

FROM SANNYAS TO SIYASAT : CONTEXTUALISING YOGI ADITYANATH IN UP POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

The meteoric rise of Yogi Adityanath to the helm of affairs in India's most populous state in 2017 was nothing short of a political earthquake. 5 years down the line, another stupendous victory for the BJP under his leadership bucking anti-incumbency which has plagued ruling parties in Uttar Pradesh since the past 3 decades, only puts him back in the limelight. This paper doesn't seek to attempt only a biographical sketch of the saffron-clad Chief Minister tracing his journey from sannyas (priesthood) to siyasat (politics) rather aims to situate him in UP's political trajectory exploring, assessing and evaluating how and why he exactly fits into the jigsaw puzzle of the BJP's larger political schemes for the state with a nuanced analysis in conclusion on his road ahead as an emerging figure in national politics.

KEYWORDS : Sannyas (priesthood), Siyasat (politics), UP's political trajectory, Yogi Adityanath, State Politics

"Agar Gorakhpur mein rehna hain toh Yogi, Yogi kehna hain" to "Agar Purvanchal mein rehna hain toh Yogi, Yogi kehna hain" to "Agar Uttar Pradesh mein rehna hain toh Yogi, Yogi kehna hain" (Follow Yogi if you have to live in Gorakhpur to Follow Yogi if you have to live in Purvanchal to Follow Yogi if you have to live in Uttar Pradesh), the evolution of the preceding political slogan seemingly encapsulates Yogi Adityanath's growing stature in politics. Existent literature in this domain involves critical autobiographies and journalistic accounts of the UP CM on one hand while academic contributions revolve around the impact of Hindutva discourses on state and national politics, what it fails to gauge is that perhaps the two are not unconnected developments. Yogi Adityanath is very much operating within the social realities of UP, he is perhaps a political response to these cleavages and in turn also reshaping these to the electoral benefit of his party. Samuel. P. Huntington's pioneering work, 'The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of the World Order' embracing the 'civilisational paradigm' hypothesised a post - Cold War order wherein in wake of waning ideological influence, people "need new forms of stable community and new sets of moral precepts to provide them with a sense of meaning and purpose" (Huntington, 1996) - societal identity markers are able to meet these needs, with Yogi Adityanath embarking on a second term after steering the BJP to another landslide win in 2022 it is right time to address the temporal gaps in literature and identify the linkages between the biography of the priest - politician, hagiography of his political party and Uttar Pradesh's larger political trajectory, developing a political sociology approach for who is Yogi Adityanath seems inextricably related to the how and why of BJP's political discourses in Uttar Pradesh.

UNDERSTANDING U.P. POLITICS : A TIMELINE

Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state currently sending 80 members to the Lok Sabha and 403 MLA's to its Legislative Assembly in Lucknow has always remained a 'nerve-centre of national politics'. Delving into its political trajectory would only point to striking similarities with the country's evolving political patterns, no aberration for a state located in the Hindi heartland. Dominated by the Congress in the early years post Independence deriving its strength from grass - roots organisation (Brass, 2008) albeit with a tendency for short-lived Chief Minister's prominent faces included the likes of Govind Ballabh Pant, Sucheta Kriplani, Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna amongst others barring intermittent rule by the Bharatiya Kranti Dal under Charan Singh, the Jan Sangh and Socialist Parties remained prominent opposition players in state politics (Weiner, 1968) until 1977 when the Janata Party swept polls in aftermath of the Emergency. The Congress returned to power in the 1980s under the leadership of V.P. Singh and thereafter Narayan Dutt Tiwari replicating its Lok Sabha victories at the state level. 1989 proved a watershed year for state politics with the election of Mulayam Singh Yadav as Chief Minister leading the Janata Dal to a clear victory, later credited with the founding of the Samajwadi Party (SP) as cracks surfaced in the Janata Parivar ruling the state from 1993 to 1995 and then again between 2003 - 2007. As the politics of 'Mandal and Mandir' rocked UP's political landscape in the decade of the nineties, the SP flourished primarily on a Muslim - Yadav votebank while Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) led by his protégé Mayawati relied on Dalit - Backward consolidation mainly the Jatavs raking up deep-rooted caste loyalties only to be countered

