

Verdict 2019

How Harmony Lost Out: Voices from Western U.P. Over the Years



Vidya Subrahmaniam



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and other BJP Candidates from Western UP during the First Election Sankalp Rally at Meerut in Uttar Pradesh on Thursday, March 28, 2019. Photo: R V Moorthy

As in 2014 and 2017, so too in 2019, the Jats of western U.P. overwhelmingly voted the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This time they voted in even larger numbers even though there was a clear alternative before them in the form of the gathbandhan, a three-way alliance among the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Rashtriya Lok Dal. It didn't seem to matter to the community that the RLD was led by Ajit Singh, heir to the Jat legacy and son of the late Prime Minister and illustrious farmer leader Chaudhary Charan Singh. Nor did it seem to matter that Jat farmers were in distress across western U.P. on account of a deeply-felt agrarian crisis. In conversations with Vidya Subrahmaniam, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, New Delhi, community leaders confessed to being seized by a sense of hopelessness. Yet, in a repeat of 2014 and 2017, the conversations also revealed persisting anti-Muslim feelings in the community. To recall a passage from a 2017 article by the author: "... a BJP victory or defeat is really only for the record. The language and thought processes of U.P.'s people have already been transformed and conditioned by the corrosive discourse that has split the State on Hindu-Muslim lines."

fringe benefit of covering elections is the opportunity it affords to understand the social issues that confront voters, whether or not these shape their choices when they go into the voting booth to cast their votes.

The 2019 Lok Sabha election is over, the verdict is in and the whys and wherefores have followed, many analyses unsurprisingly done with the benefit of hindsight. The scale of victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in North and western India has exceeded the best-case projections by a long distance. In Uttar Pradesh, a further shock was on account of the failure of the three-way Gathbandhan (GB), which was expected to pose a tough challenge to the BJP.

In the event, the GB won only 15 seats for a vote share of 37.3 per cent to the BJP's 62 seats for a vote share of 49.6 per cent. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the BJP had won 71 seats for a vote share of 42.3 per cent. The SP had won five seats for 22.2 per cent and the BSP zero seats for 19.6 per cent. Together, the SP -BSP combine had a vote share of nearly 42 per cent which was only a few decimal points behind the BJP.

In 2019, belying expectations, the combined vote share of U.P.'s two principal regional parties declined by five percentage points (19.3 per cent BSP and 18 per cent SP) while the BJP's vote share jumped by over seven percentage points to stand at 49.6 per cent which is nearly half the votes

cast. Three points arise from this: The gap between the BJP and the alliance was too large for the latter to do even reasonably well. Two, when a political party straddles the 50 per cent vote share zone, whether in terms of overall performance or on individual seats, then its opponents, no matter that they have formed a strong alliance, will have no chance. Third, as indicated by the drop in the combined vote share of the SP-BSP gathbandhan, the transfer of votes between the alliance partners did not reach its full potential.

This essay looks at Western U.P. from my perspective of covering three recent elections in the region -- 2014 Lok Sabha, 2017 assembly and 2019 Lok Sabha. What emerges from these travels is a distinct pattern: A very high vote share for the BJP, the Jat community's consistent preference for the BJP despite sometimes confusing claims to the contrary, and persisting communal fissures.

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Travelling in Western Uttar Pradesh for Election-2019 was almost like going back in time to 2017 and 2014 with only some variations. An additional factor starkly noticeable this time was the deeply felt agrarian crisis. For sugarcane farmers, it was a triple whammy of delayed payments for crop deposited, inflation in input costs leading in turn to mounting debt, and destruction of standing crop by unproductive cattle that could not be disposed of because of moral policing by gau rakshas. The second thing that stood out was the entrenched nature of caste and religious fissures. This despite the fact that superficially all seemed well. Tensions appeared to have cooled between Jats and Muslims who had turned into bitter enemies in the wake of the 2013 Muzaffarnagar communal conflagration; the disharmony had ripped apart the social fabric of Western UP. Six years later, members from both communities attested to a measure of harmony.

"Beneath the surface, suspicion lurked and conversations, especially with Jats, brought out the underlying resentments, mainly towards Muslims but also towards Dalits."

