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ARTICLE



## The 2022 State Elections in Uttar Pradesh and the RSS-isation of the BJP

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### ABSTRACT

Since 2014, the BJP has become increasingly dominant in Uttar Pradesh, India, a state where, as recently as 2012, its vote share had slumped to 15 percent. This paper examines, through ethnographic field research with party workers and others, the reasons for the turnaround in the party's fortunes. A large part of the answer lies in the increasing strength of BJP party organisation, modelled on an RSS template, as well as the increasing coordination between the RSS and the BJP, with RSS personnel frequently seconded to the BJP. This intense closeness between the RSS and the BJP is a new post-2014 feature, something that did not characterise earlier periods of the BJP in power. A second key factor, building on the BJP's increased organisational capacity, and one long advocated by the RSS, is the mobilisation of state welfare benefits by the party and the concerted effort to convert welfare recipients, coming from all communities, into supporters. A third key factor, at which the BJP is increasingly adept and where RSS organisational skills provide a significant advantage, is the micromanagement of caste dynamics and religious polarisation as and when required to gain and maintain a political advantage.

### KEYWORDS

BJP; Hindutva; Indian politics; local elections; RSS; UP; Uttar Pradesh

'We are the experts in the science of organisation!'

M.S. Golwalkar<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Since 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has won four consecutive elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP), an unprecedented achievement in the post-Congress era. The BJP victory in the 2022 state elections was all the more impressive in that the party

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1. Cited in D. Thengadi, *Karyakarta* (Pune: Bhartiya Vichar Sadhna, 5th ed., 2011 [1995]): 106.

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also increased its vote share from 39.7 percent to 41.3 percent (Table 1). The BJP crossed the 40 percent bar in a UP assembly election for the first time in its history.<sup>2</sup> It is the capacity of the BJP to attract voters from all sections of society, including even some Muslim votes, that has consolidated its position following its dramatic success in the national elections of 2014.<sup>3</sup> This consolidation has enabled the BJP to project itself as a national and inclusive party representing all communities.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the BJP is able to tar its main opponents in UP—the Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)—as communalist, sectarian, nepotistic (*vanshavadi*) and corrupt.

How did the BJP manage to attain such consistent electoral dominance in India's most populous, complex and electorally significant state? A key part of the answer lies in the adoption of the organisational methods (and often personnel as well) of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the RSS methods of collating local knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Such methods have needed to be combined with a significant degree of decentralisation, permitting centrally ordained strategies to be adapted to local differences and contexts.

This paper deploys ethnography to understand the role of BJP party workers in the making of a grand BJP narrative that seamlessly combines both 'development' and 'identity'. We analyse the BJP's internal political organisation and its strategy both in the run-up to and during the election. Adopting an ethnographic bottom-up or 'worm's eye' view of the process means that we seek both to nuance and to provide a complementary viewpoint to more top-down analyses of the BJP's success.<sup>6</sup>

The BJP's presence on the ground was analysed in terms of organisational structure (*sangathan*) and leadership (*netritva*) in four diverse constituency situations: Gorakhpur Urban, Kushinagar, Varanasi and Khurja (in Bulandshahr) (case studies from the first two sites are provided below). The first and third authors were participant observers at various stages and phases of the 2021–22 campaign of the BJP. Over a period of one year, the study deployed structured and unstructured questionnaires, focus-group interviews, participant observation, and content analysis of news reports.

The UP election results of 2022 were historic in more ways than one. There was a record 60.67 percent voter turnout. More women than usual (62.22 percent) voted for the BJP.<sup>7</sup>

2. To two decimal points, the BJP vote share in 2022 was 41.29 percent while that of the SP was 32.06 percent. Lok Dhaba Trivedi Centre for Political Data, accessed April 27, 2023, [https://lokhaba.ashoka.edu.in/browse-data?et=AE&st=Uttar\\_Pradesh&an=18](https://lokhaba.ashoka.edu.in/browse-data?et=AE&st=Uttar_Pradesh&an=18).

3. The BJP won 8 percent of the Muslim votes in the 2022 assembly election in UP: *The Hindu Bureau*, 'The Hindu-CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey 2022: Welfare, Regional Factors Provided Ballast to BJP in Uttar Pradesh', *The Hindu*, March 12, 2022, accessed September 29, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/the-hindu-cds-lokniti-post-poll-survey-2022/article65215064.ece>.

4. N. Mehta, *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party* (Chennai: Westland, 2022): Chap. 3.

5. On the history of the RSS, see W.K. Anderson and S. Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987); W.K. Anderson and S. Damle, *The RSS: A View to the Inside* (Gurgaon: Penguin Viking, 2019). On the RSS's role in the new BJP, see A. Singh, *The Architect of the New BJP: How Narendra Modi Transformed the Party* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2022); Mehta, *New BJP*.

6. For example, C. Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021); P.B. Mehta, 'Hindu Nationalism: From Ethnic Identity to Authoritarian Repression', *Studies in Indian Politics* 10, no. 1 (2022): 31–47; B. Yadav and I. Patnaik, *The Rise of the BJP: The Making of the World's Largest Political Party* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2022).

7. Bharti Jain, 'Turnout of Women Exceeds Male Voters in UP This Year', *The Times of India*, March 10, 2022, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/assembly-polls-turnout-of-women-exceeds-male-voters-in-up-this-year/articleshow/90111868.cms>.

These two facts taken together indicate a possible shift in UP politics. Not one of the ‘strong’ chief ministers in the last three decades—Kalyan Singh (BJP), Rajnath Singh (BJP), Mulayam Singh Yadav (SP), Mayawati (BSP) and Akhilesh Yadav (SP)—was able to win two successive elections. It is the first time in UP that a party other than the Congress has managed to return to power with an overwhelming majority. Repeat victories in state elections have been commonplace elsewhere in India, such as in Gujarat, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, but not in UP.

The BJP’s 2022 victory has altered and redrawn the political boundaries within the state. A key factor in the BJP’s victory was the decimation of the BSP vote and the transfer of a substantial part of it to the BJP. In the 1991 assembly elections, under Kalyan Singh’s leadership, the BJP received 31.45 percent of the votes and a majority on its own with 221 seats. Thereafter, it went into steady decline in state elections and reached its nadir in 2012 with 15 percent of the votes and just 47 seats (Table 1). The 2014 Lok Sabha election was the moment of resurrection for the BJP. The party and its allies won 73 Lok Sabha seats (out of 80); since then, it has been dominant in the state. In the 2017 assembly elections, the BJP’s vote-share more than doubled and its seats expanded more than six times as compared to 2012.

It is unlikely that there could be any single-variable explanation for this extremely rapid rise of the BJP. Vaishnav’s observation about the study of changing voter preferences in Indian politics applies in this case: ‘our bedrock assumptions about how [the] voter behaves are no longer accurate’.<sup>8</sup> Older explanations of political change in India invoked a ‘democratic upsurge’<sup>9</sup> or a ‘silent revolution’.<sup>10</sup> Such explanations were plausible to explain the dramatic rise of the Backward Classes and subsequently Dalits in UP politics, but they fail to explain the BJP’s resurgence a decade later. Among the newer explanations advanced to explain the BJP’s recent success are ‘subaltern Hindutva’<sup>11</sup> and ‘silent

**Table 1.** Seats and vote share of the four major parties in the last seven assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh.

	BJP		SP		BSP		Congress	
	Seats	Vote %	Seats	Vote %	Seats	Vote %	Seats	Vote %
1991	221	31.45	92 (JD)	18.84	12	9.44	46	17.32
1996	174	32.52	110	21.80	67	19.64	33	8.35
2002	88	20.08	143	25.37	98	23.06	25	8.96
2007	51	16.97	97	25.43	206	30.43	22	8.84
2012	47	15.00	224	29.13	80	25.95	28	13.26
2017	312	39.67	47	21.82	19	22.23	7	6.25
2022	255	41.29	111	32.06	1	12.88	2	2.33

Source: ECI website.

