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**RECASTING REPRESENTATION: MANYAVAR KANSHI
RAMJI AND THE DEMOCRATIC ASSERTION OF THE
BAHUJAN**

Kapil Sarkar

Research Scholar in Political Science, Department of Economics & Politics, Vidya Bhavana,
Visva Bharati, Santiniketan, West Bengal, India.

E-mail - kapilsarkar1112@gmail.com

ORCID ID - <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9154-0925>

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Keywords	Abstract
<p><i>Bahujan Assertion, Caste and Power, Democratic Mobilization, Kanshi Ram, Bahujan Samaj Party, Social Justice Politics.</i></p>	<p>This article examines the political thought and praxis of Manyavar Kanshi Ramji as a transformative intervention in the theory and practice of democratic representation in postcolonial India. Moving beyond procedural understandings of electoral democracy, Manyavar Kanshi Ram reconceptualized representation as a project of structural power transfer to the Bahujan the socially marginalized majority comprising Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and minorities. Drawing intellectual inspiration from Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar yet departing strategically from his approach, Manyavar Kanshi Ramji shifted the focus from constitutional safeguards within elite-dominated frameworks to the consolidation of an autonomous political majority capable of capturing state power. Through the formation of BAMCEF as an ideological and organizational training ground, and later the establishment of the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984, he institutionalized a new model of subaltern political mobilization rooted in demographic arithmetic, cadre-based discipline, and long-term consciousness building. The article argues that Manyavar Kanshi Ram’s strategy of “social engineering,” which expanded the political base beyond Dalits to a broader Bahujan coalition, represented not opportunism but a pragmatic democratic method aimed at dismantling entrenched caste</p>



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hierarchies through electoral means. By foregrounding numerical majority as a moral and political claim, he challenged tokenistic inclusion and critiqued co-optation within mainstream parties, insisting instead on autonomous representation as the basis of substantive equality. His politics redefined state power as the “master key” for social transformation, thereby linking representation to governance, resource distribution, and symbolic dignity. While debates persist regarding majoritarian logic and ideological compromises, Manyavar Kanshi Ram’s intervention fundamentally altered the grammar of Indian democracy by centering caste-based exclusion within the discourse of popular sovereignty. The article concludes that his democratic assertion of the Bahujan constituted a radical yet constitutional reimagining of representation one that sought not merely participation in the political system but its social reconstitution.

1. INTRODUCTION

The evolution of democratic politics in postcolonial India cannot be adequately understood without examining the radical intervention of Manyavar Kanshi Ram, whose political thought and organizational strategy recast the meaning of representation from elite mediation to subaltern assertion. Emerging in the decades after independence, when formal constitutional equality had been established but social hierarchies remained deeply entrenched, Manyavar Kanshi Ram confronted a paradox at the heart of Indian democracy: the coexistence of universal adult franchise with the continued marginalization of the majority population structured by caste. While the constitutional vision articulated by Babasaheb Ambedkar had institutionalized safeguards such as reservations and fundamental rights, the operational sphere of political power continued to be dominated by socially privileged minorities who controlled parties, bureaucracy, and ideological discourse. Manyavar Kanshi Ram’s central argument was that democracy without social power redistribution amounted to symbolic inclusion, and that true representation required the transfer of state authority into the hands of the Bahujan- the historically oppressed majority comprising Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and minorities. His intervention was neither a rejection of constitutionalism nor an embrace of revolutionary rupture; rather, it was a strategic reorientation of democratic politics toward organized numerical strength. By transforming the sociological category of the “Bahujan” into a coherent political subject, he challenged the Congress-centric model of umbrella politics that relied on patronage and fragmented caste alignments, arguing instead that fragmented subaltern communities must consolidate to claim sovereign power through elections. The formation of BAMCEF in the late 1970s signaled his recognition that ideological preparation and cadre formation were prerequisites for durable political change, as he sought to mobilize educated employees from marginalized communities to serve as the intellectual and organizational vanguard of a broader mass movement. This preparatory phase culminated in the establishment of the Bahujan Samaj Party in 1984, marking a decisive shift from consciousness-building to direct electoral contestation. The BSP did not merely add another party to India’s plural political landscape; it redefined the grammar of



