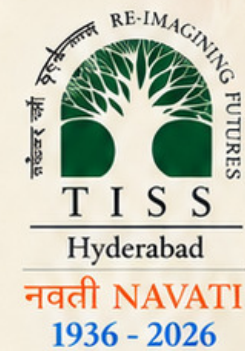


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NEGOTIATING CASTE AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

*The Pasi Community in Awadh,
Uttar Pradesh*

Vinod Kumar

School of Public Policy and Governance, TISS Hyderabad

Working Paper No. 10
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Negotiating Caste and Religious Identity

The Pasi Community in Awadh, Uttar Pradesh

Vinod Kumar *

Abstract

This study explores how the identity of the Pasi caste in the Awadh region of Uttar Pradesh has been [re]constructed through electoral politics since the rise of identity politics, particularly from 1980 onwards. In constitutional parlance, the Pasis are classified as a Scheduled Caste (SC); within the varna hierarchy, they have historically been positioned as 'untouchables', 'Panchamas', outcastes and others, while in the political and emancipatory vocabulary of the anti-caste movement, they are identified as 'Dalit'. Broadly speaking, Dalit assertion can be divided into two strands: the first aims at upward mobility within the caste system, and the second at the annihilation of caste. In this context, this study analyses the narratives of social and political elites from the Pasi caste and how they imagine the collective identity of the Pasis. In other words, it examines how the Pasi community negotiates caste and religious identity, navigating between an identification that locates caste pride within the Hindu social order and a Dalit identity shaped by social and political movements that challenge caste-based hierarchies and discrimination.

Keywords: caste, identity, Pasi, hierarchy

1. Introduction

In October 2025, an elderly Dalit man with difficulty walking was unable to reach the toilet in time and urinated involuntarily inside a temple premises in Kakori town of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. A local Baniya¹ who claimed to be the trustee of the temple allegedly forced the old man to lick the urine and clean it up, and abused him in a humiliating tone by referring to his caste identity as

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¹ The term *Baniya* is used for the trading community in the region; its members have also assumed the caste title Gupta and claim Vaishya as their varna. However, there are different sub-caste groups within the Baniya caste, and some of them, such as the Bhujwa, are considered the most degraded among the Baniyas.

a Pasi². The incident sparked widespread outrage, resulting in a series of demonstrations across the region, led primarily by Dalit social and political organisations and including leaders from the mainstream political parties – the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Congress. Consequently, the accused was arrested, and a detailed investigation is under way. Interpretations of the incident were broadly polarised, with competing narratives largely shaped by caste affiliations. Narratives articulated by upper castes tended to emphasise the exoneration of the alleged perpetrator, while those advanced by lower-caste groups foregrounded demands for justice for the victim.

Broadly, this incident was articulated as an atrocity against Dalits within the framework of the hierarchical caste structure, a system of upper-caste domination over the lower castes. Ideally, Dalit assertion is supposed to be a struggle against the caste system, which relegates the lower castes to the worst socio-economic status and treats them as untouchables without rights. That is how the Ambedkarite vocabulary explains the caste mechanism, its implications for Dalits and a probable solution: the annihilation of caste.³ In practice, every caste aspires to be ranked higher in the caste hierarchy, which is manifested in the construction of a self-image of high origin based on myths.⁴ The discourses that emanated from the outrage over this incident among different social and political elites of the lower castes, particularly the Pasis, revealed an inherent contradiction in the Dalit movement. On the one hand, a group of Dalit leaders and activists, irrespective of political party and other organisational affiliation, spoke of the impunity of the upper castes, emboldened by the ruling party (the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP), which upholds the social and cultural status quo by propagating the ideology of Hindutva. This discourse recognises that the ascribed identity of the Pasis as degraded in the caste hierarchy results from the social and cultural construction of Hindu society, and it upholds the vocabulary of the anti-caste movement to address the social injustices against Dalits. On the other hand, a contrary discourse emerged in which some groups of the Pasi caste denied the low origin of their caste. By invoking both historical⁵ and mythical⁶ figures associ-

² “The Hindu.” “Uproar over Elder from SC Community Forced to Lick Ground as Opposition Alleges Display of Casteism.” *The Hindu*. Accessed October 10, 2026 URL: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/uttar-pradesh/uproar-over-elder-from-sc-community-forced-to-lick-ground-as-opposition-alleges-display-of-casteism/article70190676.ece>

³ B. R. Ambedkar, “Annihilation of Caste”, in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, vol. 1, comp. Vasant Moon (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1979), 23–96. First published 1936.

⁴ Anand Teltumbde, “Identity Politics and the Annihilation of Castes”, *Seminar*, no. 710 (October 2018), https://www.india-seminar.com/2018/710/710_anand_teltumbdei.htm.

⁵ Bijli Pasi, Lakhan Pasi and Raja Suheldev (as local kings), and Uda Devi as a warrior icon.

⁶ Claiming origin from the mythical Brahmin sage Parasurama.

ated with their caste, they assert claims to social superiority within the fold of the caste hierarchy. This group contests its identification with any collective identity of Dalits, whether imposed upon them by the Brahmanical system as “Achhut”, “Avarna” or “Panchama”, or evolved in the anti-caste movement as “depressed”, “lower caste” and “Dalit”. They assert pride in their identity as a historical ruling and warrior class in the Awadh region, trace their lineage to the mythical sage Parasurama, and invoke faith in Lord Shiva (Mahadev/Mahakal).

The social identities of individuals are socially constructed and subject to change in response to social conditions. A caste, however, is an enclosed social group that leaves no room for social interaction and mingling with other castes; it is tightly compartmentalised in a hierarchical order, guarded by endogamy and perpetuated through the notion of purity and pollution. It is unlikely that the self-claims of any caste can break this line and attain a higher status in the ritual sense. Against this backdrop, understanding the competing claims of various stakeholders in a caste society is significant for analysing how collective self-identifications are imagined and constructed and what their limits are in the social hierarchy. Identity politics and electoral dynamics in the Awadh region create different stakeholders who seek to mobilise Pasi groups for political and material interests. Different political parties and the elites of caste groups interpret caste history, myths, icons, legends and heroes according to their political and ideological interests. Hence, this paper critically examines the two larger competing discourses within the Pasi caste over its self-identification. Scholarly interest in identities has been in vogue since the rise of the modern nation state. A plethora of research has established the role of elites in the [re]construction of identities. Elites strategically construct collective identities to maintain power, secure legitimacy and mobilise support, a process in which group intellectuals play a central role by using modern media (print media) to cultivate an imagined sense of belonging among the members of the group.⁷ Drawing on the classical literature on the role of elites in identity [re]construction, this study focuses primarily on the discourses and narratives of the political and social elites of the Pasi caste in the Awadh region of Uttar Pradesh to understand the dynamics of the collective self-identification of this caste group. It then uncovers the inherent contradictions and challenges in the competing discourses and narratives of self-identification.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 6–7.

