

A politics of little change

Caste equations and the minority card will determine which party wins Uttar Pradesh

It is being billed as a make or break election for the super two, the harbinger of the big one later. Leading the charge for a 'resurgent' Congress is the young Lochinvar, Rahul Gandhi with his high-octane campaign. His efforts at tripping up the Mayawati government are the stuff of front pages every day. Not to be outdone, the BJP president Nitin Gadkari has unleashed the once fiery sanyasin Uma Bharti on the electorate. Though not quite comfortable in her new role as BJP envoy from Madhya Pradesh to Uttar Pradesh, she is easily a far greater crowd puller than most of the BJP's colourless state leadership. So, you could be forgiven for thinking that this is the battleground in which the Congress and BJP are trying to best each other.

But, in reality, both are still marginal players despite high visibility in the national media. The real battle is between the incumbent Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) which seems to have got a new lease of life. The leaders of both are not given to studio interviews, though they are partial to the occasional witty one-liners. It is in the hinterland of UP where not much has changed over the decades that the battle for the soul of the state will be fought. And no amount of change in the idiom of national politics will work in this immensely complex and populous state. It has traditionally had abysmal development indicators, yet this has not been an overriding feature in elections in the state. While the Congress and BJP are grappling to find that emotive issue which will strike a chord with the voter, the BSP and the SP have got it down pat. It is quite simple, nothing works like the old caste equations here. And, of course, to an extent, the minority card. So it is the politics of no change that will determine the winner.

So secure is she in having cracked the caste conundrum that Mayawati does not seem unduly perturbed that she has not really delivered the goods even to the constituency which is closest to her heart, that of the Dalits. The SP's Mulayam Singh Yadav, once dubbed Maulana Mulayam for his espousal of the cause of the minority community, is falling back on wooing Muslims away from the Congress and also dabbling in a bit of caste politics. The SP is hoping to eat into the BSP's votebank. Despite the barbs and counter-barbs, neither the Congress nor the BJP are taken to be serious contenders in the state. They may increase their voting percentage at best, but the prize is not likely to come to either. A marginal increase in votes will be claimed as achievements by both parties. And there it will end. When the dust settles, there is every chance that heads, it's Mulayam Singh and tails, it's Mayawati.

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