

## **FORMATION OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY OF INDIA AND IMPACT ON THE POLITICS OF UTTAR PRADESH, 1952-1962**

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The Paper examine developments that led to the formation of Republican Party of India (RPI) and its impact in the politics of Uttar Pradesh in the 1950s and 1960s, which was replacement of Scheduled Caste Federation. The formation of Republican Party of India has been interpreted to suggest that a politics based on the Dalit identity was not helpful in achieving meaningful electoral gains. But there is also wider issue at stake here relating to differences between political mobilization based on caste identity and that grounded in class. Also many have identified the emergence of the RPI with a shift from caste to class-based politics, I argue instead that the RPI was keen to intervene in the political process through alliances without diluting their commitment to a caste-based Ambedkarite agenda.

Ambedkar announced the formation of the Republican Party of India (RPI) on 13 October 1956, and a day later he along with 3,00,000 Dalits converted to Buddhism in a mass ceremony at Nagpur in Maharashtra. He did not live to formally establish the party, which was infact founded by his followers on 3 October 1957. According to Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, a month after announcing the formation of the RPI Ambedkar, as president, dissolved the Scheduled Caste Federation in its final meeting in Delhi on 13 November 1956.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary scholars and observers have pointed to the contradiction that such a move entailed for the aims and objectives of the Dalit movement. Mendelsohn and Vicziany have summed up the core debate by arguing that the RPI represented “a party along class rather than caste lines”.<sup>2</sup> Ambedkar’s biographer Dhananjay Keer has argued that the Dalit leader was convinced that the SCF had created barriers “between them and the other classes” which he wanted to erase by establishing a new party.<sup>3</sup> Rammanohar Lohia has similarly claimed that Ambedkar was convinced of the need to move away from caste to class based mobilization by incorporating lower castes, workers, peasants and Dalits into a single party.<sup>4</sup>

The above arguments reflect the general consensus in the writings on RPI, that the politics and mobilization based on Dalit identity was rejected in the 1950s in favour of class mobilization. It is assumed by most scholars that the leaders of the SCF decided to rescind their earlier strategy of building a party emphasising the separate identity of the Dalit in favour of a more inclusive social alliance which would draw from various social classes and groups in Indian society. However, I would like to suggest that there exists an alternative interpretation to this and one that is closer to the Dalit perspective. In this section I shall argue that by becoming involved in the RPI, Dalits in Uttar Pradesh were keen to intervene in the political process through the creation of wider alliances without diluting their commitment to an Dalit identity. Further, I will argue that such an initiative represented the legacy of their recent struggles that

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<sup>1</sup> Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu (1960) ‘*Bhartiya Republican Party hi kyon avashyak Hai?*’ ( Why is Republican party of India Necessary? ) Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan, Lucknow [1960] P. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Mendelsohn & Vicziany, Marika (1998) ‘The Untouchables: *Subordination, poverty and the state in modern India* Cambridge, P. 212.

<sup>3</sup> Dhananjay Keer (1962) ‘*Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*’ Bomabay, Popular Prakashan [ first published in 1954] PP.499-500

<sup>4</sup> Rammanhor Lohia (1964) ‘*The Caste System*’ Hyderabad PP. 33-36.<sup>1115</sup>

has validated the absolute necessity of fighting for their on rights, and reflected a new confidence in their abilities to achieve their aims.

From a Dalit point of view, Indian independence arrived along with a series of contradictions. The Constituent Assembly unanimously passed a Bill abolishing untouchability and making its practice a criminal offence. It also established a programme of affirmative action. In doing so, the leaders of independent India were fulfilling the demands of the Adi-Hindu movement that were first raised in the 1920s. Ambedkar was an elected member of the Assembly as a Muslim League candidate from Bengal, but after the partition and independence of India, the creation of Pakistan, Ambedkar had to vacate the seat. The Congress nominated Ambedkar to the Constituent Assembly from the Bombay Legislative Council in July 1947, paving he way for his appointment as Law Minister in Nehru's new cabinet.<sup>5</sup> Ambedkar's decision to join the Congress Government prompted some leaders of the UP SCF like Manik Chand, Piarelal Talib, R.S. Shyamlal and Nandlal Jaiswar to follow suit and join the Congress.<sup>6</sup> Manik Chand and Piarelal Talib were elected to the Lok Sabha from UP and Rajasthan respectively in the 1952 elections.<sup>7</sup>

