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Politics in Gorakhpur since the 1920s: the making of a safe ‘Hindu’ constituency

Shashank Chaturvedi^a, David N. Gellner ^b and Sanjay Kumar Pandey^c

^aDepartment of Political Science, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India; ^bSchool of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK; ^cCentre for Russian and Central Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

The city of Gorakhpur presents what may be a unique, and is certainly an unusual, configuration of religion and politics. The sitting MP from 1998 to 2017, Yogi Adityanath, a Hindu monk, had one of the safest seats in India and won five parliamentary elections in a row, a career that culminated in his appointment as the BJP Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in 2017. Adityanath was both an effective constituency MP and the head of a thriving Math (Hindu monastic temple). Gorakhpur used to be famous for its lawless image and gang warfare. We seek to explain how politics in Gorakhpur have evolved through three distinct periods: (1) Congress hegemony and Hindu-Muslim harmony at the local level; (2) intensified caste competition and the rise of muscular politics; (3) the impact of new caste politics (with the rise of caste-based parties such as the SP and BSP), with the Math as the focus of Gorakhpur’s ever-stronger Hindu-based political identity. The BJP’s loss of the Gorakhpur seat in 2018, in a by-election consequent on Adityanath’s elevation to Chief Minister of UP, may be interpreted as a (probably temporary) rejection of the BJP, but it does not represent a loss of influence by the Math.

KEYWORDS

Uttar Pradesh; Hindutva; muscular politics; Hindu-Muslim relations; caste

This paper seeks to explore the evolution of politics in Gorakhpur, a city and its hinterland in eastern Uttar Pradesh (henceforth UP).¹ The explanation offered for the emergence of ‘Hindu’ dominance, specifically the dominance of the Math and its abbot, currently Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of UP, is broadly historical and cultural.² In a short epilogue we deal with the apparent paradox of the BJP’s loss, in 2018, of what everyone had assumed was, and that had been since 1989, a ‘safe Hindu seat’. In a sense, the paper illustrates the old adage about all politics being local politics: what we describe is increasing dominance of Gorakhpur by the Math, by means of ‘Hindu’ politics. What the latest twist in Gorakhpur’s political history shows is that, despite Adityanath’s elevation, relationships with the BJP at a national level remain complicated. The Math’s influence is primarily felt in the city of Gorakhpur itself and in adjoining districts.

On the one hand, Gorakhpur has been through, and may be seen as a microcosm of, the standard phases of north Indian post-independence politics:³ (i) the post-independence period of Congress domination, (ii) the rise of caste-based politics, (iii) a period when the gangster-politics nexus was dominant (and for which Gorakhpur was infamous), and (iv) the rise of the Hindu Right (in which, again, Gorakhpur has played a not insignificant role).⁴ The whole Bhojpuri-speaking region of eastern UP, called Purvanchal, is proud of its history and sees itself as the heartland of the nation,

CONTACT David N. Gellner  david.gellner@anthro.ox.ac.uk

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for reasons (and in the contested and historically evolving ways) that have been well outlined for UP as a whole by Kudaisya (2006). It may be poor, it may be far from the nation's capital, but it is proud to be central to the narrative of the nation.

And yet, on the other hand and simultaneously, Gorakhpur has frequently resisted national trends. It was a major centre of the 1857 revolt against the British and later a strong supporter of the freedom movement, providing many prominent leaders. During the Non-Cooperation movement, the (in)famous 1922 Chauri Chaura incident in Gorakhpur district led Gandhi to call the movement off (Amin [1995] 2006; Kushwaha 2014). When Nehruvian modernizing dominated the country in the 1950s and 60s, peasant socialist movements were strong in the region (Burger 1969). The religious history of the region also illustrates these two contradictory trends. On the one hand, Rama's kingdom, Kosala, was here; on the other, oppositional streams such as Buddhism, Jainism, and much later the Kabir Panth, found their origins in this part of the Gangetic plains.

In Gorakhpur itself the rise of the OBCs (Other Backward Classes), so important in most of the Hindi belt, has been less marked than elsewhere. This difference is surely not unconnected to the other remarkable feature of Gorakhpur politics, namely the dominance of the Goraksanath temple (or Math) complex. The sitting MP is Yogi Adityanath, since 2017 the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. He won five general elections in a row, the last three times with over 50% of the vote. Before him, his predecessor, Mahant Avaidyanath, won three times, so that the BJP has held the seat continuously since 1989. The city's parliamentary constituency would seem to have been (at least until 2018) that relatively rare phenomenon in Indian elections, a truly safe seat.

Although there are many Hindu holy men and women involved in Indian politics, there do not seem to be many who have the longevity and intimate involvement in local politics of Yogi Adityanath.⁵ Outside of Gorakhpur the Yogi has the reputation of being a 'Hindu fanatic' but inside there is considerably more nuance. Parliamentary elections in Gorakhpur may be BJP-dominated, but politics at the level of legislative assembly and neighbourhood elections are much more complex and contested. The only exception to this is the Gorakhpur city assembly constituency. The BJP has retained the seat, just as it has the parliamentary seat, continuously since 1989. This appears to confirm the dominant perception that the BJP's support base consists in the first instance of the urban, the educated, the upper caste, and the middle class. What led to the BJP's stunning success in the 2014 parliamentary elections was its ability to expand this base and, using the appeal of Modi, to attract semi-urban Dalit, ST, and OBC voters as well.⁶

In this paper, we seek to explore both the degree to which developments within Gorakhpur are part of wider trends within UP and within India, and to offer an account that would help to explain the distinctiveness of Gorakhpur: the fact that, whatever happens elsewhere, it remains a city dominated, at least at the level of the Parliamentary and MLA elections, by the Hindu Right. The increasing strength of the Math in Gorakhpur owed much to the persistent organizational efforts of successive abbots and their attempts to project themselves as progressive and developmentalist, as *vikaspurush* (i.e. supporting education, health, road-building, overcoming caste, and so on); but it also benefited, indirectly and in the long run, from the rise of gangster politics, for which the city became famous. The Math offered an alternative power centre and source of protection that was eventually able to outlast and displace the gangsters. Since we are investigating the intertwining of religion and politics, in the next section we go into more detail on the local history of religious trends than would normally be necessary in offering an interpretation of political developments.

The religio-political history of Gorakhpur

Gorakhpur is located in a part of the Tarai region of the Gangetic plains, an area of outstandingly fertile soil watered by Himalayan rivers, possessing ancient associations with urban civilization and with early Buddhism and Jainism. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE, however, when Gorakhpur was one of the Sirkars in the province (Subah) of Awadh (Oudh) under the

Mughal Emperors, it was considered a frontier, potentially fertile, but largely covered with jungle and marshes, malarial in the monsoon season. Two centuries later, especially by the second half of the eighteenth century, by which time the local governor had become de facto independent and styled himself the Nawab of Awadh, eastern Uttar Pradesh was a region of expanding agricultural production, rising population, newly mobilized capital, higher state and landlord revenues, and burgeoning trade (including being an important gateway to Nepal) (Bayly 1983; Bhargava 1999). The region was transferred from the Nawab of Awadh to the East India Company in 1801; Gorkhali attempts to control the area came to an end with the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815. From 1829 Gorakhpur was the Divisional headquarters and included the present-day districts of Gorakhpur, Ghazipur, and Azamgarh.

By the end of the nineteenth century sugarcane was an important part of the local economy (Amin 1984). Gorakhpur became the headquarters of the northeast railways in 1945 and an important Indian Airforce base in 1963, as a response to security concerns raised by the 1962 war with China. The population of the district grew from just under a million in 1901, to 1.5 million in mid century, to 4.4 million in 2011, even though the district was split into two in 1947, the east of the district becoming the new district of Deoria. The city grew from 64,148 in 1901 to 132,436 in mid century, to 759,051 in 2011. It has more than tripled in size between 1960 and the present day.

