



THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy

VERDICT 2019

Western Uttar Pradesh: Caste Arithmetic vs Nationalism



SMITA GUPTA



Samajwadi Party patron Mulayam Singh Yadav exchanges greetings with Bahujan Samaj Party supremo Mayawati during their joint election campaign rally in Mainpuri, on April 19, 2019. Photo: PTI

In most of the 26 constituencies that went to the polls in the first three phases of the ongoing Lok Sabha elections in western Uttar Pradesh, it was a straight fight between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that currently holds all but three of the seats, and the opposition alliance of the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Rashtriya Lok Dal. The latter represents a formidable social combination of Yadavs, Dalits, Muslims and Jats. The sort of religious polarisation visible during the general elections of 2014 had receded, Smita Gupta, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, New Delhi, discovered as she travelled through the region earlier this month, and bread and butter issues had surfaced—rural distress, delayed sugarcane dues, the loss of jobs and closure of small businesses following demonetisation, and the faulty implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). The Modi wave had clearly vanished: however, BJP functionaries, while agreeing with this analysis, maintained that their party would have been out of the picture totally had Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his message of nationalism not been there.

I travelled through the western districts of Uttar Pradesh earlier this month, conversations, whether at district courts, mofussil tea stalls or village chaupals¹, all centred round the coming together of the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD). The consensus was that it was posing a serious challenge to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that had swept through the state like a tidal wave in 2014.²

But, oddly, there were few signs of members of the alliance — or gathbandhan, as it is popularly referred to — outside their party offices. The streetscape in the cities was dominated by enormous hoardings of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, promising vengeance on all those threatening the integrity of India. Only deep in the villages, individual candidates were running their own campaigns, organising small meetings, going door to door, asking party colleagues and alliance partners to make contact with their caste fellows.

In a village in Amroha, for instance, I caught up with Danish Ali, till recently the very visible national general secretary of the Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S), and now the BSP candidate here. He was making an impassioned speech to a small gathering: there was need to “break down the walls of hatred” with “love”, he said, and remind people how the Muslims of India “had chosen Gandhi over Jinnah”; above all, this was a country that bowed before the sacrifices of Bhagat Singh and Ashfaqulla Khan alike, just as it equally appreciated the music of Ravi Shankar and Bismillah Khan.

After that, there was a cup of tea and refreshments with local notables, before Ali's cavalcade took to the dusty inner roads for the next village.

Earlier at the village of Kyolikhurd in the Gautambudhnagar constituency, local SP functionary Bitti Gaur was campaigning vigorously for the BSP candidate. "We are all on duty, and we have a good understanding amongst ourselves in the three parties. We are committed to each other, and all implicitly follow the orders of our respective leaders," he told me, adding, "since I am a Brahmin, I largely campaign among Brahmins."

For the alliance members, with memories of being reduced to the electoral margins in 2014, and in the assembly elections of 2017 (when once again a heightened religious polarisation, as well as the spin that Modi successfully gave demonetisation, that he was taking money from the rich to give to the poor) were still fresh. They decided this time, therefore, to keep their daily engagements with voters low-key and out of sight; they even instructed workers not to respond to any provocative statement from the BJP. It was decided that a show of strength should be made only at major rallies, rather than on the streets.

So, on April 7, just four days before polling took place for the first of the seven phases of the general elections under way, the alliance held its first joint rally at Deoband in the Saharanpur Lok Sabha constituency. Flanking the stage, life-size cutouts of Charan Singh, the champion of the middle peasantry, and Ram Manohar Lohia, the Socialist legend, shared space with Dalit icons Ambedkar, Sahuji Maharaj, Jyotiba Phule and Kanshiram.

As the morning sun climbed in the sky, the crowds began to pour in. First came the BSP's disciplined cadres, in serried ranks, and the Bahujan Volunteer Force (BVF)'s members, smartly turned out in blue and white uniforms, complete with epaulettes that read BVF, the women in blue and white salwar kurta outfits or blue saris. Then came the boisterous and high spirited members and supporters of the SP and the RLD. As they mingled, waving each other's party flags, some even wore the caps of all three parties on their heads, each peeping out from the one above it. Banners coloured blue, red and green, and green and white — the colours of the BSP, SP and the RLD — carrying the election symbols of the three parties fluttered overhead.

