

An Enigma Called Kanshi Ram

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Kanshi Ram, who died on October 9, 2006 after a long spell of illness, has been a veritable enigma in contemporary Indian politics. What else would one call a person, sans any resources, coming from nowhere and still posing a challenge to the mightiest of the mighty in the land that historically despised his antecedents; a politician who abhorred all principles and every norm, made a virtue of what is normally considered a vice and was still most sought after by the political bigwigs; a leader who never revealed his vision of emancipation and was still followed and revered by people as their messiah? Some people think of a parallel in B R Ambedkar and make comparisons. A comparison between these seemingly incomparable personalities could be misleading; but it may be surely said that Kanshi Ram emerged as the biggest and most creative leader in the post-Ambedkar dalit movement.

Born on March 15, 1934 in a humble Raidasi Sikh (dalit) family in Khawaspur village of Ropar district in Punjab, Kanshi Ram earned his BSc degree and took a job in a munitions factory in Pune. It is here that he was initiated into Ambedkarism by persons like the late D K Khaparde, his co-worker. His previous affiliation is said to be with a group headed by D Sundarayya. An incident in 1971 in which a qualified dalit woman was denied a job impelled Kanshi Ram onto a path of social activism. Mainstream dalit politics then was represented by faction-ridden Republican Party of India (RPI) in Maharashtra, although there was a rebellious eruption in response thereto of

frustrated dalit youth in the form of the Dalit Panthers. Kanshi Ram is not known to have considered joining either of them; rather, as his early comrades claim, he was against the Dalit Panthers. He instead discerned potential in an unlikely class of government employees belonging to dalits, other backward classes (OBCs) and religious minorities and formed the All India Backward and Minority Employees Federation (Bamcef) on December 6, 1973.

What distinguished Bamcef from many other dalit outfits was the perseverance and hard work of Kanshi Ram. Of course, he was actively helped by local Ambedkarite dalits, most of them coming from the Nagpur region. They are all lost to Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) historiography today. Since the Bamcef's apolitical format fitted well the government employees who yearned for "giving back to the society", many people plunged into it and contributed their time and money in a missionary mode. The Bamcef soon spread across the country, though it remained unnoticed to the mainstream media. To counter this media bias, it launched its own organ *Oppressed Indian* and later scores of daily/weekly newspapers in most Indian languages.

Viable Political Constituency

The most significant contribution of Kanshi Ram is his conception of bahujan as a viable political constituency and a political strategy of controlling the balance of power. Bahujanwad was meant to enlarge the potential constituency to claim 85 per cent of the population. The idea of bahujan may be traced to Mahatma

Phuley and even Ambedkar's strategy of making use of contradictions among the ruling classes. But their effective fusion and "operationalisation" is to be credited to Kanshi Ram. His creative genius is reflected in the coinage of names he gave to his organisations, such as Bamcef or Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS-4) or the catchy slogans with which he mobilised people. By declaring "jiski jitni sankhya bhari, uski utni bhagidari", he re-emphasised the rights of people to share political power and revived the strong Ambedkarite sense of dignity and self-respect in the masses who were mostly reduced to a votebank of the upper caste leadership of the ruling class parties. He set an example of selflessness, sacrifice, simplicity and devotion in public life. He stayed a bachelor and cut off his relationship with his family. He inspired confidence in people by demonstrating seemingly impossible feats, such as launching his own newspapers and declaring his intention to launch a TV channel. He always talked big, never grumbling about resources, which further drew people towards him.

This overbearing confidence characterised even his political campaigns, when he transited from the apolitical Bamcef to form DS-4 in 1981. Its theme slogan 'brahmin, bania, thakur chor, baki sab hum DS-4' (meaning, brahmins banias thakurs are thieves, the balance all are DS-4) offensively excluded the upper castes and attempted to consolidate all others. With a span of three years Kanshi Ram transformed the DS-4 into a full-fledged political party, the BSP, launched on Ambedkar's birthday with a slogan 'vote hamara, raj tumhara; nahi chalega, nahi chalega'. The goal was based on an Ambedkarian dictum that political power was the key to all problems. The trend of fragmentation of politics through the assertion of the regional bourgeoisie in the 1970s that precipitated in the Emergency and in whose aftermath a wide coalition was ushered into power at the centre provided a congenial political climate for the BSP's strategy of exercising a lever for the balance of power. In elections, when even the mainstream parties could not muster courage to contest all the seats, the strategist in Kanshi Ram decided to do so, not to win them but to cause the defeat of and weaken the mainstream parties. This strategy resulted in rout of the Congress Party

in different elections in Uttar Pradesh. The concept of a 'majboor sarkar' (dependent government) in place of everybody's claim to provide a 'majboot sarkar' (strong government) proved a stroke of genius in forcing the mainstream parties to beg support of the BSP. It is this strategy that lent it the requisite bargaining power to grab government power in UP repeatedly.

