

Will Mayawati be PM, wonders India's Dalit capital

This city, famous for the Taj Mahal, is also known as the Dalit capital of India. And people here are busy debating if Mayawati - the woman who has risen from the bottom of the social hierarchy to be Uttar Pradesh chief minister - will finally get a shot at the country's top post.

Before the verdict of the 15th Lok Sabha is finally out, Agra residents are wondering if 'Mayawati will be offered the prime ministership or if history will repeat itself like in 1977, when Jagjivan Ram, the tallest Harijan leader then, was sidelined by anti-Dalit elements who installed Morarji Desai in the post'.

In numerous tea shops across the city, in the Dalit neighbourhoods of Jagdishpura, Bodla, Gwalior road and elsewhere, the concern for Mayawati, chief of the Bahujan Samaj Party, is all too evident.

'The Dalits of India want to see Mayawati as the prime minister of India. The Dalits are unanimous that she fully deserves the post as she is not only an efficient administrator but also the icon of crores of Dalits all over India,' says social activist Netra Pal Singh of Jagdishpura.

Agra has a strong presence of the socially backward Jatav community, involved in the shoemaking trade. With a population of over 300,000 here, they are also present in large numbers in neighbouring towns. And these Dalits see one of their own in Mayawati.

'The BSP leaders at the local level are fully convinced that the opportunity has already knocked on Maya's doors,' says Arvin Pushkar, a Dalit activist.

A Buddhist monk said if Mayawati - who has so far gone with the Third Front, in which the Left is a key player - plays her cards intelligently she could emerge as the new rallying point in the current political scenario.

It was a year and a half ago that Mayawati began to be projected as a future prime minister by several political groups, including the Leftists, and she herself has made her ambition all too evident. A section of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders has also demonstrated a soft corner for her.

Analysts here say for the Leftists in India the present moment is a historic opportunity.

'If they support Mayawati's ascendance to the top job, the Communists can ride piggyback on her party's organisational structure in Uttar Pradesh and broadbase the Left movement which has never found roots in the Hindi heartland,' according to senior mediaperson Rajeev Saxena.

Mayawati's name appeared some months ago in the roster of 100 most powerful and influential women in the world, published by a prestigious American journal.

Many compare her meteoric rise with US' first black President Barack Obama.

A protege of late BSP founder Kanshi Ram, she rose from being a humble teacher to chief minister of a state which is bigger than the Russian federation in population and which sends the largest contingent of parliamentarians to India's Lok Sabha.

Most Dalit leaders prior to her had no doubt toiled to organise the underprivileged classes but they also invariably bungled their entry into the power structure.

It was Mayawati who, through sheer aggressive posturing and hard bargaining, not only ruled the state thrice but has now presented herself as an indispensable actor in the power game in New Delhi.

Her spectacular rise has meant the end of political invalidity of the Dalits and their consolidation into a crucial political constituency. They form 15 percent of the Indian electorate.

For the moment at least, Mayawati has filled a vital emotional vacuum and given a new lease of hope to the downtrodden often described as the 'wretched of the earth'.

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