that turned backward caste groups into a political majority. To him, the KHAM alliance started off caste-based vote-bank politics in Gujarat, which was electorally effective but socially divisive. This is because in 1980, the commanding radical faction conspicuously excluded the Patidars from the party leadership and ministries. But the strategy lacked the wherewithal to develop unity among these communities at the grass-roots levels. This propelled an upper caste opposition accusing radicals of creating "class conflict" in society, and fostered the anti-reservation agitations against the Dalits and OBCs. The government was too weak to withstand dominant forces (Shah 1990). Moreover, since the mid-1980s the Congress initiated neo-liberal economic policy gave importance to public private cooperation and entry of subaltern groups in the public sphere without alienating agrarian or industrial capital (Desai and Roy 2016) and through which the party's high command sidetracked the radical faction. Also, the dominant castes had already moved out of the Congress, first to the Swatantra Party, later, the Janata Party and still later to the BJP.

The KHAM formula, as Varshney remarks, made the backward castes upwardly mobile in politics. Nonetheless, the negative repercussions of KHAM became visible with the alienation of the Hindu upper castes that were pushed to the fringes of Gujarat's politics. Consequently, this disgruntled class went on to become the new power base of the BJP in the 1990s. Thus within space hollowed out by the decline of the 'Congress System' a new era ushered in Gujarat politics that saw the rise of the BJP.

This KHAM coalition could not deal with the unpopularity of the post-Emergency Congress (Jaffrelot 2024). But their strategy helped them in getting into power in 1980. Jeffrelot argues that this was the first time when OBC MLAs formed a larger group than Patels in the Legislative Assembly of Gujarat with 20.4% as compared to 18.8% Patels. After Solanki assumed power as Chief Minister of Gujarat, he began implementing policies aimed at consolidating his KHAM coalition. A key move came in 1981 when his government introduced reservations for the socially and economically backward Classes based on the recommendation of the Bakshi Commission. This policy increased the reservation quota in education and government jobs for Other Backward Classes (OBC) to 27%, in addition to the existing quotas for Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST), bringing total reservation to around 49%. His

government also decided to raise the quotas for Dalits in government jobs and educational institutions from 10 percent to 27 percent (Desai and Roy 2016). Moreover, Gujarat's Chief Minister Madhavsingh Solanki in 1980 building up on the legacy of his predecessor Jinabhai Darji tempered his pro private sector approach by launching a series of social welfare programs. These actions alienated the upper caste as they felt excluded from the political power which then ignited fierce opposition from the upper caste communities, particularly the Patels, who felt their opportunities were being curtailed as they symbolised the questioning of social order which Jaffrelot called "silent revolution". The protests began as peaceful demonstrations and boycotts but quickly escalated into violent agitations. Government property, including buses, was targeted and clashes broke out across the state, particularly in urban centers like Ahmedabad. For the first time in this context, middle-class men and women took the streets, showing no qualms about targeting their lower-caste neighbours (Sheth and Menon,1986). The agitation took communal shape in 1985 as Hindu-Muslim tensions were exploited with Muslims (part of KHAM coalition) becoming targets. As Ornit Shani, in her book on the 1985 riots, argues that "in spite of an inter-Hindu caste reservation conflict and prevailing class tensions among them, an all-Hindu consolidation against Muslims emerged". Jeffrelot argues that the communal shift of the agitation was done to preserve Hindu unity. Shani, however, argues that even though upper castes identified themselves as agitators against their Muslim neighbours, their anger was directed against the government, rather than against Muslims. The state police were accused of either inaction or complicitly in the violence and the Indian army was eventually employed to restore peace in the area. Solanki faced immense pressure from both opposition (including BJP, Janata Party and Lok Dal) and within his own party. In July 1985, after months of unrest, he resigned under directives from the Congress high command. The aftermath of Solanki's reservation politics had profound effects. His 1985 election victory demonstrated the election success of the KHAM formula but it also alienated upper caste voters, particularly Patels, Brahmins and Banias, who began shifting allegiance to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) thereby closing any future possibility of using the strategy of leveraging the interests of lower caste and class (Desai 2011) for stable and endurable political gain. This event exposed the fragility of caste based coalitions and fuelled the BJP's rise in Gujarat, aided by Ram Janmabhoomi movement in 1990s.

By 1995, BJP consolidated power in the state and capitalised upper caste voters who were protesting against the congress government. Thus, paradoxically while the KHAM strategy brought short-term success to the congress government, it sowed the seeds for its long-term decline in Gujarat as upper caste and sections of the middle class gravitated toward the BJP's Hindutva and development narrative. Thus, the caste bloc of the central Gujarat had once again defeated the caste bloc of the periphery and even the KHAM coalition (**Shani**). Solanki's successor, Amarsinh Chaudhary declared that there would be no increase in the percentage of seats reserved for OBCs until "national consensus" emerged. Shani concludes "the aftermath of the Ahmedabad riots of 1985 marked the beginning of the political shift in Gujarat from Congress rule to the rise of the BJP, which further strengthened the upper caste position." Pravin Sheth and Ramesh Menon conclude: 1985 will probably go down in history as the year which heralded the re-emergence of the political clout of Patels in Gujarat. Howard Spodek in his writing 'From Gandhi to Violence: Ahmedabad's 1985 riots in Historical Perspective', traces the economic conditions in 1985 that contributed to increasing violence. 1) A fragmenting urban ecology breaking up long-standing social bonds and reinforcing class polarization. As the city industrialised and urbanised rapidly, older mixed neighbourhoods where people of different classes, castes and religions lived in proximity-gave way to segregated enclaves. Economic disparities widened, with wealthier groups moving to new residential areas

and poorer communities being relegated to slums or industrial zones. This spatial fragmentation eroded the social bonds that once moderated conflict, such as mutual dependence and shared cultural practices. Instead, it reinforced class polarization, creating resentment and mistrust between the "haves" and "have-nots." fuelling violence as economically marginalized groups clashed with those perceived as privileged crafting and employing the narrative of security and development;

2) A loss of local control over the city's fate to external political and business interests. Historically, the city's textile industry and merchant class had given it a degree of autonomy and self-governance. By 1985, however, the decline of the textile mills and the rise of external economic forces diminished local agency. Decisions about investment, urban development, and resource allocation were made by outsiders—national political parties, large corporations, and distant policymakers— who prioritized profit or political gain over the city's social stability. Furthermore, there was an absence of a strong opposition from lower caste and classes due to historical dominance of Gandhian reconciliation traditions and non-conflictual modes of organizing employed by the Textile Labour Association (TLA) (Breman 2004) along with organisationally weak communist and socialist left and a lack of trade unions. This loss of control left residents feeling disenfranchised and powerless, fostering a volatile environment where grievances could erupt into violence; 3) Penetration into politics of illegal businesses such as bootlegging and drug peddling. The economic decline of legitimate industries, like textiles, created a vacuum that illegal enterprises filled; 4) The entrance of strong-arm goondas into the political process as mercenaries and even as independent participations. Economic hardship and unemployment drove many young men into this role, where they were hired by politicians or businessmen as enforcers to intimidate rivals, suppress dissent, or incite unrest. Over time, some goondas transitioned from mercenaries to independent players, leveraging their muscle power to carve out their own political influence. This infusion of violence into politics heightened tensions and provided a ready supply of agitators during the riots; 5) Politicization of police and administration; 6) An inflammatory press. Sensationalist reporting, biased narratives, and the spread of rumours amplified communal and class divisions and 7) Rich, new culture and academic institutions focusing attention away from the institutional needs of a highly politicized society. In addition the liberalisation policies of Congress led to coming up of new industries but in conjunction with casualisation and informal work which translated into low wages and lack of benefits further aggravating and deteriorating the unemployment crises and material condition of workers making it easier for resentment and smaller narratives of security and development along with bigger narrative of Hindutva by organisation such as Jan Sangh to take root.