2. Method

The study is based primarily on the qualitative method, which is well suited to investigating a particular phenomenon (a case of caste atrocity in Kakori town of Lucknow) in depth within its real-world context. It combines a thorough review of the scholarly literature on caste identities in general, and on the identity of the Pasi caste in particular, with my own empirical research. The Awadh region of Uttar Pradesh was purposively selected as a case study because of its distinctive sociological and political relevance to the historical and contemporary experiences of the Pasi caste. For data collection, the study relies mainly on semi-structured interviews with social activists and intellectuals from the Pasi caste. The content and narratives that emerged from the incident in Kakori town, as circulated across print, national and social media – particularly those produced by various stakeholders, including social groups and political leaders from the Pasi caste – have been systematically analysed. Apart from the interviews, direct observation in the field, informal interactions and conversations with community members, different statistical datasets (historical and contemporary), state and national legislation, and various media and civil society reports have been examined to capture the socio-political conditions and to analyse the political behaviour, aspirations and imagination of the Pasis.

Since a group's elites and intellectuals generally play a significant role in shaping the community's direction and imagination, ten social activists exclusively concerned with the issues of the Pasi caste, ten intellectuals and twenty students pursuing master's and PhD degrees were selected for interviews and group discussions. The interviews were recorded manually and transcribed, and, in keeping with the wishes of the respondents, most of their identities have been anonymised.

The data and information gathered from the interviews and field survey were analysed thematically to identify 'patterns of meaning', focusing on the socio-political context and structural conditions that [re]shape the narratives of the respondents.⁸

⁸ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qpo630a>.

3. Myth and History Concerning the Identity of 'Pasi'

A prevalent popular narrative among some Pasis of Awadh is that they descend from the ancient mythological sage Parasurama.⁹ They claim a Kshatriya lineage on the basis of a popular mythological story constructed by Brahmanical legends.¹⁰ However, among the Pasis in different parts of the Awadh region, several stories are popular about how Parasurama created the Pasis.¹¹ One of the stories narrates that one day in a jungle a man was about to kill a number of cows.¹² On hearing the cries of the sacred animals, Parasurama rushed to save them, but the cow killer was aided by his associates. Parasurama therefore made five men out of kusha grass and brought them to life by letting drops of his sweat fall upon them, so that they could save the animals.¹³ That is how the term Pasi emerged, from the Hindi word for sweat, *pasina*.

Etymologically, there is no single opinion among scholars, and no unified story among community members, about the term Pasi. Another story goes that, at the request of five Pasis, Parasurama seized a Kayasth woman and handed her over to them. Their offspring came to be known as the Kaithwas Pasi.¹⁴

In William Crooke's ethnography in Pratapgarh, a claim to Kshatriya descent was narrated: "The ancestor of the tribe was one Rattan Daksha. When Parasurama destroyed the Kshatriyas, he killed Raja Vena as well as others and then the Rani kept the corpse of her husband and implored Parasurama to create a man to continue the race. Parasurama touched the head of Raja Vena, and out of it sprang a man of dark complexion emerged with a bow and arrow in his hand. He was the first RajPasi, and he was entrusted with the duty of watchman of the kingdom".¹⁵ In Pilibhit district, the story of origin from the Kshatriya Raja Vena is that, since the rishis were offended by his impiety, they killed him, but at the prayer of his Rani they formed a man out of his sweat (*pasina*), and

⁹ William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, vol. 4 (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1896); K. S. Singh, *The Scheduled Castes*, People of India, National Series, vol. 2 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993) [reference to be confirmed]; Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006) [reference to be confirmed].

¹⁰ Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

¹¹ Office of the Registrar General, India, *Census of India 1971, Series 1 – India, Monograph Series, Part V: Pasi (A Scheduled Caste in Uttar Pradesh)*, Ethnographic Study No. 1, draft by H. N. Singh, ed. H. L. Harit and N. O. Nag (New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs, 1972).

¹² Singh, *Scheduled Castes*, 1070.

¹³ Singh, *Scheduled Castes*, 1070.

¹⁴ Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*; Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*; Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

¹⁵ Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*; Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*.

he was the first Pasi.¹⁶

According to some narratives, the term Pasi is also derived from the Sanskrit word *pasika*, meaning “one who uses a noose”.¹⁷ A noose is an instrument used for climbing palm trees for toddy tapping. This version can be corroborated by the fact that, in some parts of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, a group within the Pasi caste is still engaged in the occupation of toddy tapping. One of the sub-groups of the Pasis is the ‘Tarmali’, a name that also appears to derive from the traditional occupation of toddy tapping. According to the census report of 1931, the ‘Tarmali’ appear to be an untouchable and depressed group very akin to the Pasis.¹⁸ In the field survey for the 1971 census, many Pasi informants also confirmed that Tarmali is synonymous with Pasi. This leaves little doubt that the term Tarmali is used for the Pasis, though it is not unlikely that it is used for those Pasis who are primarily associated with toddy tapping and who, in some areas, may form a distinct sub-caste.¹⁹

Etymologically, the term ‘Pasi’ is derived from two different traditions of origin: the first is associated with the caste occupation of toddy tapping, which uses a ‘passa’ or noose for climbing palm trees, and the second with a mythological and glorious association with the *pasina* (sweat) of Parasurama. However, ethnographic studies in the 1970s found that some groups of Pasis emphasised the latter version to justify their supposed Kshatriya origin, which they thought was helpful in their social climbing.²⁰ The ethnographic study for the 1971 census notes that interpretations of the etymological meaning of the caste name shift from mythological to historical events to justify a glorious and pristine past.²¹ The social elites of the Pasi Jagriti Manch, a caste organisation based in Lucknow, the capital of UP, interpreted the term Pasi to mean ‘a soldier’. According to them, the term ‘Pasi’ is composed of two words: ‘pa’, meaning ‘grip’, and ‘asi’, meaning ‘a sword’. A Pasi is thus one who holds a sword in his hand – in other words, ‘a soldier’. They claim to be the descendants of the martial class who served in the militias of local princes and of the country.²²

From a historical perspective, the narratives around the self-assumed identity of the Pasis as a former warrior or ruling class of the Awadh region are based largely on oral traditions rather than on

¹⁶ Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*; Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*.

¹⁷ Singh, *Scheduled Castes*; Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

¹⁸ Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*.

¹⁹ Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*.

²⁰ Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*; Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

²¹ Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*.

²² Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*.

historical facts. William Crooke's ethnography is considered one of the most reliable sources on the early history of the Pasis, along with other tribes and castes of the Awadh region. He documented the oral traditions prevalent among some groups of Pasis in the late nineteenth century and found that "in parts of Oudh they have a tradition which professes to explain their connection with other possibly allied tribes on the basis of a series of ridiculous folk etymologies. Thus, the RajPasis say that they are a branch of the Pasis and originally came from Gujrat. Tilok Chand, instead of being the eponymous hero of the Bais Rajputs, was according to them a Bhar king and called his family 'Rajbansi' or "those of royal lineage" and from this came the name RajPasi".²³

Different stories are prevalent across the Awadh region about how the various sub-castes of the Pasis originated. These stories are largely about warfare, and about how some groups of Pasis who left the battlefield were reduced to a lower status in society. For example, Crooke noted, from the oral narratives of the Pasis, that "after a time they fell out and some took to their beds (Khatya) and were called Khatiks, others took to the trees in a grove (Bagh) and were called Bachhal; while the remnant were called RajPasi or "royal" Pasis".²⁴ In Pratapgarh, the Pasis, Arakhs, Khatiks and Pachhars are all one. According to the oral narratives about these castes, the original Pasis fought a great battle against the Raja of Newar. Some of them were cowards and hid under a cot (*khatya*), and hence became known as Khatiks, and others hid behind an *arka* tree, whence they came to be known as Arakhs.²⁵