8. M. Vaishnav, ‘From Cakewalk to Contest: India’s 2019 General Election’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Website, April 16, 2018, accessed May 15, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/04/16/from-cakewalk-to-contest-india-s-2019-general-election-pub-76084>.

9. Y. Yadav, ‘Understanding the Second Democratic Upsurge: Trends in Bahujan Participation in Electoral Politics in the 1990s’, in *Transforming India*, ed. F. Frankel et al. (Delhi: Oxford University Press): 146–75.

10. C. Jaffrelot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).

11. B. Narayan, *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation* (Delhi: Sage, 2009); A.P. Singh, ‘Subaltern Hindutva’, *Seminar* 720 (August 2019), accessed October 11, 2023, [https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/702\\_abhinav\\_prakash\\_singh.htm](https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/702_abhinav_prakash_singh.htm); G. Prakash, ‘Dalits and the BJP’, *Seminar* 720 (March 2019), accessed August 10, 2022, [https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720\\_snigdha\\_dhrubo\\_guru.htm](https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720_snigdha_dhrubo_guru.htm).

majority'.<sup>12</sup> However, such theorisations face many questions, especially in the light of the BJP's debacle in West Bengal in 2021, as well as in other state elections (as in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Maharashtra), where local considerations and regional variations have combined to defeat them.

The BJP's own analysis of its successes and failures focuses on ground-level organisation. It makes sense for outside analysis to do the same and to look particularly at the ways in which rank and file motivation is sustained election after election. Immediately after the BJP's stunning national success in 2014, it suffered losses in the Bihar and Delhi assembly elections of 2015. As Verniers pointed out at the time, the BJP lost these elections because it discarded its local units, shunned its regional allies, ran political campaigns that were highly personalised and Narendra Modi-centric, and chose relatively unknown figures as their candidates for chief minister.<sup>13</sup> The BJP seems to have learnt from the mistakes of 2014 and 2015, as the 2022 assembly elections show.

### Organisation (*sangathan*) first: The RSS-isation of the BJP

The BJP stands out from most other political parties in India because of the primacy that it gives to organisation. Of course, it is not the first party in India to have a strict 'organisation first' policy. The communists, both revolutionary and revisionist, demonstrated the advantages of a strong organisation.<sup>14</sup> But the BJP is the first to do so on a national level and with repeated success in elections.

Despite being expensive and labour-intensive, the BJP's planning for elections has attained a kind of 'permanent mode', or what Jaffrelot, describing Narendra Modi's period as chief minister in Gujarat, calls 'quasi-permanent mobilisation and spectacle'.<sup>15</sup> Banerjee remarks that election campaigns in India are like a 'military campaign', relying on discipline, shrewd strategy, intelligence, optimum deployment of personnel, and a judicious amount of 'shock and awe'.<sup>16</sup> Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state in terms of size of electorate, was witness to all the above and more during the 2022 assembly elections. However, contrary to Banerjee's observation that an 'election campaign facilitates a rare contact between voters and their representatives' and that 'these two worlds remain largely separated during the business-as-usual tenure of a parliament',<sup>17</sup> we noticed that the BJP has learnt how to stay in constant contact with voters and how to keep them aware of what it does for 'the people'.

12. S. Banerjee, 'When the "Silent Majority" Backs a Violent Minority', *Economic & Political Weekly* 37, no. 13 (2002): 1183–85.

13. G. Verniers, 'The BJP and State Politics in India: A Crashing Wave? Analyzing the BJP Performance in Five State Elections', IFRI, Centre for Asian Studies (2015), accessed May 29, 2022, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/asie-visions/bjp-and-state-politics-india-crashing-wave-analyzing-bjp>.

14. D. Bhattacharyya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); M. Banerjee, *Cultivating Democracy: Politics and Citizenship in Agrarian India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2022): 170.

15. Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*, 44.

16. M. Banerjee, *Why India Votes?* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014): 42.

17. *Ibid.*, 42.

Banerjee's insight about cadre-based parties applies equally to the BJP:

Their political work continues in the interim period between elections for the three tiers of democratic government, but in a low-key way often hidden from view, done at the margins and as much through formal institutions. To that extent, the election campaign is less a military matter than the overt harvest that follows quiet and prolonged sowing and cultivation.<sup>18</sup>

The organisational presence of the rank and file, round the clock and year after year, among the voters, visible and loud, even during what, for other parties, would be the 'quiet and prolonged' phase of relative inactivity, seems to be the 'new normal' for the BJP. On the basis of continuous engagement with electoral politics in the Gorakhpur Urban and Padrauna (Kushinagar) constituencies over the last six years, we suggest that the BJP has crafted new mechanisms for its workers to continuously engage with the voters and deliver them to the voting booth. The party is building on a long history of organising and disseminating its message, going back to the days of the Jan Sangh. What has happened, in effect, is the RSS-isation of the BJP. In the past, especially during the period of Atal Bihari Vajpayee's leadership, both the BJP and the RSS were keen to keep a distance between the two organisations. Increasingly, they have grown together.

Another important aspect of the BJP's strength at the grass-roots level, post-2014, is its strategy of encouraging close links between the citizen, the government and the party.<sup>19</sup> All the units of the organisation are supposed to take part in and encourage participation in flagship government programmes, such as the Namami Ganga Programme (Clean Ganga Programme), Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign), Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (Save the Girl Child, Educate the Girl Child policy), Ujjwala Yojana (free LPG connections), Ayushman Bharat Yojana (health benefits of up to Rs5 lakh), Pradhan Mantri Jan-Dhan Yojana (Prime Minister's Public Finance Scheme), Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (Prime Minister's Life Insurance Scheme) and other policy rollouts.

As the BJP sought to transform itself from a cadre-based into a mass party, it tried to ensure that the newly recruited members acquired a 'greater sense of belonging to the BJP'.<sup>20</sup> Regular activities at the district level were organised in the build-up to the assembly elections. The goal was clear: to project the party not merely as an election machine, but also as an organisation that does 'good work' all year round; in other words, it has begun to see itself (just like the RSS) as an all-encompassing organisation central to the identities of its members. Despite the usual anti-incumbency voting, the BJP and its allies won 74 of the 131 close contests in the 2022 assembly election, which is testimony to the strength of the organisation in terms of being closely identified with these programmes.<sup>21</sup>

18. *Ibid.*, 43.

19. A. Ganguly and S. Dwivedi, *Amit Shah and the March of the BJP* (Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2019): Chap. 9.

20. Yadav and Patnaik, *Rise of the BJP*, 172.

21. 'Close contest' here means that the winning margin was less than 5 percent. The SP won 55 such seats.

The BJP claims to have created a loyal *labharthi* or beneficiary vote base of 25 crore (250 million) nationally, cutting across caste, gender, region and religion.<sup>22</sup> The BJP has tried to evolve an identity for these beneficiary groups as a class, while occasionally reminding them of their caste and religion, especially in the case of the ‘backward’ (*pas-manda*) Muslims. *Labharthi* as a category includes not only actual beneficiaries but also their family members as well as anyone hoping to be identified as a *labharthi*. The BJP’s closeness to this aspiring class has diluted the distinction between the government, citizens and the party. Welfare, for the BJP, as Ahmad has pointed out, has become an electoral bargain struck by a ‘charitable state’.<sup>23</sup> What has less often been appreciated is that expanding welfare to the most needy is exactly what lifelong RSS activist and ideologue of the Jan Sangh, Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, advocated with his philosophy of Antyodaya or ‘raising the most backward’ in his book, *Integral Humanism*.<sup>24</sup> Upadhyaya’s economic philosophy had little influence on the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) BJP government of 1998 to 2004;<sup>25</sup> now, at least in relation to the *labharthis*, it may be said to have come to fruition.

