

# **The Politics of Apna Dal: Navigating the Landscape of Single-Caste Parties in Uttar Pradesh, India**

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This study examines the political ascent of Apna Dal in Uttar Pradesh, focusing on the core research gap: how single-caste parties sustain influence beyond identity mobilization through strategic alliances and organizational tactics. While existing scholarship highlights the role of caste-based mobilization, there is a notable research gap in understanding the strategic alliances and organizational processes that enable such parties to sustain influence amid political fragmentation. Guiding this analysis is a theoretical framework rooted in identity politics and coalition theory, emphasizing the interplay between social recognition and political pragmatism. The core argument positions Apna Dal's success as a "contingent success" model, where pragmatic coalition-building with larger entities and territorial concentration of its Kurmi vote base strategically overcome the limitations of a narrow social base. Key findings demonstrate that the party's durable influence hinges on strategic coalitional opportunism rather than deep institutionalization, making its power disproportionate to its size. However, this leader-centric approach results in organizational fragility, evidenced by succession crises. The study concludes that Apna Dal exemplifies how caste-centric parties leverage strategic adaptability to secure political leverage and policy influence.

**Keywords:** Apna Dal, Identity Politics, Caste-Based Parties, Electoral Alliances, Social Justice, Coalition Theory, Uttar Pradesh

## **Introduction**

Political parties have been a major part of socio-political changes in India. They hold significant importance within democratic frameworks, serving as vehicles for political engagement, representation, and the articulation of diverse interests and beliefs. These parties also act as advocates for social factions aspiring to wield political influence, effectively broadening the democratic process by offering a platform for marginalised communities. India, for instance, has witnessed the emergence of numerous new parties, some of which have ascended to governance at national or state levels. In certain regions, these parties

have either been marginalised or have formed alliances with their opposition counterparts. During the late 1970s, the influence of the Congress Party waned, leading to the emergence of various regional parties in multiple Indian states, including Uttar Pradesh (UP).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, in the early 1980s, caste-oriented parties began to surface in different states, Uttar Pradesh (UP) being one of them.

Moreover, the role of caste in politics has significantly shaped the landscape of party dynamics in India. The process of caste politicisation works in both directions; politics relies on caste as much as caste finds a need for political representation (Kothari, 1995). When choosing politics as their avenue of interest, caste groups seize the opportunity to assert their distinct identities and vie for positions. The mobilisation of lower-caste politics primarily fell under the purview of political parties, driven by the sole objective of gaining control over the machinery of the state. The phenomenon of "Mandalization"<sup>2</sup> has enabled many backward castes like the *Yadav*, *Kurmi*, and *Jatav* to achieve more political representation, leading to their effective control over the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP).

While existing academic scholarship extensively covers the role of caste-based mobilization in India, there is a notable gap in understanding the specific strategic alliances and organizational processes that allow single-caste parties to sustain their political influence amidst high levels of political fragmentation. The politics of *Apna Dal* is the central focus of this study, which critically examines the party's ascent within the complex, caste-driven political landscape of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The core research problem addressed is how single-caste parties effectively leverage a focused social identity to influence both electoral outcomes and non-electoral politics. This study focuses on primary questions to address the identified gaps in scholarship regarding the organizational and strategic processes of single-caste parties, this study focuses on primary research questions How do single-caste parties like *Apna Dal*, *Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party* (SBSP) and *NISHAD Party* leverage specific social identities to influence electoral outcomes and policymaking, and What roles do alliances with larger national parties play in enhancing the electoral influence and survival of niche parties. How do internal organizational dynamics, such as charismatic leadership and succession crises, affect the party's prospects for growth?

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<sup>1</sup> In 1970, Rajni Kothari published a book titled 'Politics in India'. The major theme of the book was devoted to the then dominant Congress party. Kothari stated that the Congress established itself as the nation's authoritative speaker and agent of criticism and change, both before and after Independence.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Mandalization' refers to the politics, policies, and programmers which was recommended by the Mandal Commission report which also recommended reservation for the OBCs. Mandalization of politics means, that every party started to woo OBCs vote bank. It gave a surge to a range of OBC leaders in every political party.

A debate emerges in this context: the ideological stance upheld by the *Samajwadi Party* (SP) and the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) have also been embraced by these parties representing a single caste. Hence, the question arises as to why political distinctions manifest between major and minor caste-based parties. In the context of Uttar Pradesh (UP), it is observed that the political parties, namely the *Samajwadi Party* (SP) and the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP), have strategically leveraged the caste identities of Other Backward Classes (OBC) and Most Backward Classes (MBC) to garner electoral support. However, once these parties secure victory in elections, they tend to marginalise these castes, compelling them to establish their own single-caste political entities. The novel rise of single-caste parties in UP, their social justice politics differ from the SP/BSP. Their strategy involves bargaining for recognition and representation by challenging the immediate graded caste hierarchy, often by forming alliances with the BJP (Bishen, 2024).

In the democratic landscape of Uttar Pradesh (UP), single-caste political parties like *Apna Dal* have emerged as significant actors in advocating for community-specific interests and social justice. Despite their growing influence, these parties face persistent constraints related to their narrow social bases, limited geographic reach, and ideological singularity. The challenge lies in understanding how such parties navigate coalition politics, sustain their relevance, and attempt to expand their influence beyond their core caste support, amidst competition from larger, more inclusive parties (Patel, 2022). This study positions the success of *Apna Dal* as a "contingent success" model, challenging established theories of party institutionalization. Against "Catch-all" Theories: While Kothari (1964) emphasizes broad-based inclusion for stability, I argue that in fragmented democracies, "strategic adaptability"—the ability to leverage a niche vote bank through alliances—is a more vital survival mechanism for marginalized groups. Against the "Inclusive Identity" Argument: Scholars often focus on the SP and BSP as the primary vehicles for OBC mobilization. This paper argues that their failure to maintain inclusive representation created a vacuum that necessitated the rise of "single-caste entities" to provide both symbolic and substantive representation for sub-castes. The Addressing Institutional Fragility: In contrast to models suggesting parties must have deep organizational depth to survive (Panebianco, 1988), I argue that "partial institutionalization" centred on charismatic leadership allows niche parties to remain relevant, though it makes them structurally vulnerable to succession crises.

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to analyse *Apna Dal* and the broader trajectory of single-caste parties in Uttar Pradesh. It combines qualitative interviews with key party leaders and political analysts, selected through purposive sampling, with quantitative analysis of electoral data from 2012 to 2022. Semi-structured interviews provide insights into the party's ideology, internal organisation, alliance strategies, and challenges that electoral statistics

alone cannot capture. Qualitative data are analysed using thematic analysis, while validity is ensured through triangulation and standardized protocols. Despite limitations such as elite bias and restricted generalizability, this approach offers a balanced and rigorous understanding of *Apna Dal*'s political dynamics.