As several historical and ethnographic sources mention, the Pasis of the Awadh region have traditions claiming that they were the lords of the region and that their kings reigned at Sandila, Dhaurahra, Mitauli and Ramkot in the districts of Kheri, Hardoi and Unnao.²⁶ According to the narratives of caste members, "the last of the Pasi lords of Ramkot, Raja Santhar threw off his allegiance to Kanauj and refused to pay tributes. On this Raja Jaychand gave his Ganjar country to the Banaphal heroes, Alha and Udai and they attacked and destroyed Ramkot leaving it the shapeless mass of ruins which we find it now".²⁷ Russell surmised that the Pasis were a Dravidian tribe who held a part of Awadh before it was conquered by the Rajputs; the tribe may formerly have had some other name, or they may be an occupational offshoot of the Bhars.²⁸ Bingley (1899) mentioned

²³ Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*, 139.

²⁴ Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*, 139.

²⁵ Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*, 142.

²⁶ Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*; Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*; Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

²⁷ Crooke, *Tribes and Castes*.

²⁸ Russell, cited in Registrar General, *Census of India 1971: Pasi*.

that, before the annexation of Oudh in 1856, the region was ruled by Rajput lords who kept large gangs of Pasis to fight their battles.²⁹

Table 1. Sub-castes of the Pasis as Reported by Scholars (1891 Census and Other Ethnographic Accounts)

On the Basis of the 1891 Census	Crooke (Op. cit.) from Mirzapur	Sherring (Op. cit.) from Benaras (Varanasi) ³⁰	Russell (Op. cit.) from Madhya Pradesh ³¹	Risley (Vol. 2, 1891) from Bihar ³²
Raj Pasi	Bhar	Bhar	Raj Pasi	Kamani
Baurasi	Baurasi	Gujar	Gujar	Gaiduha
Kaithwas	Kaithwas	Kaithwan/Kainswat	Kaithwas	Byadh (hunter)
Mothi	Pahri (watchmen) (Crooke, 109)	Tirsuliya	Tirsuliya	Tirsuliya
Arakh	Pas Magnta	Pasiwan	Mangta	
		Chiriyamar	Chiriyamar	
		Biadeh or Byadh	Ghudchadha	
		Jaiswar	Baheliya	
		Bihari	Khatik	

Source: Office of the Registrar General, India, *Census of India 1971*, Series 1 – India, Monograph Series, Part V: *Pasi (A Scheduled Caste in Uttar Pradesh)*.

In an ethnographic study by Badri Narayan (2006), a section of educated and upwardly mobile Pasis claim several names from their caste as rulers of the Awadh region, including Bijlee Pasi, Satan Pasi, Lakhan Pasi, Chhetta Pasi and Maharaja Daldeo.³³ Moreover, mainstream (both regional and national) political parties are also [re]inventing the historical heroes of the Pasis and building narratives that suit their electoral calculations and ideological agendas. Uda Devi Pasi is one of the historical figures who has great importance in the present process of presenting the glorious and pristine past of the Pasis. In this case, however, the historical facts are too obscure to establish the original caste identity of Uda Devi. The story of a woman who killed thirty-six British soldiers was documented by British historian Forbes-Mitchell, but nowhere in this narrative is the woman's caste identity mentioned.³⁴ The narratives from the Pasi caste about Uda Devi recorded by R.K. Chaudhury (1997) describe how, in the 1857 struggle for freedom, Begum Hazrat Mahal organ-

²⁹ A. H. Bingley, *Handbook on Rajputs* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1899).

³⁰ Matthew Atmore Sherring, *Hindu Tribes and Castes, as Represented in Benares*, vol. 1 of *Hindu Tribes and Castes* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1872).

³¹ R. V. Russell, assisted by Rai Bahadur Hira Lal, *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1916).

³² Herbert Hope Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal: Ethnographic Glossary*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891).

³³ Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

³⁴ Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

ised an army of women after her husband was arrested by the British.³⁵ The commander of this army was Uda Devi. While fighting the British, her husband Makka Pasi was killed, and Uda Devi vowed to avenge his death. On 16 November 1857, in a battle in the inner circle of Sikanderbagh in Lucknow, Uda Devi killed thirty-six British soldiers and was then martyred.³⁶ Among the Pasis of North India in general, and of the Awadh region in particular, 16 November is commemorated as the martyrdom day of their historical icon Uda Devi.³⁷

From the available narratives of both kinds, mythical and historical, it appears that the Pasis have not been associated with one particular occupation; rather, different sub-groups of the Pasi caste have been engaged in different occupations. It is unsurprising that some of the sub-groups were local kings, lords and chieftains in parts of Uttar Pradesh and the Awadh region, and that they served as soldiers under various Rajput and Muslim kings. At the same time, it also appears that some groups were engaged in menial occupations, which were treated as impure in Indian caste society. Ramnarayan Rawat discusses how colonial sociology consolidated caste identity, whereas the local archives of the region tell a different story about caste-based occupation. He shows that, although the Chamar caste has popularly been confined to the occupation of leatherwork, the land revenue archives record four categories of occupation associated with Chamars in Uttar Pradesh: peasants with occupancy rights, peasants without occupancy rights, agricultural labourers and artisans.³⁸ As the *Gazetteer of the Province of Oudh* mentions, “Chamar and Pasis are, as a rule, only allowed to keep pigs within their dwellings when their houses are situated on the outskirts of the village, as indeed is generally the case”.³⁹

4. Anti-caste Principles and Practices

Indian society is fundamentally organised around hierarchy, and this hierarchy is rooted in religious-ideological principles.⁴⁰ The history of the anti-caste movement reveals the oppressive structure of caste, and the struggles against the hierarchical order sought to bring about radical change. Since caste has been an oppressive social system in India, Ambedkar’s solution lies in the annihilation of

³⁵ R. K. Chaudhury (1997) cited in Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

³⁶ Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

³⁷ Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

³⁸ Ramnarayan S. Rawat, *Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 57.

³⁹ *Gazetteer of the Province of Oudh*, vol. 3 (North-Western Provinces and Oudh Government Press, 1878), 16.

⁴⁰ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) [reference to be confirmed].

caste.⁴¹ The ideal objective of the anti-caste movement is the complete transformation of Indian society from a hierarchical, birth-based order into a democratic, egalitarian and dignity-based social order.⁴² Jyotirao Phule, an anti-caste pioneer, explains the caste system as a human-made tool of slavery and psychological subjugation, a deliberate manipulation of religious myths to maintain power over the Shudras and Ati-Shudras.⁴³ For Periyar, the caste system is not merely a social evil but a structurally engineered mechanism of oppression designed by Brahmins to enslave the Dravidians, Shudras and Dalits.⁴⁴

The ideas of Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar provide a radical, emancipatory framework for transforming the existing Brahmanical social order. The visions of these anti-caste stalwarts have become the ideological foundations of Dalit-Bahujan social and political organisations. However, the social vision of the annihilation of caste has received little attention in the social and political practice of these organisations, apart from the electoral mobilisation of different Dalit-Bahujan castes with the promise of participation in politics, government services and education. In practice, anti-caste politics has been reduced to the politics of participation, though it is still loaded with Phule's, Ambedkar's and Periyar's vocabulary of the annihilation of the Brahmanical social order.