Local myths and stories centre on the figure of 'Gorakhnath', the founding figure of the Nath tradition (*sampradaya*), who gives the city its name. The historical Gorakhnath probably lived in the eleventh–twelfth centuries in the Deccan; therefore, local stories evidently refer to a much later successor in Gorakhnath's tradition (Briggs [1938] 1973; Bouillier 2008; Mallinson 2011; Karwoski 2012). In other words, in a reversal of what might be taken to be the more common pattern, the historical figure is more distant in time, and the mythical figure more recent. The story goes that Asaf-ud Daula, the Nawab of Awadh (reigned 1775–1797), came to Gorakhpur to hunt. His followers told him, 'Sir, since you are here, you should visit the [Muslim] holy man, Baba Roshan Ali Shah.' Roshan Ali Shah told the Nawab, 'Since you are here, you should also visit my friend and colleague, [the Hindu holy man] Baba Goraksanath.' Duly impressed by the two holy men, the Nawab granted half of the territory of Gorakhpur to each of them.⁷ The story expresses very succinctly and efficiently the distinct but complementary relationship between the city's two major religious shrines, the Imambara (the *dargah*, or holy tomb, of Roshan Ali and his descendants) and the Goraksanath Math. Both shrines, on opposite sides of the city, are fundamental to the city's identity and both are closely associated with its origin. There is in fact a third shrine commemorating a third holy man, Khaki Baba, in the centre of the city. The story, preserved in handwritten notes kept by the guardian of his shrine,⁸ is that he was also a friend of the other two holy men. The three of them, two Hindu and one a Muslim Sufi saint, would meet at Khaki Baba's place (which is indeed roughly half way between the Imambara and the Goraksanath temple). He too was offered land by the Nawab, but unlike the other two holy men, he refused it.

Interestingly, both the Imambara complex and the Goraksanath temple compound are located in heavily Muslim-dominated neighbourhoods. Tens of thousands of weavers from the Muslim community coexist with the Math in a relatively peaceful environment, a fact that people often comment on (but see further below, on how this is breaking down). It is worth noting that the revered Sufi, Kabir, was from this particular community. Many oral traditions claim to preserve dialogues between Kabir and Gorakhnath, as does a text attributed to Kabir, *Goraknathki Gosthi* (Briggs [1938] 1973, 238; cf. Dwiwedi 2010). Many of Kabir's couplets are engraved on the walls of the Goraksanath temple.

The position of *mutuwali* or guardian of the Imambara, known locally as 'Miya Sahib', passes down in the male line. The current holder, Faroukh Ali Shah, is the sixth descendant of Roshan Ali Shah (which suggests some very long-lived ancestors). Muharram is celebrated annually for 10 days with around 300 different processions all over Gorakhpur (despite the fact that Shias are a tiny minority among Gorakhpur's Muslim population). Enormous numbers of Hindus participate in the festivities and a Hindu trader, Bhagavati Das, even donated one of the ornamental chariots (*taziyas*) that are the focus of the processions.

Unlike the 'Miya Sahib', the Mahant (i.e. abbot) of the Goraksanath shrine is a celibate renouncer. The current abbot, Yogi Adityanath, is one of many who have held the position since the eighteenth century. Reflective and informed locals are well aware that the Nath tradition was, in origin, far from being a mainstream or highly Brahmanical part of Hinduism. Its yogic practice was doubtless Hindu, and its ritual, such as it was, tantric. However, its philosophy, as articulated in texts such as the *Gorakhbani*, was close to the *nirgun bhakti* ('formless devotionism') characteristic of the Kabir tradition or Sikhism. At certain places in the texts the philosophical position of the Gorakhnath tradition goes beyond the Hindu and Muslim binary and claims 'yogi' as third entity, as in the following couplet:

By birth [I am] a Hindu, in mature age a Yogi and by intellect a Muslim.

O kazis and mullahs, recognize the path accepted by Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. (*Gorakhbani* verse 14; Barthwal 1946, 6)

In other words, the Nath tradition was part of a shared Hindu-Muslim aniconic and guru-focused devotionism of the north Indian Middle Ages, aspects of which are still very much alive today, despite generations of purification attempts.⁹ By stark contrast, what the Goraksanath Math has become – rejecting this discourse of common ground between Hinduism and Islam and through a gradual and deliberate transformative process since the 1930s – is a symbol and centre of strong anti-Muslim Hindu assertion. Where once a simple set of yogic footprints were the main object of worship, now there are statues of all the Hindu gods, including Hanuman, the favourite divinity of many of those who espouse a 'muscular Hinduism'.

One index of the changing nature of the Goraksanath sacred complex is its multiple designations. It is referred to variously (1) as Math ('Mutt' in Victorian transliteration) or Hindu monastery, (2) as a Peeth (*pith*) or Tantric power-place, and (3) as 'a' or 'the' Mandir or temple. Likewise, its head is referred to as Mahant or abbot, Yogi, or simply Baba (holy man) (usually with the honorific 'ji' appended). For most ordinary people in Gorakhpur, it is simply 'the mandir', and they often say, 'we give our vote to the mandir'. Although the site was originally a Math, a residence for Hindu monks (*yogis*, *sadhus*, or *babas*) it has certainly evolved into far more than that today. It now boasts an impressive series of shrines to all the gods of Hinduism, numerous statues of holy figures in Hinduism and even of non-Hindu traditions (including the Buddha and Mahavira). In the process of shaping the visual narrative of the nation for visitors, the Math co-opts freedom fighters like Rani Laxmi Bai, holy figures like Mira Bai, Ravidas, Kabir, Vivekananda, etc., and includes the deified figure of India, Bharat Mata. Conspicuously absent is any representation of Gandhi. The Math hosts half a dozen other institutions within its premises, including a clinic, a yoga hall, a library, a hospital, a Sanskrit college, and the headquarters of Yogi Adityanath's own youth force, the Hindu Yuva Vahini (henceforth HYV). On the ground next to the temple complex, there is, for one month of the year leading up to the Makar Sankranti festival, an impressively bustling fairground with Ferris wheel, food, games, and rides. Attached to the temple is an educational foundation, the Maharana Pratap Siksha Parishad, that runs 39 colleges (including a Nursing College and the Sanskrit College).

One important institution in Gorakhpur, which has contributed to the city's fame but which has no direct connection to the Goraksanath Math, is the Gita Press, founded in 1923 (Mukul 2015). It has grown to be one of the largest religious presses in the world. The Gita Press has so far sold 71.9 million copies of the *Bhagavad Gita* and 70 million of Tulsidas' *Ramcharit Manas*. Its monthly Hindi magazine, *Kalyan*, has a circulation of over 200,000; its English version, *Kalpataru*, has a circulation of over 100,000. Located in a Muslim neighbourhood in the old city, the entrance to the Gita Press has a brightly painted ornamental façade modelled after a South Indian *gopuram* temple. Opposite is a large salesroom with its books in all the languages of India. Despite the location of the Press, there is no record of any incident which could be called communal in the area.

The staff at the Gita Press generally resist speaking with outsiders (especially since the publication of Mukul's book), but the manager was adamant that it is a purely religious foundation and had no

connection to the 'political activism' of the Math. However, it can hardly be denied that the Press, during its history, has had many connections to the same political Hindu currents as the abbots of the Goraksanath Math. At the same time there seem to have been significant local differences. Hanuman Prasad Poddar, the key founding editor of the Press, was also a founding member of the University of Gorakhpur and in the internal tussle between Digvijaynath and the founding President of the University, discussed in the next section, Poddar actively sided with the camp opposed to Mahant Digvijayanath. The editor of Gita Press went on to chair the committee set up to compile a felicitation volume for Digvijayanath's prime opponent (Modi 1965). In short, the Press and the Temple did not always see eye to eye.