by the BJP's Hindutva mass mobilisation on religious lines in wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement thereby making 'identity politics' a living question in assessing and analysing politics in India's most populous state, a question all the more vital in UP's contemporary context. Following dismissal of the BJP's first government in the state under Kalyan Singh in 1993 over the Babri Masjid Demolition controversy, the state briefly witnessed a brief SP - BSP coalition to prevent the BJP's comeback followed by several short lived BJP - BSP experiments with the Chief Minister rotating between Mayawati and the BJP leadership including Kalyan Singh, Ram Prakash Gupta and Rajnath Singh. After a chaotic decade and a half, 2007 signalled return to one party governments under Kumari Mayawati's BSP (2007 - 2012) and thereafter Akhilesh Yadav's SP (2012 - 2017) until the 2017 saffron tsunami yielded the largest victory for the BJP and perhaps for any party ever in UP bagging 325 of the 403 seats decimating Opposition parties, an election mandate political analysts believe vindicated faith in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's aura and agenda. After days of hectic parleys in New Delhi and Lucknow, the BJP chose Yogi Adityanath as the next UP Chief Minister over more expected choices of then Union Home Minister Rajnath Singh or former Union Minister and now Jammu & Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha or even then State BJP President and now Deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya, pulling off another political surprise just days after a record win. Taking a look back at Yogi Adityanath's life becomes only imperative in such circumstances.

THE 4 PHASES IN THE LIFE OF YOGI ADITYANATH

Born in 1972 as Ajay Mohan Singh Bisht to a Rajput family in Pauri Garhwal, Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand) he secured a Bachelor's in Mathematics from Hemwati Nandan Bahugana Garhwal University. An active member of the RSS affiliated student wing the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), Ajay Bisht left home in order to participate in the Ram Janmabhoomi Movement in the early 1990s, a phase corroborating with the BJP's meteoric rise in state politics eventually coming under the influence Gorakhnath Math and his spiritual guru Mahant Advaityanath. Shantanu Gupta in his work 'The Definitive Biography of Yogi Adityanath' explains the distinct phases in Yogi Adityanath's life, a story that seemingly fascinates many. The legacy of the Math seemingly indispensable in marking the transit from Ajay Singh Bisht to Yogi Adityanath with his ordination as a priest, his experience as a Sangh - chalak and then as an administrator at the Math shaped him for his political innings making it to Parliament in 1998 from the Gorakhpur Lok Sabha constituency formally entering public life, very much in line with the Math's tradition of churning out members of Parliament and the State Assembly, his spiritual predecessors holding the same distinction. Holding onto the seat five times in a row including the 2014 Elections, also the

year when he was anointed Head Monk of Gorakhnath Math following the death of his predecessor, Adityanath missed out on a Union cabinet berth despite much speculation over his inclusion in the First Modi Ministry only to emerge as the Chief Ministerial choice for taking over the reigns of Uttar Pradesh three years later in 2017 adventing the fourth and perhaps the current stage of an illustrious career.

LINKING THE BRIDGE: SITUATING YOGI ADITYANATH IN U.P. POLITICS

Following the 2014 Lok Sabha landslide for the BJP in which it swept UP garnering 73 of the 80 seats in alliance with the Apna Dal, victory at the next Assembly Elections due in 2017 were always on the party's radar. Going into polls, the party refrained from declaring a Chief Ministerial nominee relying on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's face in setting off a challenge from an SP - Congress alliance, decimating the BSP to pull off the largest electoral mandate ever. Later when Yogi Adityanath was declared as Chief Minister, Why Yogi ? seemed a buzzing question in political circles. A political sociology approach would demonstrate that the 'personal is the political' isn't just the war cry of second wave feminism rather an embodiment of identity politics at large. The case of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in Uttar Pradesh shall prove a vivid case in point, his personality cult flourishing on the very identity markers which hold the keys to contextualising him in state politics.