The main road that ran past the rally venue was jammed with more supporters who had arrived from neighbouring districts. Even after the leaders —the SP's Akhilesh

Yadav, the BSP's Mayawati and the RLD's Ajit Singh — began to deliver their speeches, excited supporters continued to shout slogans, so much so that one had to strain one's ears to catch the words.

The atmosphere was electric.

Twelve days after the Deoband rally, in Mainpuri, the alliance held another historic rally: this time, it was a show both of Yadav power and, more significantly, of

It was evident, as I travelled, that the Modi wave had receded across western U.P., even though the Prime Minister, local BJP leaders acknowledged, was “the only reason their party was still in the fight”.

reconciliation. After well over two decades, SP patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati shared a stage on April 19 with Akhilesh

Yadav. The political significance of this rally cannot be underestimated as it announced publicly that the feud between the SP and the BSP following the unsavoury episode in the Lucknow guesthouse in 1995 had ended.³ It also meant that Mulayam Singh Yadav had thrown his weight behind his son, Akhilesh Yadav, rather than his brother Shivpal Yadav, who has formed his own party, the Pragatisheel Samajwadi Party (PSP), challenging the SP in its Yadav bastion.

Both Mulayam Singh Yadav and Mayawati lavished praise on each other. The SP patriarch was the "real leader of the OBCs" who had “united not just the backwards but even other deprived sections of the society," the BSP leader gushed, contrasting him with Modi who was "a fake OBC". Mulayam Singh Yadav, on his part, welcomed Mayawati warmly, mentioned her seven times in his speech, and surprised everyone by saying, "Mayawati ji had often stood by us in times of crises."

It was evident, as I travelled, that the Modi wave had receded across western U.P., even though the Prime Minister, local BJP leaders acknowledged, was “the only reason their party was still in the fight”. A majority of sitting BJP MPs had been renominated and most of them were unpopular, they said. And this in a region, where in 2014, the BJP had won 23 of the 26 seats that went to the polls in the first three phases⁴— only Firozabad, Mainpuri and Badaun that went to the polls in the third phase this time were won by the SP — and that, too, by members of Mulayam Singh Yadav's own clan.

The opposition alliance's presence in the electoral battlefield is giving traction to bread and butter issues, as it is a formidable social combination: if the Jats, the Dalits

and the Muslims are more numerous in the constituencies that went to the polls in the first two phases on April 11 and 18, the Yadavs came into play in the third phase of the elections, on April 23.

For the Muslims and Dalits, who have been at the receiving end of harassment, violence, even murderous attacks under BJP regimes both in Delhi and in Lucknow, the choice has been easy, thanks to the SP-BSP-RLD alliance. The Muslims, for instance, don't have to assess which party can defeat the BJP, as the SP and the BSP are together (barring a few constituencies such as Saharanpur and Moradabad, where the Congress candidates are also Muslims, or Fatehpur Sikri, where the Congress nominee, Raj Babbar, was seen as a possible winner).

"Muslims in western UP are like the three monkeys — they can't hear, they can't see and they can't talk. They are all silent, they only want peace, and now that the SP and BSP is together, they are voting for the alliance candidates — even for the RLD," said Mohammad Asad Farooqi, a social worker, who had worked closely with the Muslim victims of the exodus from villages in Muzaffarnagar in 2013 after communal violence broke out there.

In Agra's Mantola, a Muslim ghetto with virtually no civic amenities and which lurks unhappily in the shadow of the Taj Mahal, a majority of the community are engaged in the leather trade: and GST hit them hard. Mohammad Shafiq and Mamoon Ahmad are in the finished leather business. "Earlier, Muslim votes used to get divided between the Congress, the SP and the BSP. This time, we need to use our heads — and it is easier because the SP and BSP are together," Shafiq said. Most Muslims, Ahmad stressed, "run some business, whether it is out of a khomcha⁵, or repair cycles or something bigger — life has become even more difficult for them. So we will all vote unitedly for the candidate who is in the fight."

The Dalits, after a brief flirtation with the BJP, now know who their enemy is. Dr. Satish Prakash, a Dalit scholar who teaches physics at Meerut College, said that the countrywide protest on

“Earlier, Muslim votes used to get divided between the Congress, the SP and the BSP. This time it is easier because the SP and BSP are together.”

Scheduled Castes and Scheduled

Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was a sign that Dalits had irrevocably moved away from the BJP. The attempt to render the law toothless was the last straw for

the community that was already feeling increasingly oppressed ever since the BJP came to power in 2014 — the handling of the Rohith Vemula suicide, and the flogging of seven Dalits in Una Gujarat, for skinning a dead cow to name two major episodes.

