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The New Modi Wave as Seen from Eastern UP

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Ahead of the May elections, observers in Gorakhpur in eastern UP could sense a groundswell of support for the BJP. The old caste dynamics had broken down and the efficient delivery of welfare services had built voter support. The two ensured a BJP victory.

Gorakhpur sees itself as the capital and heart of Purvanchal, the Bhojpuri-speaking eastern part of Uttar Pradesh (UP). It has a university, a medical college, an engineering institute, an air force base, the famous Gita Press, and a planetarium (built by Vir Bahadur Singh, who was, until 2017, the only “son” of Gorakhpur to become Chief Minister of UP, between 1985 and 1988).

Most important of all, Gorakhpur is the seat of the Gorakshanath religious lineage or sampradaya, which the current UP Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, heads. It has long been considered a safe parliamentary constituency for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which won it consecutively eight times—the last five of these by Adityanath himself, before that by his predecessor Mahant Avaidyanath. Then, stunningly, in March 2018, the BJP lost the by-election in Gorakhpur triggered by Adityanath taking up the post of UP Chief Minister.

That by-election defeat, by nearly 21,000 votes, at the hands of the Samajwadi Party’s (SP’s) Praveen Nishad, backed by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), was hailed by some as providing the formula for defeating the BJP both nationally and regionally. In this by-election a “Grand Alliance” (SP, BSP, and the new [Nishad Party](#)), contesting with the SP symbol, was seen as a major blow to the BJP, coming as it did not long after its massive victory in the UP assembly elections of February-March 2017. Those looking for comfort in Congress’s ability to defeat the BJP in the 2018 assembly elections of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, took further encouragement from this Gorakhpur by-election victory.

However, as always, things looked rather different at the local level. Until 2018 the Nishad community, about 15% of Gorakhpur, had always backed “the mandir”, i.e. Yogi Adityanath and his temple. But on this occasion voters were told that the BJP candidate, Upendra Shukla, was not the Yogi’s first choice. They were also reminded that the guru of Gorakshanath was Matsyendranath, a fisherman, and therefore a member of the water-related caste grouping that includes the Nishads (traditionally boatmen). In other words, on this occasion, to vote *against* the BJP was actually to vote *for* the math or mandir.

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By the time of the national elections the following year everything had changed again. Praveen Nishad had switched to the BJP and was allotted the neighbouring seat of Sant Kabir Nagar, which he duly won. The Gorakhpur seat went to the BJP’s choice candidate, Ravindra Shyamnarayan Shukla, also known as Ravi Kisan. According to a widely repeated rumour, Sanjay Nishad, Praveen’s father and the founder of the Nishad party, “sold” his son to Adityanath for Rs 50 crore, an accusation that the SP passed on to [the press](#). Whatever the truth about cash transfers, it cannot be doubted that there was a meeting or that the Nishad Party was promised two seats for joining the UDA. UP state minister and BJP leader, Siddharth Nath Singh, reported [Sanjay Nishad as saying](#): “...now Ram and Nishad have come together... our hearts were always together and now our parties are too. Gorakhpur has always been a BJP bastion and will continue to be so.”

Sanjay Nishad was invoking here the widespread knowledge of Tulsi Das’s *Ram Charit Manas*, the Awadhi/old Hindi version of the *Ramayana*, in which Lord Ram is saved by a boatman, i.e. a Nishad. It is well known that BJP leaders, especially Yogi Adityanath, are fond of iconography that identifies them with Lord Vishnu taking incarnation as Ram in order to save Hindus in times of trouble. [Elsewhere](#) Sanjay Nishad was reported as saying that it was “a natural alliance of Ram Raj and Nishadraj.” Meanwhile, keeping up the scriptural theme, Adityanath’s youth force, the Hindu Yuva Vahini (HYV), circulated the following slogan to support Ravi Kisan, the BJP candidate: *Ashwamedha ka ghoda hai, Yogi ji ne chhoda hai* (Ravi Kisan is a sacrificial horse, released by Yogi). The implication was that Ravi Kisan would spread far and wide, and wherever he went, he would establish Adityanath’s sovereignty. This slogan also identifies Adityanath as a Ksatriya king and supports the identification with Ram, who is also supposed to have performed the Ashwamedha as king, according to the *Ramayana*.

In joining or allying with the BJP, Sanjay and Praveen Nishad were recognising both local and national imperatives. The Mahagathbandhan's convincing win over the BJP in the Gorakhpur by-election in 2018 was indeed a big jolt to Modi and Amit Shah. They responded immediately. Incorporation of local leaders, such as the Nishads, was only a part of their counter-attack. The BJP government started by providing [reservations to the Economically Weaker Section](#) (EWS) among the General categories. With the [Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana](#) they provided a direct transfer of Rs 6000 per annum to all poor and marginal farmers with two hectares or less (after the election Modi extended this to all farmers). In order to counter the alliance of the SP and BSP, the BJP announced their aim of achieving 50% of the votes polled in every constituency.

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For those with their ears to the ground, it was clear that a second Modi wave was coming. Just before the elections we (Chaturvedi and Pandey) attended road shows, held in their respective strongholds, Gorakhpur and Padrauna, by two leaders, Amit Shah and Priyanka Gandhi (second in command of their parties, BJP and Congress, respectively). The contrast between the two could not have been more stark. Attendance for Shah was impressive, whereas Priyanka's crowd was much smaller. Many just came out of curiosity to see the Gandhi scion. Though the narrative of the two meetings was similar, the atmosphere could not have been more different. The BJP meeting was highly organised and a demonstration of power. Priyanka Gandhi's was small and unimpressive by comparison. Most people just came to see how she compared to her brother Rahul.