First, born in a Rajput family he caters well to the consolidation of BJP's traditional upper caste votebank. Starting off as a 'Brahmin - Rajput - Baniya party of the Hindi heartland', the OBCs are a later addition to the BJP's electoral kitty. Moreover, given strained equations between Brahmins and the Dalits, a Rajput CM fits well into the caste matrix without ruffling feathers of either section, the installation of an OBC Deputy CM in Keshav Prasad Maurya and a Brahmin in Dinesh Sharma showing that the BJP played an astute balancing game.

Next, hailing from the politically vital Purvanchal region (Eastern UP) which sends more than a quarter of UP's representatives to Parliament and the State Assembly, Yogi's strong sway in Gorakhpur and adjoining districts is well known. History shows that Yogi's bitter - sweet ties with the BJP in the past has had its electoral costs. In 2002, unhappy over ticket distribution by the party, Yogi founded the Hindu Yuva Vahini, a religious outfit which has considerable organisational presence in Eastern UP - independent candidate Radha Mohan Das won the Gorakhpur Urban seat by record margins that year with Yogi's support defeating the official BJP candidate. Even in 2004 and 2009 Lok Sabha polls, Yogi's initial ambivalence over supporting the party's official candidates significantly affected its tally despite reaching an agreement later. Moreover, this happens to be the very region of the state where the BJP faced the toughest challenge from primary Opposition SP, a tall leader

from Purvanchal was quintessential to continue its winning streak.

With an eye on the future, the party opted for a Chief Minister in the mid 40s. Despite his apparent lack of ministerial experience, as one of the longest serving parliamentarians Yogi Adityanath was no political novice rather seemed capable of providing leadership for a long-term becoming the second youngest Chief Minister of UP entering office at 44 also simultaneously blunting the SP's appeal banking on Akhilesh Yadav's youthful charisma, age was always a determining factor in this choice.

Fourth and what has perhaps proved the most defining is his identity as a Mahant, his religious lineage as a Hindu seer affiliated to a Math known for its public welfare credentials including the management of schools, hospitals and a durbar (common room) sensitive to local complainants hinting at an unmatched identical advantage for Adityanath, making him the poster boy of Hindutva Populism symbolic of a perfect BJP - RSS ideologue. (Pradhan & Chandra, 2021). A controversial firebrand leader criticising any diversion from the party's core Hindutvavadi ideals, no wonder proved the Sangh's apple of the eye for the top job influencing the central BJP leadership to opt for the sannyasi (monk) to run the siyasat (governance) of Uttar Pradesh over several party veterans and seasoned administrators. Allusions to the RSS's Gujarat Model aren't completely misplaced. The choice of Narendra Modi, then National General Secretary to replace veteran Keshubhai Patel as Gujarat CM in 2001 and sticking to him despite his controversial handling of the Godhra riots set a new narrative wherein political compulsions don't necessarily force parties to dilute their agenda and enter the mainstream rather bank on polarising figures to secure electoral success. (Jaffrelet, 2019) Mr. Modi's hinduised nationalist credentials coupled with his administrative achievements yielded concrete results transforming Gujarat into an the very laboratory of Hindutva, an invincible BJP fortress for decades now. Post the 2014 national election victory for Mr. Modi which made Hindutva Populism the dominant discourse of national politics, the situation seemed ripe for re- running the experiment in Uttar Pradesh with Yogi Adityanath as its mascot.