For the Jataavs, the largest Dalit community in UP, the events of the last few years have turned them irrevocably against the BJP, whether in urban or rural areas. At the Kanshiram Park in Shergarhi, Shastri Park, in Meerut city, it is early evening: the grass has all but disappeared and on the uneven dusty ground, groups of men, all in trousers and shirts, are sitting on their haunches, playing cards. They are daily wage labourers, but the combined impact of demonetisation followed by the faulty implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), has ensured that much less work comes their way now. Many even voted for the BJP in 2014, and again in 2017, even though most of them are Jatavs, the community to which BSP supremo Mayawati belongs. “We were all fooled by Modi. He actually wants to enslave the labour class and the Muslims. During notebandi, we weren't paid for four months. This time we are all voting for Behenji (i.e. the BSP),” they say.

The BSP did not win a single seat in 2014, and won very few in 2017. The growth around that time of the Bhim Army, a group of brash young Dalits from UP's Saharanpur, which opened schools for children of their community, with its leader, Chandrashekhhar Azad styling himself as “The Great Chamar”, seemed to hold out promise to young Dalits, who were no longer as enamoured of the BSP's Mayawati. But when Azad demonstrated —after his release — that he might have political ambitions, it did not go down well with many in the community, who did not wish to see a possible split in Dalit votes. Prakash said, “The Bhim Army made a blunder. The Dalits wanted a social movement, as they regard the BSP as a political movement. It is wrong of Azad to contest the Varanasi seat as he will cut Dalit votes and damage BSP.” (Since this conversation, Azad has withdrawn his nomination from Varanasi and announced his support for the alliance; not just that at the April 7 rally, his supporters showed up at the alliance rally in Deoband.)

A section of the Yadavs, who earlier owed total allegiance to the SP, also moved in 2014 and 2017 to the BJP, that was riding the Hindu wave. As a result, in 2014, the party won just five Lok Sabha seats, three of which fall in the third phase of the current elections. All five were won by members of the Yadav clan, a sign that the

party no longer had a grip on the entire community, as well as the fact that it had shrunk to being just a Yadav party. In the by-elections to Gorakhpur and Phulpur in 2018, the SP leadership had learnt its lesson and it fielded a Nishad and a Kurmi (both OBCs) respectively from these two constituencies — and won both seats. Of course, the SP had the backing of the BSP for these two elections — and this became the basis for the current alliance. The results of the ongoing elections will demonstrate whether the Yadavs will return to Mulayam Singh Yadav and Akhilesh Yadav: a theory that is doing the rounds is that even if they don't return to the extent the Muslims and Dalits are, a substantial section will be back in their natural home — as the community, having tasted power under SP rule in the past, would like to have that clout back again.

As for the Jat community, which had voted as one for the BJP in 2014 and 2017, many of them are returning to the RLD. Part of the credit for this turnaround can be given to Ajit Singh, who has been travelling for the past year through Muzaffarnagar district, holding small meetings in villages, bringing Jats and Muslims together. “I have only been working on (re-establishing) bhaichara (brotherhood),” he told this writer, “speaking to people in small groups, asking them to bury the hatchet, and mend relationships in the larger interest of the farming community. I have been telling Hindus and Muslims, *aa jao, gale mill lo* (come on, embrace each other), try and withdraw cases against each other to end the bitterness.”

Ajit Singh’s message of peace has made some impact; he has also succeeded in

With religion receding into the background, rural distress, the negative impact of demonetisation and GST, loss of jobs and closure of small businesses, have been playing on the minds of all but the most hardcore BJP voters.

reminding them of the only man before whom they are willing to bow their heads — Chaudhary Charan Singh, who gave them “leadership, identity, pride”. “He was like a God for us”, says

advocate Dharmendra Baliyan. As Charan Singh’s son, Ajit Singh, and his son, Jayant Chaudhury, have been beneficiaries of that legacy and goodwill, but so have other Jats fighting on behalf of the alliance.