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electoral politics by asserting that demographic majority, when organized, could dismantle entrenched caste hierarchies through constitutional means. Manyavar Kanshi Ram's emphasis on "political power as the master key" encapsulated his belief that social reform without state control would remain limited and reversible, and that control over legislative and administrative apparatuses was necessary to transform patterns of resource distribution, symbolic recognition, and bureaucratic culture. His approach also reconfigured debates on representation within democratic theory, moving beyond liberal notions of individual preference aggregation to foreground collective historical injustice as a basis for political legitimacy. In this framework, representation was not merely descriptive presence in legislative bodies but substantive empowerment that altered who governed and in whose interests policies were formulated. The strategic alliances and social engineering experiments that later characterized the BSP's electoral successes, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, reflected Kanshi Ram's pragmatic understanding of coalition-building in a fragmented polity, even as they generated debates about ideological compromise and majoritarian logic. Yet these tactical maneuvers were anchored in a larger project: to normalize the idea that those historically relegated to the margins could legitimately claim the center of state power. By mobilizing caste as a structural category rather than a narrow identity marker, Kanshi Ram expanded the democratic imagination, compelling Indian politics to confront the material foundations of equality. His project illuminated the gap between formal democratic institutions and substantive social transformation, arguing that the promise of universal suffrage would remain incomplete until the Bahujan converted their numerical strength into organized political authority. In doing so, he not only extended Ambedkar's critique of caste-based exclusion but also adapted it to a mass electoral age, crafting a model of constitutional radicalism that sought transformation through ballots rather than insurrection. The significance of Kanshi Ram's intervention therefore lies not only in the electoral rise of the BSP but in the deeper theoretical shift he introduced: a reconceptualization of representation as democratic assertion rooted in collective self-respect, institutional capture, and strategic mobilization. His politics demonstrated that democracy is not self-correcting; it must be continuously reconstituted by those excluded from its benefits, and it is through such organized assertion that constitutional promises are translated into lived realities.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: FROM AMBEDKAR TO BAHUJAN CONSCIOUSNESS

The theoretical foundations of Bahujan politics as articulated by Kanshi Ram are deeply rooted in, yet strategically distinct from, the emancipatory vision of B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's critique of caste as a system of "graded inequality" provided the philosophical and structural diagnosis that would later inform Kanshi Ram's political praxis. For Ambedkar, caste was not merely a social hierarchy but a comprehensive system of exclusion that penetrated religion, economy, and political power, thereby rendering formal democratic equality insufficient without social transformation. His insistence on constitutional safeguards- reservations, fundamental rights, and institutional checks- was grounded in a profound skepticism about the moral reform of caste society and a



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realistic assessment of majoritarian domination within representative politics. Yet Ambedkar's project unfolded within the context of a newly independent nation-state where the immediate task was to embed principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity within constitutional architecture. He sought to secure political space for marginalized communities within a framework that was, at the time, overwhelmingly controlled by upper-caste elites. Kanshi Ram inherited this constitutional foundation but confronted a different historical conjuncture: by the 1970s and 1980s, universal adult franchise had normalized electoral democracy, yet the social composition of power remained disproportionately skewed. In this altered context, Kanshi Ram reinterpreted Ambedkar's legacy not as a closed doctrinal system but as a strategic blueprint requiring mass political consolidation. While Ambedkar emphasized safeguards within an elite-dominated polity, Kanshi Ram emphasized the transformation of that polity itself through numerical assertion. He shifted the axis from protection to power, arguing that political authority was the "master key" capable of unlocking social and economic emancipation. This reinterpretation did not negate Ambedkar's constitutionalism; rather, it extended it by insisting that constitutional provisions would remain underutilized unless the oppressed majority acquired the capacity to govern. Thus, Manyavar Kanshi Ram's theoretical move was to translate Ambedkarite critique into an electoral arithmetic that foregrounded the demographic strength of the marginalized as a latent source of sovereignty. The concept of "Bahujan consciousness" emerged from this strategic reworking of Ambedkarite thought and signified more than a rhetorical rebranding of Dalit politics. Drawing on the Buddhist-inflected phrase "Bahujan Hitay, Bahujan Sukhay" (for the welfare and happiness of the majority), Kanshi Ram constructed the Bahujan as a political category encompassing Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and religious minorities- communities fragmented by internal hierarchies yet united by structural exclusion from state power. His theoretical insight lay in recognizing that caste oppression persisted not only because of ideological hegemony but also because of political disunity among the oppressed. The challenge, therefore, was to cultivate a shared historical consciousness that could transcend localized identities and generate collective political will. Organizations such as BAMCEF became laboratories for this consciousness-building process, targeting educated employees who had accessed state institutions through reservations but often lacked a cohesive ideological framework. Kanshi Ram believed that this emergent middle stratum could function as an intellectual vanguard, disseminating a counter-narrative that reframed caste from a private stigma into a public question of power. The eventual formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party institutionalized this consciousness within the arena of electoral competition, transforming sociological majority into organized political agency. In theoretical terms, Bahujan consciousness challenged liberal individualism by asserting that historically oppressed groups must act collectively to rectify structural injustice; representation was thus reconceived as the self-assertion of a majority denied effective voice. At the same time, Kanshi Ram's framework navigated a delicate tension between majoritarian logic and emancipatory ethics: the Bahujan majority was invoked not to replicate domination but to dismantle it by democratizing access to