Tracing Dalits in the 1985 riot

Ornit Shani explores the process of communal nature of Gujarat in changing the character of caste and deepening uncertainty within Hindu moral order. Thus, he argues that the caste and its relation with the state are critical factors in rising Hindu. Shani argues that the nature of caste and its stability as a social unit depended on the definition it was given within politics, in relation to other categories of social differentiation, in the context of struggle for the control of state material and ideological resources, nationalism and the growth of communal antagonism, which Ornit calls 'ethnoHinduism.' These religious and cultural identities, he argues, are found to be contingent upon political rivalries, economic pressures and social context. In the context of redistribution and recognition policies caste boundaries were defined in relation to class and religion by the state and were also persistently renegotiated with the state. The social, economic and political changes occurred after independence generated transformation in caste-

class relations, hierarchies and positions within the Hindu order. Class fissures occurred within caste, caste faced changes in class and a new group emerged. After independence some groups of Dalit were able to get jobs in the mills while some benefited from the reservation policy and made their place in government jobs. 'At least one person from either of these communities is found in most government departments' (Ghanshyam Shah). As a result of urbanisation and growing economic opportunities, class fissures appeared within the various caste groups. Some got to utilize this opportunity while those who remained suffered the impact of the closure of the textile mills. Shani argues that "the Patels of Vadigam and upper caste in general in the walled city, felt threatened by the mobilisation of Dalits." Furthermore, Dalits participation in politics served to accelerate their mobilisation. Shani argues that some groups among the Dalits and the backward castes in general began to consolidate themselves as politically relevant social actors. This mobilisation process among the Dalits resulted in a growing sense of uncertainty within the Hindu moral order among the upper caste (Shani 1990). The Upper caste frustrations further intensified because their caste status lost its importance as, Shani argues, class became more pertinent as an emblem of social difference. The inter-caste and class fissures were inscribed upon the city's face, especially as their economically wealthier caste fellows moved in cities and the differences in living conditions between them and their Dalit and Muslim neighbours became less distinct. Reservation was also a contention among the upper caste. Indeed, if a Dalit could be a professor, the whole idea of the caste system lost its meaning. (Shani 1990). This caste-class relations among Hindus began to be reflected in the modes of political mobilisation towards Hindu nationalists. Shani argues that the construction of a 'Hindu opinion'. Some Dalits who were part of the KHAM alliance started feeling alienated from the Congress party in the context of the crises in textile mills. Dalits constituted a large segment of the workforce in Ahmedabad. The Textile Labour Association (TLA), which was closely associated with the congress party, disappointed the workers when the mills were closed down and its failure discredited the party as the champion of the workers. At the time the TLA did not provide aid to workers, Hindu organisations and the BJP began to support them. As Shani argues for some Dalits, for whom economic advancement and education had brought no changes in their social position, affinity with an upper caste party like the BJP created a sense of social inclusion. Jaffrelot argues that even before 1985 Sangh Parivar was trying hard to reach out to Dalits. Even Dalits turned against the Muslims, not only because they felt more Hindu now but also because they could loot Muslims properties during the riots. The incorporation of some Dalit in the Hindu fold was also symbolically associated with the Hindu religious rite of the Rath Yatra. Thus, Shani argues that Hindu organisations fulfilled both the need for a politics of redistribution and recognition in the form of pride and acceptance. Additionally, established Hindu-right organizations such as Bharat Sevashram and Hindu Milan Mandir had carried out street-level welfare activities, with the aim of uplifting the lower castes as these groups believed that the sudra (lower caste) has been unfairly rejected from Hindu society, even though they work hard and bear much suffering. The use of such street-based, neighbourhood mobilization tactics by these groups, including riots and violence, helped to draw a line between Hindus and Muslims, while largely enjoining Dalits and OBCs to enter the Hindu fold by becoming participants in the violence (Desai and Roy 2016). It thus facilitated the construction of alternative solidarity strategies and alliances based on promoting unity between lower and middle caste Hindus.

Liberalisation and the Neo Middle Class

Liberalisation in India is conventionally linked to 1992 reforms, however the state of Gujarat traces its first hardening between 1960 and 1975 under Congress rule wherein the party integrated a wide base of

support from upper, intermediate and lower caste displaying an absence of class conflict and a broad political coalition. This trade orientation of Gujarat has in fact long garnered state support throughout its history and has been described as a "bureaucratic-liberalism" model of economy by Aseema Sinha. This developmentalism, understood as the role of the state in guiding markets through strategic action against the central government (Sinha 2006) has been apparent since the 1970s especially in measures such as creation of an "investment promotion cell" which fostered a hybrid form of state capitalism. Although in the post-independence period of 1950s and 1960s as discussed by Sinha, the entrepreneurial spirit did manifest as resistance to the Nehruvin system of state owned economy through circumvention of adverse consequences (Jaffrelot 2024).

In the 1990s, Gujarat liberalised its economy much more quickly, partly due to a deep fiscal crisis and even turned to Asian Development Bank (ADB) for a loan leading to public sector restructuring and fiscal reforms (Jaffrelot 2024). The government launched a number of policies constructing the 'Gujarat Model' of development ranging from downsizing of loss making Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) to privatisation of ports. With Gujarat's traditional orientation towards entrepreneurship, the industrial policies from 1990- 2000 had fostered the growth of Small and Medium enterprises (SMEs) with positive discrimination and incentives for settling in backward regions and by marginalised social groups like SCs, STs and OBCs. Narendra Modi while building up on the efforts of the previous governments promoted infrastructure though he also broke away from some previous traditions. The Modi government's industrial policy of 2003 did away with the positive discrimination and special attention to backward areas while simplifying administrative procedures to create a business friendly environment. The industrial policy of 2009 aimed to create necessary conditions to make Gujarat an attractive destination for investment through acts such as Gujarat Special Investment Region Act. His developmental narrative hinged on his objective of attracting investment to the state through initiatives such as Vibrant Gujarat Summit and Gujarat Infrastructure Development (Amendment) Act. Under his leadership Gujarat became the first state to establish a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) with simple administrative procedures, tax concessions, subsidies and flexible labour laws. His initiatives did make Gujarat a popular destination for investment though more from the domestic front. These policies enabled Gujarat to perform better than most states economically (Jaffrelot 2024) cementing Modi's image as "Vikas Purush" (Developmental Man) providing hope for a better future. Furthermore, Modi rhetorically combined the ideal of masculine strength with a steely determination to bring prosperity, order, and technological progress to every Gujarati thereby linking regional pride (asmita) with 'development' to form an interlocking signifier that had a reach across castes, classes, and political borders (Desai and Roy 2016). However, this model of development was accompanied by a growing precarity of workers and jobless growth belying his pro-business approach. They also had an impact on peasantry due to the provisions regarding lands which enabled the Modi government to liberalise the selling of common land (gauchar), even at below market prices which antagonised sections like Dalits.

The policies of successive governments from affirmative action programs, housing, welfare, and other guaranteed income policies enacted by the former Congress government to jobs generated by industrial growth resulted in a measure of upward mobility for some members of the working class and improved their lives. Social mobility also created class differentiation across caste groups which reduced their homogeneity. This emergent class of aspirational groups were identified by Modi as the "Neo-Middle Class". This new class of people instead of rising up against the upper dominant class were captured by the interwoven narratives of religion, security, status, honor, development and a paradox of Hindu culture

with western ideals of modernity (Jaffrelot 2024). While OBCs formed the majority of this class, Dalits were also its part. These new Dalit bourgeoisie in a bid to emulate the upper caste embraced sanskritisation enabling their affinity for the Hindutva fold. In place of both caste and class, the articulation of progress with religious nationalism offered a potentially new grammar of politics (Desai and Roy 2016) generating a new form of political culture. Jaffrelot expanded on how the interweaving of urbanisation and religion created this political culture and garnered support for BJP - " Urbanisation results in less religious mixing and more exposure to Hindu nationalist propaganda. In villages, Hindus and Muslims who have been neighbours for centuries often share some rituals and beliefs. In cities, especially riot-prone ones, these practices are less likely to occur, not only because of a more individualistic lifestyle, but also because of the ghettoisation process, which diminishes the chances of inter-religious interactions. Second, urban dwellers are easily targeted by ideological messages and images. Politics are constantly played out on television, on the internet, on mobile phones and on walls, not to mention the state of quasi-permanent mobilisation which is primarily an urban phenomenon" (Jaffrelot 2024). Thus, the BJP's articulation project linking Hindutva, development and order gained traction among subaltern classes by revealing ineptitude of the Congress Party and the weakness of political alternatives. However, despite the attractiveness of these narratives of development and security their effect on Dalits was limited due to the politics of caste and the precariousness of labour creating an ambivalence towards BJP which manifested as neither full acceptance nor resistance (Desai and Roy 2016). While BJP's articulation project and neo-liberalisation has had an effect on social solidarities and social bonds it has not led to a disappearance of caste consciousness rather fragmented it. This ambivalence of Dalits has not allowed the formation of a dalit consciousness as they got divided between Congress which has done much for its progress revealing continued past loyalty but still fraught due to its attempts to cater to the upper and middle castes; and BJP with its hope of a better future constructed from the narratives of Hindutva and development.