Following the communal violence of 2013, the Jats themselves admit, they got carried away by the BJP’s communalisation of what were local incidents. The story that was put out that year was that two Jat men had murdered a Muslim in an “honour

killing” for “stalking” their sister. The stalking story was eventually proved false but, by then, angry Muslims had retaliated and killed the Jat brothers. This then came in handy to spin a larger narrative of “love jihad” — of a Muslim conspiracy to target innocent Hindu girls, to humiliate the Hindu community and add to their own numbers. In reality, however, the three men had had a fight — that led to the murder and counter-murders — after their motorcycles crashed into each other, the stuff of daily life in mofussil India. It was however, enough for a concerted killing spree in which many more Muslim lives were lost.

But the madness of 2013 has died down now, Today, Jats have had time to rethink their options — and the alliance looks like a winning option, and fits in with their proclivity as a community to be seen as “anti-establishment”. The BJP is *now* the establishment. Dharmendra Malik, the spokesperson for the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU), that has played a leading role in recent farmers’ movements, said, “At least 50 per cent of the Jats have moved to the alliance.”

With religion receding into the background, rural distress, delayed sugarcane dues, increase in fertiliser prices, the negative impact of demonetisation, and GST leading to loss of jobs in the informal sector and closure of small businesses, has been playing on the minds of all but the most hardcore BJP voters.

“Since there is no Modi wave, caste is playing a role again, and the gathbandhan has made caste polarisation possible,” says RP Singh, who used to teach at Aligarh Muslim University. He adds, “Those who are voting for the BJP are no longer voting blindly — only if the person is a good candidate: unlike 2014, Modi is not enough to swing an election.” The result is that the alliance is now in a direct fight with the BJP in virtually all the 26 constituencies in western UP, barring a few where the Congress, too, is in the fight — such as Fatehpur Sikri, from where Raj Babbar is contesting, or Bareilly, from where Pravin Singh Aron is the party’s candidate.

The social combination has also given the alliance “pulling power”: its strength on the ground has meant that in some constituencies where it has fielded a candidate from a community outside its base vote, it is actually getting substantial support from its members as well. In Ghaziabad, where the sitting BJP MP, former Army Chief and central minister General VK Singh is the party’s candidate, ground reports after the polling on April 11 suggested that a large section of the Bania community (traditional BJP supporters) voted for the BSP’s Suresh Bansal.



Varanasi: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath campaigning at Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, on April 18, 2019. Photo: PTI

This “pulling power” also means that among some upper caste communities that are not entirely enamoured of Yogi Adityanath’s style of rough and ready governance and his deployment of a large number of his caste fellows, Rajputs, in police stations, for instance, nor of Modi’s authoritarian style are looking for other options. In the village of Enayatpur, at the Kela Devi Inter College, a group of school teachers provide an opportunity to study an almost perfect caste matrix. There are eight teachers and one is the school clerk. The teachers include two Rajputs, one Brahmin, two Mauryas (an OBC caste) and three Jatavs. The clerk, Dharamvir Singh, is a Valmiki, who hesitates initially to voice his views to an audience that includes the school principal — finally, he opens up and says that he believes the alliance is a better bet. The three Jatavs, Anish Kumar, Vikas Kumar and Satish Kumar all strongly come out in support of the alliance, and criticise Modi's penchant for crony capitalism and criticise his poor record in the creation of jobs. The two Rajputs, Principal Gabendra Pal Singh, and his colleague, Bhavesh Singh, are both Modi supporters, as are the two Mauryas, Chandresh Kumar Maurya and Ashok Kumar Maurya. They all say that farming issues have all been forgotten after the Balakot

airstrikes, that Modi deserves another five years and that they don't wish to see chaos — they want a strong, stable government.

The Brahmin, Jitender Sharma, launches into a diatribe against Modi and the way he has crushed dissent, controlled the media, and failed to create jobs. He also talks of Yogi Adityanath's poor governance: "If we vote the BJP back, Modi will be even more authoritarian, but we have no choice because the Congress is not in a position to form the government." Sharma is the second speaker, but by the time the conversation is coming to an end and Anish Kumar mentions that this government has ended schoolteachers' pensions, he looks at me and says, "I have changed my mind. I will vote for the coalition." It's not clear whether the termination of the pension scheme is the reason why Sharma says he has switched sides, or whether he has just done some arithmetic of his own: without him, it is 4:4 and his could be the casting vote.

Traditionally, in U.P. the Brahmins' first preference is to be in power, failing which they would like to be on the winning side: was that working in Sharma's mind? From his remarks, he is clearly no fan of the BJP and Modi — he even tells me he is a regular reader of the Wire which, along with the BBC, provides him with "the truth". This is not to suggest that all Brahmins will shift their custom to the alliance — only that there are some chinks in their armour.

