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From political assertion to state authority: Kanshi Ram, Mayawati and the gendered trajectory of Bahujan Power

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Abstract
This paper examines the transition of Bahujan politics from organized political assertion to the actual exercise of state authority focusing on the strategic continuum between Kanshi Ram and Mayawati. Existing scholarship has largely treated Bahujan politics through the lenses of representation, symbolism or electoral volatility often stopping short of analysing what happens when marginalized politics governs rather than merely contests power. The central argument advanced here is that Kanshi Ram's most consequential intervention lay in constructing a durable theory of power rooted in numbers, discipline and institutional capture which Mayawati later operationalized through the machinery of the state. This shift marked a decisive movement from moral critique to rule, from visibility to authority. The paper reads Kanshi Ram as the architect of assertion and Mayawati as its executor whose tenure as chief minister represented one of the rare moments in postcolonial India when Bahujan politics exercised sovereign power rather than negotiated inclusion. Particular attention is given to the gendered nature of this transition. Mayawati's authority was repeatedly framed as excessive, authoritarian or symbolic in public discourse revealing how caste and gender combine to produce heightened suspicion when marginalized women govern. Methodologically, this paper draws on political sociology and historical analysis combining close reading of speeches, organizational strategies and state practices with high-impact scholarship on power, representation, democracy. By foregrounding governance rather than identity, this paper reframes Bahujan politics as a serious experiment in rule exposing both its achievements and its fragility. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on democracy, gendered authority and the limits of inclusion in deeply unequal societies arguing that dignity acquires its sharpest political meaning not at the moment of representation but at the point where power is exercised and defended.

Keywords: Kanshi Ram, Mayawati, Bahujan Politics, state authority, political assertion, gendered power, caste and democracy, governance, political sociology

Introduction

The question that frames this paper emerges from a persistent analytical weakness in how Bahujan politics has been understood like representation has too often been treated as the endpoint of political struggle rather than as a threshold that reveals new and sharper problems. Postcolonial Indian democracy expanded representation early and visibly yet the presence of marginalized actors in legislatures, cabinets and public office did not dismantle the deeper organization of power that continued to privilege caste, class, and elite networks etc. This gap between presence and authority is not accidental. It reflects a broader tendency in political theory to assume that inclusion naturally leads to influence, an assumption that collapses quickly once one examines how the state actually works. Ambedkar had warned of this danger at the moment of constitutional founding insisting that political democracy without social and economic democracy would remain unstable and reversible, capable of absorbing equality in form while denying it in substance (Ambedkar, 1948) [1]. That warning structured the dilemma faced by Dalit-Bahujan politics in the decades that followed. Movement politics proliferated, moral critique deepened, symbolic recognition expanded yet the machinery of the state remained largely intact. Kanshi Ram read this history with little patience for illusion. He rejected the comfort of representation without control and treated politics not as moral performance but as organized struggle over institutions. His significance lies precisely here. He reframed Bahujan politics as a project aimed at the state itself arguing that dignity survives only when backed by authority and that authority cannot be borrowed from sympathetic elites or sustained through ethical appeal alone. Kanshi Ram was thus a strategist of power, not because he dismissed values but because he understood how little protection values enjoy without enforcement. The shift he initiated from movement to party, from protest to capture was not a retreat from Ambedkarite politics but a translation of it into a language the state could not ignore. Yet Kanshi Ram never ruled. His intervention prepared the ground. The moment of rule arrived with Mayawati. To read Mayawati merely as a representative Dalit woman leader is to repeat the analytical error this paper seeks to correct. Her tenure as chief minister marked a rare instance in which Bahujan politics moved beyond negotiation and entered the domain of state authority exercising control over bureaucracy, budgets, land, law and public space. Power changed meaning at that point. Decisions were no longer appeals; they were directives. This transition exposed the limits of democratic tolerance. Mayawati's authority was not received as ordinary governance but as excess, repeatedly framed as authoritarian, symbolic or personalistic. Such framings cannot be understood apart from gender. Gender here does not function as an identity supplement but as a structural condition that shapes how authority is read and contested. Women in power especially those from historically stigmatized castes encounter a narrower range of acceptable conduct. Decisiveness appears as arrogance. Centralization appears as tyranny. Assertion appears as illegitimacy. Gopal Guru's work on dignity and humiliation

