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## Advani to Modi to Yogi, a Hindutva story foretold

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Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, meeting BJP President Amit Shah in New Delhi on March 21, 2017. Photo: PTI

*Narendra Modi has crafted the BJP into a winning machine that can win without Muslims, without alliance partners and without the need to appear moderate. Alliance partners, who were needed by the BJP for their OBC support and secular beliefs, have been rendered redundant. Looked at another way, Advani, Modi and Yogi would form a continuum with the Vajpayee era as an aberration, writes **Vidya Subrahmaniam**, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy.*

**Y**ogi Adityanath has completed a little more than a month at his new perch as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. And the highlight of the month has been the dramatic makeover of the chief priest of the Gorakhnath mutt in Gorakhpur in eastern U.P.: he has transformed before our disbelieving eyes from a rabid, hate-dispensing monk with a militant, Muslim-baiting following to enlightened leader with an egalitarian, inclusive vision.

Indeed, if Yogi has been recast by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a development man committed to the welfare of all people, including Muslims, the media has willingly followed the lead. There have thus been reports of Yogi employing Muslims at his mutt; of Muslims turning to him for help and dispute resolution. Yogi has also been commended for his love for animals with some accounts even calling him an environmentalist. In one word, the flattering reportage wants us to believe that Yogi has been wrongly projected as a bigot when in truth he is not only a most reasonable man but fully qualified to be chosen as the Chief Minister <sup>1</sup> .

Whether Yogi in his personal life is nice to Muslims is irrelevant in the larger context of his extreme right political beliefs and how that has unfolded on the ground. Videographic evidence of his hate speeches surfaced on digital and social media even as he was being sanitised by the mainstream media <sup>2</sup> . In office in the past month, Yogi has toned down on the incendiary rhetoric; there are also reports that he has reined in the Hindu Yuva Vahini (HYV), the rampaging private militia he founded in 2002.

But the HYV knows of no other way than to violently enforce its writ, and it was likely puzzled that it was being advised to pull back by Adityanath who had vigorously led the organisation's previous pursuits. In the event, not only did Adityanath's appointment as Chief Minister fail to restrain his own flock, his being rewarded with office came to be seen as licence by the larger community of Hindu hardliners to do as they willed. Over the past month, assorted Hindu groups, including in some places HYV volunteers, have attacked and humiliated young couples, gone into people's bedrooms, forcibly closed legally-run meat shops, and targeted Muslims in the guise of preventing cow slaughter. From Saharanpur and Agra in U.P. through Jammu to Delhi, there have been violent attacks on Muslims, and even on the police, as a report by Sreenivasan Jain for NDTV showed <sup>3</sup> .

Unsurprisingly, the violence has led to outrage among liberal Indians, among them committed supporters of Prime Minister Narendra Modi: Where they wanted free-market economics, they seem to have got free-running vigilantism <sup>4</sup> .

The question to ask then is: Why did the BJP choose a polarising figure like Yogi to helm U.P. when it could have picked anyone from the 312 MLAs elected on its ticket? More so, when it is clear that U.P. is going to be run by Modi and party chief Amit Shah. If the idea was to provide good governance, there is nothing in Yogi's record to suggest that he alone can deliver on this. Far from it, Yogi's record shows his involvement in creating strife, which is the opposite of good governance. It is possible that Yogi will deliver on some, or many of the poll promises—his first Cabinet meeting waived farm loans—but that could have been done by anyone acting on orders from Modi and Shah.

**“** *The only way to understand Yogi Adityanath's elevation to U.P. Chief Minister is to see it as the intended and inevitable culmination of a process of majoritarianism that started in the late 1980s with the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Ram Janmabhoomi movement.* **”**

The only way to understand Yogi Adityanath's elevation to U.P. Chief Minister is to see it as the intended and inevitable culmination of a process of majoritarianism that started in the late 1980s with the Bharatiya Janata Party-led Ram Janmabhoomi movement. However, unlike in the past, when coalitional compulsions effectively checked the BJP from going the full distance on Hindutva, this time everything is in place. Whatever the internal differences among the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the BJP and Yogi, they are aligned on the *parivar's* philosophy of cultural nationalism, which shorn of frills is the belief that India is civilisationally and unalterably Hindu and it must be explicitly seen to be so in all spheres, individual, social, cultural and governance. With Mohan Bhagwat helming the Sangh, Modi and Shah in command at the Centre and Adityanath ruling in U.P., moving forward on this goal has never seemed more achievable than now.