Dalits continued their struggle by reminding the Congress Government that the conditions of *achhuts* had not changed significantly even after independence. A Dalit organisation in Lakhimpur-Kheri passed a resolution stating that after independence their conditions had not improved in the same way as that of the Hindus, even though both communities have the same rights in independent India's constitutuion.<sup>8</sup> Leaders and activists of the SCF claimed in various meetings and demonstration that the Congress Government was providing benefits only to Hindus, a complaint repeated in Lucknow, Bareilly, Kanpur, Agra, Saharanpur, Aligarh, Fatehpur, and Meerut. Chamars in many parts of UP, particularly in the Awadh region, protested against the continued practice of *begari* and demanded improvement in "their standards of living" through the implementations of fair wages, the provision of housing and educational facilities, and the distribution of land.<sup>9</sup> These protests made immediately after independence are reminders of the persistence of the exploitative regimes against which Dalits have continued to struggle years after the achievement of India's independence from the British.

The SCF organised its annual conference in Lucknow on 24 and 25 April 1948, where it reaffirmed its commitment to the Dalit struggle and demanded adequate representation in Government services and legislative assemblies, the provision of access to Dalits to public places, and the abolition of *begari*.<sup>10</sup> It was on this occasion that Ambedkar gave what I regard as one of the most important speeches of his political career-a speech which has gone entirely unnoticed in much of the scholarly writing on Ambedkar, perhaps because it was given in Lucknow rather than in Maharashtra! At the heart of the speech was Ambedkar's proposition that:

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<sup>5</sup> The Pioneer, 2 July 1947

<sup>6</sup> The Pioneer, 10 May 1947.

<sup>7</sup> Kshirsagar, R.K. (1994) '*Dalit Movement and its Leaders (1857-1956)*' Delhi, P. 230-2, 253-58

<sup>8</sup> PAI, May 7 1948.

<sup>9</sup> Ramnaarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Unouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India*,

Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010

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<sup>10</sup> The National Herald, 26 April 1948.

now is the time for the Scheduled Castes to unite under one banner, one slogan, one leader, one party and one programme...[the Scheduled Castes] must maintain their separate entity and attempt to make themselves as potential force so that they may be in a position to do political bargaining.<sup>11</sup>

Reminding his audience that earlier they had negotiated with the British because they were in power, he emphasized that after independence the Dalit had to do the same with the Hindus and their party the Congress. By joining the Congress Ministry Ambedkar claimed he was sharing the Congress' power for the benefit of *achhuts*.<sup>12</sup> Ambedkar's vision was shared one in which the Dalits of UP were equal participants. He believed that the evidence of their equal participation was apparent in their successful struggles of the last few decades. By giving this speech Ambedkar was underscoring the recent successful struggles of the SCF in UP, as well as his enduring commitment to an *achhut* perspective through which Dalits in UP had been able to formulate effective social and political agendas.

I suggest that the most enduring legacy of the Adi-Hindu movement in UP was the conceptualization of separate Dalit identity which was not merely a political category but also a social and cultural category—a way of thinking not just about the Dalit society but also about Hindu society. It is only through the recognition of the history of movement and the way thinking which accompanied this movement that Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu and millions of other Dalit were able to describe the Congress as a Hindu party, or recognized and point out the fact that other political parties including the Left parties are led by caste Hindus. The sense that the Dalits of UP had in the 1940s and 50s, and still have today, having their own agenda, was made possible only through the history and political organisation of these decades. Shastri claimed that the Congress Government was forced to include Ambedkar in their Government because of their satyagraha and agitation in 1946-47, and not because it was a “gift” by the Congress to the Dalits.<sup>13</sup>