This study analyses the social and political trajectory of *Apna Dal* as a case study of single-caste party dynamics in Uttar Pradesh (UP). The research explores the strategies employed by *Apna Dal*, including alliance formation with larger parties like the BJP, in enhancing its electoral influence. This study focuses on identifying the challenges faced by *Apna Dal* in expanding its support base beyond its traditional caste community and region. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of the analysis is the future prospects of *Apna Dal* in maintaining and growing its political relevance in a changing socio-political landscape. This research is crucial for filling a significant gap in the understanding of how caste-based political parties operate and sustain themselves in contemporary Indian democracy. By examining *Apna Dal*'s experience, the study sheds light on the broader phenomenon of niche, identity-driven politics and their implications for social justice, coalition-building, and democratic representation. Insights from this study can inform policymakers, political strategists, and scholars interested in the evolving nature of caste politics and regional parties in India, emphasizing the importance of organizational capacity, inclusive outreach, and strategic alliances for small parties aiming for sustainable influence.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Single-Caste Parties and Identity Politics**

The theoretical framework guiding this study revolves around the concepts of identity politics, coalition theory, and social representation, which collectively help in understanding how single-caste parties like *Apna Dal* strategize to mobilize support, influence policy, and sustain political influence within Uttar Pradesh's fragmented political landscape. Identity Politics is central to understanding *Apna Dal*'s emergence and mobilization. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (2010) politics of recognition, the study views *Apna Dal*'s demands as fundamentally rooted in challenging the social hierarchy to gain rights and status. This framework emphasizes a three-dimensional social justice quest: recognition (asserting the Kurmi identity), redistribution (demanding specific reservation quotas), and representation (securing political office). This identity-based mobilization leverages the social capital of the Kurmi community, translating shared cultural and social recognition into a cohesive, reliable political support base.

The Coalition Theory and Strategic Pragmatism, informed by William Riker's concept of "conditionality," provides a strategic lens for analyzing *Apna Dal*'s alliances, particularly with the BJP. This theory explains that *Apna Dal*, despite its narrow social base, overcomes its systemic constraints by forming strategic alliances to achieve electoral dominance. The party leverages its geographically concentrated Kurmi support as a complementary asset to its larger

partners, securing legislative seats and political leverage that would be unattainable alone.

Hartz (1955) argued that identity politics serves as a means for socially excluded groups to claim recognition and influence, particularly when mainstream parties neglect or marginalize their interests. *Apna Dal*'s emphasis on representing the Kurmi community aligns with this by seeking social recognition and political power rooted in caste identity. The study shows that the major parties like the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) often marginalize smaller, specific OBC/MBC communities after securing power, compelling these marginalized groups (Kurmi, Nishad, Rajbhar) to establish their own single-caste political entities. *Apna Dal* Example: *Apna Dal* emerged in the post-Mandal era (mid-1990s) as an assertion of Kurmi identity after Dr. Sonelal Patel, a prominent leader in the BSP, established the party due to differences with Kanshi Ram. This perfectly illustrates Hartz's point: when the mainstream (BSP, in this case) failed to adequately recognize and represent Kurmi interests, a new, single-caste party emerged to fill that gap.

Rooted in Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) ideas, social representation theory explains how political parties serve as channels for marginalized communities to seek legitimate representation within institutions. *Apna Dal*'s core objectives advocating for social justice, reservations, and a caste census—are analyzed through this lens. The party seeks both symbolic (validating the Kurmi identity) and substantive (gaining access to resources and policy outcomes) representation, linking micro-level identity mobilization to macro-level policy influence.

In the context of the Global South, where party systems often exhibit weak institutionalization, small, identity-based parties like *Apna Dal* cannot rely on robust organizational depth for survival. Instead, their longevity hinges on two key factors partial institutionalization, focused on charisma as they develop organizational structures that are often leader-centric and tied to specific caste loyalties, making them vulnerable to factionalism and succession crises. Another is strategic coalitional opportunism. They maximize their influence and survival by acting as spoilers or facilitators through strategic alliances and elite bargaining, leveraging their geographically concentrated niche vote banks (clientelist resources) to secure legislative gains and policy influence disproportionate to their overall vote share. This integration argues that *Apna Dal*'s success is therefore contingent on these strategic maneuvers and charismatic appeal, rather than on achieving the structural transformation or deep institutionalization seen in older, established party models.

### **Political Evolution and Growth of *Apna Dal***

The rise of *Apna Dal* exemplifies the dynamic processes underpinning the rise of caste-based political parties in India. While its historical development is often depicted through a series of anecdotal events such as leadership emergence, electoral successes, and alliances, an academically grounded analysis reveals

deeper patterns consistent with broader theories of party evolution in a caste-politics context (Patel, 2022). Although in the specific context of Uttar Pradesh (UP), extensive academic research has explored the changes observed within the party structure following the country's independence. Initially, there was a prolonged phase of Congress Party rule from 1947 to 1967 (Kothari, 1964). During this period, the Congress Party acted as an inclusive entity, representing various castes, classes, and religious groups (Brass, 1984). It functioned as a catch-all party, garnering support from a broad cross-section of society (Kothari, 1964). The subsequent phase, spanning from 1967 to 1993, was known as the "Congress opposition system" (Yadav and Palshikar, 2003). During this time, the Congress Party remained a significant player in national politics, although its direct influence in the state diminished. Since 1990, there has been a noticeable uptick in the involvement of significant political entities like the *Samajwadi Party* (SP) and *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP)<sup>3</sup> across the state (Hasan, 1998). The third phase shifted towards a competitive multi-party system, signalling the decline of the Congress Party's dominance. The influence of backward and lower castes within the Indian democracy expanded in tandem with the deepening of democratic values (Yadav & Palshikar, 2003). The fourth phase commenced in 2007 and continues to the present (Verma, 2016). Besides, the decline of Congress as a political force paved the way for the rise and establishment of several single-caste parties such as *Apna Dal*, *Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party* (SBSP), *NISHAD Party*, *Ulema Council*, and *Lok Dal*, among others.

*Apna Dal's* evolution reflects partial institutionalisation, primarily centred around charismatic leadership and caste loyalty, rather than formal organizational depth. The party's initial mobilization was heavily dependent on founder Dr. Sonelal Patel's leadership charisma, which aligns with leader-centric models of party development. The Caste is a primary axis of political identity in *Apna Dal*, serving as the basis for resource mobilisation and electoral support. The party's focus on the Kurmi community exemplifies *caste-based consolidation*, a process whereby political parties mobilize support through delineated caste identities, forging social solidarity and political coalitions around shared caste interests. The political development of *Apna Dal* is indicative of caste-based party formation in post-Mandal north India, especially in Eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP). Being a part of the larger context of OBC mobilization, the

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<sup>3</sup> The Samajwadi Party (SP) is a prominent political party in India, founded in 1992 by Mulayam Singh Yadav in Uttar Pradesh. It is primarily focused on social justice, promoting the welfare of marginalized groups, including the backward classes, Dalits, and Muslims. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) was founded by Kanshi Ram in 1984, with the primary goal of empowering Dalits, backward classes, and other marginalized communities. The party is rooted in the ideology of Ambedkarism, advocating for the rights and upliftment of Dalits, tribals, and other disenfranchised groups in India.

party attempted to transform Kurmi identity into an independent political agenda. *Apna Dal*, which originated in the mid-1990s in eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP), is a stage of subaltern political assertion in the post-Mandal era, especially among Kurmi and other backward classes (OBCs) that are allied with them.