Volte-face of the BSP

In 1993 the BSP contested the UP assembly elections with another offensive slogan: 'tilak, taraju aur talwar, maaro inko jooto char'. In the wake of the demolition of the Babri masjid, this slogan echoed the anti-Hindutva sentiment of the secular forces. As part of a pre-poll alliance with Samajwadi Party (SP), the BSP grabbed the chief ministership but when the SP's turn came as agreed, it withdrew support and again formed the government with the support of the BJP. In the next election in 1996, the BSP had a pre-poll alliance with the Congress but after the polls, it allied with the BJP and formed the government. After the expiry of its term, it declined support to the Kalyan Singh government. At the centre, it played a key role in defeating the Vajpayee-led government in a no-confidence motion in 1998. All this did not prevent the BSP from forming government in UP with the BJP's support again in 2002. And, after grabbing the government power, Mayawati, the protégé of Kanshi Ram, stooped so low as to give a clean chit to and campaign for Narendra Modi, who was condemned by the entire world for his devilish role in the genocide of Muslims in Gujarat. The volte-face of the BSP was complete in the 2002 UP elections. The BSP, whose election meetings used to begin by asking the upper caste people to leave the audience, now began to woo brahmins by replacing its bahunwad by sarvajanwad. The slogan it coined said: 'hathi nahin ganesh hai, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh hai!' (The election symbol of the BSP is not a simple elephant; it is the Hindu triumvirate – Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh.) The BSP that at one time had withdrawn support to BJP on the charge of soft-peddalling the Atrocity Act had itself sought to render it ineffective by saying that it was being misused. Kanshi Ram had verily blessed this somersault!

Kanshi Ram had a peculiar way of responding to criticism of his opportunistic behaviour. Before someone accused him of political opportunism, he himself would declare that this was his strategy. As a matter of fact, all political parties

essentially did the same but they feigned decency and decorum. What they did surreptitiously, Kanshi Ram did openly and thus exposed the prevailing double standards in politics. It is interesting to note the people who accused him of political opportunism and unreliability repeatedly sought alliances with him even after his alleged misdemeanour. Kanshi Ram had repeatedly characterised the Congress and the BJP as the two sides of the same coin, calling one 'savnath' and the other 'nagnath' (both meaning the same – snake). If after such an indictment, these parties continued to seek political alliances with this unreliable person, it was their opportunism as well that got exposed. Kanshi Ram barely occupied a formal position of political power, except as an MP from Itawah in UP and Hoshiarpur in Punjab. He never made a mark as parliamentarian either. However, there may not be any other politician who was as feared as Kanshi Ram was in the mainstream political arena. People believed that this master strategist could throw up any number of surprises to catapult himself into the prime minister's seat at any time.

Unitary Control

Indeed, Kanshi Ram proved himself a strategist par excellence not only in political matters but also in the organisational matters. He never let any stereotypical dictums or opinions of others influence his strategy of having a unitary control over the organisational apparatus. Be it his Bamcef, DS4 or BSP, none had any operative organisational structure; none had any specified lines of authority. Everyone derived his or her authority at the whims of the supremo. This has basically safeguarded the BSP from internal splits and insulated it from horse trading suffered by all other parties, particularly those of its ilk like the RPI. Anyone defying the writ of the supremo invited his/her individual political demise without denting the party in any manner. Kanshi Ram was accused of being unscrupulous in disposing of people after using them. This is largely evidenced by the fact that none of the prominent people who supported him during his Bamcef days at Pune and Delhi are to be found in the BSP, except for the lone Mayawati. It is the same underlying organisational principle that sent them into political oblivion. Outsiders may term this organisational approach feudal and autocratic, but in the prevailing political milieu it has proved to be the effective stratagem to safeguard the integrity of party. The unitary control was ensured not only in

structural matters but also in all others. Kanshi Ram never promised anything or spoke of any plans, programmes or published any election manifesto. He was acutely aware that any such thing would constrict his strategic space.

Purely, in terms of electoral politics, which has somehow become a major obsession with all the dalit parties, Kanshi Ram's strategy proved quite effective, albeit in only certain parts of the country. He gave a qualitative impetus to moribund dalit politics, locating itself in the wider space peopled by the downtrodden. But he identified these people in terms of their castes and communities. Notwithstanding the fact that the bahun identity as coined by him is really a contradiction in terms, many people had believed in it but none knew how to gear it into action. Kanshi Ram seemingly succeeded in this task, at least in symbolic terms. Careful analysis may, however, reveal that a combination of certain historical developments and situational factors made possible much of this success. As he himself experienced, the political gains that he made were not replicable elsewhere. As such, these gains are bound to be short-lived and illusory unless they are built upon to implement a radical programme to forge a class identity among the constituents. In the absence of such a class-agenda, which is certainly a far cry with the BSP, the party was bound to degenerate into manipulative politics to grab government power. The BSP's unprincipled pursuit of power is basically driven by this exigency. It is futile to see in this manipulative game a process of empowerment of the subject people. The imperatives of this kind of strategy necessarily catapult a significant part of the dalit movement into the camp of the ruling classes as has happened with the BSP. The BSP's electoral parleys with all and sundry of the ruling classes essentially reflects this process of degeneration and exposes its own class character.

It is not easy to assess Kanshi Ram, either as a leader or as a legacy. Most of his obituaries customarily showered praises and paid eulogy to him as the messiah of dalits. His detractors however differ. The unprincipled pursuit of governmental power that he represented, falsely projecting this as bestowing political power to dalits, to the detriment of every other aspect of the dalit movement has certainly been a great negative. Whether in the long run, his model of politics furthers the dalit cause or hampers it is a question that can be posed but not easily answered. **EPW**

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