But beneath the surface, suspicion lurked and conversations, especially with Jats, brought out the underlying resentments and communal feelings, mainly towards Muslims but also towards

Dalits. Ironically the very thing that was thought to have fostered amity in the region was the reason

for the hard feelings: The alliance among the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

A more detailed analysis will follow later in this essay but for now consider this example: My first stop in 2019 was Jat-dominated Khanpur village in Siwalkhas which is part of Meerut district but falls in the Baghpat Lok Sabha constituency. The Baghpat seat is home ground for the family of the late Chaudhary Charan Singh, a formidable farmer leader from the Jat community who was Prime Minister between July 1979 and January 1980. His son Ajit Singh, who later founded the RLD, proved to be an indifferent inheritor of his father's legacy. Nonetheless, he continued to be supported by the Jat community, which voted him six times between 1989 and 2009 with only two breaks in between, 1998-1999 and 2014 to 2019. In the 2019 election, the RLD gave the party ticket to Ajit Singh's son Jayant Chaudhary, whose victory seemed certain because the RLD was now part of the Gathbandhan. Jayant Chaudhary was seen as a young Jat leader committed to the welfare of farmers. But there was one more thing about him which may in fact have gone against him: his effort to restore communal harmony in the region by building bridges between the Jats and Muslims. At age 80, his father, Ajit Singh, had chosen to contest from Muzaffarnagar, also fired by the same mission: to end the strife between Jats and Muslims.

On his 80 th birthday on February 12, 2019, Ajit Singh had sworn that he would bury communalism in the same place from where it had erupted in 2013, destroying Hindu-Muslim relationships built and sustained over decades. On the campaign in Muzaffarnagar, he drove home this point:

"...why have I come to Muzaffarnagar to contest election, you tell me? ...I have come to Muzaffarnagar because you are responsible for bringing the BJP to power. You fought with each other and destroyed the *bhaichara* [brotherhood]. As a result of that you have to bear Modi today.." ¹.

Yet his voters did not vote him sufficiently to ensure his victory. The victor was once again Sanjeev Balyan, an accused in the 2013 anti-Muslim violence who is also a minister in the Narendra Modi Government.

My reason for choosing the Jat village of Khanpur as my first halt was because of an unpleasant encounter I had had in the same village in 2017. I had been in conversation with village elders, when a noisy crowd of young men burst in on us shouting abusive anti-Muslim slogans and "Jai Shri Ram". One among them was Anirudh Chhikara, a 16-year old schoolboy, who was presented to me as the region's 'mini Sangeet Som'.

Like Sanjeev Balyan, Som was also an accused in the 2013 violence. As I wrote at the time:

"The chief claim to fame of Mr. Som, the sitting MLA and current candidate from Sardhana, also in Meerut district, is that he is an accused in the 2013 riots. On January 17, 2017, Mr. Som, nicknamed *Sangharshveer* (brave warrior) for frontally fighting Muslims, had a case booked against him for showing video clips of the 2013 riots. However, for 'mini Sangeet Som' and other young Jats, this was only proof that he remained committed to protecting 'us from them'.." ²

My impression at the time was that barring a handful of Jat elders who supported the RLD, the rest were all firmly in the Modi camp.

I wanted to check if the RLD's joint front with the SP-BSP alliance and Jayant Chaudhary's candidature had brought about a change in mood in the village. When I reached Anirudh's house, it was to find that he was away in Meerut. But his father, Bharat Chhikara, more than made up for his absence. For the next half hour he eulogised Modi even as he attacked the Gathbandhan, focusing his ire particularly on Muslims and Dalits. He was sure that the BJP's Satyapal Singh will hand out a big defeat to Jayant Chaudhary despite the latter's Jat origins and illustrious lineage. Chhikara claimed that 2014 was the first time he voted the BJP and before that he had been loyal to Ajit Singh. What changed? I asked him. "Narendra Modi", he said. In 2014, it was the newness of Modi that appealed. In 2017 and 2019, it was Modi's aggressive Hindu nationalism and heroism vis-à-vis Pakistan that made him turn unequivocally to the BJP.