*Apna Dal*, a Kurmi-centric political party in Uttar Pradesh (UP), India, was founded on November 4, 1995, by Dr. Sonelal Patel, who was a prominent member and leader of the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) (Verma, 2005). He established *Apna Dal* due to differences with Kashi Ram. Dr. Sonelal Patel was a strong BSP leader in the 1990s and contested his first election in 1989 for the Choubeypur assembly seat under the *Lok Dal* led by H. N. Bahuguna, using the bullock cart as his party's symbol (Verma, 2016). BSP founder Kanshi Ram selected him to expand the party's support in Kanpur. As the BSP candidate, he garnered around 20,000 votes. Kanshi Ram appointed Dr. Sonelal Patel as the General Secretary of Uttar Pradesh's BSP. From this position, Dr. Sonelal Patel endeavoured to unite Dalits, backward classes, and *Kurmi* farmers in the state. However, Kanshi Ram gave significant importance to Mayawati, a young female member, which caused consternation among several dedicated party members who had worked towards BSP's development (Singh, 2010). This situation marginalised Sonelal Patel within the BSP, compounded by his displeasure with Mayawati's arrogant demeanour. The conflict came to a head in 1995 when the BSP was given the chance to lead a coalition administration in UP. Consequently, Kanshi Ram opted to nominate Mayawati as the chief ministerial candidate. Mayawati's government had a brief tenure from June to October 1995. During this period, numerous party leaders left the BSP due to the limited political opportunities for many Dalits and OBC leaders, leading to the formation of new political parties (SG, 1999).

Dr. Sonelal Patel consistently championed the rights of the impoverished, farmers, Dalits, tribals, and backward communities through his involvement in various political parties. (Verma, 2016). Although influenced by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar's ideas, Dr. Sonelal Patel observed the ongoing neglect of marginalised and backward groups in society. Recognising the significant *Kurmi* population in the state, he realised their lack of representation and unity. This insight propelled him to establish a political party, aiming to secure *Kurmi* participation in positions of power.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Sonelal Patel was well aware of the *Kurmi* community's potential strength, which had hitherto been fragmented. His goal was to unite them, thereby reshaping the state's political landscape. Despite the Yadavs having previously consolidated their position through the *Mandalisation* process and Mulayam Singh Yadav's political movement that led to the formation of the *Samajwadi Party* (SP), Dr. Patel focused on attaining social and cultural recognition through his political party's establishment (Verniers, 2018). To

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Anu Priya Patel, president of Apna Dal Party of Mirzapur in her residence on January 22, 2021.

establish the *Apna Dal party*, Dr Sonelal Patel initiated public engagement within the *Kurmi* community. In November 1994, he organized a rally at *Begum Hazrat Mahal Park* in Lucknow as a crucial step in this endeavour. Sonelal Patel believes, based on how openly casteist Mulayam Singh Yadav's government is, UP should be where all OBCs get special treatment and be treated equally.<sup>5</sup> The opposition groups argue that the Yadav, chief minister's caste, is more inclusive than other OBCs. When Sonelal Patel, called for a “*Kurmi Rajnitik Chetna Maha Rally*,” he believed *Kurmi* as a caste, are just as well-off as the Yadav's, but census numbers make it harder for them to get quotas (Verniers, 2018). They say that the Yadav's have an advantage because they all have the same last name, while the *Kurmis*, known by their various sub-castes like *Verma, Patel, Singh*, and *Gangwar*, do not. So, it was not a surprise that the “*Upjati chhodo, Patel Jodo*” (drop the sub-caste, write Patel) slogan at the all-party rally in Lucknow tried to establish *Kurmi's* identity.<sup>6</sup> As a result of this rally, the *Kurmi* community realised how powerful they were, and the political strategists knew a *Kurmi* caste party was on the rise in the state of Uttar Pradesh at the time (SG, 1999). In November, the rally at *Begum Hazrat Mahal Park* was prohibited, while the rally at *Baradari Park* saw the announcement of the formation of *Apna Dal*. (Verniers, 2022). The main concern of the *Apna Dal party*, which emphasises power, is not about enjoying happiness; it's about the welfare and service of the oppressed and poor, dedicated to continuing the fight for social justice. *Apna Dal's* evolution fits within emerging *patterns of caste-party development* observed in Indian states: initial mobilization based on charismatic leadership and caste loyalty, subsequent attempts at institutionalisation, engagement in alliance politics, and strategic adaptation through electoral alliances with national parties.

The case of *Apna Dal* is highly relevant for understanding the dynamics of other single-caste parties in Uttar Pradesh (UP), such as the *Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party* (SBSP) and the *Nishad Party*. These parties, while representing different castes, share fundamental characteristics in their origin, strategy, and limitations. *Apna Dal's* foundation on the political ascent of the *Kurmi* community is analogous to how other single-caste parties are formed, often representing Most Backward Classes (MBCs) or Other Backward Classes (OBCs) who felt politically excluded. *Apna Dal* focused on the *Kurmi* community. Similarly, the *Nishad Party* champions the interests of the *Nishad* (boatmen/fishermen) community, and the *SBSP* targets the *Rajbhar* community (Patel, 2024). These communities including *Kurmi, Rajbhar, Nishad, and Kumar*, often experienced marginalization, compelling them to establish their own

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Krishna Patel, former president of Apna Dal Party of Mirzapur in her residence on January 22, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Vinay Verma, MLA of Apna Dal Party Shoratgarh of in his residence on January 25, 2021.

political entities after being overlooked by larger parties. The comparison demonstrates that the rise of *Apna Dal*, the *SBSP*, and the *Nishad Party* reflects a broader phenomenon of partial institutionalization and strategic adaptation among MBCs and OBCs in Uttar Pradesh. These parties arise because their constituent communities (Kurmi, Rajbhar, Nishad, and Kumar) were historically marginalized and neglected by larger parties, even by ostensibly pro-OBC parties like the SP and BSP. This aligns with Hartz's argument that identity politics is a response to mainstream neglect. Due to their narrow social bases, these parties survive by focusing on territorial concentration in districts dominated by their core caste community. This geographical niche maximizes their bargaining power in coalition formation. Their success is consistently contingent rather than structural. They survive by acting as kingmakers or regional power brokers through alliances, often with the BJP, which provides them with the political leverage (legislative seats and policy influence) that their limited internal resources cannot secure alone. All three parties are susceptible to organizational fragility and rely heavily on charismatic leadership (e.g., Dr. Sonelal Patel, Anu Priya Patel). This makes them vulnerable to factionalism and succession crises, a structural limitation shared by single-caste parties. By placing *Apna Dal* alongside the *SBSP* and the *Nishad Party*, the analysis transitions from a case study of one party to an understanding of a resilient political strategy used by specific marginalized communities to achieve representation and influence in India's fragmented political landscape.