Caste dynamics under the BJP

The BJP's ascent to power in Gujarat can be attributed to a number of factors that conjointly took the party to the centre stage infused with the support of a new distinctive caste coalition of Patidars, upper castes and aspirational OBCs as a consequence of dynamism of its tactics that still sustains its power.

In the initial phase from 1995 to 1998, the BJP rose to power winning 122 seats (42% of the total votes) in the 1995 assembly elections and thereby formed the government in Gujarat for the first time in the state's history. This was an upshot of what Ghanshyam Shah defined as the meticulous support structure built by the party at the grassroots level since the 1960s. The prelude came in the late 1980s when it won the Rajkot Municipal Corporation in 1983 and subsequently the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation in 1987. Simultaneously, influence of the various affiliates of the Sangh Parivar that penetrated the rural local structures extended the party's base through the creation of new patronage networks.

Deconstructing the factors and the consequences of these electoral shifts in terms of political strategy and voter base also gives insights into the present political or electoral base enjoyed by the party. Interestingly, the 1995 assembly elections was a first direct confrontation between the BJP and Congress party as in the pre-1995 era, the BJP had either been a partner in a coalition or had seat sharing adjustments with other small parties. BJP's decision to contest the elections all by itself was probably propelled by its impressive victories in the Zilla Panchayat election, where it secured 599 seats out of the total 772 seats. In comparison, the Congress party secured a mere 111 seats. Moreover, it also adopted shrewd political tactics of expanding its base proactively owing to the failure to capture power in the two electorally

significant states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in 1993.

The nuances of this shift, however, become clear through the analysis of the Jan Sangh in the state that gained immense popularity among the Bania and Brahmin castes, (the class of petty traders). A section of Rajputs, who hailed from Saurashtra also supported it. Moreover, it gradually brought the powerful Patidar/Patel community as well to its fold in the 1980s. In fact, the anti-reservation agitations and the Ram-Janmabhoomi movement forced both the backward communities and the upper castes to mobilize together and shift their loyalty to the BJP from the Congress. As a result, the party gained considerable ground among the Backward communities. It also performed phenomenally by securing 38% of the OBC vote share. However, the BJP's highest vote came from the upper castes (67%) and Jains (50%). Surprisingly, it also received 7% of the Muslim votes in rural Gujarat. Significantly, the BJP's voter base also extended to the Dalit communities. Though this decimated the KHAM strategy, the stability of BJP's newly acquired voter base was, however, still uncertain.

Another round of notable developments occurred during the phase from 1998 to 2001 marked by the emergence of Hindutva that brought huge electoral ramifications in tandem with the most crucial shift of the convergence of caste and communal identity as the prime factor on which the BJP expanded its electoral base. The foundation for this had already been laid by the Sangh Parivar from the mid-1980s, when it popularized the notion of Savarna viewed through the prism of Hindutva. Unlike the earlier versions of polarization rooted in the hierarchical difference existing between the Savarna and Avarnas was now transformed into a direct Hindu-Muslim confrontation. This was also prompted by the support enjoyed by the Congress Party among the Muslims which the Sangh Parivar countered using strategies such as 'yatras'. These initiatives were, however, launched amidst tremendous internal differences within the party. But the party managed to hold on to the reins of power in the 1998 Gujarat Assembly elections by securing 117 seats, with a total vote share of 47.44%. The powerful Patel leader Keshubhai Patel was sworn in as the Chief Minister.

Yet almost immediately after this momentous victory, factionalism resulted in divided loyalties between the supporters of Keshubhai and the then General Secretary of the party, Narendra Modi. This divide had serious repercussions for the party and the upcoming Zilla Panchayat elections in the year 2000 in which the BJP managed to secure only 192 seats out of 717 seats. Such an abysmal performance mounted pressure on Patel to resign whereby Narendra Modi was chosen as the caretaker CM for Gujarat in 2001. Nonetheless, the BJP was able to exploit the internal differences within the Congress Party and capitalized on its mass cadre to spread the agenda of the leadership as well as the party. This initiated a new phase of Gujarat politics with two important outcomes. First, the discourse on Hindutva shifted from being largely restricted to the difference between Savarnas and Avarnas to the Hindu-Muslim divide. This led to growing popularity of the Sangh Parivar in Gujarat that expanded the BJPs political base well beyond the Savarna castes. Second, the BJP became an established parallel power structure under Narendra Modi that came to define the BJP in the post-2002 phase, when the BJP unit of Gujarat almost became a powerful autonomous unit of the party having a wide social base inclusive of even the Muslims. Yagnik and Sheth as well as Berenschot observed that these shifts also changed the trajectory of the Hindutva movement in the state by challenging its several presuppositions.

The important aspect of this ascendency was however, the rise of Narendra Modi as for the first time, the CM hailed from the OBC. With a population of 37.6%, the OBCs of the state now stood at the forefront of Gujarat politics, acting as a countervailing force to the Brahmins (3%), Vaishyas or Jains (2%) and the powerful Patel (14%) who had so far dominated the political scene. This rise of the OBCs phenomenon

was congruous to what Jaffrelot (2003) termed as the 'silent revolution'. The OBC provided the BJP, which was still seen as a Brahmin-Baniya dominated party, a potential vote bank.

This period also came to be defined by anti-incumbency that the BJP faced especially from the Patidars in Saurashtra region. Mukhopadhyay informs us that this legitimacy challenge arose mainly owing to the former CM Keshubhai Patel's administrative inefficiency in dealing with the rehabilitation of the Kutch earthquake victims. This brought the defeat in 2000 itself in the Ahmedabad and Rajkot Municipal Corporations and in the 2001 by-polls. However, the leadership factor under Narendra Modi turned the perceptions of the voters positive especially after 2002. Yet, Dhattiwala found out that the BJP simultaneously confronted the backlash of the Godhra incident whereby 154 of 182 constituencies were affected by the riot.

Nonetheless, in terms of the social composition of voters in those elections, there emerged a diversified political base that has remained intact and even kept expanding as reflected in the party's performance in the successive elections of 2007 and 2012 with 117 and 115 seats respectively. BJP attained an overall majority of votes from different caste and community groups, though the vote share of these sections diminished over the years, especially of the SCs and STs. Contrary to this, a steady gain was visible from the Muslim votes, from a mere 10% of votes in 2002 to 21% in 2012. This may be attributed to the post-2007 outreach initiatives by Narendra Modi that built trust among the Muslims. Significantly, post-2002 marked a shift in the mainstream political discourse from Hindutva to 'Good governance' and 'inclusive development'. This helped the BJP to construct a strong political base of the Patels, the Kshatriyas, the OBCs, and the Muslim. Jaffrelot calls this an attempt to 'plebeianism' the BJP to a considerable extent under Narendra Modi. This winning formula proved a masterstroke in keeping the BJP in power for decades. But, it realised that support of the SCs and STs, too, was imperative to win elections and more so, for realising the Hindutva project.

BJP and its Dalit outreach

Owing to the Congress failure in meeting the rising aspirations of the deprived communities, the Sangh Parivar evolved various strategies for mobilising the OBCs, SCs and STs to build a Hindu unity around the issue of Ram Janmabhoomi against Muslims. To win over Dalits, the party instituted the Samajik Samrasta Manch (SSM: Social Assimilation Platform) and Seva Bharati. Anand Teltumbde described how this led Hindutva to strategically co-opt dalits by offering deceptive discourses and practices whereby dalits embraced Hindutva, a communal ideology with distinct anti-dalit content.

K N Panikkar rightly attributes this embrace to the attractiveness of "Hinduisation" which invited Dalits to be part of a larger and "superior" tradition whereby the Sangh parivar effectively manipulated this cultural quest of dalits through sanskritisation. Second, globalisation and deradicalisation of dalit politics further accentuate the vulnerability of Dalits to Hindutva.