helps clarify this asymmetry showing how respect is unevenly distributed and how the denial of legitimacy often operates through moral language rather than formal exclusion (Guru, 2009) [7]. Mayawati's governance unsettled entrenched expectations not because she violated democratic norms more than others but because she exercised authority without performing deference. This discomfort reveals how deeply caste and gender shape the boundaries of acceptable rule. The movement from margins to the state thus marks the most consequential phase of Bahujan politics not because it resolved inequality but because it made its contours visible. Once power is exercised the fiction that democracy is neutral becomes harder to sustain. Christophe Jaffrelot's analysis of the rise of lower castes shows how electoral mobilization altered political competition yet his account also demonstrates how fragile such gains remain once they confront entrenched institutions and elite counter-mobilization (Jaffrelot, 2003) [8]. Mayawati's tenure sits precisely at this fault line. It reveals both the possibilities and the limits of assertion once it becomes authority. Reading Kanshi Ram and Mayawati together therefore allows a different analytical move. Kanshi Ram appears not as an agitator who stopped at numbers and Mayawati not as a symbolic inheritor but as successive moments in a single political trajectory that sought to institutionalize assertion. Gender is central to this trajectory because it exposes the unequal costs of ruling. Authority exercised by marginalized men is contested; authority exercised by marginalized women is pathologized. This distinction matters for political sociology and democratic theory alike. It forces a reconsideration of what inclusion means when those included refuse to govern gently. It also resonates with broader critiques of Eurocentric political theory that assume a universal subject of power while ignoring how authority is differentially policed across societies (Bhambra, 2014) [2]. The central argument of this paper follows from this reading. Bahujan politics reached its sharpest and most revealing moment not when it entered legislatures but when it governed. Mayawati represents not symbolic inclusion but the institutionalization of assertion, a moment when dignity was no longer requested but enforced through the state. That moment was unstable, contested and ultimately fragile yet its significance lies precisely in how it unsettled democratic comfort. It showed that power from the margins is tolerated only as long as it remains representational. Once it becomes authoritative, it is disciplined through critique, ridicule and moral panic. Understanding this transition is essential not only for assessing Bahujan politics but for grasping how democracy manages inequality while claiming inclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper rests on a deliberate separation between representation, authority and rule, a separation that is often blurred in analyses of marginalized politics but is crucial for understanding what changes when power is actually exercised through the state. Representation refers to presence and voice within formal institutions, authority refers to the socially recognized right to decide and command and rule refers to the capacity to enforce decisions through bureaucratic, legal, coercive means. These categories do not automatically align. A group may be represented without possessing authority and authority may be claimed without the ability to rule. Political sociology insists on keeping these distinctions visible because modern democracies frequently expand representation while tightly regulating access to authority and rule. This insight has deep roots in classical sociology particularly in Weber's analysis of domination which emphasizes that power becomes durable only when it is routinized through institutions and accepted as legitimate, even if reluctantly (Weber, 1978) [12]. Building on this, contemporary political sociology has shown how marginalized groups are often incorporated into political systems in ways that preserve existing hierarchies offering voice without control and inclusion without redistribution. Loïc Wacquant's work on advanced marginality is especially relevant here as it demonstrates how the modern state manages inequality not primarily through exclusion but through regulated inclusion producing populations that are politically visible yet structurally contained (Wacquant, 2008) [11]. The state thus appears not as a neutral arena but as a dense concentration of power where recognition, coercion and redistribution intersect. It is the site where dignity can be symbolically acknowledged while material hierarchies remain intact or alternatively, where authority can be exercised to reorder access to resources and space. Gender enters this framework not as an identity category layered onto caste or class but as a structural condition that shapes how authority is read, contested and policed. Feminist political sociology has long argued that authority is gendered with women in power facing narrower thresholds of legitimacy and harsher scrutiny for actions that appear routine when performed by men (Connell, 2009) [6]. This asymmetry intensifies when women come from historically stigmatized groups. Their authority is more likely to be framed as excessive, personalistic or authoritarian revealing how legitimacy is unevenly distributed even within democratic systems. Patricia Hill Collins's analysis of intersecting systems of power helps clarify this dynamic showing how race, gender, class etc. do not simply add to one another but reorganize the very terms through which authority is recognized or denied (Collins, 2000) [5]. In this sense, gendered legitimacy is not about attitudes alone; it is built into institutional expectations about who can rule, how they should speak and what forms of command are deemed acceptable. The state, within this framework is not merely an instrument but a terrain of struggle where counter-elites attempt to convert social assertion into durable authority. The concept of counter-elites is central here. Rather than imagining elites as fixed or inherently oppressive, political sociology treats them as functional positions within systems of power. Marginalized politics that seeks transformation must therefore produce its own elites capable of navigating bureaucracy, law and governance without dissolving into accommodation. This insight echoes C. Wright Mills's emphasis on the power elite which underscores how decision-making in modern societies is concentrated and why entry into these circuits matters more than symbolic participation (Mills, 1997) [9]. Political assertion, as a conceptual tool captures the moment when marginalized groups refuse the limits of recognition and move toward organized pressure on institutions. It is distinct from protest or moral appeal. Assertion seeks to alter who decides rather than merely what is said. State authority, in turn, names the consolidation of this assertion within formal structures of rule where decisions are backed by administrative capacity and coercive power. The transition from assertion to

authority is neither smooth nor guaranteed. It exposes marginalized actors to intensified scrutiny and resistance particularly when gender disrupts expectations of command. Gendered legitimacy names this uneven terrain. It refers to the differential credibility granted to authority claims depending on the social location of the claimant. Women from dominant groups may face resistance; women from marginalized groups face suspicion that is deeper and more persistent often framed through moral language rather than explicit exclusion. Gopal Guru's work on humiliation is instructive here as it shows how dignity is undermined not only through deprivation but through subtle delegitimation where authority is questioned even when formally granted (Guru, 2009) [7]. By bringing these concepts together, the framework moves analysis away from leadership narratives that focus on personality, style or success and toward structural power. Leadership narratives often personalize outcomes that are better explained by institutional design, social hierarchy and the uneven distribution of legitimacy. A political sociology of power asks different questions like who is allowed to rule, under what conditions, and at what cost. It treats governance as a site where inequality is reproduced or disrupted through routine decisions rather than dramatic gestures. This approach aligns with broader critiques of Eurocentric political theory that assume a universal subject of power while ignoring how authority is differentially experienced across social contexts (Bhambra, 2014) [2]. In the context of Bahujan politics, this framework allows for an analysis that does not reduce governance to representation or gender to symbolism. Instead, it foregrounds how authority is built, contested and constrained when it emerges from the margins. The purpose of this framework is therefore not to evaluate leaders as individuals but to trace how structural power operates when historically excluded groups enter the state as rulers rather than supplicants. By holding apart representation, authority, rule, and by situating gender as a constitutive dimension of legitimacy, the analysis makes visible the deeper stakes of marginalized governance in contemporary democracies where inclusion is celebrated but authority remains tightly guarded.

