



**BEHENJI:**

**A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF MAYAWATI**

by Ajoy Bose

Penguin Viking, 277 pages, Rs 499

Reviewed by BEN FRUMIN

**I**N A LAND where a person's career prospects and social standing are hugely affected by the intransigent and brutal hierarchy of caste, class and religion, and where cruel gender bias routinely compels expecting parents to illegally abort female fetuses viewed as unwanted burdens, the story of Mayawati Kumari is an amazing and hopeful anomaly. A member of the Dalit caste, historically one of the most crushingly oppressed communities on earth, and a woman, Mayawati (as everyone in India calls her) is currently serving her fourth nonconsecutive term as chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, and one of its poorest. With a population of more than 160 million, if Uttar Pradesh were an independent nation-state, it would be the sixth largest on the planet.

And Mayawati's governorship over this mass of people is not the sort of precarious rule tenuously balanced atop a feeble and fractious coalition that many governments in India at all levels are. Instead, her party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, which is as synonymous with its leader as any personality cult, swept to an incredible real majority victory last year by uniting an unlikely team of voters that included both oppressed Dalits and the upper caste

Brahmins traditionally responsible for doing the oppressing.

What this incredible caste-transcending victory means for the future of India—where elections are often based on identity politics, pandering promises to demographically identified vote banks and furious gotcha name calling—has become a hot topic among India's chattering classes. Can the Mayawati model be replicated in other jurisdictions across India, where already blue chalkings of the BSP elephant adorn walls in neighborhoods rich and poor, in states large and small? And, more importantly, who is Mayawati? There is startlingly little known about the Dalit woman who catapulted from oppressed obscurity to the ranks of India's most powerful leaders, a woman who many believe will be prime minister one day. Who is she, and how on earth did she overcome the crushing inequities of her caste and gender to gain riches, fame and power?

These are among the most compelling questions in Indian politics, and the fact that they remain unsatisfyingly answered makes *Behenji*, a cursory and sympathetic political biography of Mayawati by veteran Indian journalist Ajoy Bose, a terrible disappointment. Mr. Bose declares early in *Behenji* (a respectful term for sister) that "Mayawati the person is virtually unknown" and that "no one, not even her closest associates, can lay claim to know the real Mayawati." True or not, readers of Mr. Bose's book are certain to feel the same sense of detachment from the Dalit leader, who throughout the book remains a distant name attached, sometimes only tangentially, to power plays.

Mr. Bose's two-dimensional, enig-

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matic Mayawati is a character described by over-the-top adjectives and sweeping statements, rather than shown through illustrative up-close anecdotes. She is a shape-shifting politician who in some passages has the careful demographic-exploiting guile of Karl Rove, and in other passages appears to be a mere puppet of her mentor, Kanshi Ram.

Further, Mayawati is often not even the central character of her own story. There are numerous long passages exploring the BSP's role in recent elections, alliances and governments while hardly mentioning Mayawati at all, implying indirectly that perhaps she was the beneficiary of the actions and decisions of others rather than the prime mover herself. Mr. Bose's Mayawati is often a flat character hovering on the fringes of her own story.

Still, Mr. Bose does provide intriguing detail on the double crosses, secret deals, ephemeral and illogical alliances, and violent conspiracies of Indian politics. He offers believable if weakly sourced theories on how Mayawati, once installed as the head of the BSP by high-powered Dalit leader Kanshi Ram, was able to navigate this treacherous, constantly-changing landscape.

But the critical question of why Kanshi Ram put an unknown political novice into such an important role is never really answered, despite Mr. Bose describing Mayawati's first meeting with Kanshi Ram as "perhaps one of the most significant encounters in Indian politics" and "the defin-

ing moment of Mayawati's life and career." The source of the comically unbelievable details of this hour-long meeting between the big-shot Dalit leader and Mayawati, then an unknown 21-year-old schoolteacher with no ambition higher than scoring a cushy government job as a district collector, goes totally unmentioned by Mr. Bose. One can only assume that this passage, like many others, is essentially lifted

from Mayawati's massive two-volume autobiography—a self-serving text that can hardly be considered gospel.

The most intriguing material here isn't the result of the author's own digging, but rather the footnoted work of other journalists. It's unclear whether Mr. Bose even had to leave his desk to report the bulk of this book. The many charges of cronyism, nepotism and corruption against Mayawati

are dismissed as untrue or overblown, often without evidence.

Most egregiously, Mr. Bose never even asked Mayawati for an interview, declaring that his "gut sense" was that Indian political leaders are wary of biographers and that Mayawati's involvement might hinder rather than help his work. The result is a political biography that hobbles along on Mayawati's unreliable autobiography and the work of other writers, never really answering that the most fundamental questions about the lady who may very well lead India.