At the 16 May rally (Credit:Shashank Chaturvedi)

In households, in villages and on the streets, what people were saying seemed very different to the buzz created in media rooms in Delhi. *Jati ko lekar kabtak challenge?* (for how long will we carry the burden of caste?), *vote to kamal ko pad raha hai, candidate ko kaun puchh raha hai?* (largely the vote is for the lotus (BJP), who cares about the candidate?), *kaun hai vikpaksh mein?* (who is there in the opposition?), *Modi ne sab ko kuch na kuch diya hai* (Modi has given something to everyone). Many such utterances were to be heard across both constituencies (Gorakhpur and Kushinagar) as we tried to understand the pulse and mood of the voters.

What surprised us most during our fieldwork was the range of issues discussed among the voters and the art of defending the most popular leader in this election. This was an eye opener and a surprise. To a large section of the voters what mattered was the availability of fertilisers, an uninterrupted power supply, scores of toilets not only constructed but also in use, the availability of gas cylinders in houses for which cooking on gas used to be a distant dream, *pakka* roads, along with upright and strong leadership which believes in delivering to the last mile of the village. At least on these issues, even those who were vocal in opposing Modi accepted that the delivery of government schemes was very smooth and that there was no discrimination.

An old villager from Betia village of Kushinagar, a Pathan Muslim, did not mince his words in opposing Modi, but even he accepted in the same breath that no previous government had delivered so much to all the sections of the people. If nothing else, he admitted that he would be a beneficiary of reservations for economically weaker sections, as provided by the Modi government. Some other trends were discernible. We got indications that some of the Muslims who had directly benefited from the Ujjwala/toilets/cash transfer, and especially housing, might vote for the BJP. Though we could not meet any Muslim women, there were hints that some of them took a positive view of the Triple Talaq law. There was no palpable fear among these rural Muslims as a result of the lynchings elsewhere in the country.

The communal divide is clearer among the upper castes and upper Other Backward Classes (OBCs) than it is in the lower rungs. These sections are also better informed about the “successes” of Modi's foreign policy, especially vis-à-vis Pakistan and China. Balakot and Doklam, as well as the designation of Masood Azhar as an international terrorist. These were seen as attesting to Modi's success in projecting a strong India (in comparison to the perception of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as 'docile').

This explains the rationale behind the BJP's “communal and divisive politics”. The poorer sections may be won over with development programmes, while the affluent sections are more susceptible to communal rhetoric and assertive external policies. But they too talked about better roads and nearly uninterrupted electricity supply.

This may seem like a paradox, but one could assert that while some of the BJP's politics and rhetoric might be communal and regressive, a large section of its voters support it for what could be glossed as progressive reasons, i.e. because of its introduction of the reservation for the EWS and PM Kisan and because of its stance on Triple Talaq. Many others support it for purely economic reasons. They are willing to overlook the government's failure to create jobs or increase farm incomes, because of more efficient service delivery than in the past and because the government seems pro-active in creating welfare programmes from which they are likely to benefit. On the other hand, the Opposition, which on the face of it is seen as pursuing a liberal/ secular and social justice agenda, bases its support and political calculations on parochial (caste) considerations. The liberal intelligentsia simply fails to fully appreciate these ground realities and nuances.

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All the arithmetical calculations, which suggested that the alliance of the SP and BSP would benefit from strong vote banks, backfired. There is now a section of voters, who, though they may traditionally have been with their respective parties (SP or BSP), have decided to move in a new direction, though in a relatively silent way. The margin by which Ravi Kisan won (greater than Adityanath in 2014) indicates that BSP voters did not transfer their votes to the SP. This flies in the face of the conventional understanding of the BSP's vote bank and its ability to transfer its core votes to its allies. It reminded us of the tectonic shift in politics in North India during the 1980s and 1990s, when Dalits and OBCs started voting for their respective “parent parties”, such as the BSP and the SP/RJD, silently and not necessarily disclosing to the dominant castes (mainly Brahmins, Bhumihars, and Rajputs) that they had deserted their “masters”.

Caste links between voters and parties are sacrosanct no more and both the SP and the BSP have lost the kind of control they used to have over their critical mass base. We may be witnessing a repeat of what happened in Bihar when the fortunes of Lalu Prasad Yadav went into decline after Nitish Kumar succeeded in attracting backward caste communities to the cause of development. It is too early to

identify this shift as the breakdown of caste-based voting, but certainly there are new fault lines emerging in the Hindi belt which may be working in favour of the BJP.

In addition, according to the data released by the Election Commission of India, for the first time in the history of general elections in India, women voted in almost equal numbers as men. We may speculate that, as with Nitish Kumar, women voted overwhelmingly for Modi. Our field observations certainly confirm strong support for the BJP among women voters. It was Nitish Kumar's support from women voters that helped him transcend caste boundaries. There is evidence to speculate about another "silent revolution" in the making. This new mood in the country is certainly not comprehensible to many in Delhi. A liberal disconnect has cut them off from the ordinary people who decide the future of the country.

References:

For more details on the political history of Gorakhpur, see the following:

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