

Kanshi Ram: The Man and his Legacy

An Essay

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Kanshi Ram's main legacy is that political mobilization and use of State power is required to provide dalits self-respect, dignity, social equality and political empowerment to fight against domination and oppression within an unequal social order.

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Kanshi Ram, the man who introduced seminal change in dalit politics and Indian democracy died on October 9, 2006, evoking little public interest. The electronic and print media reported it but did not spend much time or space on it. While there were write-ups and obituaries in leading English daily newspapers, the accompanying photographs were of mourning relatives or VIPs placing a wreath on his body, none from the past when he played an active and determining role in politics. This was perhaps because Kanshi Ram had been ailing for over two years. But this does not detract from his significant achievements or the rich, though controversial legacy, he has left behind which will be debated for sometime to come.

Kanshi Ram never held any office throughout his career in politics. Rather, he directed his abilities towards planning mobilizational strategies for the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), the party he founded. Despite this within a short period he emerged as the most important post-Ambedkar Dalit leader in the country. His political career has left a lasting imprint on politics in Uttar Pradesh and at the national level. The BSP formed by him was responsible for the decimation in Uttar Pradesh of the Congress historically the party supported by the Scheduled Castes in north India since the colonial period.

The emergence of the BSP changed the terms of the discourse within caste politics, making the Congress Party irrelevant and shifting focus to an independent Dalit party. By joining hands with the Samajwadi Party (SP) in the early 1990s the BSP was able to 'contain' the communal politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Despite thrice joining hands with the BJP, once in office the BSP took up pro-Dalit policies vigorously and also played a seminal role in defeating and marginalizing *Hindutva*. There is general agreement even among the critics of the BSP, on the centrality of Dalit politics following its capture of power in Uttar Pradesh in 1995. Throughout the 1990s no party could form a government in the state without its support.

In the larger context of the country it is worth remembering that Kanshi Ram led his movement for the disadvantaged masses precisely when the Congress Party under P.V. Narasimha Rao decided to introduce Economic Reforms, requiring the retreat of the State from welfarism. Much of the opposition to new market-oriented policies has come from notions of Social Justice put forward by leaders such as Ram. Despite his authoritarian control over the BSP as its 'Supremo' Ram showed great foresight in his selection and mentoring of Mayawati who has been able to carry forward his work.

The life and career of Kanshi Ram epitomize the new social forces that emerged due to democratization and affirmative action in post-independence India. Born on March 15, 1934, Kanshi Ram was a Chamar Ramdasia from Khawaspur village, in Ropar district, Punjab. His family was not poor nor was his early life exploitative as popular stories about him try to make out, but they were not well off either. His father and uncle were in the army and his family owned some land, due to which he was able to obtain an undergraduate degree in Science at Ropar. Brought up in Punjab, which was comparatively free from the social stigma of untouchability, he did not experience the exploitation that dalits in north India usually face in their childhood.

In fact, he remained unaware of the oppression suffered by dalits in the country until two events in his life: He experienced caste discrimination while working in the early 1960s as a Researcher in the ERDL in Pune and second, he was deeply influenced by Ambedkar's writings, particularly 'Annihilation of Caste'. These made him aware of his identity and instilled pride in his background. He also realized that political organization and mobilization of Dalits – who were large in number, formed a national constituency and suffered from the same disabilities – on a common platform was needed, revolutionary methods were not necessary. His early experiences in Pune, where dalit leaders were sharply polarized over the future of the dalit movement, were important in shaping his thought and action setting him on a political trajectory markedly different from that of other dalit leaders. Kanshi Ram briefly toyed with the idea of joining the Republican Party of India (RPI) and later the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra, but found both wanting. The former was divided into many factions creating warring leaders, which he attributed to too much intra-party democracy that made it incapable of any serious activity. The latter he felt indulged in endless debates on dalit identity and relevance of Marxism and Buddhism to the dalit cause, which were a waste of time as they merely blurred the clear political focus needed in organizing a social movement.