Kanshi Ram's Theory of Power: Preparing the Ground for Rule

Kanshi Ram's theory of power begins from a blunt refusal that sets him apart from much post-Ambedkar Dalit politics like the refusal to treat moral appeal as a sufficient political strategy. He did not deny the ethical force of Ambedkar's critique of caste nor did he dismiss the importance of dignity, justice or historical wrong. What he rejected was the assumption that exposing injustice would, by itself, unsettle those who benefited from it. In Kanshi Ram's reading of Indian democracy morality circulates freely while power remains tightly guarded and the distance between the two is not an accident but a design feature of a system that absorbs critique without yielding control. This is why he insisted repeatedly and without apology that assertion must precede reform and that power must come before policy. Reform, in his view, follows authority; it does not create it. Policies protecting the marginalized remain paper promises unless backed by those who can enforce them through the state. This position placed him at odds with strands of Ambedkarite politics that had come to rely heavily on constitutionalism and legalism often mistaking rights for power and protection for control. Kanshi Ram's intervention was to translate Ambedkar's warning about political democracy without social democracy into an organizational doctrine as without capturing institutions, ethics remain vulnerable (Ambedkar, 1948) [1]. His emphasis on cadre discipline followed directly from this diagnosis. Discipline was not aesthetic severity; it was a defence against fragmentation. Kanshi Ram had watched Dalit politics fracture along lines of region, ideology, personality and patronage, each fracture weakening collective bargaining power. Cadres, trained politically and bound by loyalty to the organization rather than to charismatic individuals were his answer to this problem. Organization mattered more than crowds. Numbers mattered only when they moved together. Vote consolidation was therefore not a slogan but a technology of power designed to convert demographic strength into electoral leverage. This logic resonates strongly with political sociology's insight that modern power operates through aggregation and coordination rather than spontaneity and it finds empirical support in comparative studies of ethnic and marginalized parties which show that success depends less on moral appeal than on disciplined organization and credible control over votes (Chandra, 2004) [4]. Kanshi Ram understood that as long as Bahujan votes remained dispersed across parties controlled by others, they would function as resources rather than as decision-makers. Consolidation was meant to end this dependency. His rejection of elite intermediaries must be read in the same light. Kanshi Ram had little faith in upper-caste liberals, progressive patrons or sympathetic brokers who claimed to speak for the oppressed while retaining control over institutions. Such intermediaries, he argued that delayed emancipation by translating demands into acceptable language and manageable reform keeping real authority elsewhere. This rejection was often misread as hostility or paranoia. In fact, it reflected a structural insight as mediation preserves hierarchy. Direct control disrupts it. Kanshi Ram therefore insisted on autonomous leadership drawn from within Dalit-Bahujan communities not because of identity purity but because of accountability. Leaders who shared the condition of exclusion were less likely in his view to trade away long-term power for short-term recognition. Christophe Jaffrelot's analysis of lower-caste mobilization helps clarify why this strategy proved transformative showing how Kanshi Ram shifted Dalit politics away from incorporation within dominant parties toward the construction of an independent political pole capable of reshaping electoral competition itself (Jaffrelot, 2003) [8]. The architecture of power he built through BAMCEF, DS-4, and finally the BSP reflects a sequential theory of politics. Political education came first to create a shared understanding of history and power. Organizational rehearsal followed to test discipline and coordination. Electoral contestation came last when the machinery was ready. This sequencing reveals Kanshi Ram's distance from romantic notions of politics as spontaneous uprising. He treated politics as craft, learned through repetition, patience and calculation. Policy, in this framework, was deliberately postponed. Critics accused him of lacking a detailed program beyond power capture. Kanshi Ram did not deny this. He argued that policy without authority is decoration. This stance aligns with a broader sociological understanding of the state as a site where recognition, coercion and redistribution converge and where access determines