Teltumbde finds many dalits falling prey to what Shamsul Islam calls an illusory casteless Hindu society. He tracks down Hindutva's evolving strategy towards dalits in terms of how it cultivated dalit elites initially, and later targeted the dalit masses. These strategies involved justification of traditional caste-based occupations, particularly that of the Valmikis, as "spiritual activity" (Modi 2012). The legend of Meghawar (also known as Vankars in some parts of Gujarat), a Dalit jati, and the Gujarat government's training programme in karma-kand (Hindu rituals) for SC manual scavengers also highlight the same tendency. These offered positions to Dalit political aspirants, but ignored the problems of the SCs on the practice of untouchability and atrocities. It resorted to a rhetoric of vikas (development) and patriotism

under its ideological plank of Hindutva and neoliberalism which played the game of divide and rule for impeding the emergence of a collective dalit identity.

Teltumbde also finds a close connection between the two powerful ideologies of religious fundamentalism (Hindutva) and globalisation (neoliberalism) whereby the ascendancy of the latter emboldens the former to perpetuate their oppression further. Suhas Palsikar throws ample light on how Hindutva also made attempts to appropriate Ambedkar ideologically and politically by projecting him as an anti-Muslim Hindu social reformer for uniting the dalits and caste Hindus against the Muslims.

Ram Puniyani, a strong critic of Sangh parivar's communal politics, discusses Hindutva's hidden agenda behind this so-called social engineering programme whereby he sees Hindutva as the new edition of Manusmriti, which aims to perpetuate the dominance of elite upper class/caste Hindus over the dalits. Tracing the Hindutva supported anti-dalit riots in Gujarat in 1980 and 1984, Puniyani argues that the dalits have always remained Hindutva's prime targets till the 1980s, when the Sangh parivar cleverly changed its strategy by replacing the dalits with the Muslims as its prime target and adopting social engineering to woo the former. This way Indian Muslims (mostly former untouchables), Puniyani argues, have again become new untouchables due to Hindutva politics, ironically with the support of the dalits.

Thus, the backward castes such as STs and SCs (Dalits) still remain unsatisfied with BJP with the feeling that much has not been done to abolish untouchability and discrimination prevails particularly among the SCs. This feeling came about as a result of Modi's vision of development that stood devoid of social justice concerns whereby its development model appeared caste-blinded. Consequently, this feeling provided the breeding ground for the emergence of Dalit consciousness in the aftermath of the Una flogging incident of 2016.

Movements built up in the wake of the 2016 Una Dalit flogging incident sparked issues of Dalit oppression into the public spotlight. Despite the absence of a strong and organized Dalit movement, these instances highlight the growing awareness among Dalits and the potential for more robust mobilization in the future. The situation is thus not static whereby the signs of Dalit activism may grow stronger in response to ongoing social and economic challenges. Thus in the Post-Una scenario, there is a resurgence of Dalit activism in Gujarat despite historical constraints. Nonetheless, the sustainability of this movement remains uncertain.

Absence of Dalit consciousness in Gujarat

The absence of Dalit consciousness in Gujarat can be understood in terms of the state's specific socio-cultural, economic, ideological, and political dynamics. Against the background of virulent activism against caste-based discrimination perpetrated on Dalit communities in India, Gujarat presents a unique case, where Dalit consciousness or the political mobilization of Dalits based on their rights and identity, has been relatively muted compared to other states such as Uttar Pradesh or Maharashtra. Anand Teltumbde and Subhash Gatade argue that unlike Maharashtra, Gujarati dalits did not develop any dalit consciousness.

Much of this is owed to socio-cultural and religious factors of Gujarat being strongly influenced by Hindutva and Hindu religious conservatism, that can be traced to Mahatma Gandhi's "paternalistic" influence where in the label of "harijans" made Dalits a part of Hindu community. This was fused with a tendency to submit to the hegemony of upper castes till 1980s, by insisting on deliberate focus reforms rather than radical resistance. This inevitably softened the assertion of Dalit consciousness compared to Ambedkar's radical approach of annihilating caste that shaped Dalit politics in Maharashtra. Consequently

Gujarat neither experienced a strong Ambedkarite movement nor the emergence of an independent Dalit identity. Although organizations like the Gujarat Dalit Panthers emerged in the 1970s, they did not sustain a mass movement. Afterwards, the 1980s saw a nascent dalit consciousness originating in the form of anti-dalit riots but Advani's 1990 'rath yatra' shattered its force. Teltumbde and Gatade examined this Hindutva-dalit relationship in the context of the economic crisis during the 1980s that severely afflicted the dalits and Muslims. This engendered a sort of economic competition between the two groups whereby Hindutva conveniently converted it to communal clashes.

Gopal Guru makes an insightful observation on Hindutva's penetration into the dalit bastion by noting how the erosion of the public sector, that gave a psychological confidence to resist upper caste domination, was exploited by Hindutva by providing material gains for political support.

The cultural quest for public visibility using electronic and digital spectacle overshadowed Ambedkarism. Hindutva gets further reinforced as globalisation's lack of a cultural alternative to the dalit youths compels a "subsidised satisfaction" through the promising cultural universe of Hindutva.

Hindutva conveniently transmutes the caste into the communal category where dalits become Hindus, forgetting their caste antagonism and adversarial identities.

Ironically, though the political landscape of Gujarat is dominated by caste-based parties, the focus often remains on broader issues of development or the politics of the ruling party. Thus, the Dalit rights or identity never truly became a dominant political discourse. Additionally, a significant lack of dedicated Dalit leadership in Gujarat further pushed many Dalits to get subsumed into the general political fold rather than organizing separately. This made Gujarat a stronghold of Hindutva politics whereby the BJP adopted an accommodative approach to assimilate lower castes within a broad Hindu identity. This alignment exchanged some political representation for independent Dalit assertion.

Notably, Gujarat's rapid economic growth over the past few decades accompanied by robust industrialization, urbanization, and development, did not provide many Dalits with equal access to the benefits of development. Nor did this lacunae produce a large-scale movement centered on Dalit grievances, possibly due to a focus on economic opportunities rather than caste-based activism. There is thus a lack of organized movements despite there being some less intense and temporary upsurge in the form of protests which are not as visible as in other states. The cause for this possibly lies in the fact that Dalit activism in Gujarat has been fragmented without a single, unifying figure or movement that can bring the community together on a large scale, similar to leaders like B.R. Ambedkar or organizations like the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra.

Besides these, intervention of other social groups such as the Patels and other dominant castes in Gujarat often overshadowed Dalit concerns. The dominance of upper-caste groups in the state sometimes sidelined Dalit issues. Moreover, Dalits in Gujarat are themselves internally divided into several sub-castes such as Vankars, Chamars, and Rohits, each with distinct identities and socio-economic conditions.

Moreover, the upward social mobility of Dalits in Gujarat, particularly in urban areas, has probably reduced the urgency for collective Dalit mobilization, as some individuals are able to achieve relative success within the existing system.

This, however, does not mean that Dalit consciousness in Gujarat is entirely absent. Movements built up in the wake of the 2016 Una Dalit flogging incident sparked issues of Dalit oppression into the public spotlight. Despite the absence of a strong and organized Dalit movement, these instances highlight the growing awareness among Dalits and the potential for more robust mobilization in the future.

The situation is thus not static whereby the signs of Dalit activism may grow stronger in response to

ongoing social and economic challenges. Thus in the Post-Una scenario, there is a resurgence of Dalit activism in Gujarat despite historical constraints. Nonetheless, the sustainability of this movement remains uncertain.

What brought this shift?

All this radical transformation occurred as a consequence of two unprecedented political mobilisations in a single year, that is, 2016 with its epicentre in the Saurashtra region. The first was led by the dominant caste of Patidars demanding reservations in government jobs and educational institutions. The second was Dalits asserting dignity and social justice coupled with cultural autonomy. Both the agitations marked the presence of educated, middle-class youth at its forefront. While the Patidars received support from almost all the upper castes, the Dalits were symbolically backed by a few Muslims, OBC organisations and human rights groups.

Una Flogging incident:

The Dalit agitation was spurred by the attacks on Scheduled Caste tanners by gau rakshaks (cow vigilantes) on 11 July 2016 in Mota Samadhiyala village of Unablock, Junagadh district, Gujarat. This prompted a Dalit Outrage on the streets in protest not only as an immediate response to the incident but as a fierce resistance against the llarger, everyday socio-economic and human dignity issues that affected them.

The prelude to the incident was provided by the 2011 amendment of the Gujarat Animal Preservation Act, 1954 which imposes a complete ban on cow slaughter as well as transportation and selling of beef. Using this, the vigilantes accused the Rohits of Mota Samadhiyala village of cow slaughter and punished them, first by flogging in the village and then dragging them to Una town, 24 km away. Afterwards, the victims were tied to a car opposite the local police station and thrashed again with iron rods and pipes, in full public view. The attackers forced a Muslim onlooker to beat the tanners to prove that Muslims are also against beef consumption. Moreover, the recorded video of their actions was circulated on social media as a warning. This ignited the anger of young Dalits in the surrounding areas who agitated in different ways, including blocking the Bhavnagar-Somnath highway for four hours.