The 1940s provided an important break by bringing together disparate Dalit organisations under the SCF with a vision of Dalit politics, and a commitment to their rights that continues to define the lives of Dalits today, It is my submission that the idea of a united interests across all across all castes of Dalits under the shared identity of *achhuts* acquired a unanimous acceptability among diverse sections in the 1940s—sections which previously, in the 1920s would have recognized themselves as belonging to a shared community. A few examples will illustrate this point. Unlike the SCF and later the RPI, the Independent Labour Party founded by Ambedkar in 1937 failed to capture the imagination of the Dalits in U.P., despite the fact that Indian Labour Party was formed in 1937 with the socialist aim to “advance the welfare of the labouring classes”.<sup>14</sup> There could be many reasons for the lack of enthusiasm among the Dalits U.P. for the ILP, in sharp contrast to the almost complete support for the SCF, but most likely, the successful construction of a united Dalit identity by the SCF attracted the Dalits from across

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<sup>11</sup> The National Herald, 26 April 1948.

<sup>12</sup> The Leader, 26 April 1948.

<sup>13</sup> Shankaranand Shashtri (1994) ‘*Poona pact Bnam Gandhi*’, Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan , Lucknow P. 147. For instance Sudha Pai claims that it was a “Gift” by the congress party. Pai, Sudha ‘*Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution*’, P. 74., Zelliott, E. ‘*Congress and the Untouchables, 1917-1950*’, in Richard Sission and Stanley Wolpert (ed), *Congress and Indian Nationalism* (Delhi 1988), P. 193.

<sup>14</sup>For detail see Zelliott, Eleanor ‘Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement’, P. 246.

caste and regional spectrum. The fact that almost all the Chamar castes Mahasabha, like the Jatav Mahasabha of Agra, Kureel and Chamar Mahasabhas of Kanpur, Adi-Hindu Raidass Mahasabha of Allahabad, and Dalit organisations like Kumaon Shilpakars Sabha of Almora were among the prominent organisation which established the SCF in their respective region. Thereby giving an institutional shape to the idea of Dalit identity.

Even those outside the SCF affirmed their commitment to *achhut* identity. It was not until the 1940s that Jagjivan Ram, the most influential Congress Dalit leader, criticised Gandhi and defended Lord Wavell's characterisation of the Congress in 1944 as a caste-Hindu party.<sup>15</sup> Jagjivan Ram at a press conference expressed surprise at Gandhi's criticism of Wavell's describing it as self-contradictory. He argued that the Poona Pact acknowledged that the Dalits and Hindus are two separate groups.<sup>16</sup> Only at this point, two, did Jagjivan Ram claim that despite being a member of the Congress his first commitment lay with the interest of the Dalits.<sup>17</sup> Never before had he represented himself and his commitment in quite this way. The two petitions submitted in 1946 by the Congress Harijan organisations from Meerut and Saharanpur demanding that the Congress recognizes the rights of Dalits separately from Hindus or the struggles initiated by the Dalit Congress MLA, Jaipal Singh in 1946, in Saharanpur an other part of U.P. for the rights of Dalits, are others examples.<sup>18</sup>

The agenda of Dalit identity and politics laid by the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha in 1928, including a programme for defining a set of rights, seemed to have reached fruition in the 1940s. It was no longer the idea of Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, but one that was shared by various Dalit organisations, including individuals and organisations belonging to the Congress like Jagjivan Ram, and worked out through their movements and struggles from 1928 to 1947 in UP. It was this clear perception of their agenda that convinced Ambedkar to join the Congress Ministry in 1947. The formation of RPI, I am arguing, did not represent an abandonment of the Dalit identity and politics, nor does it represent a move to Class politics as suggested by a host of scholars. By framing the formation of RPI as a shift 'from caste to class' we mess the Dalit point of view which looked at the possibility of building up political alliances without losing the focus and power of a united Dalit identity.