### **Post-Sonelal Patel Apna Dal**

The phase following the death of Dr. Sonelal Patel in 2009, particularly the period after the 2012 elections, serves as a crucial test for the study's regarding the structural limitations of single-caste parties. Sonelal Patel's death led directly to an internal crisis that fractured the party, dividing it into two factions: Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), led by his wife, Krishna Patel, and Apna Dal (Sonelal) [ADS], led by his daughter Anu Priya Patel. Analysing these dynamics is essential to determine whether this internal conflict weakened the party's institutional resilience or paradoxically bolstered its external alliance capacity. The single-caste parties rely heavily on charismatic leadership, making their organizational structures inherently vulnerable to succession crises. The party's evolution reflected "partial institutionalization," prioritizing the founder's charisma and caste loyalty over formal organizational depth. The sudden leadership vacuum and the ensuing familial dispute over candidate selection directly exemplify this structural fragility.

The inability to manage the succession process smoothly confirms that Apna Dal lacked the "fixed structures, routinized practices" and organizational capacity necessary for stability beyond the founder's life. The resulting factionalism—culminating in the formal recognition of Apna Dal-Sonelal as a state party while the other faction, Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), sought alternative alliances (like with the SP)—demonstrates a severe weakening of organizational

coherence and ideological unity. The division into two separate entities fundamentally undermined the party's capacity for sustained political stability (Patel, 2024). While the internal organization suffered, the outcome of the factional split paradoxically strengthened the external strategic position of the dominant faction, Apna Dal (Sonelal), in the context of coalition politics.

The study positions Apna Dal's success as a "contingent success" model, where strategic adaptability—the ability to leverage a niche vote bank through alliances—is vital for survival in a fragmented democracy. The dominant faction, led by Anu Priya Patel, successfully allied with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) during the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. By securing a legislative seat and aligning herself with the rising national power (BJP), Anu Priya Patel successfully institutionalized her faction as the legitimate representative of the concentrated Kurmi vote bank. This alignment demonstrated that the party's "survival and subsequent success were 'contingent rather than structural,'" heavily dependent on strategic coalitional opportunism (Brennan & Buchanan, 1980). The alliance allowed Apna Dal-Sonelal to secure legislative seats and political leverage "disproportionate to its overall vote share" by acting as a crucial regional power broker.

However, the subsequent success of the Anu Priya Patel-led faction, *Apna Dal* (Sonelal), in forging a stable and electorally successful alliance with the BJP, demonstrates that this fragmentation paradoxically strengthened the strategic alliance bargaining capacity of the surviving faction. By consolidating the party's core asset—the concentrated Kurmi vote bank—under a single, reliable leadership structure (ADS), the faction maximized its utility to the larger national party, ensuring its political survival and influence in a manner consistent with coalition theory (Riker, 1962). The distinction is central: internal institutional depth was sacrificed, but external political leverage was gained, underscoring the dominance of strategic coalitional opportunism over organizational resilience for single-caste parties in Uttar Pradesh.

### **Social Base of Apna Dal**

The term 'social bases of the party', pertains to demographic groups that consistently support a specific political faction, irrespective of the issue or time of year (Marks, Attewell, Hooghe, Rovny, & Steenbergen, 2022). *Apna Dal* primarily garners support from the Other Backward Classes castes, particularly from the *Kurmi* community, which constitutes approximately 3 to 4 percent of the party's voter base according to the 1931 Census conducted by the British Government in India.<sup>7</sup> The use of the 1931 Census serves as a historical baseline

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<sup>7</sup> Bureau, T. H. (2023). Apna Dal (S) reiterates support for caste-based census. *The Hindu* , October 18. Retrieved on January 12, 2024, from The Hindu website: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/apna-dal-s-reiterates-support-for-caste-based-census/article67431501.ece>

to indicate the social presence of Kurmis in Uttar Pradesh (UP, rather than as a precise contemporary demographic measure. Despite its dated nature, such data remain analytically relevant for understanding the persistence of caste identities and their role in political mobilisation. Historical caste proportions help explain long-term social structures and patterns of voter behaviour, supporting theories of caste and ethnic resilience in Indian politics. The party has experienced a 12 percent increase in voter support across 16 districts in Uttar Pradesh (UP). The districts include Mirzapur, Sonbhadra, Bareilly, Unnao, Jalaun, Fatehpur, Pratapgarh, Kaushambi, Allahabad, Sitapur, Bahrach, Shravasti, Balrampur, Siddharthnagar, and Basti.<sup>8</sup> The *Kurmis* are the second largest group of backward castes in Uttar Pradesh, following the Yadavs 8.7 per cent (see Table 1 below). According to the 1931 caste census, they make up 3.5 percent of the population in Uttar Pradesh (UP) (Table 1). Kurmis are spread across Uttar Pradesh (UP), but the influence of the factions of *Apna Dal* is mostly limited to the Purvanchal region (East UP). Kurmi voters might give their loyalty to other Kurmi leaders belonging to traditional political parties in other regions (Patel, 2024).

This class has a significant impact on approximately 100 assembly seats in Uttar Pradesh. The *Kurmi* community holds significant influence in urban areas, particularly in the districts adjacent to the Ganges River, spanning from Kanpur to Mirzapur. *Apna Dal* secured a vote share exceeding 40% in the 2017 assembly election in the nine seats it won. The *Apna Dal*'s electoral strength is rooted in caste bloc voting, wherein Kurmi voters mobilise around co-caste leadership based on shared identity and interests. This support is reinforced by demographic advantage: as a numerically significant and politically organised OBC group, the Kurmis provide *Apna Dal* with a stable vote base, enabling the party to exercise influence beyond its organisational size. In sum, the support base of *Apna Dal* can be conceptualized as a caste bloc, reinforced by structural demographic advantages, social networks, and identity-based mobilisation. The use of 1931 Census data, while outdated as a precise measure, functions as a symbolic reference point emphasizing the persistence of caste identities as a basis for political organisation. The electoral success of *Apna Dal* reflects the broader applicability of ethnic politics theories, where caste groups utilize mobilization strategies that combine social identity, demographics, and shared interests to influence electoral outcomes. This perspective underscores that caste-based parties are both a product of socio-demographic realities and adaptive political strategies aimed at securing recognition within the complex fabric of Indian electoral politics.

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<sup>8</sup> Srivastava, R. (2024). Kurmis, a community that keeps all UP political parties on tenterhooks. *India Times*. February 3. Retrieved on March 11, 2024, from The Times of India website: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/kurmis-the-key-political-community-in-uttar-pradesh/articleshow/107376154.cms>

**Table 1 : Distribution of Castes based on 1931 Caste Census in Uttar Pradesh**

Category	Caste Names	Percentage of Total Population
<b>A) Upper Caste</b>	Brahmin Thakur Bania Kayastha Khatri	9.2 7.2 2.5 1.0 0.1
<b>Total of Subgroup A</b>		20.0
<b>B) Other Backward Caste</b>	Yadav Kurmi Koeri Lodh Gujjar Kahar Gadaria Teli Nai Barhai Kachi Murao Kewai Others (including Rajbhars and Nishad)	8.7 3.5 2.8 2.2 0.7 2.3 2.0 2.0 1.8 1.5 1.3 1.3 1.1 10.7
<b>Total of Subgroup B</b>		41.9
<b>C) Scheduled Castes</b>	Chamar Pasis Dhobi Bhangi Others	12.7 2.9 1.6 1.0 2.8
<b>Total of Subgroup C</b>		21.0