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state resources and symbolic recognition. By foregrounding numbers as a democratic claim while retaining commitment to constitutional procedure, Manyavar Kanshi Ram articulated a form of constitutional radicalism that sought systemic change through ballots rather than rupture. The theoretical shift from Babasaheb Ambedkar's guarded engagement with majority rule to Kanshi Ram's confident mobilization of a marginalized majority marked a significant evolution in anti-caste political thought, recasting democracy itself as a terrain of organized assertion where consciousness, arithmetic, and institutional strategy converged to redefine representation as collective empowerment.

3. BUREAUCRACY AND POLITICAL AWAKENING

Manyavar Kanshi Ram's early career as a government employee in the Defence Research and Development Organisation exposed him to the structural limits of reservation policies. Although affirmative action opened doors to public employment, institutional culture remained exclusionary. This experience catalyzed his conviction that state institutions could not be transformed without political control. In 1978, he founded BAMCEF (Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation), an organization designed to mobilize educated employees from marginalized communities. BAMCEF's innovation lay in its strategy: rather than mobilizing the poorest segments directly, it targeted a rising educated class that had benefited from constitutional safeguards. Saheb Kanshi Ram believed that this class had a historical responsibility to lead the broader Bahujan masses.

BAMCEF functioned as an ideological training ground. It cultivated political consciousness, organizational discipline, and a shared narrative of historical injustice. Importantly, it operated as a non-political, non-agitational body in its early phase, focusing on consciousness-building rather than electoral contestation. This staged approach reflected Saheb Kanshi Ram's belief in long-term preparation before entering the arena of competitive politics.

4. THE BIRTH OF THE BAHUJAN SAMAJ PARTY

The birth of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984 marked a decisive turning point in the trajectory of post-Ambedkarite politics, transforming the language of social justice into an organized electoral project under the leadership of Manyavar Kanshi Ram. Emerging after years of ideological groundwork through the BAMCEF and the more agitational Dalit Shoshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti (DS4), the BSP was conceived not merely as another political party but as the institutional embodiment of Bahujan consciousness. Saheb Kanshi Ram recognized that without direct engagement in electoral competition, the marginalized majority comprising Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and minorities would remain dependent on patronage networks within dominant parties. The formation of the BSP thus signified a strategic shift from consciousness-building to state capture through constitutional means. Its foundational slogan, "Bahujan Hitay, Bahujan Sukhay," invoked both moral legitimacy and demographic arithmetic, asserting that those who constituted the majority of India's population had the right to



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govern. Unlike earlier Dalit formations that often focused narrowly on symbolic protest or remained confined to specific caste bases, the BSP articulated a broader coalition politics that aimed to consolidate fragmented subaltern identities into a unified political bloc. The party's early electoral performances were modest, but its significance lay in reshaping political discourse: it challenged the dominance of the Congress system and regional upper-caste elites by foregrounding caste as a structural axis of power rather than a residual social category. Saheb Kanshi Ram's insistence that **"political power is the master key"** encapsulated the party's ideological orientation- state authority was viewed as the instrument through which social and economic hierarchies could be dismantled. The BSP's organizational structure reflected a high degree of centralization and cadre discipline, designed to prevent co-optation and ensure ideological coherence in a competitive political environment. It mobilized grassroots networks, deployed symbolic assertion through public rallies and iconography, and cultivated leaders from marginalized communities who could translate social grievances into electoral momentum. Over time, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP demonstrated that an autonomous Bahujan party could not only influence coalition politics but also form governments, thereby converting representational claims into administrative authority. The party's emergence redefined the meaning of representation in Indian democracy: it was no longer sufficient for marginalized individuals to occupy token positions within mainstream parties; instead, collective political agency rooted in shared historical experience became the foundation of legitimacy. In this sense, the birth of the BSP was not simply an organizational milestone but a theoretical intervention into democratic practice, asserting that genuine representation requires the capacity to govern, redistribute resources, and reshape symbolic hierarchies. Through its formation, Kanshi Ram institutionalized a new phase of anti-caste politics one that sought transformation through ballots rather than appeals, and through majority consolidation rather than fragmented protest thereby embedding Bahujan assertion at the very heart of India's electoral democracy.