Kanshi Ram's greatest asset was his marked ability as an organization builder and master strategist. From his early political experiences in Pune was born the BAMCEF a shadow, non-political but unique organization made up of the educated employed dalits who could "pay back" or help the more oppressed and exploited sections of their community. Kanshi Ram conceived of it as "a think-tank, talent-bank and financial-bank of the oppressed and exploited society, to move its mission ahead". The BAMCEF is often credited with collecting funds and writing manifestoes during elections, but it played a much larger role in arousing and uniting the dalit community during the 1980s prior to the formation of the BSP. The movement's appeal broadened with the formation by Kanshi Ram of the DS-4 in 1982 meant to harness the political energy created by the formation of the BAMCEF. A quasi-political party, it held *prachar yatras*, cycle rallies and *jagrans* to arouse the dalits. Its birth arose out of the denunciation of the Poona Pact of 1932, on the celebration of its 50th anniversary by the Congress Party. Describing it as an anti-dalit pact, Kanshi Ram pointed out that Gandhi had humiliated Ambedkar and put forward the concept of reserved seats, which had created 'chamchas', or puppets out of dalit leaders of mainstream parties. Gandhi's views on the *varna* system and use of the term *Harijan* were portrayed as derogatory.

From here the formation of the BSP - conceived of as a “mission” - in 1984 was the next step as by now Kanshi Ram had decided that only by capturing power could a dalit movement affect fundamental change in society. This is seen in a key slogan of the time: “*vote hamara, raj tumhara, nahi chalega, nahi chalega*”. Thus, the ground was deliberately and carefully prepared for the formation of the BSP. During its initial years the party’s virulent critique of the Indian State particularly of Gandhi and the Congress party as *manuvadi* and its reinterpretation of the Nationalist Movement and the project of nation-building as not inclusive of the disadvantaged sections of society, appealed to a more politically conscious, younger generation of educated dalits. Consequently, it was able to emerge as an ‘alternative’ political formation to the Congress, which enabled it within a decade of its formation to capture power in 1993 with the support of SP and in 1995 with the support of the BJP. Unlike the RPI the BSP has survived, it is more radical in its opposition to the caste system, has a distinct self-identity, committed leadership and social base and has emerged as a strong party, which cannot be co-opted by mainstream parties. While this can be attributed to the strong wave of assertion among the lower castes in north India in the 1980s, it was Kanshi Ram’s skilled leadership that was able to harness it and consolidate dalit votes behind the party.

BSP’s achievements

The BSP under the leadership of Kanshi Ram has a number of noteworthy achievements to its credit. The emergence and establishment of the BSP as a strong dalit-based party is an important achievement and the party has contributed substantially to the *social deepening* of Indian democracy. It created a new identity and counter-identity to the *varna* system of ‘dalit’ and Ambedkarism, respectively. This has succeeded in removing the hold of Brahminical ideology and the submissive attitude of the dalits providing them with a new confidence and self-respect. These achievements have had a significant impact in the political field: they have broken down the vertical patron-client relationships with the upper castes, the accompanying political mobilizational pattern of vote-banks and constructed new solidarities on a horizontal dimension. The success of the BSP in Uttar Pradesh has been due to Kanshi Ram’s skill in adapting its mobilizational strategies to the rapidly changing political scene during the 1990s. During the early 1990s it mobilized as a militant and exclusive dalit-based party in isolation from *manuvadi* parties and formed a coalition with another lower caste party the SP. In the second half of the 1990s when Uttar Pradesh politics entered a phase of ‘moderation’ and parties shed their confrontational attitudes as no party could gain a majority, the BSP entered into coalitions with *manuvadi* parties and gave tickets to non-Dalits to overcome its narrow base and capture power. More recently, the party has carried forward this principle under Mayawati by seeking the support of the upper castes in a bid to create a more broad-based party with a dalit core, to meet the challenge of the SP in the forthcoming Uttar Pradesh elections in early 2007. The electoral success of the BSP, spread of the power of the vote among dalits and capture of state power are important achievements which have impacted on dalits not only in Uttar Pradesh but also elsewhere and contributed towards the gradual development of an all-India dalit identity.