The RPI represented an effort to come to terms with the realities in India-citizenship, adult suffrage, affirmative action, and elections. After initial uncertainties, the principles behind the foundation of the SCF were found to be inadequate for dealing with the new realities of independent India. It was formed, I suggest, as a party of Dalit allied with other interests, in order to strengthen what Ambedkar called the 'bargaining power' of the Dalits, thereby enabling them to attain some of their goals. Indeed, the RPI represented the discovery by Dalits of alternative ways to tackle the new political realities with which they were confronted. Tilak Chand Kureel, the president of the SCF in UP, advised Dalits in June 1948 that they should vote for the socialist candidates to defeat the Congress in the coming elections.<sup>19</sup> We can take Kureel's statement as an indication of the wider thinking among the leaders of the SCF who were taking

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<sup>15</sup> Nalin Vilochan Sharma, '*Jagjivan Ram: a Biography*' Patna & New Delhi, P. 127.

<sup>16</sup> Sharma, Nalin Vilochan, '*Jagjivan Ram: a Biography*' Patna & New Delhi, P. 132 and The Hindustan Times, 18 June 1945.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. P. 127

<sup>18</sup> For details see F. No. 41/4/1947-r, 'Request from the Scheduled Caste of UP', Secretariat of the Governor-General Reforms Office, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>19</sup> PAI, 28 September 1948

up even more sophisticated strategies for achieving their goals. Others like swami Chamanand and Asharfi Lal Pasi, were advocating an alliance with the Socialists in UP.<sup>20</sup>

Explaining the objectives behind the formation of Republican Party of India in 1960, Jigyasu claimed that its principles were based on the constitution that Ambedkar framed: “justice, equality, liberty and fraternity”, so that every Indian could enjoy the opportunities and benefits of these values and achieve their development.<sup>21</sup> Through these general aims of the RPI, argued Jigyasu, Ambedkar wanted to attract Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Baddhists, Christians and Dalits as its members.<sup>22</sup> The hope behind its formation, according to Jigyasu, was that “if 80 per cent of India’s population consisting of oppressed-backward-exploited-deprived come together” then they could capture political power.<sup>23</sup> The formation of RPI and the conversion to Buddhism were the lasting legacies of Ambedkar to the Dalits, that has continued to shape and inspire their struggle throughout India.

Reading through the anthropological study of Owen Lynch on the politics of the Jatavs in the early years of the 1960s, a careful reader may note that a Jatav politician irrespective of ‘his’ political affiliation-Congress, RPI, or the Jan Sangh-is involved in politics to secure various advantages from the state for the benefit of Dalits.<sup>24</sup> The Jatav leaders of the Congress party explained their motives in joining the party in familiar Ambedkar terms, saying “we intend to get [the backing of the Jatav masses so that we can present our demands forcefully to Congress, who alone can help us now. If we have the people (the Jatavs and Dalits) behind us, Congress will meet our demands.”<sup>25</sup> The Jatavas were members of the Congress not because they believed in the ideology of the Congress but because they believed this was the best way to get their voice heard and their agenda implemented by the state. R. S. Khare’s study of Lucknow Chamars in the 1970s elaborates the Lucknow Chamars’ distinctive ideological world. Khare demonstrates that the Dalit agenda has enabled Chamars to maintain their separate radical Dalit identity that equips them to deal with the other dominant sections of society.<sup>26</sup>

Mobilisation by RPI activists and politicians in UP was rooted in the cultural and political premise of Dalit politics which hoped to attract support from other sections of society. The programme of the RPI focused on the Dalits, and its “Charter of Demands” raised issues that aimed at covering all sections of Dalits by demanding the improvement of the implementation reservations for the Dalits and Tribals, extending this coverage to Buddhist converts and tightening the legislative provisions against the practice of untouchability. If these issues addressed the concerns of the more privileged sections of Dalits, the “Charter of Demands” also included radical proposals aimed at the rural poor in demanding that land must go to the actual

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<sup>20</sup> PAI 18 June 1948.