5.ELECTORAL STRATEGY AND SOCIAL ENGINEERING:

The electoral strategy of the Bahujan Samaj Party under the guidance of Manyavar Kanshi Ram represented one of the most innovative experiments in democratic mobilization in postcolonial India, often described as "social engineering." At its core, this strategy sought to convert the numerical strength of the Bahujan Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, and minorities into a cohesive electoral bloc capable of capturing state power. In its initial phase, the BSP consolidated Dalits as a disciplined and loyal vote base by emphasizing dignity, symbolic assertion, and autonomous representation, thereby breaking their dependence on mainstream parties that had historically relied on patronage and token inclusion. However, Saheb Kanshi Ram recognized that demographic majority alone would not automatically translate into legislative majority due to caste fragmentation and the **first-past-the-post** electoral system. Consequently, the party gradually expanded its outreach beyond its core constituency, strategically incorporating OBC groups and, at times, segments of upper castes to build broader winning coalitions. This



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calibrated expansion was not an abandonment of Bahujan politics but a pragmatic adaptation to electoral arithmetic, demonstrating Saheb Kanshi Ram's belief that ideological commitment must be matched with tactical flexibility. The strategy reached a more refined form under the leadership of Mayawati, who implemented carefully structured candidate selection formulas and alliance-building efforts in Uttar Pradesh, balancing caste representation across constituencies to maximize electoral viability. Critics viewed these alliances especially those with ideologically divergent parties as opportunistic compromises, arguing that they diluted the radical edge of anti-caste politics. Yet from the BSP's perspective, social engineering was a means of destabilizing entrenched caste hierarchies by reconfiguring political alignments; it sought to transform historical antagonisms into temporary electoral partnerships while retaining Dalits as the moral and organizational core. Importantly, this strategy challenged the conventional assumption that caste identities necessarily produce fixed political loyalties; instead, it demonstrated that caste blocs could be reassembled through strategic leadership and issue framing. By distributing tickets to candidates from diverse communities and emphasizing governance themes such as law and order and development, the BSP attempted to reposition itself as both a party of social justice and administrative competence. Electoral strategy thus became an instrument of social restructuring: by altering who represented whom, and under what coalition logic, the BSP disrupted the monopoly of traditional elites over political power. In analytical terms, Kanshi Ram's social engineering redefined democratic competition as a site where historically oppressed groups could negotiate alliances without surrendering their core agenda, revealing the dynamic interplay between identity, arithmetic, and institutional rules in shaping outcomes within India's representative democracy.

6. REPRESENTATION AS POWER TRANSFER:

For Manyavar Kanshi Ram, representation was not a symbolic gesture of inclusion within an already structured hierarchy but a concrete process of transferring state power from historically dominant minorities to the marginalized majority he termed the Bahujan. This reconceptualization marked a decisive shift in democratic thought: instead of viewing elections as mechanisms for aggregating individual preferences, Manyavar Kanshi Ram treated them as instruments for restructuring social authority. In his analysis, post-independence democracy in India had institutionalized universal suffrage but had failed to alter the social composition of ruling elites; upper-caste dominance persisted within political parties, bureaucracy, and economic institutions, thereby limiting the transformative potential of constitutional guarantees envisioned by Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar. Manyavar Kanshi Ram argued that without control over legislative and executive power, marginalized communities would remain dependent on benevolent intermediaries who often diluted their interests. Thus, he framed political power as the “**master key**” capable of unlocking social dignity, economic redistribution, and bureaucratic reform. The formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party institutionalized this philosophy by creating an autonomous platform through which the Bahujan could contest and capture governmental authority. Representation, in this framework, meant not merely descriptive presence having members of oppressed communities in



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office but substantive control over policy decisions, resource allocation, and administrative priorities. By mobilizing caste as a structural category rather than a fragmented identity, Manyavar Kanshi Ram sought to convert demographic majority into governing majority, thereby aligning democratic arithmetic with social justice. This model of power transfer also challenged tokenism within mainstream parties, where marginalized leaders often lacked autonomy or were constrained by dominant leadership structures. However, Manyavar Kanshi Ram's theory was not a call for exclusionary majoritarianism; rather, it envisioned the Bahujan majority as an emancipatory force whose governance would democratize state institutions and extend equality rather than replicate hierarchy. The emphasis remained firmly within constitutional procedures elections, party organization, and legislative negotiation underscoring a commitment to reform through institutional means rather than extra-legal confrontation. In this sense, representation as power transfer became both a normative claim and a strategic program: democracy would achieve substantive depth only when those historically excluded from power assumed the authority to govern, redefine public priorities, and reshape the symbolic and material structures of the state in accordance with principles of equality and collective dignity.