Since 2019, the BJP has conducted regular training programmes for its booth-level functionaries on how to stay connected to the *labharthis*. Many of these trainees were new recruits and, mostly, had not undergone the rigours of RSS *shakha* (branch) discipline. Newspaper reports suggest that most such training programmes were held in collaboration with the RSS.<sup>26</sup> In some of the co-ordination meetings of the RSS-BJP, government officials were also involved.<sup>27</sup>

The dominant understanding about political parties in the developing world is that, by and large, they are characterised by relatively weak organisation. Political parties in India have often been portrayed as loose associations of influential locals and regional powerholders without strong organisation or ideology.<sup>28</sup> Thus, according to Auerbach et al., Indian political parties lack strong norms or the organisational wherewithal to exert a meaningful presence in the daily lives of citizens between

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22. See Yamini Aiyar, ‘Decoding the BJP’s Model of Welfarism’, *Hindustan Times*, April 14, 2022, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/decoding-the-bjp-s-model-of-welfarism-101649940189084.html>; B. Narayan, ‘There Is a New Addition to BJP’s Identity Politics in UP: It’s Called Beneficiaries’, *The Print*, February 4, 2022, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://theprint.in/opinion/theres-a-new-addition-to-bjps-identity-politics-in-up-its-called-beneficiaries/820711/>; R. Mahapatra, ‘New Votebanks on the Block: Beneficiaries over Right Holders’, *Down to Earth*, March 9, 2022, accessed August 21, 2022, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/governance/new-votebank-on-the-block-beneficiaries-over-rights-holders-81865>; A. Tiwari, ‘BJP Banks on Labharthi Factor but Past Losses Show It Has Its Limits’, *India Today*, updated February 17, 2022, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly-polls-2022/story/bjp-banks-on-labharthi-factor-up-polls-1914260-2022-02-17>. Mehta emphasises the new role of cash transfers in *New BJP*, 68.
  23. H. Ahmad, ‘The New Charitable State’, *The Indian Express*, March 14, 2022.
  24. D.D. Upadhyaya, *Integral Humanism* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Janata Party, 1965).
  25. J. Abraham, ‘In Search of Dharma: Integral Humanism and the Political Economy of Hindu Nationalism’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2019): 16–32.
  26. Amar Ujala, Gorakhpur edition, December 11, 2021; *Dainik Jagran*, Gorakhpur edition, December 11, 2022.
  27. Kumar Anshuman, ‘BJP, RSS Hold Meet on Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections’, *The Economic Times*, October 13, 2021, accessed May 14, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/uttar-pradesh/bjp-rss-hold-meet-on-uttar-pradesh-assembly-elections/articleshow/86975317.cms?from=mdr>; Kumar Anshuman, ‘BJP, RSS Hold Meet on Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections’, *The Economic Times*, October 13, 2021, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/uttar-pradesh/bjp-rss-hold-meet-on-uttar-pradesh-assembly-elections/articleshow/86975317.cms?from=mdr>.
  28. H.L. Erdman, *The Swatantra Party and Indian Conservatism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967); L.P. Fickett Jr., *The Major Socialist Parties of India: A Study of Leftist Fragmentation* (Syracuse, NY: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1976); L.P. Fickett Jr., ‘The Rise and Fall of the Janata Dal’, *Asian Survey* 33, no. 12 (1993): 1151–62.



elections.<sup>29</sup> They cite Keefer and Khemani, who argue that parties in India rarely appeal to voters on the basis of well-specified policy platforms: ‘individual politicians often are credible to narrow segments of the electorate with whom they have established a personal reputation grounded in a history of repeated interaction’.<sup>30</sup> Others have described Indian political parties as organisationally shallow and over-reliant on personalistic ties rather than ideology.<sup>31</sup>

If there is one party that constitutes a glaring counter-example to these generalisations, it is the BJP. The party, particularly in UP, has since 2013 reinvented its organisational structure at the grass-roots level, bringing in innovative methods of mobilising its cadres and centralising campaign planning and strategy, while at the same time giving some autonomy to local units in implementing policies and using resources. The party has given no space to what Wyatt, writing about Tamil Nadu, calls party ‘entrepreneurs’.<sup>32</sup> The likes of Amar Singh and Azam Khan in the SP, or Nasimuddin Siddiqui, Swami Prasad Maurya and Indrajit Saroj in the BSP, were eventually relegated to the margins, first in their own party and then, eventually, in state politics.

As many have suggested, in different ways, the BJP has ushered in a new era of Indian politics. Vaishnav and Hinston interpret the rise of the BJP as constituting the emergence of a fourth party system in India where ‘politics has returned to the construction of jati-level alliances, as in the second party system—but with a twist’—namely, the successful BJP strategy of attracting non-dominant groups (non-Yadav Other Backward Castes (OBCs) and non-Jatav Dalits) away from the SP and BSP.<sup>33</sup> Nalin Mehta effectively argues the same case.<sup>34</sup>

The BJP has challenged head-on the core premise of dynastic politics. It may be true that dynasties have allowed subaltern groups to increase their presence in politics,<sup>35</sup> but the BJP never misses an opportunity to attack its opponents for corruption, dynastic

29. A. Auerbach et al., ‘Rethinking the Study of Electoral Politics in the Developing World: Reflections on the Indian Case’, *Perspectives on Politics* 20, no. 1 (2022): 250–64.

30. P. Keefer and S. Khemani, ‘Why Do the Poor Receive Poor Services?’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 39, no. 9 (2004): 935–43; 937.

31. A. Kohli, *Democracy and Discontent: India’s Growing Crisis of Governability* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); P. Chhibber, F. Refsum Jensenius and P. Suryanarayan, ‘Party Organisation and Party Proliferation in India’, *Party Politics* 20, no. 4 (2014): 489–505; A. Ziegfeld, *Why Regional Parties? Clientelism, Elites, and the Indian Party System* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

32. A. Wyatt, *Party System Change in South India: Political Entrepreneurs, Patterns and Processes* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

33. M. Vaishnav and J. Hinston, ‘India’s New Fourth Party System’, *South Asia Journal* (August 2019), accessed October 14, 2023, <http://southasiajournal.net/indias-new-fourth-party-system/>.

34. Mehta, *New BJP*. India’s electoral history since Independence can be broadly classified into four periods: 1952–67 (Congress dominance), 1967–89 (growing opposition at the state level), 1989–2014 (coalition politics), and 2014 onwards (the rise of the BJP). For more on the party system in India, see Chhibber et al., ‘Party Organisation’; P. Chhibber and R. Verma, ‘The Rise of the Second Dominant Party System in India: BJP’s New Social Coalition in 2019’, *Studies in Indian Politics* 7, no. 2 (2019): 131–48; Vaishnav and Hinston, ‘India’s New Fourth Party System’; C. Jaffrelot and G. Verniers, ‘A New Party System or a New Political System?’, *Contemporary South Asia* 28, no. 2 (2020): 141–54; R. Verma and A. Ali, ‘The Central Force behind India’s Fourth Party System’, *Economic & Political Weekly* 56, no. 10 (2021): <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/central-force-behind-indias-fourth-party-system>; A. Jha, ‘Expanding the Vote Base in Uttar Pradesh: Understanding the RSS–BJP Combined Mobilization Strategies’, *Samaj: South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* (2021): DOI: [doi.org/10.4000/samaj.7238](https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.7238).