The Opposition—or more accurately the non-BJP parties—which fought back in 1996 and 2004, today seems to have lost its will to protest, much less be able to reorganise itself and retaliate. There is confusion about how to stop the BJP's march, and whether an attempt should even be made to stop it as there is fear that excessive attacks on Modi and Yogi could have the reverse effect of pushing voters closer to them. An opposite and equally valid argument could be that the BJP wins because the propaganda in its favour far exceeds criticism of the party, that the BJP goes out to bat with the media on its side. In the current environment, though, there are no buyers for the alternative explanation.

The disarray in the Opposition is in contrast to the *parivar's* determined pursuit of the Hinduisation project. The BJP's war-like aggression on winning elections is a case in point. The party has made it clear that it wants it all, from Panchayat to Parliament, and will invest in the smallest contest the same energy and resources as it would in a Lok Sabha election. For any political party to be so consumed by the thought of vanquishing the opponent clearly suggests an objective larger than immediate victory. In an interaction with party persons on Delhi's civic body elections, Amit Shah said he wanted the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) uprooted from the city. It rankled Shah that the infant party stood in defiance surrounded by saffron on all sides—Haryana to the west, Uttar Pradesh to the north and east and Rajasthan to the south.

Contesting, winning elections, and fighting to the finish, are part of the democratic process. But when the language is muscular, almost violent, especially with regard to a tiny, beleaguered opponent that has already been relentlessly oppressed, then the intention is not to win but to conquer and send a message of invincibility both to rivals and potential partners and voters. The phrase Congress-*mukt* (without the Congress), coined by Shah, is now slowly being applied to other parties. The BJP has made deep inroads into the Northeast, Orissa and West Bengal, and looks poised to enter Tamil Nadu on the back of a united All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). It is worth remembering that both the Naveen Patnaik-led Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Orissa and the Mamata Banerjee-led All-India Trinamool Congress in West Bengal were once part of the National Democratic Alliance.

This shows that the BJP first uses an ally to gain a foothold in a state and then eventually grows bigger than the ally. So by 2019, the BJP could arguably use the space it has gained in Tamil Nadu to emerge as a force of its own in the State. It stands to reason that when this expansionist roadmap reaches its logical end, India will have turned into something of an empire under a single ruler. There will certainly be pockets of resistance to even the most authoritarian rule. However, if most of India comes under BJP rule, we could have *de facto* if not *de jure* Hindu Rashtra without the need for an overhaul of the Constitution.

The enormity of this achievement is underscored by the BJP's 25-year long struggle to get to this stage. This journey has been one as much of defeats and disappointments as of hope, perseverance and triumph. But through

the ups and downs, the party, and even more the RSS, has been unwaveringly committed to the goal of furthering the Hindu agenda.

The party's first breakthrough Hindutva moment came in the late 1980s when Lal Krishna Advani, and the BJP's sister organisation, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), jointly plunged into the Ramjanmabhoomi movement, and managed to convince an unprecedented number of Hindus that a Ram mandir had to be built at the precise spot where the Babri Masjid stood. In 2002, Modi emerged as a new hero of the Hindu right. A long-time pracharak with the RSS, Modi was an unusual Chief-ministerial choice. But in retrospect, and from the perspective of reaching Hindutva to the widest possible audience, there could not have been a better choice. The 2002 anti-Muslim violence elevated Modi to Hindu Hriday Samarat, and later when communal passions cooled down and Muslims were thought to have been taught a lesson, he developed a model of Gujarat that had Hindutva subsumed under the broader umbrella of *vikas* (development). The formula was a runaway success, and he won every single election held in Gujarat. If Modi won, scaled new heights, grew into a phenomenon and forced party and *parivar* alike to accept him as a national leader in the face of internal disquiet, it is because the latter recognised his phenomenal potential: He was like Advani but only more charismatic and more seized by a sense of revenge which made him especially suited to recreate and sustain the hysteria that took Advani to his peak. It is easy to see why Yogi, cast in the same mould as Modi, could do the same thing in deeply divided U.P.