However, there have been weaknesses, which must be acknowledged and understood if the dalit movement is to move forward. Kanshi Ram was not able to mobilize the backward castes together with the dalits and create a 'Bahujan' party. While the socio-economic reality of the rural power structure in Uttar Pradesh to a large extent did not allow this to happen. It was also because the BSP was formed as a party in which *the* interests of the Dalits would be given prime importance. Kanshi Ram tried to give the term dalit in a broad meaning encompassing all the oppressed and exploited, but the party was unable to reconcile the contradictory positions. A second feature is that much of the grassroots assertion and activism in Uttar Pradesh, often described as Ambedkarisation and which in some parts pre-dates the formation of the BSP, has remained outside the ambit of the party. These activities are not the outcome of the emergence of the BSP, or its mobilizational activities.

The BSP is not a party interested in encouraging dalit assertion at the grassroots. With its roots in the BAMCEF a middle/lower middle class organization rather than struggles in the countryside, it is more interested in competitive electoral politics, political empowerment of dalits and capture of state power. The BSP is a highly successful party but not a social movement interested in transformation of the social order. It is not an anti-systemic party/movement but a party that wants to work within the system, capturing power from the Brahminical elite, replacing and not destroying it. This is also seen in the fact that it has kept out of many major dalit struggles, the best examples being the *Namantar* agitation in Maharashtra, the agitation against the desecration of Ambedkar's statue in Bombay in July 1998, or the Shergadi incident in Meerut in 1994. Rather, Kanshi Ram's role was that of a reformer who adopted the Parliamentary path of gradual social transformation.

Equally importantly, the BSP began as a party founded on the support of the emerging, educated middle class among the dalits and subsequently gained the electoral support of the vast mass of poorer dalits in Uttar Pradesh, which is no mean achievement. Yet apart from its symbolism, provision of self respect, raising the issue of social justice and spread of the electoral process among them, how democratizing and empowering has the BSP-experience been for the vast mass of subaltern Dalits in the state? In his *The Chamcha Era: An Era of Stooges* written in 1982, Kanshi Ram describes two stages by which the political position of the dalits would undergo transformation. The first was the capture of power through electoral victory from the upper castes; in the second the revolution would penetrate into society transforming it. The BSP, which came to power on a critique of mainstream parties, had unfortunately little alternative economic agenda to offer. While Kanshi Ram underlined the need for ending poverty and a number of policies such as land reform, nationalization of industry, need for better wages, etc., how this would be implemented was not clarified. According to him poverty is the result of social and political powerlessness rooted in the unequal caste system and not an economic condition to be dealt with by economic policies. Thus, what he wanted was not reform of the system, but a share in political power to ensure that dalits are not oppressed and to provide them a sense of self-respect.

The result was that the BSP in power under his protégée Mayawati, spent considerable amounts on dalit-oriented programmes such as Ambedkar Villages, Periyar Melas, and Ambedkar parks aimed at consolidating the dalit vote behind the party. These programmes left little funds for investment in key sectors such as education, infrastructure and health, which is harmful for the economy but more particularly, for the poorest sections of the population, which includes a substantial section of the dalits. It is questionable whether these programmes initiated for dalits by the BSP when in power have actually led to their upliftment. Most of these programmes can be described as mere symbolism. There have been few large-scale programmes such as land reform, housing or education for dalits. There are also reports of many welfare policies not being properly implemented and the benefits not reaching the poorest sections of the dalits. A perusal of the *Human Development Report* of Uttar Pradesh reveals the poor condition of dalits in the state. Capture of power is important, but a party such as the BSP that attempts to gain power for introducing change, must be able to explain why it wants to rule and more important, what it has to offer. This is the dilemma facing the dalit movement today: It has succeeded in emerging as an important movement/party and even captured power, but it does not know where to go from there.

In conclusion, the main legacy of Kanshi Ram has been that political mobilization and use of State power is required to provide dalits self-respect, dignity, social equality and political empowerment to fight against domination and oppression within an unequal social order. Through this message he opened a new chapter in the dalit movement. The struggle is not over and the BSP under the leadership of Mayawati is attempting to carry forward this task. However, the BSP lacks an ideology of socio-economic empowerment to take it forward. A dalit movement must have a broad social agenda, a programme of development and a vision of transformation. Is self-respect and empowerment for dalits, which the BSP leadership rightly claims as its achievement, enough in the long run? With the capture of power by the BSP, dalits will expect not only self-respect but also improvement in their material situation. The movement led by Kanshi Ram and the party formed by him has been one of 'assertion' it needs to develop an ideology and agenda of socio-economic transformation.

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