35. K. Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); K. Chandra, ed., *Democratic Dynasties: State, Party, and Family in Contemporary Politics* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016).



politics, nepotism and cronyism. During the campaign of 2014 and subsequently, the BJP continually reminded voters with slogans such as ‘2G, 3G and *Jijaji*’ (‘2G, 3G and Brother-in-Law’—a reference to licences being handed out to relatives), ‘*Bua aur Babua*’ (‘Aunt and Nephew’), ‘*Chacha Bhatija ki Sarkar*’ (‘Government of Uncle and Nephew’), ‘*Parivarvad*’ (‘Nepotism’) and ‘*Vanshavad*’ (‘Dynasticism’). All these are obvious taunts aimed at the Gandhis of the Congress Party and the Yadavs of the SP. Internally, the BJP has fashioned an organisational structure that consciously shuns this style of politics as well as the factionalism of the old Congress system (while pragmatically tolerating some dynasticism at the local level).<sup>36</sup> Thus, the BJP has managed to portray itself as a vote mobiliser on horizontal lines for the sake of the nation, making it possible for Amit Shah, then president of the BJP, to claim in 2017 that ‘[a]mong about 1,650 small and big parties, the BJP is the only one in which internal democracy is alive and vibrant. It is the only party in which workers are given an opportunity based on their performance ...’.<sup>37</sup>

### **The role of Amit Shah**

The BJP faced a huge challenge in UP in 2014. It had won a mere ten seats in the 2009 parliamentary elections and just 47 seats in the 2012 assembly elections. It was clear that it needed to rebuild the party down to the booth level and to reinvent its social engineering of UP’s complex caste dynamics. Such a policy, mainly targeting OBCs and others, had been recommended by K. Govindacharya, general secretary of the party in the 1980s, but was not taken up systematically until Narendra Modi took charge.<sup>38</sup>

The BJP has now evolved bureaucratic mechanisms to make sure that nothing is left to chance in its battle for votes. Within a few days of the 2022 assembly results, local newspapers reported that BJP district units were holding meetings to take stock of the voting patterns and to examine the causes behind low votes for their candidates in certain booths.<sup>39</sup> Such meetings even took place in constituencies where the BJP was victorious, including in current UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath’s own seat in Gorakhpur.<sup>40</sup> District units submit reports to the state and central offices in the first week after results are declared and this is followed by booth-level meetings. The party ensures that senior local leaders—the member of parliament (MP), member of the legislative assembly (MLA) and state-level office-bearers, in coordination with the local leaders and party cadres—translate the plan into workable action points in order to advance the party’s interests at the booth level.

36. On factions within the Congress Party in its heyday, see P. Brass, *Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1965); R. Kothari, ‘The Congress “System” in India’, *Asian Survey* 4, no. 12 (1964): 1161–73.

37. Ganguly and Dwivedi, *Amit Shah*, 318–19.

38. V. Pandit, ‘Modi, the Successful Social Engineer’, *The Hindu BusinessLine*, May 31, 2019, accessed May 14, 2023, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/modi-20-indias-social-engineer/article27350612.ece>.

39. ‘*Kamjor Booth Honge Majboot*’, *Dainik Jagran*, Gorakhpur edition, July 9, 2022.

40. ‘*Gorakhpur ke in Panch Ilako mein Mohallon mein CM Yogi ko Mile Sabse Kam Vote*’, *Amar Ujala*, Gorakhpur edition, March 14, 2022.

A senior office-bearer in the Varanasi district unit explained that the rejuvenation of the party started in 2013–14 when Amit Shah took charge of UP for the 2014 general elections.<sup>41</sup> He added that the BJP has learnt from experience that wherever its candidate is in a direct contest with the Congress, its chances of winning are high. For instance, in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, out of the 189 seats in which the party was head-to-head with the Congress, the BJP won 166. A respondent in Varanasi, a key functionary of the party, said that an almost similar situation obtained in the 2017 assembly elections: the BJP won the two-thirds of the 200 seats where there was a direct contest with the SP-Congress alliance.

Amit Shah stressed the importance of local organisation down to the booth level. At the BJP National Council meeting immediately following the victory in 2014, he said:

I want to say a few things to party workers in the context of the near future. If we are to look at the working of booths on the national scale, we realise booths are weak. They need to be strengthened. Second, BJP workers should not leave any election right from Panchayat to Parliament. Every election is an opportunity for expansion, every election is an opportunity to connect with the mass, and every election is a window to take party ideology to the people.<sup>42</sup>

These are the words of a party president who had just delivered a historic victory and whose party had just formed the first non-Congress government with a full majority of its own in Indian history. Shah's official website links to dozens of similar speeches. The stress is on the accumulation of votes, rather than simply winning the election. Another major change in the organisation was in terms of its constituent units. Earlier, the party was organised around cells. A major reorganisation, undertaken in 2015, reshaped the party around 19 'departments' and nine 'projects'.<sup>43</sup>

### The RSS method of organisation as applied by the BJP

To see how the BJP has been transformed, one needs to go beyond a focus on elections and opinion polls, and engage with a seminal text like Thengadi's *Karyakarta* ('Activist' or 'Cadre'), which analyses the outlook the RSS seeks to cultivate.<sup>44</sup> The book argues that the '*adhithan*' (foundation/aim) of the Sangh can be fulfilled only through its distinct '*karya ki rachna*' (work mechanism) and '*karya sanskriti*' (work culture).<sup>45</sup> Thengadi prescribes 'impersonal organisation' ('*avaiyaktik sanstha*') based

41. On the key role of Amit Shah, see also Ganguly and Dwivedi, *Amit Shah*; Yadav and Patnaik, *Rise of the BJP*.

42. Amit Shah's speech available at Amit Shah, 'Amit Shah Addresses BJP National Council at Talkatora Stadium, New Delhi', YouTube video, 47:12, March 13, 2015, accessed July 14, 2022, <https://youtu.be/-Jze5wxMvIw>.

43. These departments include good governance, policy research, media, training, political feedback, party journals and publications, the coordination of disaster relief, and media relations. Yadav and Patnaik write that three departments became the major focus of the party: Ajeevan Sahyog Nidha (Lifetime Co-operation Fund); IT, Website and Social Media Activities; and Documentation and Library: see Yadav and Patnaik, *Rise of the BJP*, 172. On similar lines, projects are intended to pursue a short-term objective such as office modernisation, e-libraries and the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission). One may note that a government programme like Clean India Mission is also a project of the organisation: cf. Ganguly and Dwivedi, *Amit Shah*, Chap. 9.

44. The author of this text (full reference details in fn 1), Dattopant Thengadi (1920–2004), an RSS ideologue and founder of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, Swadeshi Jagran Manch and Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, was also the organising secretary of the Jan Sangh in the 1950s.

45. *Ibid.*, 96.

on human psychology as the sure means to reach the destination. The focus of the organisation should be daily meetings based on the principle of ‘To meet is to know, to know is to understand, and to understand is to love’.<sup>46</sup> The author recommends ‘repeated get-togethers on the pretext of a meeting or picnic.... We should meet even if there is no purpose because it leads to the psychological principle of shared mentality [i.e. *esprit de corps*] (*saamohik maansikta ka manovaijyanik siddhant*)’.<sup>47</sup>

The conventional view is that the BJP is run in an authoritarian top-down way. One of our respondents, a district-level party functionary in charge of the Fazilnagar constituency, disagreed:

People jump to the conclusion that the BJP works under a high command (*upar se command aata hai*) culture where Amit Shah and Modi are supreme. The fact is that the media and intellectuals conveniently ignore or choose to forget that there is a robust system of organisational secretaries (*sangathan mantriyan ka ek majboot tantra hai*) in our party, and they are the eyes and ears of the organisation. Whatever organisational transformations have taken place since the inception of the BJP in 1980s, it is because of these secretaries.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from *The Rise of the BJP*, an insider work that Bhupendra Yadav, national general secretary of the BJP and a minister in Modi’s government, co-authored with economist Ila Patnaik. They showcase the contributions of Sundarlal Bhandari and Modi to demonstrate the power of organisational secretaries.