Several Dalit outfits, active at different levels, either in consultation with each other or independently, gave a call through social media for a Gujarat bandh on 20 July 2016 in light of the events at Una. The tanners stopped collecting and skinning cattle carcasses in several villages. Around 250 Dalits dumped cow carcasses outside government offices in a few towns. Around 2,500 scavengers of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation too went on a flash strike. Showrooms, banks, shops, petrol pumps, clinics, restaurants, and schools shut down. Vehicles and trains were held up by the protestors even as dozens were torched or vandalised. More than 75 of them were detained. On the other hand, more than 20 Dalit youth attempted suicide, two of whom died. A Dalit litterateur Amrutlal Makwana expressed his protest by returning a government award and cash prize.

In this charged atmosphere, more than 30 Dalit organisations came together and jointly formed the Una Dalit Atyachar Ladat Samiti (udals, committee to fight against Una Dalit atrocities)and the Dalit Asmita Manch (self-respect front). They announced a grand demonstration and assembly on 30 July 2016 at Ahmedabad. For this, the government grudgingly granted permission for the venue known as Acher Depot on the periphery of the city. It was a ground clogged with water, too small to accommodate the participants. An overwhelming majority of the participants were young, there were a sizable number of middle-aged to older tanners, scavengers, ragpickers, farm and non-farm labourers, petty businessmen and also government servants. Dalit and non-Dalit human rights activists, Muslims, OBCs and upper caste liberals

from Gujarat and elsewhere also attended to express solidarity.

Jignesh Mewani emerged as the new face of the agitation. The momentum of the gathering spurred the organisers to spontaneously announce a follow-up programme called swabhiman yatra (dignity march) from Ahmedabad city to Mota Samadhiyala village on 5-15 August 2016. However, in the last phase, the yatra faced opposition from local non-SCs and supporters of gau rakshaks whereby the marchers changed their route to avoid clashes with miscreants. The yatra ended on 15 August at Mota Samadhiyala with a flag salutation by Radhika Vemula, mother of the late Rohith Vemula who committed suicide at Hyderabad University. Leading the Yatra, Mevani presented a charter of 10 demands, including justice for the Una victims, alternative livelihood options, legal frameworks for protection against atrocities and grant of five acres of land to each Dalit family in the state. He gave a 30-day ultimatum to the government with the intent to expand the protest to other states in alliance with all deprived communities.

A non-governmental organisation (ngo), Navsaijan, also organised a mahasammelan on 31 August 2016 at Rajkot under the auspices of "Rashtriya Dalit Adhikar." Human rights activists from other parts of the country extended their support. One of the dissenters of the swabhiman yatra, the Amreli Jilla Dalit Samaj, organised a relay fast against Dalit atrocities in Amreli on 8 August 2016. Another group, Dalit Sanman Sangharsh Manch backed by the Bahujan Samaj Party organised a five-day yatra from Junagadh to Gandhinagar (29 August-4 September 2016). It was received at Ahmedabad by an OBC outfit making the agitation by and for all deprived communities.

A few despairing Dalits converted to Buddhism whereas fewer others reinvented their cultural roots as natives to counter the dominant Brahminical culture. All these pointed towards one fact, that is, an emergence of consciousness within the Dalit community in Gujarat that hitherto has not been brought to the surface. Though its force got somewhat diminished in the face of repressive response of the state, it has created a new chapter in the political history of Gujarat that may have a possible future if an effective leadership comes to spearhead a systematic organisation of Dalit interests.

Emergence of Dalit consciousness in Uttar Pradesh and it's comparison with Gujarat

The political trajectory of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh has been marked by an assertive participation and representation in democratic processes. Christophe Jaffrelot describes it as a 'silent revolution', where the political trajectory of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh has been marked by an assertive participation and representation in democratic processes. Christophe Jaffrelot describes it as a 'silent revolution', where Dalits and other marginalised communities gradually challenged the socio-political dominance of the upper caste through democratic means. Sudha Pai attributes the rise of dalit consciousness, a product of democratisation, economic development, and affirmative actions of the state post-independence.

According to the 2011 Census, UP has a population of approximately 19.9 crore, of which 79% are Hindus and 19% are muslims. In terms of caste composition, National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) indicates that there are 41% OBC, 19% upper caste, and 21% Dalits. The Dalits are internally divided in two categories Jatav/chamar, which are 55% of Dalit population and rest comprise of Pasi, Dhobi, Kori, and others- often referred as 'Ati-Dalits'.

The political landscape of UP is shaped by four major parties- the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Congress, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), and Samajwadi Party (SP). Traditionally, Upper caste and Dalits form the support base of congress, Yadavs and Muslims of SP, chamars of BSP and upper caste, merchants and traders supported BJP.

Initially, Caste was not the dominant factor in UP politics. Much like Gujarat, Congress was the umbrella party, adopting a strategy of uniting the extremes of the social spectrum: the upper caste and the Dalits. In the Lok Sabha election, Congress gained 45% SC votes in 1967, 47% in 1971, and 52% in 1980 (Puspendra 1999). However, no significant change in the social and economic conditions of the Dalits led to widespread disillusionment with the Nehruvian Model and the Congress Party. This prompted Dalit and other minority communities to search for other alternatives.

Following the decline of Congress, the BJP emerged as a major force, securing a majority with 221 seats in the 1991 state assembly election. However, unlike Gujarat, the influence of Hindutva diminished as caste based mobilisation reasserted itself as the central axis of political identity. This shift culminated in Mayawati's historic majority government in 2007, representing a significant assertion of Dalit political power. Yogendra Yadav called it the 'third electoral system'- where dormant social identities acquire new salience in electoral competition.

Unlike Western India, particularly Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh had not experienced any large scale anti-caste movement till the late colonial period. There were a few small and isolated movements that happened, which were limited to urban areas and educated leaders. Sudha Pai describes the rise of Dalit consciousness not as a product of movement but as a construct of the educated generation. Several factors have contributed to the slow growth of Dalit consciousness in the region: Firstly, the rigid and unchanged character of social structures. Secondly, the absence of widespread anti-caste ideology like the bhakti movement in the West and the passive acceptance of the unequal social system. Thirdly, lack of economic development and industrialisation. In Bombay, industrialisation played a catalytic role in breaking down the traditional village structure. Fourth, the upliftment model of Gandhi instead of mobilisation to construct a distinct identity. Gandhi created the identity of "harijan" for untouchables and exploited class for their moral upliftment. He believes that the varna system can lead to specialisation of work and prevent unemployment. According to him, the problem is not in the work of the untouchable but the indignity associated with their work. He tried to abolish untouchability and make their work honourable.

In the 1920s, Swami Achhootananda, a Dalit writer, played a crucial role in the awakening of Dalit consciousness. He led the Adi Hindu movement, which challenged the domination of Brahmins and the Arya Samaj. It advocated for Dalits to identify with the original (Adi) inhabitants of India, who practiced bhakti devoid of caste discrimination. He also set up several schools for Dalit children to raise Dalit literacy. He was a pioneer in inculcating print culture among the Dalits. By the 1940s, educated Dalit leaders became interested in the ideas and activities of Ambedkar. They tried to create a new identity for the Dalits, rejecting the nomenclature "Harijan" seeing it as patronizing. One such attempt was made by Shankarnand Shastri, who used the term 'Achhut', means "pure", to instill pride in Dalits. Similarly, Kanshi Ram called Dalits- 'mool nivasi' -the original natives of the state. This emerging inclusive achhut identity tried to mobilise and unite the diverse section of Dalit society: Jatavas, Jatav/ Chamar, adi-dharmis, Pasis, others. Their major aim was to gain self-respect, resistance to exploitation and oppression, and a rejection of 'Manuwadi Brahminism'.