**Source:** 1931Caste Census of India for the United Province of Agra and Avadh (Present Uttar Pradesh)<sup>9</sup>.

In Uttar Pradesh (UP), Kurmis are on the OBC list for both the State and Centre, the Social Justice Committee Report of 2001 and the Justice Raghavendra Kumar Committee of 2018 suggested the subdivision of reservations for Other

<sup>9</sup> Note: the caste census of United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Vol-XVIII, Uttar Pradesh - Census 1931 - India. (2021, May 28). Censusindia.gov.in. <https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/32516>

Backward Classes (OBCs).<sup>10</sup> The Social Justice Committee Report of 2001 (Samajik Nyay Samiti, 2002). This committee, led by Hukum Singh, recommended a three-fold division of reservation for OBCs to ensure that reservation benefits percolate down the hierarchies. Mainly, the report aimed to rationalize reservations by placing the Yadavs in Group A and Kurmis in Group B. However, Justice Raghavendra Kumar's Committee Report (2018)<sup>11</sup> reiterated the need for dividing the OBC reservation. It was constituted on the demand for Jat reservation and has been reported to suggest putting the dominant OBC castes—the Yadavs, the Kurmis, and the Jats into one category. The three-fold division of OBCs was reiterated, although with a different composition than the 2001 report. The proposed subdivision is related to the demand from parties like the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP), which advocates for a three-fold subdivision of the OBC reservation so that benefits trickle down to the Most Backward Classes (MBCs).

Besides that, Table 2 provides a voter classification in Uttar Pradesh that highlights the decisive role of caste arithmetic in shaping political strategies and electoral outcomes. Non-upper castes dominate the electorate, driving the shift from Congress-era politics to identity-based mobilization after the Mandal era. Intermediary (Backward) Castes (OBCs), at 37.6%, form the largest bloc, making their support essential for any party seeking power. This explains the rise of SP and BSP since the 1990s. However, OBCs are internally fragmented, leading to the emergence of single-caste parties like Apna Dal, SBSP, and the NISHAD Party, which consolidate specific sub-castes and gain leverage through alliances. Scheduled Castes, at 21.6%, remain a crucial vote bank, historically mobilized by the BSP and increasingly targeted by the BJP. Upper castes (Brahmins and Rajputs), though politically important, together form only 16.3%, insufficient on their own to secure a majority.

**Table 2**  
**Classification Based on Voter Analysis in Uttar Pradesh**

**Source:** Sharma, S. (2024, June 3). UP, Haryana may see a big shift in Dalit vote share, predicts exit poll. India Today.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/up-haryana-may-see-a-big-shift-in-dalit-vote-share-exit-poll-reveals-2548548-2024-06-03>

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<sup>10</sup> Rashid, O. (2018, December 19). OBC quota split a factor in U.P. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/obc-quota-split-a-factor-in-up/article25783124.ece>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Castes	Per Cent
Intermediary (Backward) Castes	37.6
Scheduled Castes	21.6
<i>Brahmins</i>	9.6
<i>Rajputs</i>	6.7

### Ideological Foundations of *Apna Dal*

Every political party emerges from specific environments shaped by historical, economic, and socio-cultural factors. It will be incumbent on each party to identify the preferences of its constituents, set objectives to serve those interests, and embark on a program of action to achieve goals. Each party can express its overall perspective of its surroundings and the role it sees for itself. In other words, each political party defines its ideology, associated with problem-solving; it must provide not just a theoretical framework but also a plan of action for concepts in practice. When a party develops its ideology, it proclaims how it aims to allow society to fulfil the tasks of pattern maintenance, goal achievement, and environmental adaptation. *Apna Dal*'s ideological foundation presents a clear duality, serving both as a substantive blueprint for social transformation (its declared ideology) and an instrumental tool for political power and alliance-building (its practiced strategy). *Apna Dal* operates with a dual political identity, where its declared ideology provides the substantive motive for mobilization, while its practiced electoral strategy provides the instrumental mechanism for survival and power acquisition. The declared ideology serves as the party's foundational mandate, centred on achieving social justice and recognition for marginalized communities, particularly the Kurmi caste. The practice of Electoral Strategy (Instrumental Mechanism). The practiced strategy is driven by political pragmatism, utilizing the party's niche identity as a resource to secure political power and overcome structural limitations through strategic alliances.

The party is profoundly influenced by the egalitarian ideas of Lord Buddha and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. This foundation underpins its commitment to implementing the fundamental principles of universal justice, freedom, equality, and brotherhood outlined in the Constitution of India.<sup>12</sup> Dr Sonelal Patel's primary objective in establishing *Apna Dal* was to advocate for the rights of the poor, backward, farmers, and tribal to provide them a dignified place in society. Fundamentally, the party seeks recognition for its core support base, the Kurmi community, challenging existing social hierarchies to gain rights and status. This involves leveraging caste identity to assert the community's social and cultural distinctiveness in the democratic process. *Apna Dal*'s ideological

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Anu Priya Patel, president of Apna Dal Party of Mirzapur in her residence on January 22, 2021.

position can be characterized as pragmatic and caste-centred rather than purely doctrinal. Its core objectives resonate with substantive ideals of social justice rooted in Ambedkarite and Buddhist principles, yet these principles are often mobilized instrumentally to achieve electoral gains and alliance-building. The party's strategic behaviour—forming alliances with larger parties and focusing on caste-based issues—indicates that ideology functions as both a substantive blueprint for social justice and an instrumental tool within the While *Apna Dal* proclaims adherence to egalitarian ideals and social justice, its ideological consistency appears complex and somewhat fluid.<sup>13</sup> The party's ideological stance fundamentally aligns with caste-centric social justice, emphasizing upliftment of backward communities, particularly the Kurmi caste. However, the party's strategy increasingly leverages pragmatic alliances, chiefly with the BJP, a party with a broader Hindutva and development agenda, suggesting a possible shift from a purely caste-identity-based ideology to a more pragmatic, alliance-driven approach. *Apna Dal* successfully integrates its caste-centric identity politics (the ideology) with strategic political pragmatism (the strategy) to navigate the fragmented landscape of Uttar Pradesh, using its principles both to mobilize its core community and to negotiate powerful electoral partnerships.

### **Aims and Objectives of *Apna Dal***

The primary objective of the *Apna Dal* party is to function as a political, social, and economic movement that seeks to implement the fundamental principles of universal justice, freedom, equality, and brotherhood outlined in the Constitution of India.<sup>14</sup>

#### **1. Political Representation**

The *Apna Dal* party aims to actively participate in politics and engage with the government to foster a movement and facilitate transformative outcomes. Political change is a necessary prerequisite for achieving any form of change. Therefore, it is imperative to actively pursue political power to bring about desired transformations. *Apna Dal* regards democracy and participation as fundamental pillars of the nation. As our political representation in the parliament and legislative assembly grows, we will amplify our advocacy for social justice. Increasing political representation for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) is crucial for achieving social justice.