In Uttar Pradesh, this ‘mission mode’ of organisational preparedness was evident throughout the five years of the Adityanath government, i.e. from March 2017 onwards. Earlier, the party had divided every constituency into different sectors with between eight to ten booths under each sector. Now, to micromanage the election campaign further, it has introduced the idea of *shakti kendra* (power centres) to ensure better coordination among booth-level workers, district office-bearers and state-level party functionaries. Two amendments to the party constitution, Yadav and Patnaik argue, played a crucial role in the expansion of the party in UP: first, registration for party membership could now be done online, i.e. by anyone with a smartphone; second, each member was assigned responsibilities, which was intended to make them feel an important part of the organisation.<sup>48</sup> Every active member, in the initial membership drive, was tasked with inducting 100 new members. Each member was asked to spend seven days a year contributing to party activities. One such ‘active member’ of the party said, ‘How can we rest before Lord Ram’s work is finished? (*Ram kaaj kinhein binu mohe kahan aaram*)’. When we enquired who Ram is in this context, the respondent was quick to add, ‘Modi, who else?!’ This exercise of keeping cadres motivated in the interval between two elections (two-and-a-half years in the case of UP) has put the BJP right at the top in terms of organisational capacity. Traditionally, half of UP’s sitting MLAs lose their seat in assembly elections. In 2022, unprecedentedly, the BJP managed to retain 232 seats.<sup>49</sup>

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46. *Ibid.*, 97.

47. *Ibid.*

48. Yadav and Patnaik, *Rise of the BJP*, 165.

49. Lok Dhaba Trivedi Centre, accessed November 23, 2022, <https://lokdhaba.ashoka.edu.in/dash>.

One interlocutor, 'Mohan Gupta', the BJP OBC cell head of a Vidhan Sabha (legislative assembly) constituency, gave an appointment time in between 'two slots' of his duty of *jansampark* (mass campaign) for 'Maharaj ji':

He recited his speech, as if on autopilot, listing *vikas* (development), *suraksha* (security/law and order), *pratyashi* (right candidates in the election), *apradh tantra par ankush* (control over criminals and their nexus), *vyapar mein badhat* (economic growth and business), and *sabka saath, sabka vikas aur sabka vishwaas* (support for all, development for all, and trust for all). These were the fundamentals around which BJP election campaigns had been organised since 2014. This time, 2022, was no different. Asked about how and on what grounds party workers achieve promotion, Gupta stated that the party has its own *aantrik mulayankan* (internal evaluation) mechanism. He listed the following as criteria for assessing a *karyakarta's* contribution: *swachha vichaardhaara* (clean ideology), *samay* (how much time one devotes for the party), *sugamta* (how well one solves the problem), *naitikta* (morality of the worker), *imaandari* (honesty), *janaadhar* (mass base of the worker), *sampark* (contact with people), and *samaajik samikaran* (social equation, i.e. overall fit with the social—i.e. caste—make-up of the unit or constituency).<sup>50</sup>

The last consideration has gained crucial importance in the BJP's scheme of restructuring the party. Right from the top, i.e. the Central Parliamentary Board, to the booth level, the party has consciously appointed party workers from Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and OBC communities. It has certainly helped the party to transform its former image as a North Indian Brahman-Baniya party.

Gupta emphasised that fulfilling the tasks assigned by the top leadership was their main goal (*lakshya*) and mission (*dhyey*). For example, it was his task to maintain a database of all OBC sub-castes in two constituencies. The way in which he went about this was almost identical to the practice of local RSS mobilisers. Gupta starts at the ward level and identifies voters from each sub-caste. Then he selects 25 prominent known and respectable voters from each ward and holds meetings with them, both individually and as a group. The aim is always to bring them within the party fold and, through them, to influence a larger base. This exercise continues in each ward throughout the year:

We get all the data and then keep in touch with them. As the election inches closer, we increase the frequency of meetings. In my area there are 38 OBC sub-castes and I have a list of all of them, with 25 prominent faces from each sub-caste in each ward of the municipality. I keep tabs on them.

When we asked an 'active' member of the organisation in Kushinagar about the 'target' of recruiting 100 new members and its practicality, he compared it to marketing. A marketing head knows in advance that the target is unrealistic but uses it to motivate his executives. As with corporate jobs, promotion is the reward if one gets close to the target.

The scale of the organisation was impressive. By end of August 2021, the party had already held an 'intellectual class conference' (*prabuddh varg sammelan*, a euphemism for Brahmins), booth-level meetings, training for the *vistaraks*

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50. Shashank Chaturvedi, fieldnotes.

(membership mobilisers), social media cell meetings, and membership drive meetings, etc.<sup>51</sup> For the Gorakhpur region alone, which has 62 legislative assembly seats in ten districts, a total of 70 *vistaraks* (eight in 'standby mode' or as reserves) had been appointed.<sup>52</sup> These *vistaraks* were appointed by the party through a process of written examination followed by an interview. To monitor the functioning of the *vistarak* in these constituencies, a *vistarak pramukh* (head mobiliser) and a *saha-vistarak pramukh* (deputy head mobiliser) were appointed. The *vistaraks* are assigned the specific duty of adding 25,000–30,000 new members (voters) to the party. For this, they were instructed to stay in their respective constituencies until the elections were over. We could not access the exam booklet, but one *vistarak* informed us that there were 60 multiple choice questions on the history of the Jan Sangh and the BJP, the structure of the organisation and its activities, and who is who in the organisation in states adjoining UP and in the central leadership. Those who qualified were asked to appear for an interview. The personality test was 'basically to assess the orientation and commitment towards mission-2022'.

One of the key aptitudes that the BJP is seeking to assess is the ability to do 'fieldwork' (*pravaas*).<sup>53</sup> The BJP has borrowed this term from its mother organisation, the RSS, where the full-time volunteers (*puṇakalik swayamsevi*) stay in the field (*pravaas*) for an extended period. In the early 1980s, it was Sunder Singh Bhandari, RSS organisational secretary in Rajasthan, who introduced the BJP to the idea of *pravaas*, helping it to expand in North India.<sup>54</sup> Gradually the practice took a back seat. After 2014, with the growing influence of the RSS as its organisational secretaries were deputed to the BJP, the practice has been revived. The party assigns a BJP 'fieldworker' (*pravaasi*) to a cluster of state and national constituencies. They are supervised by a cluster-in-charge and other party functionaries to whom they report. The exercise is generally done two years in advance of an election and the aim is to collate electorally important information: geography, political and administrative features, caste and religious composition, local deities, cultural practices, language, and local issues. The party has already appointed its fieldworkers for the 2024 national elections to 'monitor' over 140 weak seats across India in what is called the Lok Sabha Pravaas Yojana. Party MPs are directed to visit the constituencies to oversee 100 'weak' booths and to monitor the booth-strengthening activities of 30 party workers. Similarly, MLAs are assigned 25 booths and ten party workers whom they have to supervise in booth-level activities.<sup>55</sup>

One such fieldworker, recently returned from West Bengal, related in a telephone interview that he had spent three days in *pravaas*:

He met the local MPs, booth-level office bearers, and block-level and district office bearers of the organisation. In addition, he had *tiffin baithak* (lunchbox meetings) over

51. *Dainik Jagran*, Gorakhpur edition, August 19, 2021.