outcomes more reliably than intentions (Wacquant, 2008) [11]. Kanshi Ram's focus on institutional capture legislatures, bureaucracy, administrative machinery etc. was therefore not opportunism but realism. He knew that the state does not respond to suffering; it responds to pressure. His theory of power also included a rarely acknowledged element like the strategic necessity of succession. Unlike many movement leaders who cling to authority, Kanshi Ram recognized that power built around a single figure remains fragile. He did not occupy the throne himself because his project was not personal rule but durable authority. Preparing a successor was part of the architecture. This move was both strategic and risky. It required trust, discipline and the willingness to relinquish symbolic centrality. Yet it reflects a deeper theoretical insight that marginalized power must outlive its founders if it is to matter. Sudha Pai's study of the BSP underscores how this transition altered the social composition of power in Uttar Pradesh producing new political actors and forcing entrenched elites to confront authority they could not easily dismiss or absorb (Pai, 2002) [10]. Kanshi Ram's decision to remain the architect rather than the ruler thus appears less as absence and more as design. He built the scaffolding of power organization, numbers, discipline, institutional ambition without stepping into office understanding that rule would expose the project to intensified resistance and that its success would depend on whether the architecture could hold without him. This choice also reveals the distance between his politics and leadership narratives that personalize outcomes. Kanshi Ram was not interested in being remembered as a ruler; he was interested in making rule possible. His theory of power taken seriously compels political sociology to move beyond questions of intent and charisma and toward the harder problem of how authority is constructed under conditions of structural exclusion. It shows that marginalized politics cannot afford the luxury of moral comfort that reform without enforcement is reversible and that dignity, if it is to endure, must be anchored in institutions capable of commanding obedience. Kanshi Ram built that anchor. He did so without occupying the throne. That is precisely why his role as architect matters more than any office he never held.

Mayawati as State Authority: From Representation to Rule

Mayawati's political significance becomes analytically clear only when she is read not as a symbolic Dalit woman leader but as a chief minister who exercised state authority in a system historically designed to exclude people like her from rule. Much of the commentary surrounding her leadership has remained trapped in the language of representation, celebrating or condemning her presence while avoiding the harder question of what it meant for Bahujan politics to govern. This avoidance is telling. Representation is easier to tolerate than authority. Being in office signals inclusion; exercising authority exposes power relations. Mayawati's tenure marked the moment when Bahujan politics crossed this threshold. Decisions were no longer appeals to the state; they were issued from it. Bureaucracy, law, budgetary allocation, land use, policing and public space came under her command, and with that shift the meaning of power itself changed. Max Weber's distinction between office-holding and domination helps clarify this moment reminding us that authority becomes real only when commands are expected to be obeyed not merely heard (Weber, 1978) [12]. Mayawati did not simply occupy the chief minister's chair; she used it. Her relationship with the bureaucracy illustrates this clearly. Rather than functioning as a mediator between entrenched administrative elites and marginalized constituencies, she sought to discipline the bureaucracy itself signalling that loyalty flowed upward from elected authority rather than sideways through informal elite networks. This insistence disrupted long-standing habits of governance in Uttar Pradesh where bureaucratic autonomy often masked upper-caste dominance. Sudha Pai's work on Dalit assertion documents how this intervention altered administrative behaviour even as it provoked resistance and accusations of authoritarianism (Pai, 2002) [10]. Law, too, functioned differently once wielded by a Bahujan chief minister. Legal provisions that had long existed on paper relating to land, reservations and public order were enforced with a visibility that unsettled both allies and opponents. Enforcement revealed a basic truth about democratic governance that laws are political instruments whose effects depend less on their wording than on who controls their implementation. Budgetary power sharpened this truth further. Allocation of resources toward Dalit-Bahujan localities, monuments and welfare schemes was read by critics as excess or spectacle yet such readings obscure how budgets are among the most concrete expressions of authority. They reorder priorities. They leave material traces. Christophe Jaffrelot situates Mayawati's governance within a broader transformation of North Indian politics noting that lower-caste rule did not merely alter electoral arithmetic but temporarily reoriented state resources toward constituencies long excluded from them even as it intensified elite backlash (Jaffrelot, 2003) [8]. Centralization was a defining feature of Mayawati's administrative style and it is here that the difference between being in office and exercising authority becomes most visible. Centralization is often condemned in abstract terms yet political sociology shows that marginalized rulers face structural incentives to centralize precisely because institutions are not neutral. Decentralization in unequal systems often empowers those already embedded in bureaucratic and social networks. Loïc Wacquant's analysis of state power under conditions of marginality is useful here as it demonstrates how authority exercised from the margins is more fragile and therefore more likely to rely on direct control to counter sabotage and containment (Wacquant, 2008) [11]. Mayawati's centralization should thus be read less as personal temperament and more as a response to institutional hostility. Her governing decisions swift transfers of officials, strict control over messaging and an emphasis on visible assertion were interpreted through moral lenses that rarely apply to dominant-caste leaders exercising similar powers. This asymmetry reveals how legitimacy is unevenly distributed. Gopal Guru's work on humiliation offers a crucial insight here as authority exercised by the marginalized is often framed as improper, excessive or corrupt not because it violates norms but because it disrupts expectations about who is entitled to rule (Guru, 2009) [7]. Mayawati's governance triggered precisely this discomfort. She did not govern gently. She governed decisively. That decisiveness was read as arrogance, her confidence as spectacle, her use of symbols as narcissism. Yet symbols under state control are not merely cultural expressions; they are exercises of authority over public