There has been immense scholarly attention to identity politics, and many scholars view it in a positive light because of its democratising potential. It may, however, be noted that the specific dimensions of identity politics emerged not as its generic attribute but in the specific context of a particular identity.⁴⁵ Anti-caste assertions have a peculiar tendency to begin with the vocabulary of the annihilation of caste but subsequently to end up consolidating caste itself. The real social and cultural concerns of the anti-caste movement take a back seat, and short-term political and material benefits take precedence over the annihilation of caste. In practice, strategic gain glosses over moral concerns; consequently, caste becomes the medium of power politics, mobilising people along caste lines but failing to transform the caste structure in a way that would lead towards a casteless society – the real battle waged by Ambedkar and other anti-caste revolutionaries.

⁴¹ Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste".

⁴² Jotirao Phule, "Slavery (In the Civilised British Government under the Cloak of Brahmanism)", in *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya [Collected Works of Mahatma Phule]*, ed. Y. D. Phadke (5th ed. Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991), 111–80; E. V. Ramasamy (Periyar), *Caste and the Crisis of Dignity: Periyar E. V. Ramasamy Speaks at Caste Association Meetings and Caste Abolition Conferences*, ed. V. M. S. Subagunarajan, trans. R. V. Sankar, V. Rajahmani, and M. Vijaybaskar (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger Books, 2025); Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste".

⁴³ Phule, "Slavery".

⁴⁴ Ramasamy, *Caste and the Crisis of Dignity*.

⁴⁵ Teltumbde, "Identity Politics".

However, the lower-caste movement against caste-based discrimination and degradation has largely taken two different directions, at least procedurally if not substantively. One strand of the lower-caste movement is based on Ambedkarite ideology and invokes the anti-caste legacy and vocabulary, but strategically it follows the tactics of caste calculation and hence falls back into the caste structure. Another strand seeks upward mobility within the hierarchical structure of caste. Historically, in modern India, these mobilisations took the form of caste associations. The innate aspirations of castes to be ranked higher in the caste hierarchy manifested themselves in the construction of a self-image of high origin based on myths. Every caste, including the untouchable castes, had such myths, which showed its origins as emanating from Brahmins but as having fallen as a result of the intrigues of high-caste people. It thus externalised the blame for its current state. Even as these castes accused the Brahmins of being the cause of their degradation, they did not discard the ritual framework but rather sought to emulate the Brahmins' customs, rituals, ideology and way of life, a process that came to be known as Sanskritisation.⁴⁶

Louis Dumont, in his study, explores the non-hereditary process of caste climbing and shows how different non-Dwija castes have claimed Kshatriya status. Dumont mentioned in Jaiswal "that it was because of the emphasis on social function in the varna scheme, and not heredity, that the Rajputs and dynasties of different origins unconnected with the ancient Kshatriyas could claim kshatriya status, ignores the fact that the ascription of Kshatriya status to rulers of low or unknown origins was itself dependent upon their achieving putative hereditary links with the older Kshatriya dynasties through invented genealogies; and those who did not seek such validation continued as members of the lower varnas, such as King Harshvardhan of Kannauj and the Reddi kings of Andhra, who proudly proclaimed their Shudra status."⁴⁷

Claiming Kshatriya status – or, in other words, aspiring to upward mobility in the caste hierarchy – has been in vogue since colonial times. Examples include the Nadar and Vanniyar movements for Kshatriya status in Tamil Nadu, and the assertions of the Ahirs, Jats, Gurjars and Kurmis to be equated with Kshatriyas in North India.⁴⁸ Several castes, including Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalit groups, have started using the surname "Singh" in recent times, though it has conventionally been a Kshatriya title. In this context, Kumar Cheda Singh Varma (1904), in his

⁴⁶ Teltumbde, "Identity Politics".

⁴⁷ Suvira Jaiswal, *The Making of Brahmanic Hegemony: Studies in Caste, Gender and Vaishnava Theology* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2016), 16.

⁴⁸ Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996).

study *Kshatriyas and Would-Be Kshatriyas*, shows that the claims of many of these communities, such as the Khatri, Kayasthas, Jats and Kurmis, to “twice-born” status are historically questionable and often based on recent social aspirations rather than legitimate ancestry.⁴⁹ Furthermore, such self-claims of higher origin do not guarantee admission to the Kshatriya category. The Rajputs, who consider themselves the only true representatives of the ancient Kshatriyas, refuse to admit these “would-be” groups into their social and marriage circles.⁵⁰

Thus, although Shudra kings may have assumed Kshatriya status through mythological claims, they were not incorporated sociologically into the so-called original Kshatriya fold. While claiming a superior position in the caste hierarchy, a group can subordinate the caste immediately below it in the hierarchy, but cannot become equal to the original groups of the caste it claims. Most of these assertions aimed to attain material benefits, perceived dignity and power in the caste-ridden structure of Indian society.

5. Dalit Identity and the Question of Sub-caste

The term “Dalit”, however, was not a familiar word before the BSP popularised it after its formation in UP. A better-understood term for these caste groups was ‘Harijan’, or simply ‘Scheduled Castes’, in view of their categorisation in the Indian Constitution for the purposes of protective discrimination.⁵¹ The shift from Harijan to Dalit was not without purpose. Gandhi’s and Ambedkar’s understandings of the caste hierarchy and its solutions were also reflected in the fierce debate between the later Gandhian and Ambedkarite camps. The debate continued in the media and academic circles until 1990, when Kanshi Ram and Mayawati took exception to the use of the term for those whom the BSP now called Dalits.⁵² The collective identity of Dalit is subscribed to and cultivated by the social and political assertions of Dalits claiming both moral and political equality, in place of the ascribed identity structured by the caste hierarchy and romanticised as Harijan by Gandhi and later Gandhians.

The role of caste in Indian politics has been analysed positively by many scholars. Rajni Kothari

⁴⁹ Kumar Cheda Singh Varma, *Kshatriyas and Would-Be Kshatriyas: A Consideration of the Claims of Certain Hindu Castes to Rank with the Rājputs, the Descendants of the Ancient Kshatriyas* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1904).

⁵⁰ Varma, *Kshatriyas and Would-Be Kshatriyas*.

⁵¹ Pradeep Kumar. “Dalits and the BSP in Uttar Pradesh: Issues and Challenges.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 14 (1999): 822–826

⁵² Kumar, Dalit and BSP in Uttar Pradesh.

(1970) emphasises that Indian democracy has secularised caste.⁵³ For him, the primordial functions of caste, such as ritual purity, occupation and marriage, have changed, and in the democratic politics of India caste now serves to secure political power, economic opportunities, education, public employment and representation.⁵⁴ However, this positive depiction of the caste system in modern India is contested by many scholars, most importantly André Beteille (1991) and anti-caste scholars inspired by Ambedkar.⁵⁵ They contend that Kothari explains only the political aspect of caste and pays little attention to caste as a system of structural oppression that must be dismantled.