"Mark my words. This time more than 80 per cent of Jats will vote for Modi," he said. (A post-poll survey by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies showed that 91 per cent of Jats had voted the BJP).

Chhikara's father and Anirudh's grandfather, Omkar Singh, said the Jats were a martial kaum (community) and for them country always came first. As I turned to leave, Chhikara whispered in a low voice,

"Had the RLD not aligned with Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav, there was still a chance that we could have voted the party for the sake of old loyalties. But not when it was in an alliance with Muslims and Dalits."

Chhikara said Muslims were terrorists and pro-Pakistan while (screwing up his face in distaste) Jats liked to keep their distance from Dalits.

It was a wonder of the 2019 election in U.P. that the principle alliance between the SP and the BSP, happened at all. History and conventional wisdom suggested that the alliance was an impossibility, and if it happened, it would collapse under the weight of its contradictions. The bitter past between Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav's father and the SP's founding president, Mulayam Singh Yadav, aside, the SP and the BSP had also to contend with decades of hostilities between their core voters, the Yadavs and the Jatavs. That the partners overcame this baggage spoke to the survival imperatives confronting them. The BJP had driven each party to ruin and they had no choice but to unite against the behemoth.

Even so, it came as a surprise when the SP and the BSP announced their alliance at a joint rally. As alliances go, this was among the first to take off, and the expectation was it would impact elections country-wide. The reason was rooted in arithmetic. On paper, the SP-BSP combine was a strong force capable of inflicting heavy losses on the BJP. And considering 71 of the BJP's 2014 seat share of 282 came from U.P, the significance of a reversal here could not be overemphasised. With a combined vote share that was just behind the BJP's, the SP-BSP alliance was expected at the minimum to win 35-40 seats.

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However, arithmetic was but one part of the alliance. The bigger question was: would the antagonistic social bases of the two parties forget their differences and coalesce together? The arithmetic could only work, if there was chemistry between the constituents. Soon after the SP and the BSP announced their pact, the Ajit-Singh-led RLD came on board. Theoretically, this brought together three core votes: The BSP's Jatavs, the SP's Yadavs and the RLD's Jats. In the ticket distribution, the RLD got the three seats of Baghpat, Muzaffarnagar and Mathura while the rest were divided equally between the SP and the BSP. Jats were concentrated in the three seats but wielded influence across what was referred to as the Jat belt.

But as my travels showed (confirmed later by the results), the alliance with Jats was more on paper than on ground. And even where Jat votes transferred to the alliance candidates, this was in the nature of a political compact rather than a genuine association symbolising a change of heart towards communal harmony.

(At the time writing this essay, the much-feared split seemed to have happened already. The RLD had got isolated while Mayawati in a press conference argued that the SP-BSP alliance had not worked, and the results had shown that Yadavs had not voted even the SP.)

Understanding the present Jat-Muslim equation

A little background is necessary here to understand the falling out between Jats and Muslims. As seen earlier, Jats derived their political clout from Charan Singh. However, while Charan Singh was of Jat ancestry, the politics he practised was more expansive and was premised on the fact that as a farmer first, his economic vision had to be rooted in inclusive agriculture. Charan Singh knew that he had to form a larger coalition of castes and communities if he had to take on the Congress which at the time was invincible because of its command over an umbrella coalition of Brahmins, Scheduled Castes and Muslims. Charan Singh's inspiration came from Sir Chhotu Ram, a Jat-origin visionary of pre-Independence India, who worked towards forging an alliance of deprived peasantry, drawing from both Hindu and Muslim communities. ³ Charan Singh, in turn, formulated AJGAR, which was acronym for Ahir (Yadavs), Jat, Guijiar, and Rajput. Later he would add Muslims to this so that the alliance came to be known as MAJGAR.

The Ahirs or Yadavs had minimal presence in western U.P. while Rajputs were upper caste and not a natural part of the alliance. So in essence, Muslims and Jats formed the core of Charan Singh's political alliance, the two communities united also by their common identity as farmers. In fact, for Charan Singh, his kisan identity was non-negotiable and his strategy of fusing multiple political constituencies was towards enhancing this identity. After Charan Singh, the political leadership formally passed to Ajit Singh, whereas it was the late farmer leader, and president of the Bharatiya Kisan Union, Mahendra Singh Tikait, who became the true torch-bearer of his farmer legacy.