The first abbot of the Goraksanath Math with political ambitions was Digvijayanath, who was born in 1884 and was Mahant from 1934 until his death in 1969. In 1967 he won the Gorakhpur seat, standing officially as an independent (Avaidyanath had already won the MLA seat in 1962 for the Hindu Mahasabha). Digvijayanath was initially a member of Congress and was arrested for encouraging the violence that led to the Chauri Chaura killings in 1922. In 1937 he joined the Hindu Mahasabha. It is widely believed that he supplied the gun that was used to shoot Mahatma Gandhi and he was arrested and imprisoned for nine months following the assassination (Pai and Kumar 2018, 119–120). He was a leading light in the movement to recapture the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya and 'reconvert' it to a temple to Rama (Van der Veer 1987). In short, Digvijayanath was the key figure who changed the identity of the Math. His adoption of the Hindu Right ideology was intimately connected to his participation in electoral politics. And yet, despite this public, strongly pro-Hindu and political stance, he was a close personal friend of the leader of the Imambara, the 'Miya Sahib', the current holder's grandfather. Digvijayanath would go to the Miya Sahib's house every day at 4 pm to play tennis, at which they both excelled, apparently.

As long as the legacy of the freedom struggle was fresh in the popular imagination, it was hard for the head of the Math, standing against Congress, to win an election. People used to vote for candidates who had participated in the freedom struggle and had gone to jail ('jaheli neta'). A typical Congress leader during that period was Thakur Singhasan Singh, a successful legal practitioner, polished, suave, sober, who won three consecutive Lok Sabha elections (Gorakhpur South in 1952 and Gorakhpur city in 1957 and 1962). In 1967, when Singh retired from active politics, Mahant Digvijayanath was able finally to win an election. That year the Congress Party faced a leadership crisis at the national level and the Mahant also got some sympathy votes after three consecutive defeats.

Digvijayanath's successor, Avaidyanath (1921–2014), was, like him, a Kshatriya. It is now widely believed, and frequently asserted by Gorakhpur inhabitants, that the abbot of Goraksanath Math must be a Kshatriya, though there is no scriptural or other support for this notion. Nor is it clear that the abbots who preceded Digvijayanath, of whom we know the names but little else, were all from that caste background. In an interview in 2011 Avaidyanath counted the 'eradication of untouchability' as his biggest achievement in politics and felt that it was important for (uncorrupt) people like him to enter politics to ensure 'people's faith in the nation' (Chaturvedi 2016, 182). He was also a strong advocate of Hinduism and a supporter of the Ramjanmabhumi movement. Despite that, he remained on close personal terms with the Miya Sahib. On the latter's death, Avaidyanath went out of his way to commiserate with his son and successor. Locals stress that Avaidyanath was a gentle and spiritual man. Avaidyanath was elected MP four times (in 1969 and 1989 as a Hindu Mahasabha candidate, and in 1991 and 1996 as BJP a candidate); before that he had been MLA in 1962, 1967, and again in 1974 and 1977.

The current abbot, Adityanath, is Avaidyanath's spiritual successor. He became MP in 1998 at the very young age of 26. He made a name for himself as a firebrand politician, attacking Islam and publicly declaring that he did not want Muslim votes (this despite the fact that Muslims living around the temple had a tradition of voting for the abbot). Today he says, when asked if he is anti-Muslim, 'My agenda is Hinduism. I am against anyone who is against Hinduism' (interview, 6/1/14). The dominance of the Yogi in the area is expressed in the slogan chanted by his youth force, the HYV, 'if you want to live in Gorakhpur, you must chant the Yogi's name'. People make clichéd remarks on

the same lines, such as 'Muslim terrorists are so afraid that they do not even stop to piss when crossing the Yogi's territory'.¹⁰

A key event in recent history was a riot in January 2007, which people still remember vividly, although there are divergences in what they remember.¹¹ It is generally agreed that a small group of Hindu youths, who had been drinking, stumbled into an ongoing Muharram procession in the Bauxipur neighbourhood (a Muslim *mohalla*). Some claim that a few girls were part of the group and that the boys were chasing them. A scuffle broke out which eventually led to shots being fired, following which one man from the Hindu community sustained injuries and later died. The local administration was ready for communal tension at this festival period and it briefed Yogi Adityanath, requesting him not to visit the site of incident.

As the news of the death of the injured youth spread, Adityanath defied the advice of the DM and held a meeting in Khunipur, a Muslim neighbourhood, addressing a gathering consisting mainly of the members of the HYV. He used emotive terms such as 'revenge', 'pride', and 'justice to the victim'. Some of the activists responded to his call for 'justice' by destroying a tomb in the vicinity. A scuffle broke out between the Yogi's men and the police. The District Magistrate was determined to stop the local MP from causing further trouble. Extra police were called by the administration. Adityanath insisted on further protests and was arrested and held in prison for a week. Adityanath's arrest led to a week of riots in Gorakhpur and nearby places like Deoria, Kushinagar, Basti, Maharajganj, and Mau. The Miya Sahib was promised all necessary police protection, but decided to call off the last three days of the Muharram festival in order to help restore calm. When Adityanath was released from prison, he was garlanded and led in a triumphant procession back to the Goraksanath temple.

One consequence, people claim, of the events of 2007 is that Adityanath is now somewhat more guarded in his pronouncements and the HYV is not as aggressive as formerly. However, these developments could also be explained by the fact that Adityanath's power, as the sitting MP, does not at the moment face any significant challenge. Adityanath's unrivalled domination of the city also brings benefits. One informant said:

I appreciate him for (1) honest implementation of policy. The contractors do not dare misuse his funds. Roads constructed out of the MP's Fund are much better than the roads constructed out of the MLA funds by Shiv Pratap Shukla, or Radha Mohan. That's a very good contribution. (2) In Parliament he is not dumb, he is very active. Most of the times, he raises the issues of policy cases, like encephalitis. He played a vital role, raised it many times, and staged demonstrations many times on it. The minus point is that he exceeds sometimes, and misuses Hindu sentiment.

Not surprisingly, Muslims have a rather different view. A local Muslim politician, asked 'What are the biggest challenges in eastern UP?', said (expressing a widely shared view):

The biggest problem in this part of UP is communalism. People here are very good, but things are politicized. For instance look at the local MP Yogi Adityanath. You will never find him commenting on anything concerning humanity (*insaniyat*). He will always talk about politics of division. He has nothing much to offer. The only thing he knows is 'might is right'. He has no sense of justice at all ... He is all for creating tensions while we keep trying to avoid any trouble/incidents (*bawal*) between the two communities.

As noted above, the Math is surrounded by a large population of Muslims of the weaver caste. Some estimate that there are as many as 100,000 in two big localities (*mohalla*), one adjacent and the other opposite to the main entrance of the temple. It is said that the community was a solid vote bank for the Math's candidates until Avaidyanath's time. People ascribe these cordial relations not only to the philosophical proximity between Gorakhnath and Kabir, but also to economic interdependence. The community provided the labour force and products for daily use in the Math, while the annual Kichadi Mela was an ideal market for the weavers to sell their hand-made products for two months in January and February. According to a local weaver who has now started working in a mobile phone repair shop, this all changed with the Ramjanmabhooni/Babri Masjid movement. The local community, who had no memory of being victimized in communal riots before, became targets, especially in

2007. Where, before, the tradition that the Math donated the land on which the community lives was a source of mutuality, now it is a source of tension, as Yogi Adityanath from time to time raises the issue of its rightful ownership. One informant claimed that tensions went back as far as Digvijayanath who had forcefully acquired the land of an old Muslim woman and encroached on land that had previously been a Muslim cemetery. What is undeniable is that tensions have greatly increased under Yogi Adityanath. For almost a decade, until 2017, a video of a speech by Adityanath was available on Youtube, in which he called for the abduction of 100 Muslim girls every time a Muslim dares to marry a Hindu girl.