#### **2. Social Justice: Social and Cultural Recognition**

*Apna Dal* primarily prioritises the politics of marginalised communities and seek to advance their interests. To empower marginalised individuals, including farmers and the economically disadvantaged, is to involve them in the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> The *Apna Dal* Party's website link outlines the aims and objectives of the party. See the link <https://apnadal.in/about>

governance process. *Apna Dal* supports the implementation of a census based on caste.<sup>15</sup> Advocating for a 27% reservation for socially and economically disadvantaged students in medical entrance examinations. India is home to diverse populations representing various castes, communities, and religions. These groups contribute to the nation's resources and opportunities across different regions.<sup>16</sup>

### **3. Educational Capabilities**

*Apna Dal* advocates for the implementation of a nationwide judicial examination to ensure equal participation and representation for Dalit, marginalized, and backward classes in the selection for judicial posts.<sup>17</sup> The implementation of a uniform education system necessitates the abolition of the dual education system within the country.

### **4. Agricultural Issue**

While fixing the cost of agriculture and giving it the status of an industry, farmers should be given the right to keep the price of their crops.

### **Policy and Programme of Apna Dal**

*Apna Dal*'s emphasis on implementing reservations, caste census, and agricultural reforms demonstrates a targeted approach towards addressing social inequalities faced by backward communities. While these policies align with principles of social justice and affirmative action, their feasibility is contingent upon widespread administrative capacity and political will. The literature on policy implementation (Rondinelli & Crespin-Mazet, 2010) suggests that such social policies often encounter bureaucratic inertia, resource constraints, and resistance from entrenched caste and political interests. For instance, the caste census, despite political backing, remains administratively challenging due to outdated data collection infrastructure and resistance at various levels. Transforming caste-based policies into impactful programmes requires not only political commitment but also robust institutional mechanisms. While *Apna Dal*'s policies strategically address immediate social justice demands, their long-term viability hinges on integrating these initiatives within comprehensive development frameworks that prioritize governance reform, accountability, and inclusive growth dimensions well-articulated in public policy scholarship (Krook & True, 2014)

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Anu Priya Patel president of Apna Dal Party of Mirzapur in her residence on January 22, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> The Apna Dal Party's website link outlines the aims and objectives of the party. <https://apnadal.in/about>

The programmes aiming to enhance educational access, agricultural support, and social justice have the potential to reduce disparities if effectively executed. However, empirical studies (Jha & Sivakumar, 2017) indicate that caste-based welfare schemes tend to generate limited impact in the absence of broader development initiatives, such as infrastructure and governance reforms. For example, free education and reservation policies, while expanding access, often lack accountability mechanisms, leading to questions about their sustainability and actual socio-economic transformation. From a governance perspective, *Apna Dal*'s focus on caste-specific policies aligns with participatory governance theories emphasizing the inclusion of marginalized groups (Fung, 2006). However, the effectiveness of these programs depends on institutional capacity and transparency. The literature warns of the risk of creating segmental inclusiveness that may reinforce caste identities without fostering broader social cohesion or merit-based development (Kannan & Kothari, 2009). Therefore, without complementary policies promoting economic mobility and equitable service delivery, caste-centric programmes risk entrenching social divisions rather than alleviating inequality.

### **Electoral Politics and Alliances of Apna Dal Party**

In India, the electoral importance of single-caste parties has not been fully assessed due to various reasons. The first reason is that many single-caste parties tend to disappear after the election (Patel, 2024). However, this does not imply that such political parties do not influence election outcomes. In India, specific criteria need to be established for studying political parties at the state or national levels. Among these criteria, the most important one is achieving a certain percentage of votes cast or winning a specified percentage of contested seats and potential victories (SG, 1999). Single-caste parties do not receive sufficient attention in academic discussions on election studies. They are often overlooked in academic debates and are not incorporated into significant electoral analyses in India. Within the context of election studies<sup>18</sup>, they are categorized as “other” (Patel, 2024). Prominent think-tank institutions and political scholars do not devote significant attention to the examination of single-caste parties in the discourse on elections. This is because they primarily focus on major political parties, assessing solely their potential to secure electoral victories rather than delving into their objectives concerning the politics of recognition and representation.<sup>19</sup> It is imperative to seriously contemplate the investigation of single-caste parties concerning aspects of social, cultural, and political recognition. The significance of single-caste parties cannot be overlooked. These

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<sup>18</sup> Election studies are the academic study of elections, voting behaviour, political parties, and the entire electoral process.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Anu Priya Patel president of Apna Dal Party of Mirzapur in his residence on January 22, 2021.

parties have established their presence in the electoral landscape of Uttar Pradesh (UP). While single-caste parties play a crucial role in securing numerous seats, their influence becomes particularly relevant during elections (Patel, 2024).

The period begins with a crucial milestone *Apna Dal*'s initial entry into competitive assembly elections. *Apna Dal* made its electoral debut in the 2012 Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP), winning one seat. Analysing the party's performance from 2012 onwards allows the study to measure its initial political efficacy and the geographical concentration of its support base as it began contesting seats, providing the baseline for its rise. The timeframe encompasses the critical shift in *Apna Dal*'s political strategy: moving from a nascent party to a consistent, successful alliance partner, predominantly with the BJP. The *Apna Dal* made its debut in the 2012 Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP). During this initial foray, the party contested two assembly seats and emerged victorious in one seat. In a comparison with Congress and BSP, the 2012 assembly elections saw Congress secure 28 seats and BSP secure 80 seats (Table 3). This period showcases the party's evolution from "subaltern political assertion" in the post-Mandal era to a successful player in alliance politics. *Apna Dal*'s alliance with the BJP exemplifies strategic coalition theory in electoral politics, where smaller parties leverage alliances to bypass the limitations of their social base and electoral strength (Brennan & Buchanan, 1980).

In the context of Uttar Pradesh's First-Past-The-Post electoral system, small parties often face the "spoiler effect" and "electoral marginality" (Lijphart, 1994), which can threaten their survival unless they align with larger, more electorally viable entities. The study utilizes this period to demonstrate that *Apna Dal*'s survival and subsequent success were "contingent rather than structural," heavily dependent on strategic coalitional opportunism. Specifically, the analysis of electoral statistics from 2012 to 2022 helps quantify how alliances enabled *Apna Dal* to "maximize its influence and survival by acting as spoilers or facilitators," securing legislative seats and political leverage disproportionate to its overall vote share. The rise of *Apna Dal* fits within the context of caste-based consolidation and subaltern political assertion in the post-Mandal era of North India. The party's trajectory, along with similar parties like the Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party (SBSP) and the Nishad Party, is seen as part of an emerging pattern where marginalized communities establish their own entities to secure recognition, redistribution, and representation. The contemporary analysis confirms these parties share a common policy platform centred on securing social justice, recognition, and political leverage, often through advocacy for a caste census and reservations.