"Even in death, the principal identity of the men was that they were farmers and not Hindu or Muslim."

Tikait was a powerful leader with the ability to gather hundreds of thousands at a moment's notice. And most significantly, his rallies were unintended advertisements for Hindu-Muslim unity. If this fact was not written about at the time it was because few saw communal harmony as anything out of the ordinary. Just to underscore this, Tikait held a score of *dharnas* and *gheraos* demanding fair agricultural policies. In August 1989, he also headed a month-long agitation protesting the kidnapping of Naeema, a Muslim girl belonging to the region. Before that in January 1987, he had organised a protest against inflated electric bills at the Kharmu Khedi power plant in Shamli, which saw two farmers, Jaipal Singh and Akbar Ali, falling to police bullets. Even in death, the principal identity of the men was that they were farmers and not Hindu or Muslim.

It was around the summer of 1991, when the Ram mandir agitation was at its peak that Jats began their shift towards the BJP. The temple agitation had awakened the community's Hindu feelings and they expressed this openly in the 1991 general election, both when Rajiv Gandhi, attempting to regain lost ground, addressed a series of rallies in the region and when they voted.

I was touring the region at the time and I reached ahead of Rajiv Gandhi at one of the rallies, thinking I could do a mood-check among the mostly Jat crowds that was waiting for him. But I had barely started talking to them, when I was drowned in chants of "Jai Shri Ram". I was taken aback because it was a Congress rally and the audiences should have typically been Congress supporters. But not only were they vocal in their support to the BJP, they got abusive and violent with me for asking them questions.

In the 1991 Lok Sabha election, the BJP won 51 seats from U.P. and in the assembly election held in the same year, it won an absolute majority of 221 of 419 seats. Ajit Singh, who was then with the Janata Dal, won from Baghpat, but all around him there was destruction with the BJP taking Lok Sabha seats with significant Jat presence such as Muzaffarnagar, Hapur-Meerut, Agra, Mathura and Bulandshahar. Ajit Singh retained the Baghpat seat in the 1996 Lok Sabha election but the Jat ferment and the future direction of the community were already visible in the 1993 assembly elections.

As a survey by CSDS showed, the BJP was a major recipient of Jat votes in the 1993 assembly election. This was despite the SP and the BSP fighting the election together or perhaps as a reaction to that as was the case most recently in 2019 when the SP and the BSP reunited. The BJP in the 1993 election was reduced to 177 seats, down 44 seats from 1991, but the party continued to hold influence in western UP. To quote the CSDS report: ⁴

"In Upper Doab, the 'Jatland' once dominated by the late Chaudhary Charan Singh, the BJP has improved its position both in terms of votes (2.7 percent) and seats (13) mainly at the cost of the Ajit Singh-led JD which has lost 7.1 per cent votes and 17 seats in this region."

"In 1998, the wave reached Ajit Singh's home constituency and for the first time since he entered politics, he lost from Baghpat"

In the 1996 assembly election, the BJP once again fared poorly, contained by the SP and the BSP, which, though by now separated, had emerged as strong regional forces. However, the BJP swept U.P. in the 1998 Lok Sabha election, winning as many as 58 seats. The wave reached Ajit Singh's home constituency and for the first time since he entered politics, he lost from Baghpat. In the 1999 Lok Sabha election, Ajit Singh won back the Baghpat seat from the BJP but he was aware that the RLD, founded in 1996, was rapidly losing ground and had become an unviable entity. In the decades that followed, the RLD dallied with a string of parties, from the BSP in 2002 to the Samajwadi Party in 2004 to the BJP-led NDA in 2009.

Ajit Singh continued to win from Baghpat even as his Jat vote base remained fickle and amenable to wooing by the BJP. The 2013 communal conflagration in Muzafarnagar, which saw Hindu Jats pitted against Muslims, shattered the tenuous peace between the two communities. A collateral damage was the collapse of the Jat community's pact with Ajit Singh and the RLD and the revival of their attraction to the BJP, always simmering beneath the surface, but now openly and robustly expressed as communal hate.

