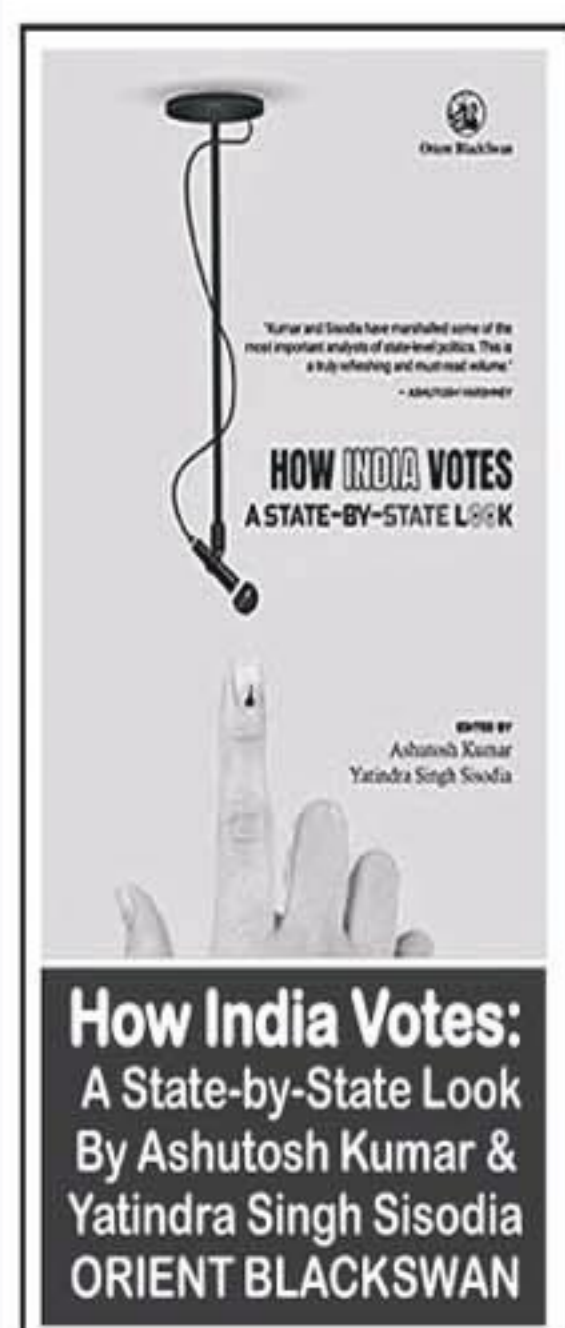




# UTTAR PRADESH: CASTE, REGION AND POLITICS

State-level politics and voting patterns get an exhaustive look in Ashutosh Kumar & Yatindra Singh Sisodia's *How India Votes: A State-by-State Look*. Excerpts from the book.



**T**HE emergence of competitive populism' employed by all political parties is characterized by the absence of any long-term policy conviction and is primarily an ad hoc measure that is vulnerable to change as per the requirements of the political expediencies. Also, the emergence of an identity-centric developmental discourse that is presented in terms of good governance by all the parties has had differential impact over different segments of the electorate. That is, while caste identities have acquired undue importance in developmental narratives, the same is

not true about religious identity. However, the 2017 assembly elections held in the aftermath of the Hindu-Muslim clashes in western UP showed clearly that communalism can raise its ugly face any time, even in a region like Muzaffarnagar, known for communal peace and harmony for decades. Thus, the tall claims of inclusive growth, identity-centric development and good governance have been received and interpreted differently by different communal identities. This was

most obvious in the wake of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, wherein the sweeping and enigmatic projection of Modi-led BJP as the heralding of a new era of development politics did not cut ice with the Muslim electorate, which interpreted the consolidation of Hindus behind Modi as an identity-centric trend leading to its ouster and re-awarding of the incumbent, subsequently suffer colossal disillusionment with the incumbent, leading to its ouster and re-awarding of the existing alternative player. In