Leaving Muslims to one side, there is a sharp polarization of opinion over whether Yogi Adityanath (and by extension his youth organization, the HYV) is casteist (*jativadi*) or not. His supporters deny the charge vehemently, pointing to his strong support for all Hindus, regardless of caste, and the fact that everyone, including Muslims, is welcome in the hospitals and colleges supported by the Math. Others assert equally forcefully that the Yogi undoubtedly is casteist, regularly favouring members of his own Thakur caste. How the politics of eastern UP came to be so strongly inflected by caste is considered in the next section.

The rise of caste politics

Having set the scene, it is now necessary to return to the period immediately following Indian independence. At that time the Congress Party had an unassailable ascendancy. The Hindu nationalists were tainted by their association with the assassination of Gandhi. But there was still plenty to fight for within Gorakhpur. It was in this context that conflict developed, taking an increasing caste-based tone, over control of the new University of Gorakhpur. Local informants were in complete agreement that this was a key arena of political struggle at the time, which went on to determine the wider politics of the town and region. Having a university was a major coup for the city and control of the university offered enormous prestige as well as the opportunity to influence numerous highly desirable appointments.

The idea of founding a university in Gorakhpur was proposed by Dr C.J. Chacko to S.N.M. Tripathi, then the DM (District Magistrate) of Gorakhpur, in September 1948 (Tripathi 2013, 364f). C.J. Chako, Principal of St Andrews College (affiliated to Agra University), initially wanted to transform the college, a missionary institute established in 1899, into a residential university, but the governing body of the college, fearing the loss of its autonomy and identity, rejected the proposal. However, Tripathi (later known honorifically as Pandit Tripathi) was not to be discouraged. He established a Trust and made Mahant Digvijayanath and the industrialist Sardar Surendar Singh Majithia Vice Presidents. He solicited donations, and made use of his connections to the first and second Chief Ministers of Uttar Pradesh, Gobind Ballabh Pant and Dr Sampooranand, in order to have 170 acres (later 250 acres) of public land donated on a 99-year lease for a nominal rent.¹² University sessions began in 1957.

Control of the university was exercised by a governing committee. Whoever controlled the committee would have considerable power to influence appointments in the university. Other members of the committee were Hanuman Prasad Poddar, Sardar Singh Majithia, and Mahant Digvijayanath. The Mahant had a major role because, unlike the Christian St Andrew's College, he had offered to merge his college, Maharana Pratap Degree College established only in 1949–1950, with the proposed university. His conditions were that all the employees of the Degree College should be accepted onto the university payroll and that one representative of the Maharana Pratap Educational Trust should be permanently on the university's governing body.

S.N.M. Tripathi was born in 1900 into a Saryuparin Brahmin family of Barpaar village in Deoria district (then part of Gorakhpur district). Tripathi was considered highly learned at the time. His 'immense' contribution to the establishment of the University was summed up as follows by C.J. Chako:

Pandit Tripathi and myself have laboured together in planning and forming processes of the University of Gorakhpur, but I can assure everyone in Gorakhpur that except for his undying determination, indefatigable efforts, most sincere, conscious and conscientious enthusiasm the University of Gorakhpur would perhaps have not seen the light of the day at the time it did. Undoubtedly he is the Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya of Gorakhpur. (Modi 1965, 22)

What is universally agreed in all accounts of Gorakhpur politics of the late 1950s and 1960s is that the university committee became a battleground between the two dominant personalities, S.N.M. Tripathi and Digvijayanath, and therefore between Brahmins and Thakurs. Each side began to recruit 'muscle power' in order to bolster their case. Furthermore, one of the few things on which there is also agreement is that this led to the rise of caste-inflected gangsterism in eastern UP as a whole. By the 1970s student politics had become highly influential in India as a whole, as evidenced by the JP movement, which played a key role in opposing the Emergency (1975–1977) (Devashyam 2012).

Portrait of a 'gangster politician'

Knowledgeable residents of Gorakhpur agree that S.N.M. Tripathi, needing to match the Mahant, sought out Brahmin student leaders of the University. One of these was Hari Shankar Tiwari. Later, starting in 1985, Tiwari was elected as an MLA six times in succession from the rural constituency of Chillupar where he was born (in Tanda village, Brahalganj Block), about 50 kilometres south of Gorakhpur. His father was a village priest without much land. Tiwari studied in Gorakhpur, where he received an MA in Sociology in 1960. (Much later, in 1984, he registered for a PhD in Sociology, but never completed it.) He became a student leader and small-time contractor.

Between 1985 and 1988 the Chief Minister of UP, Vir Bahadur Singh, was attempting to curtail the influence of the 'mafia' in Gorakhpur and had both Hari Shankar Tiwari and Virendra Shahi arrested. It is said that Vir Bahadur Singh targeted Tiwari in particular, because, as Chief Minister, Singh had tried to get the Bajaj Group to set up a scooter factory near Gorakhpur, but Bajaj pulled out when Tiwari sought protection money from the Bajaj employees preparing the feasibility study and site survey. The two gangsters, Tiwari and Shahi, ended up in jail together in Agra, people say, and decided that, in order to resist political pressure and to cut out the middleman, they should stand for election and become politicians themselves. They both stood as MPs in 1984 but were defeated in the Congress wave following the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Tiwari was still in jail when he was first elected as an independent MLA from Chillupar the following year. His victory drew nationwide attention to his doorstep. The region earned infamous sobriquets such as 'Chicago of the East' and 'Slice of Sicily'.

On the seventh occasion when Tiwari stood for election, in 2007, he was defeated by Rajesh Tripathi of the BSP. Tiwari started as an independent, and subsequently joined Congress; but this did not stop him serving under Kalyan Singh of the BJP (1997–1999) or accepting the leadership of Mulayam Singh Yadav of the SP (2003–2007). Today he has his own party, the Akhil Bharatiya Loktantrik Congress (All-India Democratic Congress). It is somewhat ironic that he was defeated by a fellow Brahmin (a Tripathi) who was standing for the BSP, when both his sons are in the BSP, and one was BSP MP for Sant Kabir Nagar until 2014 (Saran 2012). A nephew, Ganesh Pandey, was Chairman of the UP Vidhan Parishad (upper house) from 21 January 2010 until 15 January 2016.

For some, Tiwari is a kind of Robin Hood figure, though equally he is known as someone dangerous to cross if he is striking a property deal. He has never spoken against Muslims, and many Muslims speak very favourably of him (in stark contrast to how they view Yogi Adityanath). He is softly spoken and dresses in a dhoti and a Gandhi cap. He himself justifies his ministerial record as doing whatever was necessary to bring development to his constituency, Chillupar (Tehelka 2007). In interview he was very quiet and initially avoided the topic of gangs and political violence. Later, he stressed that *dharma* is helping other people. Asked about his own personal practice, he said that he recites

the Gayatri mantra on a daily basis and counts himself as a follower of the Pandit Acharya Shri Ram Sharma who advocates its use.

The following journalistic account captures well Tiwari's quietly spoken personal style:

He is extremely accessible despite the years he has been in power and leads a very simple lifestyle ... On a typical campaigning day, Tiwari's courtyard is full of ordinary people. Apart from a couple of UP Police security guards there is not a gun or fierce looking goon in sight. His house resembles a college hostel, rows of rooms with anyone welcome to catch a snooze on the wooden beds inside. When a Mont Blanc pen and expensive shoes are de rigueur for every leader worth his kurta pajama, Tiwari uses a cheap gel pen and wears muddy locally made slip-ons. If it weren't for the big shiny white Ford Endeavour and Tata Safari SUVs, he would have passed off as an elderly old-fashioned landlord. (Tehelka 2007)

Though he may have supporters and hangers-on who are willing to do so, Tiwari himself has never been known to use violence. His local well-wishers, who are many, point out that none of the cases against him have been proven, though he was in jail at the time of his first election as an MLA. He has a reputation for being kind to low-level policemen, which may explain why, whenever any police chief decided to try and arrest him, Tiwari so often seems to have received news of the move before it happened. Stories circulate about at least one remarkable escape when he was under arrest and in jail, and, because supposedly ill, he was allowed to stay, under guard, in a Gorakhpur hospital.