In fact, caste persists as an oppressive structure, but the rise of the lower castes and Dalits has democratised the political landscape. The Indian National Congress maintained the dominance of the upper castes (Brahmins, Rajputs, Baniyas and dominant landed elites) and co-opted the Scheduled Castes without fundamentally redistributing political power. After 1980, the rise of lower-caste political parties in North India, including the Janata Dal, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party, transformed the conventional structure of power. These parties turned the lower castes from passive vote banks into active political actors, and this transformation of power through democratic means has been described as a silent revolution.⁵⁶

Narayan (2011) adopts an anthropological approach to understanding Dalit politics. He sums up the rise of Dalits as the outcome of a grassroots process of collective memories, oral traditions, cultural practices and everyday political communication through which Dalits become conscious political actors and reshape democratic politics from below.⁵⁷ The struggle of the lower-caste groups (ex-untouchables) is not merely a history of oppression but also one of organised resistance, self-respect, political assertion and the creation of a new collective identity as Dalit.⁵⁸ Furthermore, Zelliot explains the shift from the imposed identity of untouchable to the self-chosen identity of Dalit. The term Dalit rejects the notion of untouchability as an inherent characteristic and locates its cause in the caste system. It therefore symbolises dignity, resistance and political consciousness.⁵⁹

Historical marginalisation, untouchability and exclusion have been common structural realities for

⁵³ Rajni Kothari, ed., *Caste in Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1970).

⁵⁴ Kothari, *Caste in Indian Politics*.

⁵⁵ André Beteille, *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective* (London: Athlone Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

⁵⁷ Badri Narayan, *The Making of the Dalit Public in North India: Uttar Pradesh, 1950–Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁵⁸ Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996).

⁵⁹ Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*.

Dalit caste groups that shape their political behaviour and their social and economic aspirations. Dalit is not a singular identity but a conglomeration of hundreds of castes, which follow the same caste principles as the upper castes – endogamy, social restrictions on intermingling and other codes of caste.

However, the politics of social engineering succeeded, to a certain extent, in bringing these different Dalit castes under the umbrella of the BSP's politics of social justice and dignity. Since identities are social constructions, they are subject to change in different socio-economic and political contexts. Socially, Dalits are divided into different castes and sub-caste groups, and their primary identity – Pasi, Chamar, Dhobi, Dhanuk and so on – remains supreme for self-identification. Sub-caste division among Dalits is widespread across the country: in some regions, one major caste has been seen as the primary beneficiary, while others have lagged behind in the Dalit movement and in politics. The Mala–Madiga and Mang–Mahar divisions among the Dalit castes are prevalent in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Maharashtra.

Yagati Chinna Rao contends that the relatively better-off Scheduled Castes have acquired a disproportionate share of reservation benefits in education and government employment, while smaller and relatively weaker sub-caste groups among the SCs have remained under-represented despite decades of reservation.⁶⁰ Analysing the sub-caste movement, Chalam (2009) argues that Dalit politics has shifted from a unified Dalit identity to sub-caste-based mobilisation.⁶¹ This shift has resulted in competition over scarce resources – reservation and political representation. On the one hand, supporters of sub-caste classification argue that it will expand distributive justice by ensuring reservation for the least advantaged castes among the SCs. On the other hand, opponents of classification caution that internal quotas among the SCs may dismantle Dalit solidarity and weaken the larger struggle against caste discrimination.⁶² Contemporary Dalit politics is increasingly characterised by competition among the sub-caste groups of the SCs, rather than solely by the broader struggle against upper-caste domination.

Although there is no very vibrant or visible sub-caste movement in UP, most disadvantaged caste groups have raised their apprehensions about the unequal benefits of reservation policies on several

⁶⁰ Yagati Chinna Rao, ed., *Dividing Dalits: Writings on Sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes* (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2009).

⁶¹ K. S. Chalam, "The Fragmented Assertion: Emergence of Intra-caste Differentiation among Dalits in India", in *Dividing Dalits: Writings on Sub-categorisation of Scheduled Castes*, ed. Yagati Chinna Rao (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2009), 143–65.

⁶² Rao, *Dividing Dalits*.

occasions. Castes such as the Musahar, Nat, Kanjar and Bansphor have been demanding inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category. These demands were made at several protest meetings and conferences, particularly in 2012 and 2013.⁶³ Leaders of these castes pointed out that some large and influential castes within the SC category have usurped all the benefits meant for the entire section.⁶⁴ Along with these castes, the Valmikis have also been demanding the sub-categorisation of the SC/ST quota in Uttar Pradesh. On 28 November 2025, the Valmiki Adi Arakshan Vanchit Varg Sangharsh Samiti organised a symbolic dharna at Commissionerate Park in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, to demand the implementation of the Supreme Court's sub-classification order of 1 August 2024. The sub-caste issue has been emboldened by the BJP's political strategy, since 2001, of attracting non-Jatav and non-Yadav Dalit and OBC groups, who have been the conventional social base of the BSP and the SP.⁶⁵ In 2018, the BJP-led UP government constituted a Social Justice Committee under the retired judge Justice Raghvendra Kumar. It recommended dividing the SCs into three groups: Dalits (four sub-castes – Chamar, Pasi, Kori and Dhobi), an Ati-Dalit group of 31 castes, and a Mahadalit group of 46 castes.⁶⁶ Following the central government's decision in 2025 to include caste enumeration in the upcoming census, the BJP's allies in UP – Omprakash Rajbhar, Dr Sanjay Nishad and Anupriya Patel – are pushing demands for sub-quotas within the OBC and SC categories.⁶⁷ Compared with other non-Jatav castes, the Pasis are numerically larger, economically better off and politically influential, especially in the Awadh region, and have benefited relatively from the reservation policies of the centre and the state. In the sub-categorisation proposed by the BJP-led government, they have been placed in the first category, Dalits, which may harm their larger interests in the allocation of affirmative action; still, a large section of Pasi groups supported the BJP in the 2022 assembly elections.

The BSP aimed to mobilise historically marginalised, socio-economically excluded and politically weak caste groups into a larger social coalition, termed Dalit-Bahujan, to capture state power and ensure social justice. However, although the BSP's politics of social engineering succeeded to a

⁶³ Badri Narayan, "The Politics of Reservation Categories in Uttar Pradesh", *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 5 (2014): 18–20.

⁶⁴ Narayan, "Politics of Reservation Categories".

⁶⁵ Swati Chaturvedi, David N. Gellner, and Sanjay Pandey, "Mandir vs Mandal in 2024: Are There Limits to the BJP's Social Engineering?", *Contemporary South Asia* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2026.2619074>, 15–16.

⁶⁶ Namita Bajpai, "Centre's Caste Census Move May Alter UP's Political Dynamics", *New Indian Express*, 2 May 2025, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/india/2025/May/02/centres-caste-census-move-may-alter-ups-political-dynamics>.