"As Muslims fled jointly occupied Jat-Muslim villages fearing attacks by their neighbours, the fissures deepened beyond repair."

As Muslims fled jointly occupied Jat-Muslim villages fearing attacks by their neighbours, the fissures deepened beyond repair. This despite the fact that there was shared labour and interdependence between Jats and Muslims. The departure of Muslims, who partnered the Jats in farming besides contributing to the village economy as carpenters, masons, artisans and cow traders, affected life for both the Muslim refugees who had to settle in small plots of land measured out to them by the Akhilesh Yadav government, and for the Jats left behind to face economic ruin.

In March 2014, ahead of the Lok Sabha election, I visited western U.P. to discover the first stirrings of regret among Jats. But this turned out to be superficial. As I recorded at the time: ⁵

"In the aftermath of the riots, the Jat Hindus had rejoiced in the mass exodus of Muslims from their villages. Today, there is regret that they let this happen. However, the visitor's surprise at the openly articulated remorse vanishes in no time. The repentance owes, not to a genuine change of heart, but to the opportunistic realisation that Muslims are needed to save the village economy from ruin, and in some cases, to buy freedom from pending criminal complaints.

"The Jat-dominated Qutba reported eight Muslim deaths. There is a haunted feel to the Muslim parts of the village, with row upon row of burnt and destroyed homes collectively testifying to the September 2013 death and devastation. The Jats here seem contrite at having allowed the Muslim exodus. Suresh Pal a retired school-teacher says, "What happened was very wrong." Yet the reason for feeling so

is opportunistic: "Our economy is finished. Muslims did all our work, from masonry and carpentry to agriculture." Eighty-year old Sukhbiri talks of a "chhoti si darar" (small divide) between Hindus and Muslims, which can be healed with the latter's return. But even as she advocates reconciliation, her language is abusive towards Muslims."

Such was the poison effect of the 2013 communal violence that western U.P. as a whole massively voted the BJP in the 2014 general election. Outwardly, the vote appeared to be for Modi's development politics. Yet what influenced the Jat vote even more than Modi's promise of an economic dawn was the BJP's promotion of communal discord. The BJP played the development card overtly but used Hindutva and anti-Muslim rhetoric to whip up emotions. The Election commission of India imposed a temporary ban on Amit Shah for his incendiary speeches made while campaigning in western U.P. An influential local BJP leader, Hukum Singh, who fought and won from Kairana, spread a manufactured story about Hindus fleeing in fear from Kairana. This and other inflammatory material were circulated in the region throughout the 2014 campaign. In Muzaffarnagar, the epicenter of the 2013 violence, the BJP's ticket went to Sanjeev Baliyan. I wrote at the time: ⁶

"The Jat Hindus here are happy that the BJP ticket from Muzaffarnagar has gone to Sanjeev Baliyan,... "No one can beat the powerful combination of Narendra Modi and Dr. Baliyan." Elsewhere in Muzaffarnagar too there is a "Modi, Modi" chant and open expression of delight at the candidature of Mr. Baliyan."

The BJP's 2014 sweep of western U.P. was as much in the number of seats won as in the votes polled. The Jat belt was completely won over. In Muzaffarnagar, the BJP polled 59 per cent; in Bijnor, 48.21 per cent; in Meerut, 47.86 per cent; in Kairana, 50. 54 per cent; in Ghaziabad 56.50 per cent; in Guru Tegh Bahadur Nagar 50 per cent. Taking U.P. as a whole, the BJP got its highest vote share of over 50 per cent in this region. As the CSDS observed in its 2014 post-poll survey, Jats consolidated massively behind the BJP. Modi's party got 77 per cent of the Jat vote. ²

The 2017 assembly election in U.P. was a near repeat of 2014. The party's overall vote share dipped only slightly, 41.35 per cent in 2017 against 42.30 per cent in 2014. The party's seat share of 325 of

