

By Sidharth Mishra



Poll times are party times. If the polls happen to be in the nation's politically most significant state – Uttar Pradesh, parties would be in plenty. No wonder the master of mergers and defections, Chowdhary Ajit Singh has once again got going. As someone who has allied with almost all the political players who matter in Uttar Pradesh, Ajit Singh is now toying with the idea of a Grand Alliance in the company of Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. He is even ready to merge his Rashtriya Lok Dal with Janata Dal (United). This is not the first time Ajit Singh, who inherited his father and former Prime Minister Chowdhary Charan Singh's massive political legacy, has sought to merge his party with another national party. He did it first in 1988-89 when the Janata Dal was formed under the leadership of Vishwanath Pratap Singh. The Janata Dal soon split into fragments. A few years later he merged his party with the PV Narasimha Rao-led Congress and also managed to win a ministerial berth.

Thereafter, he successfully bargained for some years with Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party getting

his favourite Anuradha Chowdhary the coveted irrigation portfolio in the UP government. Subsequently, he entered into an alliance with the BJP followed by the Congress in 2009. In the run-up to the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, he tried his level best to get back into the NDA, which did not entertain him. Having lost even his family seat of Baghpat to the BJP, Chote Chowdhary, as Ajit Singh is addressed by his supporters, is seeking a political revival.

Uttar Pradesh: Poll time, party time

Written by Administrator

Wednesday, 10 February 2016 11:24 - Last Updated Wednesday, 10 February 2016 11:35

The major players in Uttar Pradesh politics – BJP, Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party- have little interest in Ajit Singh; thus, his desperation to get the JD(U) in the arena. In Nitish Kumar's party, the outfit's ceremonial president Sharad Yadav and his lackey KC Tyagi have their own axe to grind in western Uttar Pradesh. Since both are rootless wanderers in electoral politics, even having Ajit Singh for company, is not a bad option for them.

Given that Mulayam Singh Yadav decided to walk out of the Grand Alliance during Bihar Assembly polls late last year, there is little chance of Janata Parivar reuniting soon. Given the social antipathy between Ajit Singh's voter-base, comprising of land owning kulaks, and Mayawati's landless Dalits, the chances of the two coming together have always been very remote.

Newspaper reports indicate that a new political party will be formed with the proposed merger of the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), led by Ajit Singh, and the Janata Dal (United). Ajit Singh has gone on to claim that a committee had been set up for both parties to settle the merger.

There are also plans to entice smaller entities such as the Peace Party and the breakaway faction of the Apna Dal with the ultimate aim of roping in the Congress.

However, if the polarisation of votes happens the same way it did in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, there is little chance that such an alliance would bear any fruit. To the uninitiated, the BJP and its allies secured 73 of the 80 seats from the state in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Chowdhary Charan Singh had managed to maintain a strong grip over the voters from Western UP because he could bring landowning farmers of Jat and Muslim communities together. The two together not only mattered in numbers but also became a dominant social and political force. Following the Muzaffarnagar riots in 2012, Jats and Muslims have been at loggerheads. In fact, the BJP during the last Lok Sabha polls even managed to sway a part of the Dalit community, hitherto known to be committed to Mayawati, into its fold.

While the Muslim-Yadav (MY) combination held steadfast with Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party in Central Uttar Pradesh in 2014, Mayawati could not implement the Dalit-Muslim (DM) combination in the areas of her influence, with her party coming out empty handed. The BJP is also working hard towards retaining the Dalits within its fold during the Assembly elections.

That's an onerous task despite having inducted Mayawati's longtime confidante Jugal Kishore within its fold. This could be an erroneous move too because Mayawati has seldom faced any challenge from defectors and rebels within her rank. BJP would have done better to promote Dalit leadership from within its own rank, which it has miserably failed to do so far.

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As of now, the possible role of another Grand Alliance in the state looks negligible. With Chowdhary Ajit Singh, having the reputation of frittering away his father's political legacy, as the engine of the alliance, it looks unlikely to gather any electoral steam. Moreover, neither does Sharad Yadav nor KC Tyagi possesses any magnetic powers to wean away their community votes to the alliance. Yadav would steadfastly remain with Samajwadi Party while Tyagi is more of a wheeler-dealer than a public leader.

In their bid to retrieve, restore and consolidate their traditional votes, it will be interesting to witness the strategy employed by the likes of Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party. Questions will also arise on whether the BJP would manage to polarise the voters all over again. But what Ajit Singh can do, only Sharad Yadav would know.

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