Politically, under the influence of Ambedkar's All India scheduled caste Federation, the UP Schedule caste Federation (UPSFC) was formed in 1945. It participated in 1945-46 election, however failed to win any seats due to the internal division between 'congress harijan' and 'ambedkarites'. In 1956, the Republican Party of India (RPI) was established. It contested the election and won one seat in parliament and one seat in the state legislative assembly. But due to a lack of a clear identity, it was eventually co-opted by the Congress Party. In 1978, Kanshi Ram founded the All India SC, ST, OBC and minority

Employees Association called the Backward minority class employees federation (BAMCEF). It was not a political body, it aimed to persuade educated members of these communities to support the Ambedkarite principle. In 1981, to organise Dalits, he established another organisation- Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS4). And in 1984, he launched the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)- a political party with the goal of gaining state power through electoral politics.

Post-independence, the rise of a new Dalit identity was linked to two developments: firstly, affirmative actions by the state and second, the democratisation of politics (Sudha pai). Although Uttar Pradesh was a backward state but by the 1980's its economy ' awakened out of slumber', there was a shift from agriculture to industrialisation. The rate of economic growth was higher than the national average. The green revolution spread agricultural growth to the eastern and central regions of Uttar Pradesh. This led to an increase in investment in agriculture. Urbanisation increased the employment opportunities in cities, which reduced their dependence on landowners and the old patron-client relationship disappeared (Pai, 2005).

Literacy rate also improved among the Dalits. Between 1971-81, the literacy rate among Dalits improved by 4% and during 1981-91, the increase was 8% points. The private unaided school of UP witnessed the highest enrolment among SCs in the entire country. A study by Jagpal Singh of three villages in Meerut district in the mid-1990s points to the rapid growth of 'unaided and unrecognised' private schools (UAUR) by Dalits. Most of these schools were set up by Jatavs to ensure education for their children and to make them 'compete with the manuvadis in all spheres of life'. This helped Dalits to get salaried employment using the reservation quota. Some of the lower caste like chamars got employed in class I government services in UP (economic times New Delhi, 4 June 1995). Others also relinquished their caste based profession and started working as manual labourers and rickshaw pullers.

These new, educated, and better-off groups among Dalits formed the Backward and minority class employees federation (BAMCEF) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram. And in 1984, he established a political party to fight elections- BSP. This educated section also became the base of BSP, out of 1,20,000 Dalit employees, 500 hold doctoral degrees, 3000 were doctors, 15000 were scientists, 7000 were graduates (Singh,1994).

This change in socio-economic condition of the Dalits due to the education and reservation policy of the state also helped in the political assertion. With the decline of the 'Congress system', politics became more democratic. And the change in socio-economic conditions helped the Dalits to take advantage of this decline. With the growing disillusionment with Congress and disappearing of the old patron-client relationship in 1980's, Dalits started looking for other options, and they found BSP as an alternative. Now they no longer want to be the vote bank of the upper caste and assert their independent identity. Till 1980's congress was gaining the majority of Dalit votes, but in the 1999 Lok Sabha election, BSP gained 22% vote, which is more than the percentage of Dalit population. All these factors led to the emergence of Dalit consciousness in Uttar Pradesh.

2007 election

In 2007, BSP formed a majority government, securing 206 seats and 30% vote share. It was a historic breakthrough for a party representing the marginalized community.

Formation of BSP marks a shift in Dalit assertion, they understood that for socio-economic development, political power is crucial. Dalits formed the core of BSP. But the percentage of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh was just 21% (according to NSSO), and it was also internally divided: chamars and the Ati-dalits. Dalits realised the difference with 'other' Hindu castes, but they were also internally fragmentated (Pai,2005).

The chamar/jatavs has massive support for BSP, 70% to 80% of their votes are for BSP (Swarajya, Decoded: UP's vastly complex caste jigsaw), whereas Balmikis and Pasis did not supported BSP. They saw it as 'chamar party' and believe that two regimes of BSP under Mayawati has benefited the chamars only. Due to this the vote base of BSP remained small and fragmented.

The other challenge was the rise of the BJP and its Hindutva politics at the national level as well as the state level. Under L.K. Advani, BJP appealed to Hindu activists and cooperated closely with RSS and VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad). It used religious symbols, criticised the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, and agitated to reclaim the site of Babri masjid and the construction of Ram Temple. On 10 November 1989, the shilanyas of the proposed Ram Mandir happened in Ayodhya. As a result of this, in the 1991 Lok Sabha election vote share of the BJP grew from 11.40% to 21%, and its Lok Sabha seats increased from 85 to 119. (Vinny Jain). Similar, trajectory was followed in the state assembly election. In 1991, BJP formed a majority government with 221 seats, secured 177 seats in 1993, and 174 seats in 1996 (Gupta, 2007). During the same years, BSP secured 12 seats and 9.4% vote share in 1991, 67 seats and 11% vote share in 1993, and 67 seats and 19.6% votes in 1996 state legislative elections. (India votes AC: Uttar Pradesh). Also, to attract other castes, Kalyan Singh, who was from the Lodhi Rajput community (OBC community), became the first BJP Chief Minister in 1991. He succeeded in attracting sections of other non-Yadav most backward castes (MBCs), and many saw him as OBC leader. BJP also started giving more tickets to OBC and SC to counter SP and BSP.

To overcome this, BSP tried forming coalition governments. In 1993, BSP formed a coalition with the Samajwadi Party (SP). But by mid-1995, BSP withdrew support from Mulayam Singh government. Then, BSP supported BJP and Mayawati became the Chief Minister on 3 June 1995, for the first time. But in October, BJP withdrew its support. In the 1997 election, after President's rule, BSP again tied up with BJP with the arrangement of rotating CM's post every six months. And in 2002, Mayawati became the CM for the third time with the BJP's support.

During these brief tenures, Mayawati aggressively pursued a Dalit agenda. (India today: Mayawati pursued the Dalit agenda, ignored governance during her tenure as Uttar Pradesh CM). She installed 15000 Ambedkar statues all over UP. Many places were renamed after Bahujan emancipators like Bhimrao Ambedkar, Ramabai Ambedkar, Buddha, Shahu Maharaj, Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Mahaprajapati Gotami, etc. She carried out land reforms in the state and distributed the land among the landless and Dalits. Bhimrao Ambedkar Rural Integrated Development Programme was started to provide basic facilities to electricity, education, and roads to villages. (Satyashodhak, Mayawati: Astute politician and an Ambedkarite, Feminist icon). These brief tenures of BSP make the dalit realise the importance of having state power.

Moreover, to expand its support base, BSP proposed a 'Most Dalit' quota for the poor and smaller dalit sub caste in UP to prevent Ati-dalits' votes to BJP or Lok Shakti of Ram Vilas Paswan. Mayawati claimed that with 26% of Dalit population, the percentage of 'most Dalit' is 6%. (Times of India, 22 July 2001). Also, the Brahmin were unsatisfied with BJP's decision to make Kalyan Singh, an OBC, Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and give more tickets to OBCs and SCs. BSP took advantage of this. Although initially BSP rejected Manuwadi Brahminism, but to gain political power, BSP made a shift from being a party Bahujan Samaj to a party of Sarvajan Samaj. (Pai, 2005). Mayawati gave tickets to a large number of Brahmins in 2007, calling it 'social engineering'. So, from a party based upon the support of a specific section, it slowly graduated to be a party of more generalized interest (Vinny Jain). So, in 2007, BSP managed accretion of votes in all sections in society.

Furthermore, the Implementation of the Mandal Commission report, which introduced quotas for OBCs, injected new energy into identity politics, and the politics of Hindutva subsided. (Gupta, 2007). This shift significantly altered the profile of "Kar Sevaks". Many OBC and SC who joined the movement, seeing it as an opportunity to get included in the greater Hindu fold, started to distance themselves from this movement. Electoral behaviour increasingly reflected caste affiliations. For example, in the 2002 assembly election in Bareilly Brahman Mahasabha decided to vote for Congress's Anil Sharma rather than BJP's Rajesh Aggarwal. In Khurja, Vaish Sabha decided to vote for Rashtriya Kranti Party rather than BJP.

The journey of BSP from a party of oppressed to a party of governance illustrates how historically marginalized communities can mobilize, organise, and assert themselves politically, using the democratic framework to challenge the entrenched hierarchies.