403 was comparable with its performance in 2014, and as in the Lok Sabha election, it swept western U.P., with a more than 50 per cent vote share. The results belied the calculation that it would be impossible for the BJP to repeat its 2014 performance. In western U.P. in particular, the expectation was that the Jats, hurt by demonetisation and the BJP's failure to announce reservation for the community, would return to the RLD. But the BJP wised up to the mood and wooed the Jats emotionally. A few days before polling, it released the audio tape of a meeting between Amit Shah and a section of Jat leaders where the former was heard speaking of their shared bond (a reference to Hindutva) and how a vote against the BJP would help the SP which practised (Muslim) appeasement policies. Shah's tactic worked and Jats once again voted the BJP overwhelmingly. As in 2014, I travelled in western U.P. during the 2017 election. And as before, I found Jats, even those that seemed disinclined to vote the BJP, unreconciled to their enmity with Muslims, I said. §

"... a BJP victory or defeat is really only for the record. The language and thought processes of U.P.'s people have already been transformed and conditioned by the corrosive discourse that has split the State on Hindu-Muslim lines. Analysts have welcomed the absence of communal violence and failed attempts at polarising voters along Hindu-Muslim blocks in this election as a sign of a State and its people returning to normality after four years of being held hostage to communal provocations... [Yet] I was astonished by how often a well-conducted, amicable conversation suddenly got diverted into hate talk and Muslim-bashing. This happened at almost every stop I made and was a pattern that [could not be missed]...In one word, Muzaffarnagar, and the communal divide it has come to represent, hasn't gone anywhere..."

Two years after the 2017 election, I was back in western U.P. and to a seemingly more congenial political climate. With the RLD joining the SP and the BSP in a three-way alliance, communal disharmony appeared to have been pushed to the background. The impression was strengthened by the agrarian distress sweeping the region. The burden on farmers, whether Hindu Jats or Muslims, was enormous and many confessed to never having faced a crisis of this proportion.

"They said living expenses had become difficult to meet, they had not been able to pay off their electricity bills, all of which added up to a severe financial crunch." In Kaserwa Kalan village in Shamli, a group of Jat farmers sat discussing their plight and gave the impression of being very, very angry with the BJP. They said they had voted against him to teach him a lesson. Among their problems: delayed payment for their sugarcane which had left them cash-strapped and unable to meet the rising input costs. The loans they took to meet costs carried high interests which became higher on default. They said living expenses had become difficult to meet, they had not been able to pay off their electricity bills, all of which added up to a severe financial crunch. On top of this was the new moral code against disposal of unproductive cattle which had become impossible to maintain. In desperation, farmers let them off in the fields where they grazed on standing crop, bringing more misery to them.

All over the region the commonest sight was of hundreds of sugar cane-bearing trucks waiting in long queues for their produce to be picked up by the sugar mills. The mills would give them 'parchis' (slips) required for harvesting the next lot of crop. Farmers complained that they had not got the parchis for the next lot while their earlier crop was still awaiting payment.

In Lalu Khedi Kasba in Muzaffarnagar, a bunch of young shopkeepers were ecstatically describing Modi's visit to his mother. "We are blessed to have a Prime Minister who places Bharat maa over his own maa," said Surinder Singh. Dinesh Kumar added, "I love Modiji. He has no family, everything he does is for the country." I interjected and said there was a lot of showmanship in what Modi did: "Why take the camera to record your meeting with your mother?" This angered them, and the conversation suddenly became all about me: "It is journalists like you who bring dishonor to our country." The only dissenting voice was of Anuj Malik, a young Jat farmer, who took me aside and whispered: "It is a dire situation for us kisans and these people are talking nonsense."

Anuj Malik led me into a by-lane and from there to his home in Sondhni Jaatan village. Once there, he showed me detailed calculations of soaring input costs, made further unaffordable by the punishing burden of debt. In the circumstances, farming had become totally unviable, he said. His family has a patch of land where they grow food for themselves But there is no income. Malik also introduced me to the local State Bank of India branch manager, Mukesh Kumar. The bank gave out loans to distressed farmers, and Kumar looked under strain from spending much of

his time going from village to village, pleading, cajoling, and sometimes coercing, debt-ridden farmers to pay off their debts. In Lalu Khedi village next door, there was a long queue of mostly poor farmers outside the local branch of the state-run Sahkari Ganna Vikas Samiti (sugar cane development committee). They were there to buy fertilizer on credit and many of them had already defaulted on previous payments and had been slapped with stiff fines.