Today Tiwari's fame reaches far and wide, and he makes use of that fame (or notoriety) in his business dealings, which are equally many and widespread. He is reported to be among the top ten taxpayers in India. In fact, as the political hold of the Mahants of Gorakhpur has increased, Tiwari's business interests have dispersed further afield. Just how Tiwari has managed to survive into a ripe old age is an interesting question, especially when several competitors, such as Virendra Pratap Shahi and Ravindra Singh, died in dramatic circumstances (the latter was gunned down at Gorakhpur railway station). One knowledgeable politician said:

You've read *The Godfather*? It is like that. He is like Marlon Brando. He is very great, I mean a genius. He survived, the others all got killed. He never hurt a fly himself [i.e. by his own hand]. Now he is a businessman, who benefits from that reputation.

Unlike the famous dons who died violently, Tiwari never lost his cool or acted against his own best interests in seeking revenge or to save face. He never succumbed to the temptations of women, alcohol, and gambling, as many others did.

Some locals argue that criminality in politics was not in fact a new development in the 1970s and 1980s. The Gorakhpur organizer for the Congress Party in the years after independence used to come and collect 'donations' for the party – and it was made pretty clear these were hardly voluntary. In other words, votes were bought, even back then, through the distribution of blankets and other goods to the poor. But the threats in this period were much more overt, and led people to seek protection from another source, namely the Math.

The context in which Tiwari was able to become a minister in the UP government was the rise of coalition politics in UP in the 1990s. In 1997 the BJP in UP under Kalyan Singh was faced with having to cobble together a majority by engineering defections from other parties. Twenty-two MLAs from Congress, including Naresh Agrawal, Jagadambika Pal, and Tiwari, created the Loktantrik Congress and joined the government. The state government formed at that time, with 93 ministers, was and remains a record for an Indian state government. The contrast between rhetoric and reality was stark, since the BJP and Kalyan Singh repeatedly asserted at that time that they intended to provide clean government and that 'The rule of law will be established, society will be free of fear.'¹³ Tiwari, controversially, became Minister of Science and Technology. Asked about the 27 criminal cases, including nine for murder and ten for attempted murder, against him, he dismissed them all as untrue and politically motivated: 'My only aim in life is serve the people of Uttar Pradesh' (Ramakrishnan 1997).

When Kalyan Singh's government fell in 1999, Tiwari remained a Minister in all subsequent governments until 2007. The charge that Hari Shankar Tiwari's supporters habitually resorted to capturing booths or bogus voting to ensure his repeated victories seems to have some credibility, as he lost precisely at the point when the Election Commission started paying close attention and deploying Central forces to monitor elections. He complained bitterly about the Election Commission's surveillance at that time (Tehelka 2007). Many people noted that, having come third in the 2012 election, he would not win again and that he had lost the aura of invincibility that surrounded him before.

Mafia politics in Gorakhpur

Though the rise of Hari Shankar Tiwari was meteoric, it did not go unchallenged. Virendra Pratap Shahi, originally from the adjoining Basti district, emerged as Tiwari's arch rival. One of the close aides of Tiwari, who later fell out with him, related that Shahi was a roadside hooligan, who used to hang out at a tea shop in front of the nurses' hostel in Basti. As an aide of Ram Kinkar Singh, ex-MLA of Basti, Shahi started his career as a middleman in the transfer and posting of nurses in the district. From there he expanded into the hospital contract business and then to contracts from municipal corporations. In between, he fell out with Ram Kinkar Singh on some personal issue, and shifted his base to Gorakhpur. By the time Shahi arrived in Gorakhpur, in the late 1970s, Balwant Singh and Ravinder Singh were already infamous. But Shahi was in luck. Tiwari, it is said, was unhappy with the growing clout of Ravinder Singh, who had become the MLA from Kauriram. So Tiwari allegedly had Ravinder Singh killed in 1980. Before that, in 1978, Balwant Singh had also been killed, also allegedly by Tiwari's men. The stage was therefore set for Shahi to become the leader of the Thakurs in the region.

In the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, gangster rivalries and gory murders became the everyday narrative of local politics. In the early 1980s Tiwari began to patronize Amar Mani Tripathi, a local student at the university, pursuing an MA in History; Tripathi, like Tiwari, was a local Brahmin. In the 1984 MLA election for Lakshimpur, Maharajganj, Tripathi dared to stand against Virendra Pratap Shahi (both stood as independents). Shahi won a convincing victory, defeating both the Congress candidate and Tripathi, who came a distant third.¹⁴ However, five years later Tripathi managed to get the Congress ticket and won the seat from Shahi, who was relegated to fourth position. Tripathi is currently serving time in the District Jail for the murder of a young poetess who was allegedly his lover. Tripathi was, it was said, a product of *Tiwari ji ka hata* or 'Tiwari's courtyard'.¹⁵ Others say Amar Mani Tripathi started primarily as a timber smuggler on the Indo-Nepal border (Mishra and Ahmed 1997). He launched his own reign of terror in the region which is aptly summarized as follows: 'Even before entering politics, Tripathi, listed as a "category A history-sheeter" with 33 criminal cases pending against him, including five relating to murder, was described in police records as a "member of Hari Shankar Tiwari's gang"' (Tripathi 2003).

Both Tiwari and Shahi became MLAs, combining politics and business. However, Shahi's electoral performance was no match for Tiwari's six consecutive wins from Chillupar. Shahi lost more elections than he won. Shahi even stood against Mahant Avaidyanath in 1996, one year before he was killed by an emerging young mafia don, Sri Prakash Shukla.

Journalist Hemant Tiwari analysed the appeal of 'mafia politicians' as follows:

The bureaucrats may overlook the advice or requests of ordinary politicians but dare not overlook demands of mafia politicians, and so they are more effective. Mafia politicians would be there from *ghar* to *ghat* [from cradle to grave], they are happy to attend weddings and funerals. They will be present themselves or send someone for every occasion. They may even sponsor the weddings of poor people. Their ability to reach to the common people and deliver services and help that mainstream politicians are unable to do – that makes them popular. These gang leaders became popular leaders, and that explains their ability to win elections. (interview, Lucknow, 29/12/2015)

Today Hari Shankar Tiwari is, in terms of political influence, a shadow of his past; he has become a respectable member of Gorakhpur society. By contrast, Amar Mani Tripathi is in jail. Sri Prakash

Shukla was killed in a police encounter in Ghaziabad 1999. The discourse of politics in the city has taken a new turn with the gradual demise of *mafia raj*. There is more money to be made in contracts, people say, than in protection and intimidation. The gangsters have gone legitimate.

Democratization, mafias, urban spaces, and extortion

The first round in the battle against the mafia dons was fought by Vir Bahadur Singh. Vir Bahadur was Chief Minister of UP from 1985 to 1988. Until Yogi Adityanath in 2017, he was the only politician from Gorakhpur to rise to this position. He is remembered for having brought considerable development to the city (improving roads, building the planetarium). Locals frequently bemoan the fact that he was able to remain CM for less than three years and speculate that, had he lasted longer, Gorakhpur would have been far more developed than it was. He always dressed and behaved very modestly for which the people loved him.¹⁶ At the same time, he introduced a new and brazen level of corruption to the way government operated. A retired government servant recalled:

Vir Bahadur Singh's politics was primarily of money and commission. In whatever department he was, he always tried to extract money. Once a senior officer of my department said to me in a private conversation that no minister before Vir Bahadur Singh took money from officers directly. He was the first. Earlier, [ministers would take] in the name of donations [to their party]. But Vir Bahadur started taking money for himself.

But at the same time Singh was admired as someone who got things done – including, as we have seen above, arresting mafia dons.