⁶⁷ Bajpai, "Centre's Caste Census Move".

certain extent, it failed to expand its ideological base among the backward and Dalit castes other than the Jatavs/Chamars, who constitute more than 50 per cent of the total Dalit population of Uttar Pradesh. Ideologically, the Pasis have been indifferent to the Chamars/Jatavs of UP. In their political behaviour, the Pasis have been more tactical, shifting their support from the SP to the BSP and, since 2017, to the BJP. The political landscape of UP, the ideological pursuits of different political parties and the vested interests of the caste elites within the Pasi caste shape and reshape the identity of the Pasis – sometimes as marginalised Dalits claiming greater participation, dignity and redistribution and fighting against the unjust Brahmanical social hierarchy, and sometimes as proud Shiva *bhakts* (devotees), a Hindu martial class and the historical rulers of the Awadh region. The next section of this paper discusses in detail how symbols, myths and historical narratives are invoked and interpreted in electoral politics to [re]construct the identity of the Pasis.

6. Electoral Politics and the [Re]shaping of Pasi Identity

History, myths, symbols, heroes and collective memories are not merely simple associations between an individual and a group, but also active political forces that [re]shape present social and political realities. Much depends on how, and for what purpose, these factors are used. Inventing and reinventing the history of Dalits and their icons has been instrumental in Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh. It was mostly after the arrival of the BSP at the national level that the heroes and icons of the Dalit-Bahujans received a respectable space in mainstream political events. The BSP presented Dalit-Bahujan and Adivasi icons as proud symbols of ruling royalty, such as Ashoka, Shivaji, Suheldev and Shahuji Maharaj; intellectuals such as Kabir, Phule and Ambedkar; and radical social reformers such as Saint Ravidas, Narayana Guru and Periyar Ramasamy.⁶⁸ These invocations of history and icons were intended to instil political confidence and a sense of pride among Dalits and other suppressed caste groups, and to reject the portrayal of Dalits by the upper castes and Hindu scriptures as inferior and dependent on the mercy of the upper castes. These icons fought against the unjust Brahmanical system to secure justice for suppressed groups.

The sense of historical marginalisation among the Pasis in particular, and Dalits in general, became sharper during the rise of the BSP, when history emerged as an important constituent of their identity formation. Mayawati wrote in 1997: “Among the Pasi rulers the name of Maharaja Bijli Pasi, Maharaja Chheta Pasi and Maharaja Daldeo deserve to be mentioned in golden letters. But un-

⁶⁸ Harish S. Wankhede, “The Cultural Politics of Dalit Icons: Mapping the Bahujan Assertion”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 60, no. 7 (2025): 37–38, 37–38.

fortunately, history of these chivalrous and majestic kings has received only negligible treatment in a few books”.⁶⁹ Caste-based icons were systematically invoked by the BSP to mobilise different Dalit-Bahujan caste groups into its ideological fold, in order to secure a *bahumat* (majority) for the Bahujans in the political battle of Uttar Pradesh and in national politics as well. The politics of social engineering helped the BSP come to power in Uttar Pradesh four times. The Pasis, who associated themselves with the BSP as part of a larger group of Dalit castes, remained among its strong supporters until 2014.

After the decline of the Congress in 1989, the dominant political parties in Uttar Pradesh remained the SP and the BSP until the rise of the BJP in 2017. The Congress party often took Dalits, including the Pasis, for granted; they never gained real power within it, as it was dominated mostly by upper and landed caste groups. After 1989, their support shifted largely to the BSP, with some portion going to the SP and the BJP. The BSP’s politics of social engineering and its appeal for social justice brought different Dalits and OBCs, including Pasi caste groups, under the larger umbrella of the Bahujans. After 1989, the largest share of the Pasi vote remained with the BSP until 2012, when the BSP lost to the SP. From 2017, there was a sharp decline in Pasi support for the BSP and an unprecedented rise of the BJP among the Pasis. After a long gap, the BJP returned to power in Uttar Pradesh in 2017, at a time when the BJP was rising across India. The elections of 2019 and 2022 show that the BJP’s support base had overtaken those of the SP and the BSP.

Conventionally, the BJP has been confined to the upper castes and upper classes; its expansion among the Dalit-Bahujans has been described as subaltern Hindutva.⁷⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot (2009) has conceptualised this political strategy as the politics of social engineering.⁷¹ This politics of social engineering is credited with the successful mobilisation of non-Yadav OBCs, non-Jatav SCs, scattered Most Backward Classes (MBCs) and their respective caste parties, through alliances with them in the 2017 UP assembly election.⁷² Narayan describes the cultural mechanism of Hindutva and how the Sangh Parivar has incorporated marginal caste groups into its fold. Hindutva organisations (particularly the BJP, the RSS and the VHP) have expanded their support among Dalit

⁶⁹ Mayawati (1997), cited in Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion*.

⁷⁰ Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar, *Maya, Modi, Azad: Dalit Politics in the Time of Hindutva* (Gurugram: HarperCollins India, 2023); Badri Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (New Delhi: Sage, 2009).

⁷¹ Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Hindu Nationalist Reinterpretation of Pilgrimage in India: The Limits of Yatra Politics”, *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2009): 1–19.

⁷² “Assembly Elections 2017: How BJP Won and the SP, BSP Lost the Dalit Vote in UP”, *Hindustan Times*, 12 March 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/assembly-elections-2017-how-bjp-won-and-the-s-p-bjp-lost-the-dalit-vote-in-up/story-rPZmjerzoe5figRRuKUdTP.html>.

communities by appropriating local Dalit myths, heroes, legends and historical memories and reinterpreting them within a broader Hindu nationalist narrative, thereby integrating Dalits into the political project of Hindutva.⁷³

Furthermore, analysing the role of caste histories and myths in UP politics, he explains that “political parties often mobilise Dalits through micro-level, identity-based social and political engineering. Many of these icons of marginalised communities exist in the wider memory of the Dalits, through folklore and folk songs. Some of them acquired political prominence through the Bahujan socio-political movement of the late 1980s. Kanshi Ram, the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and leader of the Bahujan movement, explored, collected, and reconstructed these memories within the Bahujan political discourse in order to frame a broader Bahujan identity. Around the same period, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was also engaging with these memories and icons at the grassroots level through various social campaigns”.⁷⁴

The rising historical and political consciousness among the Pasis has led to their assertion of pride and their aspiration for power. Myths, heroes, legends and caste history have become cultural capital, which has instilled self-respect and served as a source of mobilisation and a medium of bargaining for power..

After the rise of Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh in 1989, the number of Pasi MLAs increased from a single digit (8 in 1980) to 26 in 2007, the peak of the BSP in UP electoral politics, to 28 in 2017, during the rise of the BJP in UP politics, and to 27 in 2022⁷⁵. In the case of the Lok Sabha, the Awadh region comprises 12 seats, of which four – Mohanlalganj, Barabanki, Hardoi and Misrikh – are reserved for SC candidates. In the 2019 general election, the BJP won 11 seats and the Congress one, Raebareli, from which Sonia Gandhi was elected; it is conventionally considered a bastion of the Congress. In all four reserved seats, the winning candidates were from the Pasi caste and belonged to the BJP. In 2024, however, a large section of the Pasis shifted towards the INDIA alliance. Political analysts and scholars attributed this shift to the overconfidence of the BJP and to controversial statements by some local leaders about amending the Constitution and revising the provisions for social justice, which threatened the interests of the lower castes. The BJP won only

⁷³ Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva*.

