iJRASET
International Journal For Research in Applied Science and Engineering Technology



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RESEARCH

IN APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING TECHNOLOGY

Volume: 13 **Issue:** V **Month of publication:** May 2025

DOI: https://doi.org/10.22214/ijraset.2025.71455

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International Journal for Research in Applied Science & Engineering Technology (IJRASET)
ISSN: 2321-9653; IC Value: 45.98; SJ Impact Factor: 7.538
Volume 13 Issue V May 2025- Available at www.ijraset.com

Chandraskhekhar Azad Ravan's "BHIM Army": A Contemporary Dalit Movement in Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract: ***In India, there have been various post-Ambedkarite movements for Dalit emancipation. The assertion of the Bahujan Samaj Party has ushered in a new era of democratisation in Uttar Pradesh. Nonetheless, caste prejudice exists in India. For millions of people, caste atrocities are a daily occurrence. Dalits continue to be underrepresented in positions of public trust. New Dalit movements, on the other hand, have emerged that are conscious, assertive, self-critical, connected, and inclusive. Dalits have become more organised and connected in recent years and see themselves as part of an assertive social justice movement. They sympathise with Dalit parties but also criticise their shortcomings. They are also concerned that caste is being reinforced rather than eradicated, also the major concern of their hero, B.R. Ambedkar. This paper examines the "Bhim Army's" recent Dalit movement in Uttar Pradesh and its efforts to create a new Dalit narrative in the socio-political fabric of India.***

Keywords: Dalit, Bhim Army, social movement, caste.

I. INTRODUCTION

An assertive and politically aware Dalit consciousness has emerged among a subset of Dalit groups as a result of Ambedkarite ideology and the Dalit-Bahujan movements. Meanwhile, Hindutva leaders' interventions among Dalits mobilised a section of the most marginalised Dalits under the Hindutva banner. North India's Dalit movement is facing a leadership crisis. Dalit assertions in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, and Rajasthan are mostly focused on the electoral politics of Dalit-Bahujan political groups and parties.

During the 1990s Bahujan movement, the idea was that the movement and the party could help each other. Nonetheless, the BSP, which arose from the Bahujan social movement, grew gradually into a pyramid-shaped party. Its reciprocal relationship with the Dalit movement has ceased under Ms Mayawati's leadership. This has resulted in a deterioration of the broader social base and, as a result, weakened the Dalit movement. The Dalit movement is constantly confronted with new challenges, but its leaders are unable to adapt their strategies and political grammar to meet them. The BSP's failure to articulate Dalit grievances has given rise to the Bhim Army, an aggressive Dalit movement in western Uttar Pradesh.

The Bhim Army, also known as the Bheem Army Bharat Ekta Mission (meaning "Ambedkar Army Indian Unity Mission"), is a Dalit-Ambedkarite rights organisation founded in 2015 by Satish Kumar, Vijay Ratan Singh, and Chandrashekhar Azad. Its origins can be traced back to the Saharanpur district of Western Uttar Pradesh. Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar inspired the organization's name.

An Ambedkarite lawyer turned activist, Chandrashekhar Azad Ravan is the Bhim Army's co-founder and national president. The Bhim Army met for the first time on July 21, 2015, when lawyer Chandrashekhar Azad and Vinay Ratan Singh decided to start free schools for Dalit children. In western Uttar Pradesh, the organisation currently operates more than 350 free schools for Dalits and Bahujans in Saharanpur, Meerut, Shamli, and Muzaffarnagar. Chandrashekhar Azad and his friend Vinay founded the first such school in July 2015, shortly after they graduated from college. It began with small financial contributions from Dalits and grew to become the largest initiative in western Uttar Pradesh as community members from more than 200 villages in Saharanpur stepped forward to offer assistance. The rapid growth of the Bhim Army and the appeal of its aggressive stance among the region's Dalit youth marks the emergence of a new style of Ambedkarite politics.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In India, caste relations are defined by atrocity. The brutality through atrocities is intentional and calculated in order to differentiate caste atrocities from other types of violence. The Bhim Army was founded in response to discrimination and caste-based violence faced by Dalit students at AHP Inter-college in Uttar Pradesh, where students from the Rajput caste would force Dalit students to clean classrooms. Dalit students were not permitted to drink water until the Rajput students had.

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The Rajput students even broke a Dalit student's hand who dared to drink water in front of them. The Bhim Army backed up the bullied Dalit students, putting an end to the violence against Dalit students. The Bhim Army was called on several times whenever Dalits faced violence at the hands of upper castes.