By the middle of 1990s a new kind of politics appeared to be emerging. In one way, the emerging politics in the region was a microcosm of the national political scene. In the country as a whole established structures were shifting. A new phase of Indian history was ushered in by *Mandal, Market, and Mandir*: in other words, (1) by the expansion of reservations to include OBCs as recommended by the Mandal Commission, (2) by market reforms, and (3) by the rise of the BJP.¹⁷ This led to acute political instability both at the centre and at the level of the states in north India, and UP was no exception. In three years, from 1996 to 1998, the centre witnessed four governments and three Prime Ministers. In UP it was worse. Mayawati, Jagdambika Pal, Kalyan Singh, Ram Prakash Gupta, and Rajnath Singh all had brief turns as Chief Minister within four years. It is widely believed that the era of coalition politics, starting in the mid 1990s, opened the floodgates to greater moral turpitude among politicians. The extreme instability of governments meant that many MPs and MLAs who would otherwise never have been brought into cabinets, were inducted, in a desperate attempt to maintain a majority.

The BJP had trumpeted itself as 'a party with difference', a different kind of national party. But, as widely reported in media at the time, the coalition government of Kalyan Singh in 1997 accommodated 19 ministers with criminal charges (Mishra and Ahmed 1997). The coalition had seven ministers from the Gorakhpur region, including both Hari Shankar Tiwari and his protégé, Amar Mani Tripathi.

One of the lessons of this period of Gorakhpur politics was that election as an MLA offered, or seemed to offer, a 'safe landing' or 'safe haven' for criminals. As we have seen above, this was achieved by Tiwari, but not necessarily by others. Some observed that Sri Prakash Shukla would have survived if he had taken refuge or blessings from an established figure such as Tiwari. An incident (related by an eye witness) from the life of Virendra Pratap Shahi illustrates these perceptions and understandings. After allegedly killing three members of Hari Shankar Tiwari's gang, in revenge for the murder of Balwant Singh, Shahi went to Lucknow to take refuge at Ravinder Singh's residence. Singh had been elected to the UP assembly and was living in his official residence, the MLAs' Hostel. Ravinder Singh was visibly upset by Shahi's sudden appearance and said, 'How come you are here, Shahi? This is Darul Shafa! [a pilgrim guesthouse] If you are caught here, it will bring my name into disrepute' (*are Shahi tum yahan kahan? Ye darul shafa hai. Yahan se pakde gaye to badi badnaami hogi*). To this Shahi shot back in Bhojpur: 'Ok! So now you have become an MLA, I have become a criminal for you!' (*acha ta u bidhayak ban gaila ta, hum criminal ho gaini*). Shahi drew his Webley & Scott revolver and pointed it straight at Ravinder Singh. Faced with no alternative, Singh immediately arranged a safe exit for Shahi.

By late 1980s and early 1990s, the muscular politics of Gorakhpur appeared to have made deep inroads into local affairs. Every part of the urban space of Gorakhpur was increasingly identified with one or other of the two prominent mafia dons, Shahi and Tiwari. Tiwari's *hata* dominated the nearby local markets of Vijay Chowk, Dharamshala Bazaar, and Nepal road. The vegetable and fruits wholesale market was controlled by Tiwari. He had a designated man from the Nonia community, an OBC caste group specializing in vegetable farming and selling vegetables, as his 'point man'. This man, who had a shop close to the wholesale market, extorted cash from the local vegetable and fruit wholesalers on Tiwari's behalf. He supplied Tiwari's household with its daily requirements of fruit and vegetables. He also organized non-vegetarian drinking parties for railway officers, so that they would supply railway contracts to Tiwari.

In a similar way Virendra Pratap Shahi's area of influence in the city was around Golghar and Mohaddipur. Golghar is in the heart of the city and Shahi's local election office was located in the middle of it adjacent to a petrol pump. There are various stories of Shahi's way of extracting money from the businessmen of this area. It is said that, despite knowing very well that he would not win, Shahi regularly contested elections. The reason was simple. As a close aide recalled, Shahi used to have 5 million in his account before the elections and once the elections were over, he would have 10 million. Those who were part of his election strategy team in 1980s and 1990s related how Shahi was very rude, straightforward, and shameless in asking money or other resources for his election campaign. One informant recalled that during the 1993 assembly election, Shahi was contesting from the Gorakhpur Urban MLA seat. He called a meeting with local businessmen in Hotel President in Golghar. Shahi asked for two brand new Maruti vans from a big businessman, who readily agreed to it. Our respondent, who was in the meeting, later asked this businessman: 'Do you think there is any chance of Shahi winning the election? Is that why you were so prompt [to grant his request]?' To this the man replied:

If I say no, he will mock me and may later threaten me. Forget about him winning. Neither my family nor even I will vote for him. Right now he is not an MLA and he extorts so much from us. If we help him win, he will get the whole of Gorakhpur registered in his name!

In the early 1990s Om Prakash Paswan, initially a protégé of the Math, emerged as a relatively new player in the field (discussed further below). He claimed the newly expanding outskirts of Gorakhpur city which also happened to be part of his constituency. In due course the area around Medical College on Pipraich Road came under his influence. He was known for taking licence money from the auto and taxi drivers in his area. In this way even common people started to identify each neighbourhood within the urban space of Gorakhpur by the mafia don who controlled it. In this situation of gangster control, the Math was able to emerge as an alternative power centre.

The rise of the math and the decline of gangsterism: what is the link?

Amidst all this, the Math was not aloof from ongoing transformations in local politics. By 1998 Mahant Avaidyanath had gone into retirement and appointed Yogi Adityanath as his political successor. It is widely believed that as long as Avaidyanath was at the helm of the Goraksanath Math, there was no interference from the Math side in the local mafia-politics nexus. Yogi Adityanath, being so young, needed to establish his authority and he seized the chance to establish a more assertive and overtly political role for the Math. In April 2002 he established the HYV. It is described on its website as a 'non-governmental, non-political, and strictly cultural organization that seeks to take steps to support national feeling, Hindu interests, a unified voice, Hindutva, faith in Hindu scriptures, mutual harmony, the establishment of an egalitarian society, and sentiments of mutual cooperation' (hinduyuvavahini.in/samvidhan.aspx, consulted 13/6/16). The support base that eventually adhered to the HYV comprised chiefly the educated unemployed upper-caste youth that was also the first generation of post-liberalization small-town India. Neither caste politics nor the national parties had much to offer this group of men, whereas adherence to the HYV provided them with a sense

of worth in society. The HYV is not confined to Gorakhpur, but has spread to many other towns and villages in eastern UP. This 'youth force' has provided Adityanath with the 'muscle power' that he needed to establish himself as the pre-eminent leader in the region, and also to counteract the power of the mafia dons. Adityanath explicitly took credit for wiping out gangsterism in Gorakhpur in his speech to the Vidhan Sabha following the BJP's election success in 2017. Many local businessmen are clear that they much prefer the hegemony of the Math to that of the gangsters.

Already in the late 1990s the spatial imagery of Gorakhpur gradually started to be transformed. This Hinduization occurred through the saffron politics of naming. Local businessmen were encouraged to support the changes. Thus Alinagar became Aryanagar and Urdu Bazaar became Hindi Bazaar. It is generally perceived that, with the shift of mafias into more mainstream business, and with the rise of the BJP in the region and the influence of Math in the local politics, direct extortion of businesses has declined. The Math itself has become a major economic actor in the region. There are no published figures for its assets and income, but knowledgeable locals estimate that it is a major landowner: 52 acres in its main site; c. 100 acres in Devi Patan, Balrampur; 150 acres in Chowk Bazaar, Maharajganj; 40 acres of agricultural land in Passamaafi Basti; 60 agricultural acres in Chowkmaafi; 30 acres in Gopalpur, Nepal. In addition, it has around 100 shops on rent in the main site, another 30 in Gorakhpur's upmarket Golghar area, and a further 100 shops on the Nepal road.¹⁸

One local narrative recognizes the deep roots of the Gorakhnath shrine in the region and sees the rise of the BJP and the growth of the political importance of the Math as going hand in hand. Despite differences of opinion between the top leaders of the BJP and the abbot that have occurred from time to time, there is a coincidence of interests, which benefited the BJP. This narrative sees the contribution of the Math in largely positive terms, especially in its having counteracted the domination of the gangsters.