**Table 3**  
**Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Election, 2012**

Party	Seats Contested	Seats Won
Congress	355	28
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)	403	80
Apna Dal	2	1

**Source:** *Election Commission of India, 2021*

The 2012–2022 period is essential because it includes the internal crisis that tested the organizational resilience of the party, confirming the theoretical argument about fragility in single-caste parties. The death of the founder, Dr. Sonelal Patel, in 2014 falls within this timeframe, leading directly to the party's internal conflicts and division into two factions: *Apna Dal* (Kamarawadi) and *Apna Dal* (Sonelal). This structural vulnerability, rooted in dependence on charismatic leadership, is a core argument of the study. The post-2014 developments provide empirical evidence that these parties often lack the "fixed structures, routinized practices," and organizational depth necessary for smooth succession, leading to internal fracture. Analysing electoral cycles across this decade allows the study to continuously track the "representation ceiling" and other structural limitations faced by *Apna Dal*. The continued reliance on the Kurmi community and concentrated geographic reach (Mirzapur, Prayagraj, Fatehpur, etc.) throughout this decade demonstrates the party's core limitation its difficulty in achieving broad-based influence. The success within this decade highlights the enduring salience of caste in UP politics, while the limitations simultaneously underscore the necessity for these parties to seek "strategic adaptability" and possibly broaden their appeal to maintain relevance (Patel, 2024).

**Table 4**  
**The survey recorded votes for two specific factions of the Apna Dal alliance in Uttar Pradesh**

Party	N (Count)	N (%) (Total Sample)	Valid (%) (Voted Respondents)
Apna Dal Sonelal	255	3.5	3.8
Apna Dal Kamerawadi (Krishna)	16	0.2	0.2
<b>Total Apna Dal Votes</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>3.7%</b>	<b>4.0%</b>

Source: Based on the provided survey data from the Uttar Pradesh Post poll Survey 2022 by CSDS

**N (Count)** represents the absolute number of survey respondents who gave that specific answer or belong to that particular category

The primary qualitative factor is that *Apna Dal* (Sonelal) is a crucial ally of the BJP alliance, while *Apna Dal Kamerawadi* (Krishna) is aligned with the SP alliance. The survey results indirectly reflect the success of these respective alliances: *Apna Dal Sonelal* (3.8% of the valid vote). This significant share contributed to the overall performance of the BJP alliance. When respondents voted for the BJP alliance, this party often represented the coalition in specific constituencies, demonstrating successful vote transfer and consolidation within the ruling alliance's voter base. *Apna Dal Kamerawadi* (Krishna) (0.2% of the valid vote): This lower share indicates a marginal presence and contribution to the SP alliance's total. While present, its electoral impact was considerably smaller than its counterpart. *Apna Dal* candidates likely benefited substantially from the strength and image of their alliance leaders (Modi/Yogi for *Apna Dal Sonelal*, Akhilesh Yadav for *Apna Dal Kamerawadi*). The voters were generally paying attention to the larger party symbol or alliance, rather than the specific, local *Apna Dal* candidate, which is typical for junior alliance partners. As parties largely rooted in specific backward caste (OBC) politics, the *Apna Dal* factions rely heavily on caste consolidation. Their electoral performance (3.7% combined share) reflects their core ability to mobilize and consolidate these caste votes, which are essential for the BJP and SP alliances to succeed in a diverse state like Uttar Pradesh (UP).

Anu Priya Patel's leadership has been instrumental in guiding the *Apna Dal* to repeated victories in state elections over the past decade (Patel, 2022). This achievement is noteworthy given that both the popularity and support for other primary political parties in the state have dwindled during the same period (Patel, 2024). Heading to the 2022 assembly elections, Congress secured a mere 2 seats, and the BSP secured only 1.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, *Apna Dal* received 12 seats despite competing for only 17 seats.<sup>21</sup> This success story culminated in the *Apna Dal* party emerging as the third-largest political entity in the state, trailing only the BJP and SP (Table 5).

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<sup>20</sup> IANS. (2022). Assembly Election Results 2022: Apna Dal scores better success rate than bigger parties in Uttar Pradesh. *Indiatvnews*. March, 11. Retrieved on January 12, 2025, from <https://www.indiatvnews.com/elections/news/assembly-election-results-2022-apna-dal-scores-better-success-rate-than-bigger-parties-in-uttar-pradesh-anupriya-patel-latest-election-news-updates-2022-03-11-763750>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

**Table 5**  
**Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly Election, 2022**

Party	Seats Contested	Seats Won
<b>BJP</b>	370	255
<b>Congress</b>	399	2
<b>Samajwadi Party (SP)</b>	347	111
<b>Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)</b>	403	1
<b>Apna Dal Party</b>	17	12

**Source:** *Election Commission of India, 2022*

The party's founder Dr Sonelal had contested in numerous assembly and Lok Sabha elections but had never secured a victory.<sup>22</sup> Despite having 3 candidates from his party win seats in the 2002 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, he himself still faced defeat.<sup>23</sup> Despite collaborating with the BJP, the party failed to secure any seats in 2007. After the passing of Sonelal, his wife Krishna Patel assumed the presidency of the *Apna Dal*, while his daughter Anu Priya was appointed as the party's general secretary through a decision reached by party members during a meeting convened after Dr Sonelal's demise.<sup>24</sup> The responsibilities were divided, with second daughter Pallavi tasked with overseeing the party's assets and Anu Priya Patel entrusted with managing political activities.<sup>25</sup> Currently, the party is divided into two factions. One is *Apna Dal* (Kamarawadi), led by Krishna Patel, and the other is *Apna Dal* (Sonelal), helmed by Anu Priya Patel. The analysing *Apna Dal*'s success reveals it as predominantly contingent rather than structural. Its electoral gains are largely driven by coalitional advantages, regional vote concentration, and charismatic

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<sup>22</sup> Singh, S. (2009). He never won but in UP caste politics, he was never out. *Indian Express*. October, 20. Retrieved on January 12, 2025, from The Indian Express website: <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-archive/web/he-never-won-but-in-up-caste-politics-he-was-never-out/>

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Srivastava, P. (2024). Family feud over Apna Dal founder Sonelal Patel's legacy bubbles over amid changing power dynamics. *The Print*. December 19. Retrieved January 1, 2025, from ThePrint website: <https://theprint.in/politics/family-feud-over-apna-dal-founder-sonelal-patels-legacy-bubbles-over-amid-changing-power-dynamics/2409990/>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

leadership, aligned with clientelism patterns (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007). Its success hinges on contingent factors, such as alliance stability, caste mobilization, and leader charisma, rather than a deep-rooted institutional or structural transformation of the political system. However, the party's dependence on alliance ties illustrates its vulnerability; failure in maintaining alliances or a shift in larger political currents could undermine its survival, consistent with elite-centred political models where small parties' durability is fragile and highly contextual (Lunkhampitak & Adams, 2017). The small parties in FPTP systems survive through electoral niche strategies, concentrating support geographically and building targeted vote banks (Duverger, 1954; Rae, 1967). *Apna Dal* sustains itself by territorial concentration in districts dominated by the Kurmi community, enabling it to maximize vote share locally.