For the BJP, it is an imperative to shift focus from the rural distress, the negative impact of demonetisation, the closure of small businesses, and the poor implementation of the GST that surfaced as election issues and were resonating with many voters. The BJP's key plank this time has been Hindu nationalism — a poisonous cocktail of Pakistan, the Balakot airstrikes that followed the Pulwama terror attack, the perfidy of local Muslims and the "honour" of Hindu women.

At the BJP office in Agra, Dushyant, a party worker says, "Desh Bhakti ke madhyam se Hindutva ka jyoti jalana hain (We have to light the lamp of Hindutva) People have connected emotionally to Modi. We are learning all this from the US and Israel." The RSS's Ashok Kulsreshta describes 2014 as a defining moment and says it is no longer as important to work as hard, "as all our organisations want Modi to win. The battle is between the ideology of nationalism and those who want to defeat Modi."

Since the religious polarisation that was so strongly visible in 2014 is missing, this line is playing well only among core BJP supporters. Sushil Goel, a prominent

businessman in Agra, at one time with the BSP, but now “neutral”, says, “The business community, though hit by GST, in the interests of the nation, will vote for the BJP. There is a huge difference in the mood between pre and post Balakot. The country comes above self.”

But, with the feedback that the BJP received after the first two rounds of polling not very positive, it deployed Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath once again. On April 19, he said at a rally in Badaun: “When [BSP chief] Mayawati came to power, she stopped Janmashtami celebrations, and when the Samajwadi Party came, they stopped Kanwar Yatra..They discriminated...they said they will give money for boundary walls for ‘kabristans [Muslim burial grounds]’ but not for ‘shamshan ghats [cremation grounds]’, my government put an end to that discrimination. We said if kabristans will get money, we will provide a budget for shamshan ghats also.”

For many upper castes, as affected by demonetisation, GST and rampaging cows in fields⁶ as other communities, the most negative factor against the alliance is their perception of the governments provided by the latter’s leaders. A line heard in many villages is: “When Mayawati becomes Chief Minister, the Harijan Act is indiscriminately applied against upper castes. When Akhilesh Yadav become chief minister, the Yadavs and the Muslims go on the rampage.” This, even though they acknowledge that Mayawati’s record in maintaining law and order was very good, and Akhilesh Yadav, unlike his father, Mulayam Singh Yadav, is not so “casteist”, apart from the fact that his achievements on the development front were "noteworthy".

If the upper castes see the BSP and the SP as their competitors for political power, the non-Yadav OBCs are more inclined to the BJP, except where candidates from their communities have been given alliance tickets, such as in Kairana, where the SP’s Tabassum Hasan is a Muslim Gujjar.

In the final analysis, it is not so much the bread and butter issues that are playing on people’s minds as what place they might have in a particular dispensation. The emergence of caste as a factor at a time when the ruling BJP is offering fear, not hope, has helped the opposition alliance offer a credible alternative.

[**Smita Gupta**, Senior Fellow, The Hindu Centre for Politics and Public Policy, was until recently Associate Editor, *The Hindu*, New Delhi. In a journalistic career spanning 38 years, she has covered all major political parties, the Prime Minister's Office, the Indian Parliament, and national and State elections, especially in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Gujarat. In 1992-93, she was a Reuter Fellow at Oxford University, U.K. During her year at Oxford, she wrote a long paper on The Emergence of the Far Right in West Europe. She has contributed chapters in academic books on the Bharatiya Janata Party, the politics of Uttar Pradesh, and Parliament. She holds an M.A. degree from Delhi University. She can be contacted at smita_g@hotmail.com]

References:

1. Meeting place.
2. In 2014, the BJP won 71 of a possible 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh, and its ally, the Apna Dal won another two seats, taking the National Democratic Alliance's tally in the State to 73.
3. Mayawati and her party colleagues were attacked by SP workers shortly after the BSP decided to pull out support from the SP-BSP government.
4. Elections for the first three phases were on April 11, 18 and April 23.
5. A small wooden box that contains wares to be sold.
6. Since the state government banned cow slaughter altogether, farmers don't know what to do with unproductive cattle and have been letting them loose as they don't have the money to feed them any longer. They can be seen on city roads, foraging in garbage heaps, or destroying farmers' crops.