There is another, more negative, local narrative: the mafia politicians either ended up being killed by each other, or dying at the hands of the police, or (in the case of Tiwari) going legitimate; this, therefore, left the field free for Yogi Adityanath, who, however, was said to be not above using the gangsters for his own purposes. The more detailed version of the narrative is as follows. Yogi Adityanath is ambitious to register and make the presence felt in the whole region (i.e. not just in Gorakhpur city). Some say he nurses the dream of being a 'local satrap' on the model of the Thackareys of Mumbai. As part of the process of consolidating his power, Adityanath promoted Om Prakash Paswan, a local SC leader who was at that time an independent MLA for the Maniram assembly constituency (later this constituency was renamed Gorakhpur Rural). The idea was to counterbalance the growing clout of Sri Prakash Shukla. However, the Yogi-Paswan alliance did not last long. Shahi, who had just stood against Adityanath and lost, came close to Paswan. Within two years both Shahi and Paswan were killed, allegedly by Sri Prakash Shukla and an unknown entity respectively. Paswan's death occurred spectacularly in a bomb blast at a large public meeting in 1996.

At the level of public perception, groups such as the HYV, Bajrang Dal, and many more are seen as natural allies of the BJP. For the RSS Gorakhpur has always been a key site, the headquarters of their activities in eastern UP. Many of its important leaders, such as Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Rajnath Singh, and Murlī Manohar Joshi, were educated in UP. The RSS set up its own school in Gorakhpur, the Saraswati Shishu Mandir, in 1952. Avaidyanath had good relations with the RSS. The RSS subsidiary, the Vana-vasi Kalyan Chhatravas, a hostel for Tribals studying in Gorakhpur at the Saraswati Shishu Mandir, is located inside the Math grounds. The Math also supported the RSS campaign for intermingling between Hindus.

On closer inspection, however, fault lines and conflicts emerge. Adityanath set out to be independent of the RSS and to forge his own power base, with his own organizations, principally the HYV. In the short history of the organization, it has succeeded in building up a cult following and registering its presence in the collective psyche of the region (see the slogans cited in n. 10). In order to establish his dominance, Adityanath fomented Hindu-Muslim competition in the ways that have been well studied for India generally (Wilkinson 2009). Due to his independent power base, Adityanath has often been at loggerheads with the local BJP unit. Candidates for Vidhan Sabha elections necessarily



Figure 1. Yogi Adityanath's daily audience (6/1/2014).

need his blessing. In the past he has frequently chosen his own close followers, drawn from his own organizations, to contest these polls, in preference to long-standing BJP members. For many years Adityanath has kept his distance from the RSS, despite the fact that its headquarters for eastern UP are sited just 200 metres north of the Math. He visited the RSS there for the very first time following the BJP victory in the 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections and after he was named as Chief Minister. These differences with the BJP remain important, despite Adityanath's elevation to the position of CM of UP.

Adityanath and his followers, building on his predecessors' practices, have perfected a style of Hindutva politics that Hansen (2001, 65, 67, 227f, 2004) calls the 'politics of presence'. 'Performances and spectacles in public spaces,' writes Hansen (2001, 232, 2004, 24), '... are the generative political moments par excellence, the heart of political society ...' The HYV sees itself as Adityanath's personal following and is seen by the public as extension of Adityanath himself. The HYV receives extensive coverage in the local newspapers. Reports of the events it organizes list the dozens of names of HYV members and the papers never fail to carry a picture of the group with their organizational banner. The Math is powerful because it is pervasive, and because it is perceived to be powerful, it is pervasive. Even those who do not support it cannot avoid its dominance of public space. Furthermore, Adityanath's effectiveness in getting things done is also a key part of his appeal. Anyone may turn up to his daily audience (or *darbar*) from 9 to 10 am. All who enter touch his feet and then have to await their turn. His manner may be brusque, but his availability for petitioners and his workmanlike attitude to their requests is a large part of his appeal (Figure 1).

Conclusion

We set out to explain how the political scene of today's Gorakhpur came about: How did the Gorakshanath Math or temple become so dominant? How is it that Gorakhpur has become such a safe BJP

seat? How did the particular configuration, with the sitting MP a Hindu abbot, emerge and how did it manage to achieve such stability, given that anti-incumbency voting is so widespread in India?

The origins of the Math's rise to power lie in competition between Brahmins and Thakurs. The numerically weaker Thakurs needed a champion, and Digvijayanath – a tall, commanding, and athletic figure, for all that he was a Hindu monk – fit the bill. Digvijayanath sought political dominance at a time when his main competitors as leaders were Brahmins. He reached out to the OBCs of the Maniram constituency with a combination of high-caste patronage and religious leadership. He and his successors stood for overcoming caste differences within Hinduism and configuring Islam as the enemy (Wilkinson 2009). The 'syncretic' tradition of the Nath Sampraday was transformed into the anti-Muslim message of twentieth-century Hindutva.

Avaidyanath was a gentler personality than Digvijayanath, but still a strong champion of Hinduism. Starting in 1983, Avaidyanath organized a series of communal feasts (*samrasta bhof*), in which Hindus of all castes ate together in public demonstrations of commensality. He chose his nephew, Adityanath, as his successor. Adityanath was much more in the mould of Digvijayanath and fully attuned to the Hindutva message. Adityanath aimed, and largely succeeded, in overcoming caste competition within the Hindu community by the tried-and-tested means of targeting the Muslim 'other'. One should immediately add that, on the ground, the picture is a good deal more complicated than the simplistic, and politicized, vision of Hindu-Muslim opposition might suggest. The answer to the question about *origins* does not provide the answer to the question about *stability*. Brahmin-Thakur competition may have been key to the original rise of the Math under Digvijayanath; the propagation of Hindu-Muslim opposition has been key to its continued dominance.

Furthermore, a key point in the consolidation of the Math's political power is its ability to appeal widely to all Hindus. Avaidyanath repeatedly won election as an MLA from the Maniram constituency with a predominantly SC and OBC electorate. As Hindu religious leaders, the Mahants have been able to attract many Brahmin followers. The fact of Brahmin-Thakur political competition by no means implied that all Brahmins lined up against the Math; on the contrary, it had and has prominent Brahmin supporters. Hari Shankar Tiwari never stood against the Math (though one of his sons once did so). Contrariwise, Thakurs have not always and invariably stood with the Math: Virendra Pratap Shahi stood against Avaidyanath as the SP candidate in the national elections of 1996 and came a respectable second (32% to Avaidyanath's 42%).

Voters expect more than symbolic affirmation and representation in their leaders; they require effective government as well (Michelutti 2014; Piliavsky and Sbriccoli 2016; cf. Price and Ruud 2010). The Math's rise to power would not have been possible without strong and capable leadership. Nor would it have been possible without the strong 'outreach' of the Math, especially in the fields of education and medicine. Another factor, briefly indicated above, is the history of eastern UP, which sees itself simultaneously as the heart of the nation and as marginalized from the centres of power. There is a long history of oppositional politics in the region, so that people are habituated to voting for candidates who are not aligned with the governments in Lucknow or Delhi. In Gorakhpur – by means of a judicious mix of developmentalism, Hindutva, public presence, and muscle power – the Math achieved the kind of ideological dominance already in the 1990s, which the BJP was able to replicate in the country as a whole only a couple of decades later.

Avaidyanath chose his successor carefully. Adityanath was in his early 20s when he became abbot and MP presumptive. At just 44 he became Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Unless there is some radical upheaval, he can expect to stay in power in Gorakhpur for a long time to come.