<sup>21</sup> Jigyasu, Chandrika Prasad (1960) ‘*Bhartiya Republican Party hi kyon avashyak Hai?*’ ( Why is Republican party of India Necessary? ) Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan, Lucknow [1960] P.3

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P. 2-3

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. P-7 and also see Shashtri, Shankaranand, (1994)‘ *Poona pact bnam Gandhi*’, Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan , Lucknow P.187-88

<sup>24</sup> Lynch, O. M(1974), ‘*The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City of India*’, Delhi: National Publishing House , P.93-120

<sup>25</sup> Lynch, O. M(1974), ‘*The Politics of Untouchability: Social Mobility and Social Change in a City of India*’, Delhi: National Publishing House , P. 113

<sup>26</sup>R. S. Khare (1984) ‘*The Untouchable as himself: ideology, identity, and pragmatism among the Lucknow Chamars*’, Cambridge , especially introduction.

tiller, that the panchayat and waste land should be redistributed to landless Dalit labourers, and that the Minimum Wage Act of 1948 Should be enforced for the benefit of Dalits.<sup>27</sup> Writing in 1965, Shastri also noted that the RPI had launched a popular struggle to achieve its demands by organizing a massive protest rally in front of the Indian Parliament in Delhi on 1 October 1964. Two demands were addressed in the demonstration: land for the landless and reservations for Dalit Buddhist converts.<sup>28</sup>

In UP the issue of land redistribution acquired centre stage in the campaign launched by the RPI in December 1964, as its activists attempted to capture and cultivate the fallow and waste land especially in the western part of the district. It was widely reported and noted that the demonstrators in the western UP were primarily landless Chamar labourers with little supports from non-Dalit labourers and poor peasant proprietors.<sup>29</sup> The issues raised in their campaigns were about economic inequities perpetuated by the dominant Hindu castes, it was about exploitation along cast lines and not class, and the battle was also along caste lines. The following quote from the pamphlet of the RPI makes this clear:

Listen, Jatav and Muslim are friends. Down trodden and backward brothers. It is clear that during the ten years the Congress has done only for the advancement of the Brahmans and it has done nothing for the Jatav community. They have after winning spread black marketing, bribery, dacoity, controls and excessive taxes in broad day-light and brought about ruin in the country and Jatava in Particular.

Electoral compulsion induced the RPI to enter into a coalition with the Muslims in the western UP, especially in Aligarh and Agra regions. In both areas, as I have suggested earlier, Dalits had a history of political alliances with Muslims, First established in 1937-38 and then in their struggles in 1946-47. It was therefore easier for them to enter into an alliance with other minorities of India that had repeatedly faced the brunt of communal riots after independence. The electoral alliance between Dalits and Muslims transformed into electoral triumph. It is ironic that the electoral success of the RPI was not in Maharashtra where they got only three candidates elected to the State Assembly in the general elections in 1962, but in UP where three candidates were elected to the Lok Sabha and eight to the State Assembly. Out of these, one candidate in the Lok Sabha and three in the State Assembly were Muslims.<sup>30</sup>

B.P. Maurya, the most important leader of the RPI from Aligarh, who had participated in the 1946-47 SCF movement in Agra played an important role in building the Dalit alliance with Muslims.<sup>1148</sup> A Chamar from Khair tahsil from a well-off peasant family of Aligarh, he led some 1,00,000 Chamars to renounce Hinduism in favour of Buddhism.<sup>1149</sup> The alliance between the erstwhile Congress Muslim leaders and the RPI emerged following the communal riot of October 1961 in Aligarh. The RPI slogans summed up the mood of the times and reveals the ideological moorings of the party; “Jatav-Muslim bhai bhai: Hindu Kaum Kahan se ayee” (Jatav-Muslims are brothers: Where did the Hindus come from) or “Thakur, Brahman aur Lala:

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<sup>27</sup> Demands of Republican Party of India (1964)

<sup>28</sup> Shashtri, Shankaranand, (1994) ‘*Poona pact Bnam Gandhi*’, Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan , Lucknow P.187-89

<sup>29</sup> The Hindustan Times , 13 and 17 January 1965

<sup>30</sup> Election Commission: Report on the Third General Elections in India, 1962 Vol.II (Delhi 1963), PP. 6-7 12-13, 80-81, 84-85

Kar do inka Munha kala” (Thakurs, Brahmans and Baniyas: Blacken their faces). If anything these slogans indicate that the Dalit struggles against the domination by Hindu society was fought along caste lines, by emphasising their separate *achhut* identity. Rather than dissipating, the attractiveness of a shared Dalit identity has continued to grow.