52. *Dainik Jagran*, Gorakhpur edition, August 4, 2021.

53. Cf. Ganguly and Dwivedi, *Amit Shah*, Chaps. 4–5.

54. Yadav and Patnaik, *Rise of the BJP*, 164.

55. L. Mathew, 'Eyeing 2024, BJP Ministers to Visit Seats Lost in 2019', *The Indian Express*, May 26, 2022, accessed May 14, 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/eyeing-2024-bjp-ministers-to-visit-seats-lost-in-2019-7936468/>.

two days with diverse sets of party workers and mandal presidents.<sup>56</sup> He had 'data meetings' to assess the reach of central government schemes to voters of different castes, met old timers of the BJP, Jansangh, and the RSS, local businessmen, visited the local temples and other prominent places, and met all the important people of the locality. The itinerary of his stay was so meticulously designed that he just had to 'follow the road map' that he was given. On further questioning, he admitted that he did have to apply his own judgement in assessing the local situation. His feedback to the central committee is confidential and no local or state-level leader can 'dare' to try to influence it. One of the key tasks assigned to him was to identify the *labharthi* in the constituency and devise ways of nudging them to join the organisation. In addition, he had to meet the *sapta rishis* (literally, the 'seven sages'), i.e. seven prominent personalities of each booth, and urge them to motivate voters to join the party.<sup>57</sup>

During fieldwork, all interlocutors who knew the RSS well claimed that Modi is just one part of a complex organisational mechanism. An octogenarian who has been attending RSS branch (*shakha*) meetings for more than five decades said that 'the RSS digests an individual like a python'. The gist of this particular refrain was that any individual, including Modi, is merely a cog in the wheel of the RSS system. He went on:

The moon may show off its varied shape and luminosity over its 15-day cycle, but it returns to no-moon and must start again from where it has finished. Our [human] condition is such that no one individual can do anything on their own. Understand it like this: Let's say that four of us are staying in a village and we decide to cook *baati (litti) chokha*.<sup>58</sup> One of us will be in charge of flour, one of us will be in charge of oil, one of us will take care of the potatoes, and one the cow dung for cooking fuel. With responsibilities divided and coordinated, the dinner will be ready on time. Our individuality will be dissolved into the ocean of our association (*sangh*).

In this way, he stressed that what was important was the hegemony of the party, not the individual. And commenting on the ability of the party to reach out to communities that were not part of its traditional vote bank, he said, in relation to Muslims as potential supporters of the BJP:

Once a bull drops its saliva in a rice field, no matter how much you try to shoo it away, it will return and graze the crop. It is the same with the Sangh [the RSS]. It has eyed the *pasmanda* [disadvantaged] Muslims; now they will get their votes in years to come.

### From 'beneficiaries' to supporters to BJP party members

One year ahead of the UP elections, the BJP, encouraged by the RSS, ramped up its plan to reach out to the beneficiaries (*labharthis*) of government welfare schemes. It calculated and analysed the numbers of beneficiaries (invariably in millions), as one

56. Lunchbox meetings are derived from the RSS tradition of *sahbhaj* (collective dining) in which members bring their own tiffin boxes. This culture is now very prominent in the BJP and even Modi was seen carrying his lunchbox in public meetings and sharing it with the local leaders in the open. One such image can be viewed online at [https://static-ai.asianetnews.com/images/87c296e2-a541-48d7-aaba-16ad89fd7219/image\\_710x400xt.jpg](https://static-ai.asianetnews.com/images/87c296e2-a541-48d7-aaba-16ad89fd7219/image_710x400xt.jpg), accessed August 11, 2022.

57. Shashank Chaturvedi, fieldnotes.

58. A famous dish in Bihar and UP, a dough ball made of wheat flour and baked, and eaten with mashed potato.



interlocutor put it, ‘scheme by scheme’ and ‘district by district’. Through organisation meetings and training programmes down to the village and block levels, the party leadership identified the booths where support was weak in order to reach out to more *labharthis* and bring them closer to the party. The scale of organisational outreach was evident across all the constituencies we visited. In Nahar Chapra panchayat of the Padrauna assembly constituency, our respondents, mainly Musahars (SCs), disclosed that during lockdown, party workers and the administration kept knocking on their doors to ensure that they were receiving *freehwa* (free rations).<sup>59</sup> We were told that the party passed on information from the village and the state government officials responded. The usual response, interlocutors reported, was to conduct village and block camps to distribute the benefits of the government schemes, including PM Awas, PM Kisan Samman Nidhi, and Ayushman Bharat Yojana.

Yadav and Patnaik refer to Deen Dayal Upadhyaya’s advice which he gave to a Jan Sangh worker in 1957: ‘Today’s opponent should be our voter tomorrow. Tomorrow’s voter, on the day after, should become our member and our member should later transform into our active worker’.<sup>60</sup> The party sets membership targets for each state based on the current number of BJP members in a state and the number of votes polled for the BJP in that state.<sup>61</sup>

It was clear in the field that most of the first-time and young voters who were also primary members of the party had registered themselves online. The party organised a Maha Sadasyata Abhiyan (grand membership drive) immediately after the election. An office-bearer in Kushinagar said that the greater the defeat of the opposition, the larger will be the membership drive of the BJP immediately after the declaration of the results. He explained that during the party meetings in the district office, the *vis-taraks* (membership drive ‘in charges’) give clear instructions to take advantage of the demoralisation of the opposition parties and the euphoria surrounding the BJP. The landslide victory of the BJP in 2017 is a case in point. He added that the party gained a lot by appointing Adityanath as chief minister. He has become the second most popular leader in the BJP and thus mobilising cadres has become easier.

The BJP was aware that, as a party of government, it needed to try new methods:

Prior to 2014, the BJP was a party with a loyal cadre, which had mastered the methods of political mobilisation through yatras, rallies and protests. But after 2014, the party was in power and expanding towards becoming a mass party. The processes used within the party needed to change and reflect this.<sup>62</sup>

59. About 1.6 million metric tonnes of food grains are provided per month free of cost to 3.61 crore ration cardholders under two schemes: the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKAY) and the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013. In addition to funds from the Centre for these programmes, the UP government spends Rs950 crore per month. There are 3.61 crore ration cards in UP, about 41 lakh of them Antyodaya cards and the remaining PHH (priority households). While about 7.50 lakh metric tonnes of food grains is provided to these cardholders across UP under the PMGKAY per month, over 8 lakh metric tonnes are distributed under the NFSA. Sources in the state Food and Civil Supplies Department put the total number of beneficiaries at an estimated 14.96 crore (or over 60 percent of the population): *The Indian Express*, Lucknow edition, February 26, 2022.

60. Yadav and Patnaik, *Rise of the BJP*, 164, quoting from B.K. Kelkar, *Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya: Vichar Darshan*, Vol. 3 (New Delhi: Aschi Prakashan, 2014): 80.

61. Under the new system, whenever a membership drive is organised, a toll-free number is launched and people are asked to give it a missed call; the call is returned, personal details are taken, and membership is confirmed.