In one instance, a Dalit person in village Gharkoli erected a signboard on his private property which read “The Great Chamar.” The upper-caste Thakurs were upset with this celebration of Dalit identity and objected to the erection of the board. Finally, the signboard was defaced, the village statue of Dr Ambedkar was found smeared with black paint. This resulted in a Dalits and Rajput face off. The Bhim Army intervened. The group protests were held against discrimination and caste violence against Dalits by members of the upper Thakurs caste and led to violent clashes in 2017 in Saharanpur. The Bhim Army attained national prominence after these clashes took place in Uttar Pradesh.

The Bhim Army staged a massive protest rally through Lutyen's Delhi in late May 2017, with supporters waving placards with B.R. Ambedkar's photograph as well as blue flags, chanting "Jai Bhim" slogans, and wearing masks of Azad's face. At Jantar Mantar, nearly 10,000 people had gathered. Azad was arrested by UP Police in early June 2017 in Dalhousie, Himachal Pradesh. Until September 2018, he was detained under the National Security Act.

III. MISSION

Bhim Army stated its mission as "confrontational direct action to preserve or restore Dalit dignity." The Bhim Army seeks to assist marginalised sections of society, such as Dalits and farmers, as well as, more broadly, what the organization's founder, Chandrashekar Azad, refers to as "the Bahujan community, which includes S.C.s, STs, OBCs, and minorities who had been away from the mainstream for a long time."

IV. LIMITATIONS OF BSP AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Breaking away from some major postulates of the Ambedkarite movement, in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP’s shift from Dalit identity for the sake of expanding its constituency has shown the limitations of such minority politics for Dalits. Many local Ambedkarite activists are now resentful of Mayawati’s attempt to curb their grassroots social movement. The BSP's political power grab has introduced the party to the public with a new political ideology that differs from the idea of "social engineering" between the country's deprived sections. The BSP rode the chariot of power in its most recent incarnation, but political coalitions diluted the critical issues of social justice, law and order, and secularism. According to Gopal Guru, there is a risk that the BSP has abandoned efforts to empower the "bahujans" due to its obsession with power. There is a possibility of compromise in delivering social justice to the bahujan masses in the thirst for capturing "sarvajan." Such openness to non-bahujans may jeopardise the movement's moral compass. In spite of Ambedkar’s warning to the oppressed sections not to rely solely on political power for their liberation, the BSP has underestimated the value of social movements in combating these ills on the ground.

However, we can attempt to relocate Ambedkarism and his social movement in several newly constructed movements of the twenty first century. One such movement is the Bhim Army, aiming at social reform through education, agitation and organisation, keeping in line with the Ambedkarite ideology.

V. CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

Chandrashekhar describes himself as a follower of Kanshi Ram and a representative of Bahujan identity. The Bhim Army participated in nationwide Dalit protests in August 2019 against the demolition of Shri Guru Ravidas Gurughar, a temple dedicated to Sant Ravidas in Tughlaqabad, Delhi, on the orders of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA), following a lengthy legal battle between the DDA and Guru Ravidas Jayanti Samaroh Samiti. Police arrested dozens of people, including Chandrashekhar Azad and Vinay Ratan, prompting the Bhim Army to demand their release.

Chandrashekhar announced in December 2019 that the Bhim Army would formally enter electoral politics. Previously, the group functioned as a quasi-political force. According to Chandrashekhar, the new political party will establish an office in Lucknow and oppose the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Bhim Army was opposed to the BJP's Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA). The Bhim Army protested against the CAA and sought its repeal in January and February 2020. In connection with the North East Delhi riots in February 2020, street clashes occurred between pro-CAA BJP supporters and Bhim Army supporters, with both sides engaging in stone-pelting.

On March 15 2020, the birth anniversary of BSP founder Kanshi Ram, Chandrashekhar officially announced his new political party named “Azad Samaj Party”. Approximately 98 former leaders of the Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Congress and Rashtriya Lok Dal joined the newly launched party.

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Azad also founded “Mission 78,” a social organisation modelled after Kanshi Ram's All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation (BAMCEF), which has faded in prominence in recent years. “ Mission 78, like BAMCEF, would aim to bring together bureaucrats and technocrats from the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minority communities (the Bahujan samaj) to work for the uplift of the community's marginalised members. Furthermore, Mission 78 would work to raise funds for the Azad Samaj Party.