space and collective memory. Statues, parks and architecture reconfigured landscapes long dominated by upper-caste iconography, signalling a shift in who belonged at the centre of political life. This was not symbolism detached from power; it was symbolism backed by budget, land and law. Power changes meaning once it governs. As a movement, Bahujan politics demanded recognition and redistribution. As a ruling force, it had to command obedience, manage institutions and absorb responsibility for outcomes. This transition exposed the fragility of democratic tolerance. When marginalized politics governs, it is judged not only by performance but by demeanour not only by outcomes but by style. The room for error narrows. Mistakes that are routine for dominant groups become fatal when made by those from below. Mayawati's tenure thus reveals a deeper sociological truth that democracy expands representation more easily than it accepts authority from the margins. Her rule did not dismantle caste. It did something more revealing. It showed how deeply caste and gender shape the boundaries of acceptable power. Reading Mayawati as state authority rather than symbolic representative allows us to see Bahujan politics at its most consequential and its most vulnerable. It was consequential because it governed. It was vulnerable because governance stripped away the protective aura of moral legitimacy and exposed the project to direct confrontation with entrenched elites. This is the difference between being in office and exercising authority. One signals inclusion. The other tests democracy. Mayawati's rule did the latter and in doing so it confirmed Kanshi Ram's core insight that dignity acquires its sharpest political meaning only when it is enforced through the state.

Gendered Power and the Politics of Legitimacy

The uneven reception of Mayawati's authority reveals how deeply gender structures the politics of legitimacy especially when power is exercised by women from historically stigmatized castes. Her tenure was persistently read through a different moral lens than that applied to male chief ministers who employed similar or even harsher governing techniques. This difference cannot be explained by policy outcomes alone. It points instead to a gendered economy of authority in which power is expected to appear restrained, conciliatory and deferential when exercised by women, and doubly so when those women emerge from marginalized social locations. Political sociology has long shown that authority is not simply held; it is granted, recognized, stabilized through shared expectations about who is entitled to command and how that command should look (Weber, 1978) [12]. When these expectations are violated authority is not merely contested; it is pathologized. Mayawati's authority violated them on two fronts. She was a woman and she was Dalit. Each position independently narrows the range of acceptable political behaviour. Together, they produced an environment of heightened suspicion. Decisive action was framed as arrogance. Centralization was framed as tyranny. Visible assertion was framed as excess. Male leaders who centralized power were described as strong. Mayawati was described as authoritarian. This asymmetry reflects what feminist political theorists have identified as the double bind of women in power that leaders are expected to be firm but not forceful, visible but not imposing, authoritative but not commanding (Connell, 2009) [6]. For marginalized women, this bind tightens further. Authority itself becomes suspect. Patricia Hill Collins's work on intersecting systems of power helps clarify why this happens. Intersectionality does not simply add caste to gender; it reorganizes the field of legitimacy producing unique forms of scrutiny and delegitimation that cannot be reduced to either category alone (Collins, 2000) [5]. In Mayawati's case, caste marked her authority as improper even before it was evaluated while gender framed her refusal of humility as moral failure. Expectations of compromise and decorum played a central role here. Indian political culture tolerates compromise when it preserves existing hierarchies. When compromise is withdrawn by those long expected to defer, it appears threatening. Mayawati's unwillingness to perform humility unsettled these norms. She did not soften her authority through apology or reassurance. She did not mask command as consensus. This refusal was interpreted as personal flaw rather than political strategy. Gopal Guru's analysis of humiliation is particularly instructive in this context. He shows how marginalized groups are often disciplined through moral language that demands gratitude, restraint and civility, even as they are denied substantive power (Guru, 2009) [7]. When Mayawati exercised authority without these performances, she disrupted the moral economy that keeps marginalized power acceptable only when it remains symbolic. Accusations of authoritarianism must be read against this backdrop. Authoritarianism as a category is often deployed selectively. It becomes a way of expressing discomfort with power rather than a precise description of governance. Political sociology reminds us that all states exercise coercion and centralization; the question is not whether authority is exercised but by whom and under what conditions. Loïc Wacquant's work on state power under conditions of marginality demonstrates how authority exercised from below is more likely to be labelled excessive because it disrupts established circuits of control and containment (Wacquant, 2008) [11]. Mayawati's governance did precisely that. Her use of law, bureaucracy and public resources challenged informal elite dominance making power visible where it had long been naturalized. This visibility triggered backlash framed as concern for democracy. Yet similar concerns were muted when dominant-caste leaders centralized authority in the name of stability or development. Gender and caste thus operated together to produce a suspicion of power itself. The problem was not simply what Mayawati did but that she did it. Feminist scholars have noted that women leaders are often judged more harshly for the same actions and given less margin for error, a pattern that reflects structural bias rather than individual performance (Connell, 2009) [6]. When caste enters this equation, the margin narrows further. Authority becomes an anomaly rather than an entitlement. This helps explain why symbolic aspects of Mayawati's rule were treated as evidence of narcissism rather than as exercises of statecraft. Monuments, statues and architectural projects are routine tools of governance worldwide used by dominant groups to shape public memory and legitimacy. When deployed by a Dalit woman chief minister, they were recoded as excess. This recoding reveals how legitimacy is unevenly distributed across social hierarchies. Gurminder Bhambra's critique of Eurocentric political theory is useful here as it highlights how assumptions about normal leadership often rest on unmarked subjects whose authority is taken for granted while deviations from this norm are