Since taking charge, the new BJP Government in the state has set a new benchmark for strict law and order handling, the bulldozer becoming a lexicon for Adityanath as a CM tough on crime despite being subject to critics ire for allegedly targeting minorities including selective crack down on slaughter houses, madrasas and moral policing. His popularity plummeting after the deadly second wave of the pandemic, Yogi nevertheless retained his chair despite rumblings of a possible reshuffle in UP BJP in mid 2021 going onto win a hands down victory in early 2022 winning over 270 of the 403 Assembly seats. He returned at the helm of affairs for a consecutive second term after

completing full 5 years, a distinction held by no other UP CM since Independence. What explains this victory in face of a resurgent SP - RLD alliance, agrarian revolt over the farm bills and significant defections in state BJP is perhaps new M-Y factors Modi - Yogi through their welfare policy delivery creating a new brand of saffron socialism altogether (Kumar, 2017) effectively using the Media and Yojana to bolster its appeal among new social groups especially Mahila and the Youth neutralising the SP's Muslim - Yadav votebank to help the double engine Government remain on track. No wonder Amit Shah had urged the public at the very start of the campaign that the road to Delhi passing through Lucknow if PM Modi was to get a 3rd term in 2024, Yogi should be voted back to power in 2022. (Verniers, 2022)

Despite fluctuating permutations and combinations amongst the Opposition in Uttar Pradesh since 2014, be it the SP - Congress tie-up in 2017 or the much acclaimed Mahagathbandhan of the regional giants - SP and BSP in 2019 or a partnership between SP, RLD and smaller players in 2022, the BJP remained unbeatable riding high on a new rainbow coalition of social groups including the Brahmins, Rajputs, Baniyas and non- Yadav, non-Jatav Dalits, Yogi Adityanath's captaincy definitely deserves credit for holding fort and shoring up the party's vote share in every election for even the Prime Minister's unmatched popularity hasn't always been enough for the BJP to win and retain states. The absence of a regional stalwart or declining credibility of its state leadership dented its chances, the loss of states happening on both sides of a mammoth 2019 Lok Sabha victory, the 2018 December washout in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh and thereafter in Jharkhand, Delhi and West Bengal should serve as reminders. What therefore seemed like a surprise choice - a high risk one in the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh, 5 years later is seemingly proving a political masterstroke for the saffron-clad politician isn't operating in vacuum but stands at the very interstices of the social cleavages which have made and unmade UP politics thus far. Power rests in social realms, elections require tapping these potentials by responding to existent cleavages and constructing new social constituencies for political reasons of state control, Adityanath as a 'microcosm in action of the BJP' s mission' where 'who' defines the 'how and why' of politics is seemingly aimed at doing just that.

HIS ROAD AHEAD

Carefully cultivating a second line of leadership, Modi's new BJP (Mehta, 2022) has relied upon fresh faces to lead state governments. Devendra Fadnavis (Maharashtra), Manohar Lal Khattar (Haryana), Himanta Biswa Sharma (Assam), Jairam Thakur (Himachal Pradesh), Pushkar Singh Dhami (Uttarakhand), Pramod Sawant (Goa) figure in the top list, Yogi's 2022 victory has seemingly solidified his position as

'first among equals'. The BJP breaching the SP strongholds of Azamgarh and Rampur in the recent Lok Sabha bypolls has furthered added to Yogi's growing clout. Despite failing to make the cut to the BJP's Parliamentary Board, the party's highest decision making body, as a star campaigner roped in for campaigns around the country his presence is certainly being felt as an emerging face in national politics transcending state boundaries, leaving doors for speculation wide ajar regarding the possibility of projecting Adityanath as a future Prime Ministerial candidate, indications that he may soon join the Modi - Shah duo in forming the BJP's electoral triple engine although this seems too premature at the moment as Prime Minister Narendra Modi is firmly in the saddle to lead the party into another election, a tale perhaps only time will tell. If 2014 Lok Sabha election was the test of BJP's revival, 2019 tested its sustenance, 2024 shall seek to testify its dominance and in this quest, the role of Yogi led UP BJP is likely to feature prominently.

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