Furthermore, bargaining and adaptability are crucial; small parties often evolve into kingmakers or regional power brokers, as outlined by spoiler and facilitator theories. Their survival depends on institutional flexibility, alliances, and adaptation to changing political contexts. While *Apna Dal*'s political mobilization is fundamentally rooted in caste identity (specifically the Kurmi community), the analysis of its electoral politics implies that voter behaviour, even for its core supporters, is not exclusively defined by caste. The discussion suggests that for single-caste parties like *Apna Dal* to succeed, they must navigate a political environment where voters also consider broader issues and pragmatic factors. Single-caste parties face difficulties appealing to the broader electorate because voters may prioritize issues such as administration, economic progress, and social welfare initiatives over narrow caste concerns. This implies that voters outside the core Kurmi community, and potentially some within it, are motivated by broader developmental and governance issues. *Apna Dal*'s ideological foundation, while emphasizing social justice rooted in Ambedkarite and Buddhist principles, is characterized as pragmatic and caste-centered rather than purely doctrinal. This indicates that the party uses its ideology instrumentally to achieve electoral gains and alliance-building, suggesting that voters are attracted by the potential for tangible benefits and political power derived from the party's strategic actions, not just its identity narrative. *Apna Dal*'s success is largely driven by coalitional advantages, regional vote concentration, and charismatic leadership, aligning with clientelism patterns. This suggests that voter support hinges on contingent factors such as the charisma of leaders (like Dr. Sonelal Patel and Anu Priya Patel), and the perceived benefits derived from its stable alliances, which can translate to access to resources or influence, reflecting a transactional aspect of voter behaviour. The study emphasizes that *Apna Dal*'s alliances, particularly with the BJP, are crucial for amplifying its electoral influence. This dynamic means voters, even the core caste support, are effectively voting for a coalition ticket. The success of the party relies on voters accepting and supporting the strategic partnership, which might sometimes involve aligning with a party (BJP) that has a broader Hindutva and development agenda,

potentially shifting the focus away from a purely caste-identity-based ideology. *Apna Dal*'s trajectory demonstrates that the survival of single-caste parties in India's fragmented democracy hinges on a strategic blend of niche social mobilization and pragmatic coalition building. The party survives by overcoming the inherent limitation of a narrow base (the Kurmi community) through territorial concentration—maximizing influence in specific districts where its core vote bank is dominant.

### **Challenges and Future Prospects**

*Apna Dal* have gained prominence in eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP), but their effectiveness and durability are restricted and challenged by various factors. The structural and strategic hurdles faced by caste-based parties like *Apna Dal*, focusing on the "representation ceiling"—a limited capacity to expand beyond their core caste support—highlighted in political science literature as a significant barrier to substantive broad-based influence (Sartori, 1976; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Such parties often become leadership-centric, relying heavily on charismatic figures, which hampers long-term institutional resilience and organizational development, as discussed by Panebianco (1988) and Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018). An important limitation of single-caste parties is their limited support and narrow social bases. These political parties predominantly prioritize the concerns and preferences of their castes, consequently limiting their ability to garner widespread appeal and backing across the population. For example, *Apna Dal* primarily represents the *Kurmi* community (Patel, 2024). The limited scope of their social base hinders their capacity to rally voters from other castes and communities effectively. In a politically heterogeneous state such as Uttar Pradesh (UP), where alliances hold significant sway, single-caste parties may encounter difficulties in forging broader electoral partnerships essential for achieving a majority (Patel, 2022). *Apna Dal* are constrained by their restricted geographic reach, which represents a significant limitation. These parties frequently possess a concentrated support base in particular regions or districts where their caste constituency dominates (Verma, 2004). *Apna Dal*'s political influence is predominantly concentrated in Mirzapur, Prayagraj and Fatehpur, etc. (Verma, 2005). Single-caste parties sometimes encounter difficulties and challenges in forging and maintaining political alliances.

Coalition dependency emerges as a double-edged sword: while alliances enable electoral gains, excessive reliance on larger partners like the BJP risks marginalizing the party's autonomous identity and undermining its durability—paralleling insights from Lunkhampitak & Adams (2017). However, alliances with other parties are significant to maximizing election chances and building a social base with the diverse community in a fragmented political landscape. When these parties compete in elections beyond their core regions, their caste-centric programs may not appeal to voters from diverse backgrounds, restricting their capacity to build alliances and grow their political power. Moreover, single-

caste parties encounter difficulties expressing a more comprehensive ideological perspective that extends beyond the interests of their particular caste (Patel, 2024). This constraint impedes their capacity to appeal to a broader electorate beyond their caste supporters, who may prioritize issues such as administration, economic progress, and social welfare initiatives over caste concerns. The emphasis on caste-based interests hampers the creation of a more inclusive and harmonious society. Almost all single-caste parties rely significantly on their leader's charisma and appeal, frequently centered on an eminent caste leader or a strong party personality (Verniers, 2018). Unequivocally, charismatic leaders can initially win support and mobilise their followers, but the party's long-term existence is hampered by its reliance on an individual leader without well-defined organisational frameworks. The party institutionalisation process with clear organizational frameworks, durable leadership structures, and policy programs is often weak in small, caste-based parties, making them vulnerable to leadership attrition and fluctuating political winds (Rahat & Poguntke, 2009; Pempel, 2010). Thus, they hinge on overcoming these structural limitations: expanding support bases beyond caste constituencies, institutionalizing party structures, and cultivating leadership that can sustain support independently of individual charisma (Kuenzi & Lowen, 2006). Academic debates underscore that without such evolution, these parties risk stagnation or erosion in the competitive, majoritarian electoral landscape (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

## Conclusion

*Apna Dal's* political trajectory in Uttar Pradesh (UP) is emblematic of the resilient dynamics of single-caste parties in India. The party effectively leverages Kurmi caste identity to mobilize support and secure recognition, while its strategic alliances, particularly with the BJP, are crucial for converting social presence into tangible political power and legislative gains. While this pragmatic, alliance-driven strategy ensures influence, the party's dependence on a single caste and charismatic leadership imposes structural limitations, including a narrow support base and organizational fragility. *Apna Dal* thus demonstrates that single-caste parties are not marginal but rather significant, strategic players whose durability hinges on balancing focused identity mobilization with pragmatic coalitional adaptation. The study of *Apna Dal* offers several explicit policy implications for governance, democratic representation, and party behaviour. *Apna Dal's* success reinforces the sustained political salience of demands for social justice, including caste-based reservations and the implementation of a caste census. Policymakers must acknowledge that these issues are central to the political aspirations of marginalized communities and cannot be bypassed. However, the viability of such policies (e.g., reservation implementation, caste census) hinges on overcoming bureaucratic inertia and resource constraints, requiring robust institutional mechanisms and accountability.

While Apna Dal advocates for participatory governance, focusing on caste-specific welfare schemes risks generating segmental inclusiveness, reinforcing caste identities without fostering broader social cohesion or merit-based development. Governments must ensure that caste-centric programs are integrated within comprehensive development frameworks that prioritize accountability, inclusive growth, and broader economic mobility to effectively reduce inequality. The reliance of small, strategic parties like *Apna Dal* on elite bargaining and coalitional opportunism makes governance stability highly contextual. The policymakers need to understand that the survival of these smaller partners is crucial for the stability of larger governing coalitions, and their sustained policy influence can be disproportionate to their size. The fragility of single-caste parties, evident in leadership crises and factional splits following the founder's death, highlights the need for stronger party institutionalization. Policy interventions (though often indirect) or electoral reforms could encourage the development of durable organizational structures and defined ideological platforms beyond personal charisma, which would enhance the long-term resilience and accountability of regional political forces.

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