"They had all voted Modi, and their reason was: "desh to bach jayega (at least the country will be saved).""

But the agrarian distress and personal suffering did not appear to make a difference to the political beliefs of most farmers. Opposite the Ganna Vikas Samiti was a godown that stored bags of urea. Labourers, their torn clothes betraying their poverty, loaded and unloaded the bags even as the noxious smell of urea pervaded the air. They rattled off their castes, Prajapati, Kumhar, Rajbhar and so forth. They had all voted Modi, and their reason was: "desh to bach jayega (at least the country will be saved)." I was dumbfounded and tried to argue that the country was safe and had remained safe under earlier governments. But that cut no ice.

Euphemisms of hate

Pakistan was a euphemism for Indian Muslims as was the phrase "goondagardi". Even those among Jat farmers who claimed to have voted against Modi, and who were disdainful of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, there was appreciation for "one good thing": The advent of Modi at the Centre and Adityanath in U.P. had ended the "goondagardi" that was rampant during Akhilesh Yadav's tenure. Who were the goondas, I asked the Jat farmers at Kaserwa Kalan who had just finished relating their farming woes to me. Jaipal Singh, who couldn't seem to stop talking against Modi, said:

"You know them, Muslims. Our Hindu dharma is in khatra (danger) because of them. They keep breeding and adding to their numbers which means more threat to us; our girls were unsafe. Mercifully all that is over now. I hope the new government enacts a law to control population."

In Kairana, I met with the Samajwadi Party team handling the campaign of Begum Tabssum Hasan. Among them was, Umesh Pradhan, a bright young man who was referred to as Pradhanji because of his earlier stint as a village head. Umesh appeared secular and was hopeful that Jats, Muslims and Dalits would unitedly vote for Begum Hasan. However, his team was not fully on board on this. One reason for their resentment was that they had expected the party ticket from Kairana to go to Sudhir Pawar, a former member of the Planning commission and a Professor at the University of Lucknow, who is widely respected in the region for his scholarship and honesty. But the disappointment invariably got directed at the Begum. A comment heard often in conversations in the group was, "If only the SP candidate was a Hindu."

""Badmash Khatam" (criminals are finished) was a commonly heard comment with Muslims variously described as criminals, terrorists and people who bred without control."

If this was somewhat muted, everywhere else in Jatland there was little restraint on expressing communal feelings. "Badmash Khatam" (criminals are finished) was a commonly heard comment with Muslims variously described as criminals, terrorists and people who bred without control. As I ended the tour, I was once again assailed by the same feeling that I had experienced in 2014 and 2017. To recapitulate:

"... a BJP victory or defeat is really only for the record. The language and thought processes of U.P.'s people have already been transformed and conditioned by the corrosive discourse that has split the State on Hindu-Muslim lines."

As it turned out, 2019 was a repeat of 2014 and 2017. The BJP picked up a windfall share of 62 seats for a vote share of close to 50 per cent. In Western UP, it was another landslide, with 91 per cent of Jats voting the BJP in preference to the RLD which was in an alliance with the SP and the BSP. As in 2014, the wave cost Ajit Singh and Jayant Chaudhary their own seats.

Hatred had triumphed over harmony.

[Vidya Subrahmaniam is Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy. She was until recently Associate Editor with *The Hindu* based in New Delhi. In a journalistic career spanning four decades, she has written and reported extensively in a number of newspapers in Chennai, Mumbai, Lucknow and Delhi. She has also served on the national news bureaus of *The Indian Express*, *The Indian Post*, *The Independent*, *The Statesman*, and was an opinion page writer for *The Times of India*. In 2013, she won the Ramnath Goenka Award for Excellence in Journalism in the category, 'Commentary and Interpretative Writing'.]

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7. Verma, A. K. 2014. "Development and Governance Trump Caste Identities in Uttar Pradesh", Economic and Political Weekly, September 27.Vol. 49, Issue. 39.[https://www.epw.in/journal/2014/39/national-election-study-2014-special-issues/development-and-governance-trump-caste].