7. DEMOCRATIC RADICALISM AND CONSTITUTIONALISM

The political project of Manyavar Kanshi Ram can be best understood as a form of democratic radicalism firmly anchored in constitutionalism, a synthesis that distinguished his movement from both liberal gradualism and revolutionary rupture. While his rhetoric frequently invoked the urgency of power transfer and the moral claim of the Bahujan majority, Kanshi Ram consistently operated within the institutional framework established by the Indian Constitution, whose emancipatory potential had been articulated most powerfully by Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar. Rather than rejecting parliamentary democracy as structurally compromised by caste hierarchies, he sought to radicalize it from within by reorganizing its social base. His assertion that "political power is the master key" did not imply insurrectionary seizure of authority but electoral capture through disciplined organization, ideological consolidation, and strategic coalition-building. The creation of the Bahujan Samaj Party embodied this constitutional radicalism: it was an autonomous political instrument designed to contest elections, form governments, and exercise state authority legitimately under democratic rules. Saheb Kanshi Ram recognized that constitutional guarantees reservations, civil liberties, and institutional safeguards could be undermined if the social composition of power remained unchanged; therefore, democratizing access to governance became essential to preserving constitutional values themselves. His politics thus inverted the common assumption that radical social transformation requires departure from constitutional procedure. Instead, he argued that the Constitution provided both legitimacy and opportunity for historically oppressed communities to claim sovereignty through ballots rather than bullets. This approach also reflected a strategic realism: in a plural and deeply stratified society, durable change required institutional stability and legal continuity. By combining uncompromising critique of caste dominance with adherence to electoral processes, Saheb Kanshi Ram expanded the scope of



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democratic possibility without destabilizing the constitutional order. The radicalism of his project lay not in dismantling institutions but in altering who controlled them, thereby transforming democracy from a formal arrangement into a substantive arena of social justice. In this synthesis of democratic militancy and constitutional commitment, Saheb Kanshi Ram advanced a distinctive model of political transformation one that treated constitutional democracy not as a finished achievement but as an unfinished promise requiring organized assertion by those historically denied power.

8. CONCLUSION

The political legacy of Manyavar Kanshi Ram lies in his profound recasting of democratic representation as an instrument of structural transformation rather than symbolic accommodation. By transforming the sociological category of the Bahujan into an organized political subject, he compelled Indian democracy to confront the disjunction between formal equality and substantive power. Drawing intellectual inspiration from Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar yet adapting his strategy to a mass electoral age, Manyavar Kanshi Ram shifted the emphasis from constitutional safeguards within elite-dominated institutions to the consolidation of autonomous political power through electoral mobilization. The creation of the Bahujan Samaj Party institutionalized this vision, demonstrating that historically marginalized communities could not only participate in democracy but govern within it. His insistence that “political power is the master key” encapsulated a broader theoretical claim: without control over legislative and administrative authority, social justice would remain partial and precarious. At the same time, his project remained anchored in constitutional procedures, revealing a distinctive form of democratic radicalism that sought transformation through ballots rather than rupture. Although the trajectory of Bahujan politics has encountered electoral fluctuations and internal contradictions, the structural shift initiated by Manyavar Kanshi Ram endures in the normalization of caste-based political assertion and the widening of representative space for subaltern communities. He challenged tokenism, exposed the limits of patronage politics, and foregrounded demographic majority as both a moral and democratic claim. In doing so, he redefined representation as collective empowerment rooted in dignity, organization, and state power. Ultimately, Manyavar Kanshi Ram’s intervention underscores that democracy is not self-executing; it must be continuously reconstituted by those excluded from its benefits. His politics demonstrated that constitutional democracy contains within it the tools for its own deepening, provided marginalized communities possess the organizational capacity and ideological clarity to claim them. In recasting representation as power transfer and democratic assertion, Manyavar Kanshi Ram expanded the horizons of Indian political thought, leaving behind a framework that continues to shape debates on equality, sovereignty, and the unfinished project of social justice.



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