scrutinized and disciplined (Bhambra, 2014) [2]. Mayawati's rule exposed this norm by refusing to conform to it. The sociological meaning of the authoritarian label, then, lies less in empirical assessment and more in boundary maintenance. It marks the limits of acceptable power. It signals when assertion has crossed from representation into rule. What is called authoritarian often masks discomfort with marginalized women governing without deference. This insight has implications beyond the specific case. It suggests that democratic systems may expand inclusion while quietly policing authority allowing marginalized groups to appear but not to command. Mayawati's tenure made this tension visible. Her authority was contested not only through elections but through narratives that framed her rule as illegitimate. These narratives functioned as soft discipline reminding marginalized actors of the costs of ruling too visibly. Understanding this dynamic requires moving beyond leadership narratives and into structural analysis. Gendered power is not an attribute of individuals; it is a relationship shaped by institutions, norms and histories of exclusion. Mayawati's experience illustrates how quickly democratic tolerance thins when power from the margins refuses to remain symbolic. The discomfort provoked by her rule confirms the core insight of this section that accusations of authoritarianism often reveal less about governance than about the social boundaries of legitimacy. When marginalized women rule, power itself becomes the problem. That reaction tells us something essential about democracy, caste and gender in contemporary India.

Symbolism, Statecraft and Material Power

Symbolism under conditions of state power acquires a meaning fundamentally different from symbolism deployed from the margins and it is precisely this distinction that has been consistently missed in readings of Mayawati's governance. Statues, monumental architecture, renamed parks and redesigned public spaces were rarely mere acts of cultural expression; they were exercises of authority that worked through budgetary allocation, spatial control and the reordering of public memory. Political sociology reminds us that the state governs not only through law and coercion but through the organization of space and the narration of history deciding whose presence is normalized and whose is peripheral. When dominant groups use monuments and architecture, these practices disappear into the background of 'heritage' or 'development.' When a marginalized ruler does the same, they are marked as spectacle. This asymmetry reveals how deeply power shapes interpretation. Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic power is instructive here particularly his argument that symbols backed by institutional authority do not merely represent reality but actively constitute it by shaping what appears legitimate, natural and durable (Bourdieu, 1991) [3]. Mayawati's monuments functioned in precisely this way. They were not private expressions of reverence; they were public interventions that reordered the visual and moral geography of the state. Budgetary control made this possible. Symbolism without resources remains fragile easily dismissed or removed. Symbolism backed by state expenditure becomes durable, embedded in stone, land and administrative record. This is why critiques that focus narrowly on cost miss the point. All states spend public money to narrate themselves. The sociological question is not whether resources were used for symbolic projects but which histories were authorized through them and which groups were finally allowed to occupy central civic space. Christophe Jaffrelot situates Mayawati's symbolic politics within a broader transformation of power noting that Dalit assertion reached a new phase when it reshaped not only electoral arithmetic but the material landscape of the state itself forcing recognition through permanence rather than appeal (Jaffrelot, 2003) [8]. Spatial dominance matters because space is political. Parks, plazas and memorials are sites where the state stages itself. Reclaiming these spaces is not cultural performance; it is state practice. By placing Dalit icons at the centre of public space, Mayawati disrupted long-standing spatial hierarchies that mirrored caste hierarchies where upper-caste figures dominated landscapes while marginalized histories remained invisible or confined to peripheral locations. Gopal Guru's work on humiliation helps clarify why this intervention provoked such discomfort showing how dignity is denied not only through economic exclusion but through systematic erasure from spaces of recognition and honour (Guru, 2009) [7]. The monuments challenged this erasure by making Bahujan presence unavoidable. Critics framed this visibility as excess, narcissism or waste yet such framings ignore how public memory has always been curated through state power. The Taj Mahal, India Gate and countless statues of national leaders are rarely interrogated for their symbolic expenditure because their legitimacy is taken for granted. Mayawati's projects were interrogated precisely because they unsettled this taken-for-granted hierarchy. Loïc Wacquant's analysis of marginality and state containment offers another useful lens. He shows how modern states often tolerate symbolic inclusion so long as it remains reversible and non-threatening, but resist interventions that harden marginal presence into institutional fact (Wacquant, 2008) [11]. Monuments do exactly that. They make memory hard to erase. They force future governments to reckon with their presence. This durability explains why symbolic statecraft provokes stronger resistance than policy shifts that can be quietly undone. The misreading of symbolism as mere excess also reflects a narrow understanding of governance that privileges technocratic outputs over cultural authority. Yet political rule has always involved managing meaning alongside resources. Max Weber emphasized that domination relies on legitimacy as much as coercion and legitimacy is sustained through visible signs of authority that make rule appear natural and enduring (Weber, 1978) [12]. Mayawati's symbolic projects should therefore be read as attempts to stabilize Bahujan authority by embedding it into the everyday experience of the state. Architecture and monuments served as reminders that power had changed hands even if temporarily. This was not symbolic politics detached from material consequences; it was symbolic politics precisely because it was material, anchored in land acquisition, construction contracts, administrative approval and long-term maintenance. Feminist political sociology adds another layer to this reading. Authority exercised by women especially marginalized women is often expected to remain modest and self-effacing. Monumental assertion violates these expectations triggering moral outrage framed as concern for democracy or fiscal responsibility. Raewyn Connell's work on gender and power helps explain this reaction showing how displays of authority that exceed gendered norms are quickly labelled illegitimate regardless