In an article written for the *Times of India* in 2002, soon after the Gujarat anti-Muslim violence, (*From 1992 to 2002: Shame and Pride in the Family*) I had said: "The BJP has invested heavily in defending Mr. Modi—against disapproval from all sides—and not without reason. Narendra Modi has rekindled the passions that L.K. Advani had aroused with his *Ram Rath Yatra*. The parallels between Gujarat 2002 and the divisive climate that followed the rath yatra are striking. Millions of Hindus across the country cheered Mr. Advani as he boarded the rath and declared, "*Garv se kaho, hum Hindu hain.*" The raw appeal of that statement electrified listeners and brought closet saffronites out into the open..."

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Viewed in this light, Advani, Modi and Yogi would appear to form a continuum with the (Atal Bihari) Vajpayee phase as an aberration. Indeed, over the past quarter century, the party has periodically regenerated itself with a return to Hindutva. This could take an overtly militant form or be camouflaged as the politics of development and aspiration. This was seen during the Ram temple phase in 1989-91, post the 2002 pogrom in Gujarat, in the backdrop of the Muzaffarnagar violence in 2013 in U.P, in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, and, most recently, in the 2017 U.P Assembly election. Ram *mandir* saw overt violence as did Gujarat-2002 and Muzaffarnagar-2013. In 2014, Modi's campaign emphasised jobs, opportunity and development, but violence was a persistent sub-text. This is proven by the BJP's over 50 per cent vote share in 2014 in Western U.P., where the fires lit by Muzaffarnagar continue to burn to this day.

Commentators were still commending the relative peace seen during the early phases of the 2017 U.P. assembly campaign, when overnight as if the tone of the discourse changed. References to Shamshaan (Hindu cremation ground) and Kabristan (Muslim grave yard) by Modi and Shah turned 2017 into a contest for the assertion of Hindu rights. As in 2014, the BJP won big in western U.P., not least because Yogi campaigned extensively in the region,

ensuring that Muzzafarnagar and the communal angst it represented never went away from people's memory. Hindutva has always been a fallback for the BJP. A joke of an earlier time went, "when in doubt reach for Hindutva". But never before has Hindutva been so uncontested and free-reigning as now under the Modi-Yogi-Bhagwat combine.

The pre-Modi BJP was different from the current-day version. It relied on alliance partners—not just to be able to form governments but to give itself a moderate veneer. With Modi as Prime Minister, the party has liberated itself from the need to be one thing in reality and to appear to be another thing. Yogi's appointment shows that the BJP's confidence in the saleability of its ideology has reached a level where it can be unapologetically upfront about it. This is a testament as much to the party's inventiveness and Modi's appeal as to the widening voter acceptance of Hindutva.

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Two things distinguish the BJP's 2014 performance in U.P. from its 2017 replay. First, unlike in 2014, there was visible and aggressive use of Hindutva, especially from midpoint onward of the seven-phase elections. Modi added his own inflammatory bits to what was already a communal campaign. On my travels in western U.P., I noticed a people so deeply divided that they commonly referred to the election as a Hindu-Muslim election <sup>5</sup>. Modi's provocative speeches deepened the communal divide and polarised the election in his favour. Modi also camped in his home constituency, Varansai, doing extensive pujas and aartis in the Kashi Vishwanath temple, which TV captured live for state-wide audiences.