62. Yadav and Patnaik, *Rise of the BJP*, 171.



In order to ‘harness the energy’ of new members and give them a sense of belonging, the BJP started to promote government schemes as party programmes, while continuing more traditional mobilisation activities such as processions and demonstrations. Party cadres would meet the beneficiaries of central and state government schemes and remind them that the programmes would continue only if the BJP government was returned to power. Full-page advertisements in local dailies and handouts were taken out during the campaign. Meanwhile, the focus remained on maintaining regular personal contact with supporters. A post-poll survey by the CSDS suggests that 80 percent of families in UP had access to free rations, 60 percent of households had access to the public distribution system for cheap rations, and 57 percent of farmers received benefits from the PM Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana.<sup>63</sup> As the post-poll survey indicates, the party was able to reap benefits from unexpected quarters: ‘Dalit beneficiaries were proportionally higher in number who supported the BJP than the non-beneficiaries from the Dalit community’.<sup>64</sup>

The BJP is skilled at anticipating and neutralising the opposition’s attack lines. While the media and political pundits were busy recycling the old theory that there is simmering tension between the two leaders, the BJP, perhaps consciously following the RSS teaching of organisational unity, countered with an image of Modi’s hand on Adityanath’s shoulder. The party realised early on that it could not afford to keep Adityanath out of the limelight or to project Modi as the only supreme leader. The decision to declare the chief minister candidate well in advance or rather to delay until later is always a strategic choice; there are advantages to both courses of action and the BJP has done both at different times. In the 2022 UP elections, the BJP decided to project Yogi Adityanath as its candidate for chief minister from as early as October and November 2021—in other words, to make his leadership a key point of the election campaign. The BJP planned more rallies for Adityanath than any other political leader in the state. The media claimed that Modi himself coined the rhyming tagline, ‘UP + Yogi *bahut hain upayogi*’ (UP plus Yogi is highly useful, i.e. is ‘the need of the hour’). Whether Modi composed it or not, his knack of capturing the mood of the electorate made the claim appear plausible. The 2022 elections contradict the conventional view that since 2014, the BJP’s campaigns have focused on Modi alone.

This dual leadership campaign meant that Adityanath and Modi were often conflated in the voters’ minds. In one such instance in Padrauna, a Dalit said, ‘Those who have made us happy, will get our vote’, leaving it unclear who he was referring to. He then added, ‘People are saying Modi is responsible for our misery, but the fact is that whatever we have got is due to him and thus our vote will go to Yogi ji’. Adityanath has unquestionably increased his influence over the last five years. He seems now to be equally, if not more, popular in western UP. The rise of Adityanath has solved the problem, from the BJP’s point of view, of how to balance eastern and western UP.

63. *The Hindu Bureau*, ‘Hindu-CSDS-Lokniti Post-Poll Survey’. CSDS stands for the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

64. J. Mishra and S. Palshikar, ‘The Labharthi Factor’, *The Hindu*, March 12, 2022, accessed October 11, 2023, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly/the-labharthi-factor/article65215837.ece>.

### Case 1: 'Yogi ka Gorakhpur'—a cakewalk?

The RSS message to its volunteers over many years has been: 'Whether a programme is large or small, it should be well planned and well organised .... Nothing to be left to chance'.<sup>65</sup> Field research in Gorakhpur showed that these lessons had been learnt well by the BJP.

One knows that an election is around the corner when local newspapers run headlines such as 'Activists have taken charge (*vistaarakon ne sambhaal li hai apni jimmedari*), Assembly constituency heads are stirring themselves (*Vidhan Sabha kshetra prabhari bhi hue sakriya*)'.<sup>66</sup> The usual inference would be that assembly elections will take place in a few weeks. What is new is that this headline appeared on August 19, 2021, almost ten months before the elections.

Given that Gorakhpur is such a safe seat, why would the BJP move into high election preparation mode so early on? Why, immediately after the elections, would it try to figure out how to increase its vote still further? How does the organisation manage to spread its influence both before and after the election? How does it keep its cadres motivated? We put these questions to BJP supporters as well as to party cadres and district-level leaders. The usual response from BJP supporters was: 'We want to see Modi as PM' and/or 'We want Yogi as the CM'. Surprisingly, the responses of the active members and office-bearers of the organisation were more impersonal and structured. Most argued that two things kept them motivated: first, to win their booth this time (if they lost it last time); and, second, if they won it last time, to increase the vote this time. At the end of the day, it was their responsibility. 'We must keep an account of every single vote'.

On the day of nomination, February 4, 2022, Adityanath first paid his respects to Guru Gorakhnath and 'his own guru Awaidyanath' and then went directly to the Maharana Pratap Inter College grounds to address party workers. Amit Shah, the home minister, and Dharmendra Pradhan, the education minister and 'in charge' of the 2022 UP assembly elections, both flew in to accompany 'Maharaj ji' to the collectorate office for the nomination.<sup>67</sup>

Campaign posters showcased local development projects with the caption *Yogi ka Gorakhpur* (Yogi's Gorakhpur). These posters alternated with posters of quotations from Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyay and Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Even though it was a party event, Adityanath's stamp was writ large. A volunteer from the Hindu Yuva Vahini, Adityanath's personal youth force, had on his T-shirt the English slogan: 'Nation First, UP Just and Yogi Must'.<sup>68</sup>

Just before the declaration of the first list of candidates for the assembly elections, there were rumours that the BJP was keen to ask Adityanath to contest either from Mathura or from Ayodhya in order to consolidate the Hindu vote there. The party put all speculation to rest by declaring him the candidate from the Gorakhpur Urban seat. The most likely explanation for this decision was that it was intended to control the damage caused by the exit of three prominent OBC leaders from the BJP in the

65. Thengadi, *Karyakarta*, 109.

66. *Dainik Jagran*, Gorakhpur edition, August 19, 2021.

67. *Dainik Jagran*, Gorakhpur edition, February 5, 2022.

68. Presumably the word 'just' was a reference to justice.

previous fortnight. All three—Swami Prasad Maurya, Dara Singh Chauhan and Dharam Singh Saini—were cabinet ministers in the Adityanath government. More importantly, two of them were from eastern UP (Maurya had won the Padrauna assembly seat in the 2017 election). This region has 138 seats and the party had won most of them in the 2017 elections. By retaining Yogi's candidature from Gorakhpur, rather than shifting him elsewhere, the BJP wanted to counter the impact of the exodus of the prominent OBC politicians.

There are no census figures to confirm it, but various sources from different political parties and the media suggest that the caste/ethnic voter breakdown of the Gorakhpur Urban constituency is roughly as follows: Brahmins, Kayasthas and Vaishyas (Baniyas) are the three largest groups, almost equal in strength at around 60,000–70,000 each. There are about 50,000 Dalits, 40,000 Muslims, 25,000 Rajputs and 75,000 OBCs, prominent among the latter, the Sainthwars, Noniyas, Yadavs and Nishads. The Gorakhpur Urban seat also has sizeable representations of Christians, Sindhis and Sikhs.<sup>69</sup> The relatively high numbers of Brahman, Kayastha and Vaishya voters, and the lack of dominance by any single community, mean that the electoral arithmetic is in the BJP's favour.

In 2017, for his first foray into UP state politics, Adityanath took the safer route of entering the state assembly via the legislative council and did not contest an assembly election. During the build-up to the 2022 elections, Adityanath asserted in a public meeting in Gorakhpur: 'As MP, I started the movement to free Gorakhpur from mosquitoes and the mafia with the help of citizens and businessmen. The mission was successful because of people's strong faith in our intent'.<sup>70</sup> A local newspaper came up with the slogan '*Gorakhnath ka laal ban gaya hai kaal*' ('Gorakhpur's son has become Yamraj, god of death'), referring to his strict administrative capabilities and his policy of 'zero tolerance' against mafias and corruption.<sup>71</sup> Going against the dominant (and formerly justified) perception of tension between Adityanath and the BJP hierarchy,<sup>72</sup> throughout the 2022 election campaign, it appeared that the Sangh, including the RSS, the BJP, Adityanath, and Adityanath's Hindu Yuva Vahini, all worked well together.

