M ost social movements of the marginalised take the electoral route after gaining some popular acceptance. While this transition is made to seize power and get justice, party politics also robs social movements of their radicalism, as success in electoral politics demands that competing castes, communities and ideologies be accommodated.

The Bhim Army of Chandrashekhar Azad may be at such a crossroads, deciding whether to take the electoral leap or continue as social radicals. Azad has a formidable ‘opponent’ in Mayawati and the BSP. Like Azad now, Mayawati too had raised the hackles of caste-Hindus in the 1980s with her fiery speeches against Manuwad. Azad is critical of Mayawati’s Sarvajan politics and wants the focus back on the Bahujan. He is aware, however, of Mayawati’s stature among India’s marginalised, and knows it’s not yet time for the political leap. He must, therefore, publicly defer to ‘Bua’ (aunt) Mayawati.

Political analysts and adversaries keep writing off Mayawati, but her BSP continues to be a national entity. Nor is she a stranger to challenges from within in the Ambedkarite universe, but she has always tamed competition from within, and kept her party a coherent and dominant force in Ambedkarite politics nationally.

However, to sense a disconnect between Mayawati and the younger generation of Ambedkarite leaders is not a misplaced idea. In fact, Azad’s release on September 14, just a day before Mayawati moved back to Lucknow to start preparing in earnest for the 2019 elections, could be a strategy to confuse her cadre and committed supporters. His release could also help the Congress regain a foothold in western Uttar Pradesh through a Dalit-Muslim alignment—Imran Masood, state Congress vice president, has been in constant touch with Azad, who also acknowledged his support on release from jail.

The BSP’s political rivals—both the BJP and the Congress—see opportunity in new leaders like Jignesh Mevani and Azad. Some commentators have even built up Mevani as the next Kanhaiya Ram. While Azad consolidates his space in Ambedkarite politics from below, Mevani is more of an air-dropped leader into this realm, who began his political innings by critiquing the ‘identity politics’ of Ambedkar,