But a more astute strategy was to bind together the very poor and lower backward castes into one solid voting bloc through appeals to their sense of nationalism. Modi linked the November 8, 2016 demonetisation of currency (locally referred to as *notebandi*) to the greater good of the country, inviting the poorest segments to participate in what he called the nation-building project. For the poor, *notebandi* was uplifting, both for a perceived levelling of the ground between the rich and the poor, and for their chance to be involved in nation building. On the ground during the 2017 campaign, the poorer and most backward sections were the most enthusiastic supporters of *notebandi*, reciting parrot-like that they were glad to bear personal hardship for the sake of the country and the *jawan* guarding the borders. Modi's national security-honour invocation was pitch perfect.

*“Modi used outright Hindutva to unite and enthuse his core support and the higher OBCs. He spun the same thing as nationalism and a citizen's obligation towards the country to woo and unite the lower and extremely backward castes.”*

In short, Modi used outright Hindutva to unite and enthuse his core support and the higher OBCs. He spun the same thing as nationalism and a citizen's obligation towards the country to woo and unite the lower and extremely backward castes. The latter would see it as the first time that any leader had addressed them, not just as a people to be lifted above their poverty, but as equal participants in nation building and development which enhanced their self-esteem in a way never done before. Significantly, what was Nation-First was also Hindu-First, which Hindu voters readily bought into because they had been primed both by their own perception and the BJP's relentless campaign to see a strong Muslim-Yadav bias in the Akhilesh Yadav Government's welfare and developmental goals.

The choice of Yogi as Chief Minister fits perfectly into the Nation First-Hindu First script. Yogi and Modi are peas of the same pod. Yogi is nothing if not Modi of the past. Modi's 2002 speeches were as vituperative and provocatively anti-Muslim as the ones Yogi made before he became Chief Minister of U.P. <sup>6</sup> . Somewhere around 2006, before the 2007 state elections, Modi made a strategic shift from stand-alone Hindutva to Hindutva disguised as development. In an October 2007 article for the Hindu, Narendra Modi's new Avatar <sup>7</sup> , I wrote:

"In 2002, Mr. Modi was the Hindutva warrior whose fight against Muslims won him frenzied admiration. In 2007, the image he projects is of a modernist with a dream for his State. Mr. Modi's publicity managers call him a "futuristic Chief Minister" whose foresight and vision have made "vibrant Gujarat" the single most attractive destination for global investors... Mr. Modi himself told The Hindu that he wanted Gujarat to become a "first world" State..."

Yogi is set to walk the path that Modi has shown. He has already been recast as a 'moderate' with a burning passion to serve the people of U.P. He has the advantage of arriving at a time when his rivals have been decimated, the Hindu constituency has expanded and the media has been co-opted. As against this, there is consensus among the commentariat and the political class that the BSP and SP spoke up too much for Muslims and contributed their share to polarise the election in the BJP's favour. There is also confusion among the SP and the BSP about how to counter the BJP's Hindutva propaganda without appearing to be anti-Hindu. It would require imagination and perseverance to find a way out of this conundrum and reset the agenda for a genuinely inclusive politics. Without a political-ideological foundation, even an alliance between the SP and the BSP could fail.

Nationally, Modi has shown that hard Hindutva can be in consonance with governance and even alliance making. The Vajpayee phase of appeasing the allies and needing to appear moderate is over. Modi's BJP has found a new formula that does away with the need for allies. The earlier BJP was mostly upper caste, and perceived as sectarian. The BJP's allies brought OBC and Muslim support to the alliance, making it structurally sound and viable. Modi's BJP has coopted the OBCs, and made Hindutva acceptable, thereby making allies redundant in the long run. Modi has shown that elections can be won in most parts of India without Muslim support. The BJP did not field a single Muslim in U.P and yet won a humongous mandate. If the party continues with its strategy of winning over OBCs, and even Dalits, it could replicate the success in regions where it has little or no presence now.

The non-BJP parties, and even the BJP's allies, have been stunned into silence because they realise that

1. Modi can win without them.
2. He can win without Muslims.
3. He can win without delivering on jobs and growth.
4. Today's BJP is Modi plus media. Modi has shattered the cardinal principles which previously decided who won and lost.

The only way this can change is if Modi's opponents can show that Hindutva is a heady short-term solution that thrives on strife and communal disharmony which cannot be to anybody's benefit in the long term. It is a long haul.

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