⁷⁴ Badri Narayan, “In UP, the Invocation of Dalit Icons before Polls”, *Hindustan Times*, 25 May 2026, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/in-up-the-invocation-of-dalit-icons-before-polls-101779722276322.html>.

⁷⁵ These figures are estimated from the list of MLAs titled “UP MLAs Biographies”, extracted from https://uplegisaassembly.gov.in/Members/main_members_en.aspx#/showAssembly/1. The caste of some MLAs is mentioned directly; for others, caste has been identified through several other sources, including discussions with respondents.

4 seats, and the INDIA alliance defeated it in 8 of the 12. The most interesting political dynamic of this election was the Faizabad seat, an unreserved seat, where Awadhesh Prasad, a Pasi candidate, defeated the incumbent BJP MP Lallu Singh. For the BJP, Faizabad (Ayodhya) has great symbolic and ideological importance. The Ram Mandir at the site of the Babri Masjid has been one of its core political agendas and a source of the mobilisation of Hindus and the polarisation of the majority. From the Rath Yatra and the Mandir movement of 1989 to the building of the Ram temple, the BJP has been successful in polarising the majority. This defeat has been seen by the opposition, as well as by some scholars and critics, as a sign of the BJP's decline.

It is evident that the Pasis have not been the core support base of any single political party, as the Chamars/Jatavs are of the BSP, the upper castes of the BJP, and the Yadavs and Muslims of the SP. They have shifted their support according to their political and material interests. In the 2024 general election, of the four reserved seats, the BJP won two, Hardoi and Mirzapur, both with Pasi MPs, and the INDIA alliance won two: Mohanlalpur (R. K. Chaudhary, considered to be the Pasi leader in the region) and Barabanki (Tanuj Punia, from the Chamar caste). These figures indicate that the Pasi caste is not confined to the core support base of any single party.

7. Analysis of Testimonies from the Ground

This section systematically analyses the field survey, comprising interviews and focus group discussions, which largely covered activists, intellectuals and students from the Pasi caste. It also analyses online interviews, statements and discussions by these stakeholders in the media and on social media regarding the identity and the socio-economic and political concerns of the Pasi caste group.

The politicisation of the myth and history of the Pasi caste is not capitalised on uniformly by any single party or any single Pasi leader. The narratives and counter-narratives of myths, history and icons associated with the Pasi caste are largely a political battlefield between the BJP on the one hand and the BSP and SP on the other, but Pasi leaders in each party and their testimonies also play a significant role in mobilising the Pasi support base.

Suraj Pasi is the head of the Lakhan Army, a caste association that largely addresses the political and economic rights of the Pasis and the preservation and rejuvenation of the historical sites of Pasi kings and heroes in the Awadh region. The Lakhan Army is an independent Pasi organisation, and its chief is not officially associated with the BJP or with the local BJP Pasi leader and former MP Kaushal Kishore. However, his political interactions, ideological alignment and demands intersect

heavily with those of both Kaushal Kishore and the BJP. This is corroborated by the Lakhan Army's recent memorandum to R. K. Chaudhary, the SP MP for Mohanlalganj, in which he claims that a mosque located in Kasmandi Kalan, a village near Malihabad town in Lucknow, was the fort of Maharaja Kansa Pasi and a temple of Mahadev. He insisted that MP Chaudhury must accept that there is a fort of Kansa Pasi, and alleged that Chaudhury could not do so⁷⁶. The political and social stance of Suraj Pasi contrasts with that of the leaders and parties that build larger solidarity among the Dalit-Bahujans and minorities, especially the SP and the BSP. He invokes a Sanatani identity for the Pasis and claims that he is a worshipper of Shiva and a proud Sanatani. Moreover, he aggressively puts forward his anti-Ambedkarite views and his political stand against the SP and the BSP in his interviews, statements and appearances in the media, podcasts and social media. For example, he criticises Ambedkarite slogans, anti-caste symbols and the icons of other castes. In one of his interviews, he criticised the slogan Jai Bhim and also accepted the arguments of anti-Ambedkar groups who refuse to recognise Ambedkar as the architect of the Indian Constitution.

The Lakhan Army and its chief have aggressively used press conferences, social media and local rallies to distance the community publicly from the term Dalit.⁷⁷ Apart from Suraj Pasi, many other small organisations and individuals from the Pasi caste have put forward demands to the authorities and appealed to their community that the Pasi caste must not be referred to as Dalit. In this context, a Kaushambi-based Pasi organisation, the Pasi (Rajpasi) Itihas Jagrukta Organisation, led by the local leaders Lakhan Singh Rajpasi and Rajesh Rajpasi, organised a march on 20 June 2026 to the district magistrate's office to submit a memorandum to the President and the Governor of the state demanding that the "Pasi community must not be called Dalit". Several contrasting narratives of Pasi identity circulate across different social media platforms in UP in general, and in the Awadh region in particular. Some claim a Brahmin or Kshatriya lineage based on myths and oral history, while others claim a distinct identity for the Pasis as a royal class and insist that the Pasis must be called neither Dalits nor Kshatriyas⁷⁸.

My interviews with educated youths and intellectuals of the community reveal the ground reality

⁷⁶ News18 Hindi. "[What Is Lakhan Army? Warning, Kasmandi Fort March, Suraj Pasi, and Arrest of Maulana]." News18 Hindi. Accessed October 10, 2026. URL: <https://hindi.news18.com/news/uttar-pradesh/lucknow-what-is-lakhan-army-warning-kasmandi-fort-march-suraj-pasi-arrest-of-maulana-conversion-local18-10709380.html>

⁷⁷ Rashid, Omar. "The Politics of Pasi Dalit Assertion in UP Reaches Parliament." The Quint, June 27, 2024. <https://www.thequint.com/opinion/awadhesh-prasad-the-politics-of-pasi-dalit-assertion-in-up-reaches-parliament>

⁷⁸ पसि न डालित | पसि भूतपति | पसि भूतपति | पसि भूतपति | पसि भूतपति | पसि भूतपति | Pasi not Dalits | The Pasi Landlords | Facebook

of Pasi identity and political orientation. One of the respondents is pursuing a PhD at Lucknow University and also leads an Ambedkarite organisation committed to the anti-caste movement and its discourse. His views on caste history, myths, heroes and icons are completely different from those of Suraj Pasi and others: “Non-recognition of our icons in the history and historical books is systematic Brahmanical strategy to reduce us mere an inferior caste serving to the upper caste. Our history is important to build confidence and pride among the community members but we also need to be careful how upper caste political parties are misleading our community by playing with our history and icons.”

Another respondent, who holds a PhD from JNU and has done postdoctoral work in the USA, asserts that the BJP has recently appropriated Pasi icons culturally and has been able to mobilise a large number of Pasis in its support. The BJP has communalised Pasi history by portraying Pasi kings and warriors as defenders of Sanatan who fought against the Muslim invasions. The folk story of the defeat of Sayyid Salar Masud Ghazi by the Pasi or Bhar king Suheldev has been used strategically by the BJP to set the Pasis against the Muslims and to assimilate them into the Hindutva fold. This respondent has been associated with the Ambedkarite movement, and his views on Pasi identity are similar to those of the BSP and other organisations of social justice. He asserted that the BJP’s politics of social engineering is diverting attention from the real concerns of the Pasis: education, employment and effective representation.