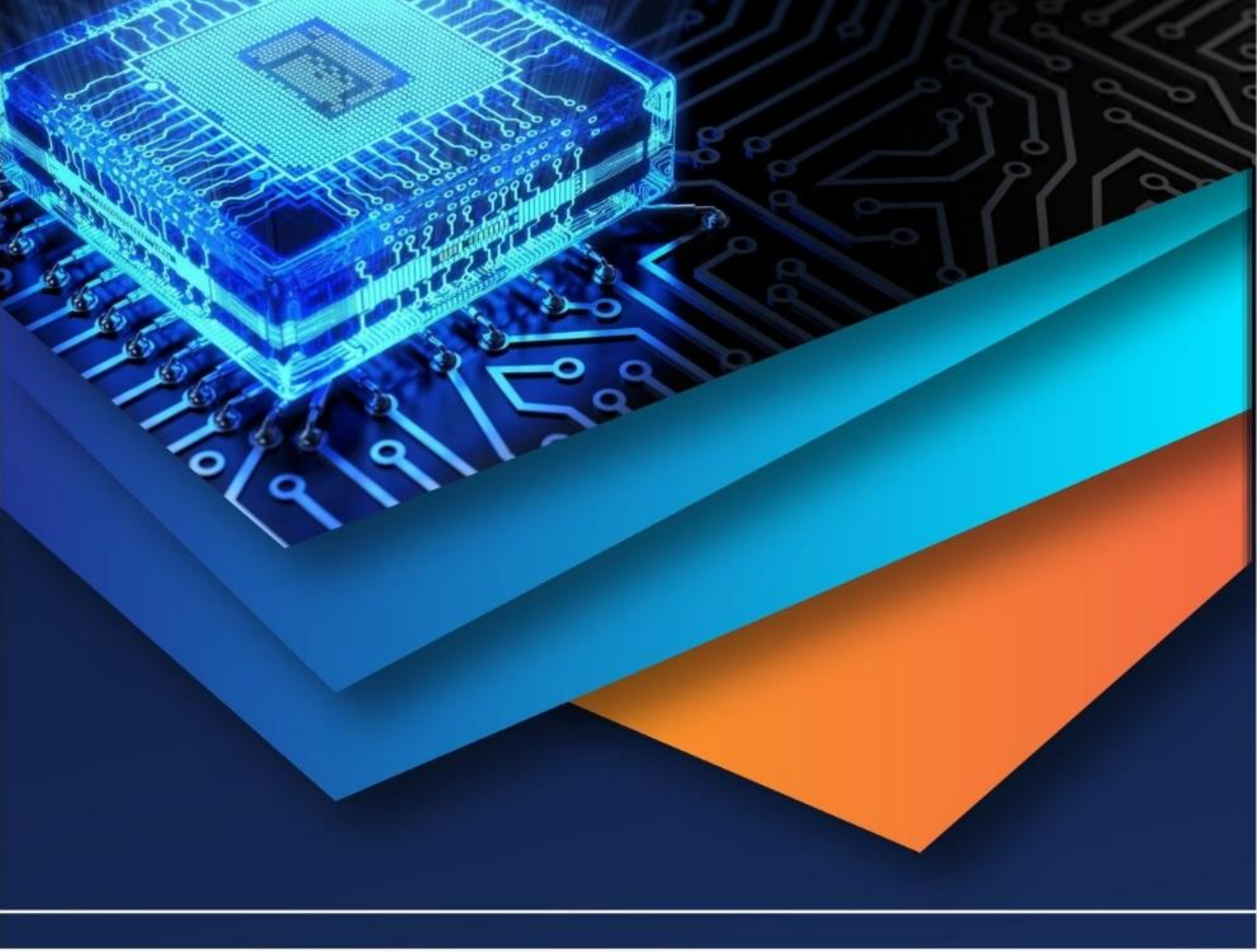
VI. CONCLUSION

The Dalit movement in north India is habituated to using caste-based binaries in its mobilisation language but has failed to respond to the changing political diction. In fact, leaders have not changed their political diction for 30 years since the time of the Kanshi Ram-led Bahujan movement. The movement is facing a crisis of agendas and social programmes. The constant repetition of unfulfilled claims and commitments create disillusionment among a section of their support base. In this context, the Dalit movement has to evolve new social strategies for its expansion to keep up with the changing times. Therefore, how the Bhim Army plays a role in strengthening the Dalit narrative in contemporary times remains a litmus test for the success of the Dalit social and political movement at large. Moreover, the upcoming state assembly elections in UP might reflect how Bhim Army and its political wing, the Azad Samaj Party presents a counter-narrative to the existing upper caste as well as Dalit narrative (under BSP) in the state.

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