of their institutional grounding (Connell, 2009) [6]. When Mayawati used monumental statecraft, she refused the demand for humility that often polices women's power. That refusal amplified backlash. The charge of excess thus functioned as a moral check on authority not as a neutral assessment of governance. Seen in this light, symbolic statecraft becomes central rather than peripheral to understanding Bahujan rule. It reveals how power attempts to secure itself against erasure by reshaping memory and space. It also exposes the limits of democratic tolerance showing how quickly legitimacy is withdrawn when marginalized authority becomes visible and durable. The key claim follows directly from this analysis that symbolic politics under state control is not symbolism it is statecraft. It governs by deciding who belongs at the centre of the political imagination and who remains at its edges. Mayawati's monuments did not replace policy; they complemented it by addressing a different register of power, one that operates through permanence rather than persuasion. Their significance lies not in aesthetic judgment but in their political function. They marked a moment when Bahujan power sought to inscribe itself onto the state itself not as a passing episode but as a claim to history. That claim was contested, ridiculed and partially reversed yet its very contestation confirms its importance. States fight hardest over symbols when those symbols threaten to make new power appear normal. This is what Mayawati's statecraft attempted. It was not gentle. It was not subtle. It was governing through memory, space and material authority. That is why it mattered.

Limits, Contradictions and the Fragility of Bahujan Rule

The experience of Bahujan rule particularly under Mayawati revealed not only the possibilities of political assertion translated into authority but also the structural fragility that accompanies marginalized governance in a democracy that expands inclusion without redistributing control. Centralization emerged as both strength and vulnerability. It was a strength because governing from the margins required tight command over institutions that were neither neutral nor welcoming. Decentralized authority in such contexts often empowers entrenched bureaucratic and social elites who possess the informal networks needed to stall, dilute or quietly reverse policy. Centralization, therefore, functioned as a defensive strategy allowing Bahujan rule to act decisively against resistance embedded within the state itself. Yet this same centralization limited institutional sustainability. When authority is tightly held to counter sabotage, it becomes harder to routinize power beyond the leader's presence. Weber's insight into domination is relevant here as authority becomes durable only when it is institutionalized in ways that outlive individual actors (Weber, 1978) [12]. Bahujan rule struggled on this front. The concentration of decision-making protected power while it lasted but made it vulnerable once electoral support weakened. Dependence on electoral cycles intensified this fragility. Democratic rule under conditions of deep inequality is episodic rather than cumulative. Each election becomes a test not only of performance but of legitimacy itself. For marginalized rulers defeat carries a different weight. Loss of office is not simply rotation; it often triggers rapid dismantling of institutional gains, policy reversals and symbolic erasure. Christophe Jaffrelot's account of lower-caste politics shows how quickly advances can be rolled back once electoral momentum breaks revealing how shallow inclusion remains when it is not backed by entrenched institutional support (Jaffrelot, 2003) [8]. Bahujan rule thus existed in a compressed time frame forced to achieve transformation quickly while knowing that continuity was uncertain. Bureaucratic resistance compounded this problem. The Indian state is not a blank slate that responds uniformly to elected authority. It is layered with norms, loyalties, informal hierarchies that often outlast governments. Sudha Pai documents how bureaucratic compliance during Bahujan rule was uneven marked by surface obedience and deeper reluctance especially when directives threatened established interests (Pai, 2002) [10]. Such resistance rarely announces itself openly. It works through delay, procedural complexity, selective enforcement and quiet non-cooperation. These techniques of containment allow the state to appear responsive while limiting actual change. Loïc Wacquant's analysis of advanced marginality helps illuminate this dynamic by showing how modern states manage disruptive power through absorption rather than confrontation offering formal inclusion while preserving control over outcomes (Wacquant, 2008) [11]. Bahujan rule confronted this logic directly and in doing so exposed how limited the state's tolerance for redistribution and symbolic reordering actually was. Elite counter-mobilization followed predictably. Political opposition, media narratives, judicial scrutiny, and moral critique converged to frame Bahujan governance as aberrant. This convergence was not solely about policy disagreement; it was about restoring normative order. Gopal Guru's work on humiliation is instructive here, as it shows how power from below is often disciplined through moral discourse that questions competence, intention, and legitimacy rather than confronting authority head-on (Guru, 2009) [7]. Bahujan rule was subjected to precisely this form of discipline. Accusations of corruption, excess and authoritarianism functioned as tools of containment narrowing the space within which marginalized authority could operate. Gender intensified these vulnerabilities. The gendered nature of authority meant that once power slipped, its legitimacy collapsed more rapidly. Male leaders often retain residual authority even after electoral defeat, sustained by networks, reputations and normative expectations of leadership. Marginalized women do not enjoy the same cushion. Their authority is treated as conditional and revocable, dependent on constant performance and success. Feminist political sociology has repeatedly shown that women leaders are granted less margin for error and judged more harshly for failure, a pattern that becomes sharper when caste or race marks them as outsiders to power (Connell, 2009) [6]. When Mayawati lost office, the reversal of symbolic and material gains was swift underscoring how little institutional insulation Bahujan authority possessed. Statues were contested, policies questioned, narratives rewritten. This speed of reversal reveals a deeper truth about democratic inclusion. Inclusion that is not anchored in structural transformation remains thin. It can accommodate presence even authority, temporarily but it resists permanence. Gurminder Bhambra's critique of Eurocentric democratic theory is relevant here, as it highlights how formal equality often masks the persistence of hierarchies that determine whose rule is treated as normal and whose is treated as exceptional