The major Dalit caste of UP, the Chamars, is inclined towards anti-caste revolutionaries and their ideology, and there is cultural and social assertion among them. One of the respondents, Ashok Kumar, a BTech graduate from UP, said that “our (Pasi) caste is more religious, takes pride being a Hindu and associates with Brahmanical myths such as Parasurama, they are more concerned about myths and religious dogma but neglecting the present social, economic and educational conditions, while Chamar/Jatav are more concerned about their economic and educational upliftment”. Ashok Kumar shared his experience that, a few years earlier, a dominant-caste co-villager visited his home and, on seeing Ambedkar’s picture on the wall of the guest room, said, “ye chamaron jaisa kam kyon kar rahe ho (why you are behaving like chamars)”. Owing to the relatively high degree of Sanskritisation among the Pasis, they consider the Chamar caste inferior to them. Ashok believes that the term Dalit is negative, even though it has political and social significance. Instead of ‘Dalit’, he considered the terms ‘Scheduled Caste’ and ‘Bahujan’ more dignified and assertive for the collective identity of lower-caste groups.

One of the respondents, an assistant professor of social sciences at one of the universities of Lucknow⁷⁹, belongs to Lakhimpur Kheri. On the political and social orientation of the Pasi caste, he stated that “however, Pasi’s are not socially and culturally assertive as Chamars, but politically they are also quite aware about their interests, they have not been permanent supporters of only BSP but whichever party after 2012 have come in power they have tried to bargain with them. Moreover, on some fundamental issues Pasi caste is quite clear, take example of Samvidhan Bachao campaign. Threat to the constitution has been seen by Pasi as threat to provisions of social justice and therefore, a large number of Pasi voted for INDIA alliance in 2024 election”. Furthermore, he said, “however BJP has been successful to appropriate our Pasi icons and mobilised a large number of voters in 2014 and 2019 general elections and 2017 and 2022 UP Assembly elections”.

Differences among the Pasis over the term Dalit depend on political affiliation and ideological orientation. Of the forty respondents, twenty-three held similar opinions about their historical past and Dalit identity. These respondents were ideologically inclined towards the Dalit-Bahujan political discourse and Ambedkar’s ideas of social justice. They nevertheless believed that they had a pristine and glorious past as rulers of the Awadh region. They placed much emphasis on how Rajput kings had destroyed some of the Pasi kingdoms; for example, Alha and Udal destroyed the Unnao kingdom. Such conflicts have been depicted as a historical battle against upper-caste oppression and domination. These respondents did not associate their identity with any Hindu mythical revelation, such as the Parasurama theory. Moreover, these 23 respondents were very comfortable with, and assertive about, the term Dalit for the collective identity of the ex-untouchables and Scheduled Castes. Electorally, their orientation was mixed. They had been supporters, sympathisers and voters of the BSP, but the decline of the BSP shifted their support to the SP after 2017. Ramnarayan Rawat, a local BSP cadre from Karjhan village in Lucknow, said of the 2024 general election, “this time we supported SP, even though I am kader of BSP. It is because until BJP will not lose power in the center, Bahnji (Mayawati) would not come in front and contest elections with her full potential”. Another respondent, an advocate from Kathingara village, responded that “it does not matter either BSP wins or SP, BJP must not be in power anymore”. The CSDS post-poll analysis shows that 56 per cent of non-Jatavs and 25 per cent of Jatavs voted for the INDIA alliance.⁸⁰ In

⁷⁹ The identity of the respondent has been anonymised.

⁸⁰ Lokniti-CSDS, *National Election Study 2024: Post-poll Survey* [full reference to be supplied]; “Thakurs and Other Upper Castes Remain Loyal to BJP in UP in LS Polls: Survey”, *Times of India*, 16 June 2024, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/thakurs-and-other-upper-castes-remain-loyal-to-bjp-in-up-in-ls-polls-survey/articleshow/111029904.cms>.

Awadh, as mentioned above, the Pasis played a significant role in this shift, and the victory of the SP's Awadhesh Prasad from Faizabad (Ayodhya), an unreserved seat, sent a symbolic message that the Pasis are not with the BJP.

Of the forty respondents, seventeen held different opinions about their identity. They claim a mythical origin from Parasurama and say that they are proud Hindus, and that the identity of the Pasis is different from that of the rest of the Dalits or Scheduled Castes. They claim that they have a Kshatriya lineage and have been rulers of the Awadh region. Bhaliya village in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, is numerically dominated by Pasis, and they have an old Shiva temple in their locality. Apart from the Shiva temple, they have a temple to a local deity, Karedev Baba, outside the village. A respondent from the community who is a law graduate expressed that "Mahadev and Karedev Baba belongs to Pasi community." His family has been associated with the RSS and has traditionally voted for the BJP. Furthermore, he stated that "we are proud Hindu and many deities belongs to our caste, the term Dalit is imposed on us by politics and its degrading. We are proud Pasi, not Dalit".

The responses of these respondents on the role of Ambedkar and the Dalit-Bahujan movement in the upliftment of the Scheduled Castes varied. Fourteen of them believed that Ambedkar and the Dalit-Bahujan movement had helped them to achieve constitutional rights such as reservation. However, they did not endorse the radical discourse of the annihilation of caste or the anti-Brahmanical discourse of the Ambedkarite movement. One of the respondents from Misrikh said that "we believe that Ambedkar and Dalit Bahujan movement have contributed for the upliftment of the lower caste, but the dominance of Chamars have sidelined the contribution of Pasi and their icons. The term Dalit is not suitable for the Pasis because we have been rulers of the region and it was Muslim invasions which have destroyed our glory in the past." Another respondent, from the Hardoi district of Uttar Pradesh, stated that "BJP has given proper representation to Pasis and also respect and recognition to our Pasi historical icons. Other political parties have just used our votes for their own benefit".

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that Pasi identity is subject to competing political and social narratives of caste history, myths, and heroes or icons. In this context, the testimonies and narratives of caste elites play a very significant role in [re]constructing the identity of the Pasis. These com-

peting projects provide an important empirical basis for examining the broader transformation of Dalit politics, the politics of historical memory and the changing relationship between caste organisations and electoral parties in Uttar Pradesh. In Uttar Pradesh, most of the dominant political parties have a conventional caste base, in which one or more castes and communities have become the core vote bank, such as the Yadavs and Muslims for the SP, the Jatavs for the BSP and the upper castes for the BJP; the political behaviour of the Pasis, however, has been very strategic and has not been confined to any single party. There is therefore no ideological homogeneity among the Pasis. Their political orientation can be described in terms of changing party strength, political representation, constitutional concerns, social justice, recognition of historical icons, religious identity and community interests.

The importance of day-to-day political mobilisation therefore lies in the interactions between caste identity, historical memory, religious identity and electoral politics. Struggles over political representation and future Pasi mobilisation [re]construct the Pasis' competing identities: for some, as proud Sanatanis, and for others, as Dalits who are struggling for equality, dignity and redistribution and who follow the emancipatory project of Ambedkarite ideology.

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