## Case 2: Audacity—Raja Sahab ka Padrauna

In its pursuit of electoral victory, the BJP is capable of ruthless audacity. In the case study considered here, the BJP devised a strategy to win; the RSS simply followed behind and offered its full and unremitting support.

It cannot often have happened that a political party has successfully requested the official candidate of a competing national party, a candidate who has been a lifelong opponent, to resign from his party, return his ticket, join a new party, and win the

69. P.K. Dutta, 'What Makes Yogi Adityanath's Gorakhpur Urban a BJP Bastion in Uttar Pradesh Election', *Hindustan Times*, February 4, 2022, accessed May 14, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/uttar-pradesh-assembly-polls-2022/story/yogi-adityanath-gorakhpur-urban-impregnable-bjp-bastion-1908736-2022-02-04>.

70. *First India*, Lucknow edition, August 5, 2021.

71. *Dainik Jagran*, Gorakhpur edition, February 27, 2022.

72. S. Chaturvedi, D.N. Gellner and S.K. Pandey, 'Politics in Gorakhpur since the 1920s: The Making of a Safe "Hindu" Constituency', *Contemporary South Asia* 27, no. 1 (2019): 40–57; 52–53.

election for the new party with just four weeks left to campaign. But this is what unfolded in 2022 in Padrauna (Kushinagar in eastern UP).

The story starts with Swami Prasad Maurya, the sitting MLA of the BJP from the Padrauna seat. Maurya got to hear that the party was about to drop him, so he switched his allegiance to the SP. Maurya had been elected and re-elected five times from Padrauna. He was also a cabinet minister in the Adityanath government. As noted above, his exit from the party, along with Dara Singh and Dharam Singh Saini, just before the elections, created ripples across the state. Maurya and Saini are both prominent OBC politicians. Their departure was considered a big jolt for the BJP and a coup by the SP.

The challenge for the BJP in Padrauna was three-pronged. First, to counter the narrative of anti-incumbency and the exodus of ministers and MLAs to the SP. Second, to look for a candidate who could win the election at four weeks' notice. Third, and most importantly, to ensure that non-Yadav OBC voters stayed with the BJP. The BJP came up with the masterstroke of inducting a prominent Sainthwar (i.e. OBC) personality in the region, Ratanjit Pratap Narayan Singh, a.k.a. RPN. He had been a popular Congress leader with family roots in local politics since his father's days. He comes from the Sainthwar royal family of Padrauna and is popularly known as 'Raja Saheb'. After winning three times as the local MLA, RPN was elected from Padrauna as Congress MP in 2009; he was appointed a state-rank minister in the Dr. Manmohan Singh government. However, he could not retain his seat and lost to the BJP both in 2014 and in 2019. Now, in 2022, by accepting the BJP offer, RPN had a chance for redemption. The BJP, for its part, had the opportunity to kill two birds with a single stone. The Congress-nominated candidate, Manish Jaiswal, who had the backing of RPN, was induced to resign from the party and join the BJP on February 4, 2022. The following morning Jaiswal was announced as the official BJP candidate for Padrauna.

Before 2017, the BJP had won the UP Vidhan Sabha Padrauna seat only once, in 1991, during the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation. Traditionally, this constituency frequently bucked the wider trend in the state and could not be considered the safe seat or bastion of any party.<sup>73</sup> In this case, the candidate was not the first choice of the local unit, but was imposed upon it by the party command in order to balance the caste equation that had been upset by the exit of Swami Prasad Maurya.

From 2014 onwards, with the increased role of feedback from booth-level workers and other party officers when selecting candidates in the BJP, and gradually in other political parties too, the tendency has been to declare the list of party candidates close to the last date for nomination. This avoids giving a head start to opponents in working out counter-strategies. With its greater organisational efficiency and larger size, it seems that the BJP has a relative advantage when deploying this tactic, which was clearly on display in this case. The well-oiled election machinery of the party is quick to reach every corner of the constituency with pamphlets, badges, flags and, of course, the candidate.

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73. Since Independence, other than the Congress, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal, Lok Dal, Communist Party, Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party and the BJP had all won the seat either once or twice only, according to ECI data.

In a meeting of the RSS election coordinators and district BJP leaders at Atmadeep School in Gorakhpur, a clear instruction was given to the Swayamsevakas that a BJP win must be ensured in at least 50 out of the 62 seats in the Gorakhpur region (in the event, they won 45). The meeting was attended by *sah sarkaryvah* (joint secretary) Arun Kumar, national secretary of the BJP B.L. Santosh, and state election 'in charge' Dharmendra Pradhan. The RSS workers were instructed to go with the BJP workers to the villages and have at least '500–600 meetings' in each assembly constituency of the region. The RSS' regional, area and district directors, and the BJP's regional head, were also present.<sup>74</sup> There were several such combined RSS-BJP meetings in all the regions of the state in the days before the vote. An office-bearer of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (an RSS affiliate) in Varanasi confirmed that the RSS-BJP tie has undergone a tectonic shift in recent years. In earlier times, he said, the RSS would wait until a day before the election to ask its cadres to mobilise voters on behalf of the BJP; nowadays it was obvious for all to see that the RSS had been in 'mission mode' to ensure that the Adityanath government was returned to power from at least six months before the election.

## Conclusion

Our research highlights the factors that have enabled the BJP to become so dominant. Underlying all of them is an efficient and relentless RSS-inspired organisation that is willing to learn from its mistakes and confident enough to provide both strong central direction and significant freedom of action at the local level. Although in some cases and where it helps the party, the BJP is willing to tolerate locally influential dynasts (as we saw in the Padrauna case), its strong stand against dynasticism in general and its willingness to change its candidates in order to counter anti-incumbency is a major strength when compared to other parties.

A striking part of the BJP organisation has been the way it is willing to work for the long term through the practice of detailed ethnographic fieldwork (*pravaas*). There is perhaps an uncomfortable similarity to the present researchers (though we represent no party and have no political agenda or aspirations). This emphasis on fieldwork, getting to know 'the people', is one part of a larger process of the RSS-isation of the BJP. The BJP and the RSS once sought to keep each other at a safe distance, so neither could be blamed for the actions of the other. There are plenty of instances in which they criticised each other in the past. Today the BJP and the RSS have increasingly overlapping personnel, ideas, programmes and practices, something that did not happen in the Vajpayee era. Techniques of organisation that have been honed over decades in the RSS have been adapted for electoral use by the BJP.<sup>75</sup> Our only cavil with Nalin Mehta's otherwise meticulous history and analysis in *The New BJP* is with his claim that the BJP has now so far outgrown the RSS that it no longer needs it.<sup>76</sup>

74. Based on local newspaper reports, including *Dainik Jagran*, Gorakhpur edition, February 22, 2022.

75. Much ink has been spilt on the question of the BJP's undoubted prowess in the use of social media, which there is no space to address here. A report by CSDS, *Social Media and Political Behaviour* (Delhi: Lokniti, 2019), suggests that this is not as decisive a factor as often thought.

76. Mehta, *New BJP*, 570.

Over time, in the Modi era, the competitive world of Hindutva politics has merged into a singular monolith combining the respective world-views of the Sangh (*rashtra dharma*), the BJP (*ekatma manav-vaad*), and the likes of Yogi Adityanath (the Hindu Mahasabha-ite version of Hindutva). Since 2014, the Sangh Parivar has become much more accommodating of dissenting voices. That is part of the explanation of the paradox that the RSS-isation of the BJP in UP has happened under a leader—Adityanath—who in the past always resisted the RSS and insisted on having his own organisation. Modi's unique contribution has been to catalyse this process of convergence. The big question is: can this new synthesis last? Or is the coalition of interests it brings together bound to break apart in due course?

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