(Bhambra, 2014) [2]. Bahujan rule was exceptional in precisely this sense. It was tolerated as an episode not absorbed as a norm. The contradictions of Bahujan governance thus lie not in individual failure but in structural constraint. Centralization was necessary yet limiting. Electoral dependence enabled access yet undermined continuity. Bureaucratic resistance neutralized policy without overt rebellion. Elite counter-mobilization reframed authority as illegitimacy. Gender amplified vulnerability once power slipped. Taken together these dynamics expose the shallowness of democratic inclusion in deeply unequal societies. Democracy proved capable of expanding representation and even allowing marginalized groups to rule but it struggled to normalize that rule. Bahujan governance illuminated this limit by pushing against it. The fragility of Bahujan rule does not negates its significance. On the contrary, it clarifies the conditions under which marginalized power operates. It shows that democracy is more comfortable with voices from below than with commands from below more tolerant of protest than of rule. Bahujan politics tested this comfort and found its edge. The lesson is sobering. Structural inclusion requires more than electoral victory. It demands institutional reconfiguration that can survive defeat gendered norms that do not treat authority as anomaly and bureaucratic cultures that respond to law rather than lineage. Bahujan rule exposed how far these conditions remain unmet. In doing so, it offered one of the clearest demonstrations of the limits of postcolonial democracy that inclusion without durability is not empowerment but exposure.

Conclusion

The trajectory traced in this paper from Kanshi Ram's construction of political assertion to Mayawati's exercise of state authority marks one of the rare moments in postcolonial India when marginalized politics crossed the threshold from representation into rule and it is precisely this crossing that gives the case its wider significance. Kanshi Ram appears here not as a charismatic mobilizer but as an architect of power, someone who understood that ethics without institutions remain exposed and that dignity without enforcement is fragile by design. He built the scaffolding organization, discipline, numerical consolidation and institutional ambition without occupying the throne himself recognizing that authority needed to be transferable if it was to endure. Mayawati, in contrast, stands as the executor of this architecture the figure through whom assertion was translated into governance, law, budgetary control and command over public space. This transition from assertion to authority was not smooth, celebrated or normalized. It was contested at every step and that contestation reveals something fundamental about democracy. Democratic systems often pride themselves on inclusion yet they remain deeply uneasy when inclusion hardens into authority, especially when that authority is exercised by those historically marked as unfit to rule. The discomfort surrounding Mayawati's governance did not arise solely from policy choices or administrative style. It arose because a Dalit woman governed decisively without apology and without performing the humility and compromise that marginalized actors are often expected to display. Gender here was not an added layer to caste; it was a structuring condition of legitimacy. Authority exercised by marginalized women was read as excessive where similar actions by dominant men passed as strength. This asymmetry exposes how caste and gender jointly police the boundaries of acceptable power. Political sociology helps clarify this pattern by reminding us that authority is not only institutional but normative stabilized through expectations about who can command and how that command should appear. When these expectations are violated legitimacy, itself becomes the site of struggle. The Bahujan case thus reveals democracy's selective tolerance that representation is welcomed, rule is resisted. Inclusion is celebrated durability is denied. The implications extend beyond India. In many postcolonial and liberal democracies, marginalized groups are encouraged to speak, protest, and even enter office but they encounter sharp resistance when they attempt to reorder institutions, memory and space. Gopal Guru's analysis of humiliation captures this dynamic well showing how power from below is often disciplined through moral language that questions competence, decorum or intention rather than confronting authority directly. Feminist theory adds further depth by demonstrating how women leaders face narrower margins of legitimacy and harsher penalties for deviation, a pattern that intensifies when race or caste marks them as outsiders to power. Read together, Kanshi Ram and Mayawati force a reconsideration of how democracy actually works. They show that political equality is easier to promise than to normalize and that democratic rotation does not automatically produce democratic acceptance of new rulers. For postcolonial democracy, this case challenges celebratory narratives that equate electoral success with empowerment. Bahujan rule exposed how quickly gains can be reversed, how shallow institutional insulation remains and how dependent marginalized authority is on continuous assertion. Yet this fragility does not diminish the importance of the transition from assertion to authority. It sharpens it. It shows that dignity acquires its most demanding political form when it governs, when it must command obedience rather than seek sympathy. For political sociology, the case underscores the need to move beyond leadership narratives and focus on structural power, institutional durability and the social distribution of legitimacy. For feminist theory it highlights how gendered authority operates not at the level of identity but at the level of norm enforcement shaping who is allowed to rule without explanation. For postcolonial democratic theory, it offers a sobering lesson that inclusion without durability is not empowerment but exposure. The future of Bahujan politics will turn on whether the architecture of power built by Kanshi Ram can be reactivated and adapted without collapsing into episodic rule and whether gendered suspicion of authority can be confronted rather than accommodated. This paper does not offer prediction or prescription. It offers clarity. The transition from margins to the state remains rare, contested and reversible. That rarity tells us less about the failure of marginalized politics than about the limits of democracies that claim equality while quietly guarding authority. Kanshi Ram and Mayawati revealed those limits by crossing them. That revelation remains their most enduring contribution.

References

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