The emergence of Dalit consciousness and political mobilization in U.P. contrast sharply with the relative absence of a strong Dalit consciousness in Gujarat in the following ways:

1. UP's larger and more diverse Dalit population, combined with a rigid rural caste system, created conditions for a stronger push against caste oppression once mobilization began. Gujarat's smaller Dalit population and more integrated social structure, influenced by mercantile and Gandhian ideologies, limited the emergence of distinct Dalit identity.
2. UP's late but inclusive economic growth, particularly through agriculture and affirmative action, provided Dalits with opportunities to break free from traditional roles, fostering political consciousness. Gujarat's early industrialization, while robust, did not translate into significant socio-economic mobility for Dalits, limiting their ability to form a strong political constituency. Its economic model integrated Dalits into dependent, depoliticised development pathways.
3. UP benefited from radical anti-caste ideologies (Adi Hindu, Ambedkarism) and strong leadership that rejected Gandhian paternalism, fostering a distinct Dalit identity. Gujarat's ideological landscape was dominated by Gandhian reformism, which integrated Dalits into the Hindu fold and stifled the growth of a radical Dalit consciousness. Thus, Ambedkarite ideology did not gain significant traction, instead Gandhian reformist ideas with paternalistic "Harijan" upliftment dominated.
4. UP's robust Dalit political mobilization, driven by dedicated parties like the BSP and leaders like Kanshi Ram, created a powerful Dalit constituency. It offered institutional and party structure where Dalit assert independent political agency. However, Gujarat's Dalit politics remained fragmented, co-opted by Congress or BJP, and lacked a unifying party or leader to consolidate Dalit votes. Its polarised politics absorbed Dalits into Hindu narrative, suppressing autonomous consciousness.

Constituency Analyses

This portion examines the role of Dalits in the politics of Gujarat, focusing on the reserved Lok Sabha constituencies of Ahmedabad West (SC) and Kachchh (SC). This framework integrates demographic, political and social analyses to trace Dalit political participation and address why major Dalit movements have failed in Gujarat, particularly in these constituencies where BJP, Congress and BSP have contested. The Structure is designed to support a comprehensive study, with specific questions and data substantiate it. This portion deals with the following questions:-

1. Why have major Dalit movements failed to gain traction, despite reserved constituencies offering a platform for representation?
2. How do Dalits participate in electoral politics in Ahmedabad West and Kachchh, and what factors shape their voting behaviour?

3. Why have major Dalit movements, including BSP's caste-based mobilization, failed to challenge BJP's dominance in these constituencies?
4. What role do urban vs. mixed urban-rural settings play in Dalit political agency and movement-building?
5. How do BJP, Congress, and BSP differ in engaging Dalit voters, and what does this reveal about Gujarat's political landscape?

Ahmedabad West Lok Sabha Constituency

The Ahmedabad West Lok Sabha constituency, situated in Gujarat's Ahmedabad district, is a fully urban parliamentary seat reserved for Scheduled Castes (SC), characterized by a diverse and dynamic demographic profile. As per the 2011 Census, the constituency's population stands at approximately 24,84,844, with no rural inhabitants, reflecting its location within the bustling city of Ahmedabad. Scheduled Castes constitute around 12% of the electorate, numbering about 197,126 individuals, while Scheduled Tribes make up roughly 0.9% to 1.18%, or approximately 14,784 people, according to 2019 data. The religious composition includes a notable Muslim population of about 12.9%, equating to roughly 211,770 voters, with Hindus likely forming the majority. The literacy rate is impressive, estimated at 75.35% to 88%, aligning with Ahmedabad's reputation as an educational hub. In 2019, the constituency had 16,43,317 registered voters, including 8,82,968 males, 7,91,430 females, and 25 third-gender voters, with turnout at 60.69%. By 2024, the electorate grew to 17,11,932, with 8,82,968 males, 8,28,895 females, and 69 third-gender voters, though turnout dipped to 55.45%. The gender ratio in 2024 was approximately 992 females per 1,000 males. Comprising seven urban assembly segments—Ellisbridge, Amraiwadi, Dariapur, Jamalpur-Khadiya, Maninagar, Danilimda (SC), and Asarwa (SC)—Ahmedabad West is a vibrant constituency shaped by its industrial and commercial significance.

Political Profile

Ahmedabad West Lok Sabha constituency, a Scheduled Caste (SC)-reserved seat in Gujarat's urban Ahmedabad district, has been a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stronghold since its creation in 2008, shaped by its seven assembly segments: Ellisbridge, Amraiwadi, Dariapur, Jamalpur-Khadiya, Maninagar, Danilimda (SC), and Asarwa (SC). The BJP has won all three Lok Sabha elections held here, with Dr. Kirit Premjibhai Solanki securing victories in 2009 and 2014, polling 376,823 votes (54.6%) in 2014 against Congress's Shailesh Manharlal Parmar, and
in 2019, winning 641,622 votes (64.35%) against Congress's Raju Parmar, who received 320,076 votes. In 2024, BJP's Dineshbhai Kodarbhai Makwana triumphed with 63.28% of the vote share, defeating Congress's Bharat Makwana (33.65%), with voter turnout dropping to 55.45% from 60.37% in 2019. The Indian National Congress, despite consistent second-place finishes, has struggled to challenge BJP's dominance, leveraging support from segments like Jamalpur-Khadiya and Danilimda, which it won in the 2022 Gujarat Assembly elections, while BJP claimed the other five. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has had a marginal presence, fielding candidates like Bhatt Sunilbhai Jayantibhai in 2019 (2,566 votes, 0.26%) and Parmar Sureshbhai Narottambhai in 2024 (0.81%), but its influence remains negligible due to limited voter base among the constituency's 12% SC and 12.9% Muslim electorate. Other parties, including independents and smaller outfits like the Right to Recall Party, occasionally contest but rarely impact outcomes, as seen with 25 candidates in 2019 and 14 in 2024. The BJP's consistent success mirrors Gujarat's broader saffron wave, while Congress's local assembly wins suggest pockets of resistance, and BSP's minimal role underscores its struggle for relevance in this urban constituency.

2024 Election Result

S.N.	Candidate	Party	EVM Votes	Postal Votes	Total Votes	% of Votes
1	Dineshbhai Makwana (Advocate)	Bharatiya Janata Party	606,545	5,159	611,704	63.28%
2	Bharat Yogendra Makwana	Indian National Congress	321,972	3,295	325,267	33.65%
3	Anilkumar Vasanthbhai Vaghela	Bahujan Samaj Party	9,448	152	9,600	0.99%
4	Bhitora Bhaveshkumar Chimanlal	Gujarat Loktantra Party	2,443	15	2,458	0.25%
5	Shankarbhai Khushalbhai Rathod	Democratic Bharatiya Samaj Party	2,345	44	2,389	0.25%
6	Vedubhai Kautikbhai Sirasat	Jan Sewa Driver Party	1,214	7	1,221	0.13%
7	NOTA	None of the Above	13,604	403	14,007	1.45%
	Total		**957,571**	**9,075**	**966,646**	

2019 Election Result

S.N.	Candidate	Party	EVM Votes	Migrant Votes	Postal Votes	Total Votes	% of Votes
1	Dr. Kirit P. Solanki	Bharatiya Janata Party	638,241	0	3,381	641,622	64.35%
2	Raju Parmar	Indian National Congress	317,797	0	2,279	320,076	32.10%
3	NOTA	None Of The Above	14,580	0	139	14,719	1.48%
4	Tribhovandas Karsandas Vaghela	Bahujan Samaj Party	9,909	0	119	10,028	1.01%
5	Chauhan Harishbhai Jethabhai	Rashtriya Power Party	2,059	0	4	2,063	0.21%
6	Malhotra Pankajkumar Dayabhai (Doctor Saheb)	Independent	1,416	0	4	1,420	0.14%
7	Vaghela Ashwinbhai Amrutbhai	Bhartiya Tribal Party	1,376	0	19	1,395	0.14%
8	Mahedia Mahendrabhai Parsottamdas	Independent	1,347	0	4	1,351	0.14%
9	Vedubhai Kautikbhai Sirasat	Ambedkarite Party Of India	1,052	0	3	1,055	0.11%
10	Bhitora Bhavesh Chimanbhai	Independent	808	0	2	810	0.08%
11	Jadav Ulpesh Jayantilal	Peoples Party Of India (Democratic)	723	0	2	725	0.07%
12	Harshadkumar Laxmanbhai Solanki	Right To Recall Party	613	0	8	621	0.06%
13	Dipika Jitendrakumar Sutaria	Manvadhikar National Party	608	0	7	615	0.06%
14	Solanki Chiragbhai Somabhai	Jan Satya Path Party	522	0	2	524	0.05%