Epilogue

On 11 March 2018, after these concluding lines were written, a by-election was held in Gorakhpur to replace Yogi Adityanath, now that he had become CM of UP. On a 43% turnout, the BJP's candidate, Upendra Shukla, a local Brahmin, was defeated by Praveen Kumar Nishad of the SP, thanks to a temporary alliance with the BSP (the BJP's vote fell by 5.27%, the SP's rose by 27.12%, and

Nishad won by a margin of 2.34%). This was widely, and especially at the national level, interpreted as a blow to the BJP and to Yogi Adityanath himself. A more nuanced and locally informed view is that it is not as simple as that. As explained above, it is key to the Math's hold on Gorakhpur to keep OBC and Dalit voters on side. Local voters believed that the BJP had not respected Yogi Adityanath's preferences in its choice of candidate (he wanted, apparently, another ascetic from the Math or, failing that, a lawyer whom he trusted). At the same time, Nishad, himself an OBC, cultivated the OBC and Dalit voters, reminding them that no one from the Math was standing this time, and that the guru of Gorakhnath was Matsyendranath, a fisherman. In other words, even the defeat of the BJP for the first time in decades reaffirms the centrality of the Math in Gorakhpur politics and by no means signals the end of its domination.

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Notes

1. For helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper we thank D.P. Martinez, L. Michelutti, C.J. Fuller, J. Mallinson, R. Guha, J. Whelpton, and two anonymous reviewers. The paper is based upon (1) Pandey's lifelong experience of politics in Gorakhpur and neighbouring districts, (2) Chaturvedi's PhD, 'Religion, Culture and Power: A Study of Everyday Politics in Gorakhpur' (JNU, 2016), and (3) field research trips conducted by both Indian authors separately and with Gellner in 2014 and 2016. We thank the ESRC for its support of the 'Political Cultures in South Asia' project (PI Lucia Michelutti, UCL) [ES/1036702/1], of which this research formed a part. In many cases it has been judged prudent to maintain informant anonymity. We take responsibility for any inaccuracies or misinterpretations that remain in the text.
2. For reasons of space, we have not dealt here with the details of electoral politics, whether local, regional, or national, except in passing; the argument could certainly be deepened by considering them.
3. It should be noted, however, that this chronology is a largely heuristic device, since the phases overlap and many of the dominant characteristics are omnipresent, as will be seen in this paper.
4. We distinguish the 'Hindu Right' – a political *position* that seeks to give expression to what it sees as the sentiments of the Hindu majority – from the 'Hindutva' *movement* as embodied in the Sangh Parivar, which by contrast has clearly defined aims and methods. Obviously, the two are intimately linked (the latter seeks to build on and give shape to the former), but their history and interests are not always the same (at one time there were, and still today there are, politicians with Hindu Rightist instincts in the Congress Party, such as Sardar Patel, K.M. Munshi, and P.D. Tandon; some BJP politicians have been relatively 'secular'). See, i.a., Jaffrelot (1996) and Hansen (1999).
5. On the multifarious involvements of ascetics in rule and trade in precolonial times, see Pinch (2006) and, on more recent times, Copeman and Ikegame (2014).
6. Chibber and Verma (2014). On the BJP's appeal to Dalits, see Narayan (2009). Most recently, see Jha (2017).
7. Different Muslim rulers seem to be conflated in the story as currently told, just as the historical figure Gorakhnath is conflated with his successors. According to Briggs ([1938] 1973, 86–87), two earlier Gorakhnath shrines were converted to mosques. Not surprisingly, the current Mandir website does not mention the Imambara or Roshan Ali; rather it stresses that medieval sources, including Muslim sources, mention the Gorakhnath shrine, and that it was damaged by Alla Ud-din in the fourteenth century and Aurangzeb in the eighteenth century.
8. It seems that the magazine *Kalyan* may have been the ultimate source, but we have not been able to verify this.
9. See Lorenzen (1987) on aniconic, non-caste Hinduism as an alternative Hindu Great Tradition. On contemporary 'syncretic' practice, see, i.a., Bigelow (2010), Gottschalk (2000), and Assayag (2004). On 'purification' attempts, a good place to start is Van der Veer (1994); cf. Dalmia (1997).
10. *Gorakhpur mein rahna hai to yogi yogi kahna hai*. And: *ksetra se nikalne wala antankwadi yahan ruk kar mutne (pisab karne) ki himmat bhi nahi karta hai*.
11. For an immediate account, see Beg (2007); for accounts appearing two weeks and a month later, the latter from a CPI(M) perspective, see Apoorvanand (2007) and Ali (2007).
12. Tripathi (2013, 371). Dr Sampooranand was later the Chief Guest at the ceremonial presentation of the felicitation volume for Pandit Tripathi in 1965. At that time Sampooranand was Governor of Rajasthan and must have travelled all the way to Gorakhpur for this function.

13. An embarrassed Vajpayee said that Tiwari was supporting the BJP Government in the public interest and that his political ideology was changing (Ahmed and Mishra 1997; Ramakrishnan 1997).
14. Mishra and Ahmed (1997). On Amar Mani, see also Tiwari and Pandey (2013, 214–216).
15. Tiwari's residence in Gorakhpur is a huge compound with very high boundary walls in the heart of the city. At the entrance, there is elongated thatched-roof structure where Tiwari used to conduct his receptions (*janta darbar*). This structure (and synecdochically the whole compound) is known locally as *Tiwari ji ka hata*. The thatch later became a symbol of dominance and power and was replicated by all aspiring politicians in the city.
16. When he became CM a description of him in *Jansatta* (25/9/85) opened: 'thoda pade likhe kisi bade gaon ke mukhiya ki tarah dikhane wale Vir Bahadur Singh ...' (Vir Bahadur Singh, who looks like some semi-educated village headman, ...).
17. On this new phase of Indian politics, see Hansen (1999), Jaffrelot (2003, 2011, Ch. 11f), Guha (2007, Ch. 23f). On the rise of a specifically Yadav approach to democratic politics, see Michelutti (2008).
18. Chaturvedi (2016, 157). The Gorakhnath Math has avoided the ubiquitous legal cases – usually to do with property – that arise when abbots have families, and the consequent pressures to reform, which constitute the normal history of many other Hindu ascetic orders (Kasturi 2009).

Notes on contributors

Shashank Chaturvedi is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. He is the author of '*Khichdi Mela in Gorakhnath Math: Symbols, Ideas, and Motivations*' (*Society and Culture in South Asia* 3(2): 135-156, 2017) and *Math, Mahant, and the Politics of Religion* (OUP, 2018, in Hindi). His interests lie in the study of religion, culture, renunciation, sects, and politics. His PhD dissertation focused on the role of the Gorakhnath Math in shaping the 'everyday politics' of Gorakhpur in eastern Uttar Pradesh, India.

David N. Gellner is Professor of Social Anthropology and a Fellow of All Souls College at the University of Oxford. Among his many publications are the edited volumes, *Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil Society in South Asia* (Sage, 2010), *Borderland Lives in Northern South Asia* (Duke, 2013), *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal* (OUP, 2016), and *Global Nepal: Religion, Culture, and Community in a New and Old Diaspora* (OUP, 2018). He gave the annual Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture in Kathmandu on 'The Idea of Nepal' in December 2016.

Sanjay Kumar Pandey is Professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, and teaches the foreign policy of Russia and the Central Asian states. His areas of interest include political systems and processes in Russia and India, with a special focus on identity, ethnicity, nationalism, and comparative federalism. He is presently involved in research projects on separatism in North-East India and the politics of eastern Uttar Pradesh. His publications include 'Contextualising India-Russia Relations' *International Studies* 53(3-4): 227-257 (Sage, 2018) and 'Politics of Belonging: Identity and State-Formation in Nagaland' in J. Pfaff-Czarnecka and G. Toffin (eds) *The Politics of Belonging in the Himalayas* (Sage, 2011).

ORCID

David N. Gellner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5152-1680>

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