Kachchh Lok Sabha Constituency

The Kachchh Lok Sabha constituency, a Scheduled Caste (SC)-reserved seat in Gujarat's westernmost region, spans the entire Kachchh district and parts of Morbi district, covering a vast area of 45,652 km², making it India's third-largest parliamentary constituency. As per the 2011 Census, the Kachchh district has a population of approximately 20,92,371, with 10,96,737 males and 9,95,634 females, resulting in a sex ratio of 908 females per 1,000 males, lower than Gujarat's state average of 919. The constituency is predominantly rural, with 65.2% of the population (about 13,64,209) residing in rural areas and 34.8% (around 7,28,162) in urban centers. Scheduled Castes constitute approximately 11.4% to 12.4% of the population (roughly 198,796 to 259,454 individuals), while Scheduled Tribes form about 1% to 1.2% (around 17,438 to 25,108). The literacy rate is 70.59%, below the state average, reflecting uneven educational access. Religious demographics are not explicitly detailed, but Hindus dominate, with smaller Muslim and Jain communities typical of the region. In 2024, the electorate totaled 19,34,444 voters,

including 9,96,628 males, 9,37,791 females, and 25 third-gender voters, with a voter turnout of 56.14%. The constituency's seven assembly segments—Abdasa, Mandvi, Bhuj, Anjar, Gandhidham (SC), Rapar, and Morbi—reflect its diverse socio-economic landscape, driven by agriculture, animal husbandry, and port-based industries.

Political Profile

The Kachchh Lok Sabha constituency, a Scheduled Caste (SC)-reserved seat in Gujarat, covering the entire Kachchh district and parts of Morbi district, has been a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stronghold for over three decades, reflecting the party's dominance in Gujarat's political landscape. Since its first election in 1957 as Kutch, the constituency saw early Congress victories, with T.M. Seth winning in 1957 and 1967, and Mulshankar Mehta in 1980. The Swatantra Party briefly claimed the seat in 1962, and the Indian Lok Dal in 1977 post-Emergency. However, since 1989, the BJP has won consistently, except for a Congress win in 1991 by Ushaben Thakkar, the constituency's first female MP. Notable BJP victories include Pushpdan Gadhavi's four terms (1996–2009) and Vinod Chavda's three consecutive wins from 2014 to 2024. In 2014, Chavda secured 562,855 votes (59.4%) against Congress's Dinesh Parmar (308,373 votes), with a 61.72% turnout. In 2019, he won with 637,034 votes (62.2%) against Congress's Naresh Maheshwari (331,521 votes), at a 58.67% turnout. In 2024, Chavda retained the seat with 659,589 votes (61.54%) against Congress's Nitishbhai Lalan (391,485 votes, 36.52%), with turnout at 56.14%. With candidates like Lakhubhai Vaghela in 2019 (6,321 votes, 0.62%) and Vijay Bhachra in 2024 (2,589 votes, 0.24%), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has had little effect on the population of 19,34,444, which comprises 12% SC voters. There was some local competition in the 2022 Gujarat Assembly elections, with the BJP winning five of the seven segments (Abdasa, Mandvi, Bhuj, Anjar, and Gandhidham) and the Congress winning Rapar and Morbi. In contrast to the Congress's historical fall and the BSP's insignificant significance in this border constituency, the BJP's hold is strengthened by its appeal among rural (65.2%) and urban (34.8%) voters.

2024

S.N.	Candidate	Party	EVM Votes	Postal Votes	Total Votes	% of Votes
1	Chavda Vinod Lakhamshi	Bharatiya Janata Party	656,979	2,595	659,574	60.23%
2	Nitesh Parbatbhai Lalan (Matang)	Indian National Congress	389,384	1,408	390,792	35.68%
3	Vijay Bhachra	Bahujan Samaj Party	6,075	36	6,111	0.56%
4	Vanazara Hiraben Dalpatbhai	Independent	5,145	6	5,151	0.47%
5	Babulal Ladha Chavda	Independent	3,348	6	3,354	0.31%
6	Kavitaben Dineshbhai Machchhoya	Independent	3,342	24	3,366	0.31%
7	Devabhai Mithabhai Gohil	Rashtriya Power Party	2,087	14	2,101	0.19%
8	Shamlia Virji Chaku	Hindvi Swarajyay Dal	1,560	13	1,573	0.14%
9	Arvind Ashok Sanghela	Gujarat Sarva Samaj Party	1,509	17	1,526	0.14%
10	Bochiya Bhimji Bhikha	Sarva Samaj Janata Party	1,491	6	1,497	0.14%
11	Ramjibhai Jakhubhai Dafda	Right to Recall Party	1,357	13	1,370	0.13%
12	NOTA	None of the Above	18,604	138	18,742	1.71%
	Total		**1,090,881**	**4,276**	**1,095,157**	

2019

Party	Candidate	Votes	%	±%
BJP	Vinod Lakhamashi Chavda	637,034	62.26%	▲ 2.86
INC	Naresh Naranbhai Maheshwari	331,521	32.40%	▼ 0.15
NOTA	None of the Above	18,761	1.83%	▲ 0.05
BMP	Maheshwari Devjibhai Vachhiyabhai	10,098	0.99%	▼ 1.24
BSP	Lakhubhai Vaghela	7,448	0.73%	▼ 1.51
	Majority			**3,05,513**
	Turnout	**10,24,512**	**58.71%**	▼ 3.07
	BJP hold			

Combine Analysis of both constituencies

Despite statutory representation through SC-reserved seats, the outcomes of the 2019 and 2024 Lok Sabha elections from the Ahmedabad West and Kachchh constituencies show a persistent trend of Dalit political marginalisation. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) continued to rule both seats.—Dineshbhai Makwana won Ahmedabad West in 2024 with 63.28%, following Kirit Solanki's 64.35% in 2019, while Vinod Chavda retained Kachchh with over 60% in both years. The Indian National Congress (INC), which increased its vote share in Kachchh in 2024 but was unable to really challenge the BJP's dominance, continued to be the closest but farthest rival. With fewer than 1% of the vote, Dalit-focused parties like the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Bahujan Mukti Party (BMP) remained electorally insignificant, while NOTA lingered around 1.5%, indicating modest but steady dissatisfaction..

The failure of Dalit movements like the BSP in Gujarat stems from their weak organizational base, lack of charismatic local leadership, and inability to shift from identity-based to issue-based politics. Reserved constituencies often produce symbolic representation, with Dalit candidates subsumed into BJP or INC hierarchies, limiting transformative politics. BJP's success lies in combining welfare delivery, symbolic gestures, and assimilation into a broader Hindutva-nationalist framework, effectively co-opting Dalit aspirations through development and inclusion narratives. In urban Ahmedabad West, middle-class Dalits are drawn to economic opportunity over caste identity, while Kachchh's mixed urban-rural character allows some space for caste-based mobilization, though still constrained by welfare dependency and communal narratives. Congress's references to Ambedkarite ideals lack organizational depth, and its marginal recovery in Kachchh shows limited potential. The persistent failure of alternative Dalit platforms highlights how Gujarat's political configuration—shaped by BJP's hegemony, welfare-state strategies, urbanization, and the dilution of caste consciousness—channels Dalit political agency into dominant party structures, leaving little room for autonomous or counter-hegemonic movements to emerge.

Conclusion

The article focused broadly on two watershed events which bring out starkly the absence of a strong and

decisive dalit consciousness in Gujarat and the rise of right-wing politics: 1985 riots and 2016 Una Flogging incident. The roots of such an absence has been traced through the state's historical, socio-cultural, economic, ideological, and political particularities. In order to explain away the ambivalence and fragmentation in the face of the atrocities and precarity faced by Dalits in the state, a number of factors have been used, including the decline of Congress and the failure of the KHAM strategy, the entrepreneurial ethos and neoliberal policies of the states leading to the construction of development narratives, co-optation and deradicalisation through Hindutva, individualised concern for social mobility, political manipulation and ideological appropriation of Ambekar. Furthermore, the Una flogging episode shows the potential and ability for the rise of Dalit consciousness and its radical transformation, but the 1985 riots mark the beginning of Hindutva and development narrative for co-optation and deradicalisation of Dalits. A comparison with the state of Uttar pradesh further enables an understanding of how despite the same base factors such as decline of Congress, globalisation and rising inequalities among others, a Dalit consciousness did not emerge in Gujarat. The analysis of reserved constituencies substantiates the findings through empirical data. However, the assertive mobilisation of dalits post-Una incident does hint at the hope and possibility of a strong articulation of Dalit consciousness despite repression by the state.

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