The deepening of democracy has led to the emergence of an assertive political agency of the subaltern

Thus, the trajectory of the electoral realm in the state represents an ironical trend of the cycle of massive anxieties and aspirations of the electorate that desires to have them realized by awarding a political party at one electoral juncture and subsequently suffer colossal disillusionment with the incumbent, leading to its ouster and re-awarding of the existing alternative player. In

shore, the massive electoral output and decisive electoral mandates that the state has witnessed in the past decade may not be representative of the popular aspirations of the electorate, but rather it seems more of a signifier of the precariousness of the electorate caught in the repetitive unimaginativeness of all the political players. On this parameter, the 2014 Lok Sabha election was also not an exception, as the subsequent by-elections in the state have primarily

gone against BJP. The dominant narrative that is emerging from the politico-electoral strategy signifies the centrality of identity-centric politics revolving around caste and religion.

UP was at the receiving end, through its identity-centric turn, in the 1990s, and it was expected that the decline of the same in the 2000s would mark development and governance taking centre stage in the state. However, the grand disappointment of the electorate at the hands of the three dominant players in the state, namely BSP (2001-12), SP (2012 - present) and BJP (2014 onwards), and the lack of any imaginative strategy for post-identity politics by the dominant political players in the state indicate that at a time when the popular aspirations of the people of India revolve around issues like growth, development and law and order, in UP the primordial politics of caste and community occupy centre stage in elections.



## Postscript

Since the Yogi Adityanath-led BJP government came to power in 2017 with a whopping majority, UP has witnessed Hindutva occupy centre stage in the cultural politics of the state. This has defined the broader contours of governance and public policy as reflected in measures like the dropping of Taj Mahal from the official list of tourist destinations in the state and not mentioning the monument in the list of cultural heritages in its first budget,

wherein more than Rs.2000 crore was allocated for policies like 'Swadesh Darshan Yojna' that included developing Ramayan Circuit (Ayodhya), Buddhist Circuit (Varanasi) and Krishna Circuit (Mathura) along with establishing a cultural centre at Varanasi. Interestingly, the same budget also allocated Rs36,000 crore for farmers' loan waivers, indicating that while occupational categories like farmers, peasants, artisans and labourers still emerge as the unit of public policy, the cultural dimension of identity

has a hierarchy, where the minorities in general and Muslims in particular are expected to trade culture for economy and governance.

**S**econd, the social outreach of the Hindutva discourse and victory of the BJP in the 2017 assembly elections, that witnessed the coming of a large section of non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits to BJP's fold, is premised upon BJP and Hindutva outfits providing the Hindu subal-

tern castes as thick political representation by denying Muslims even a symbolic representation. It is pertinent to note that BJP in a state with almost 20 per cent Muslim population did not field a single Muslim candidate in the 2014 Lok Sabha or 2017 assembly elections while providing thicker representation to lower-OBCs and the upper castes, and yet championing the discourse of development and good governance. However, the deepening of democracy that has led to the emergence of an as-

sertive and active political agency of the subaltern castes - whose shift to BJP has been made possible on account of their disillusionment with backward caste-centric parties like SP and BSP, which were perceived by a majority OBCs and Dalits as catering to single castes of Yadavs and Jatav-Chamars, respectively, along with Muslim appeasement - places BJP's cultural politics in a tenuous state where mere political representation would not satiate the subaltern aspiration. What they need and expect are concrete and tangible material benefits accruing to them, an expectation bound to be unmet and frustrated given the financial constraints the state is grappling with. In that scenario, the cultural politics of subaltern Hindutva that besides privileging subaltern caste in giving them thick political representation thrives more on a play of symbols, rhetoric and polemics would meet its limitations when the clamoring for a privileged material benefit on part of the subaltern castes would pose a challenge to BJP to retain its subaltern social-support

base. This, all the more when the low caste-centric parties like SP and BSP have started revisiting their political strategy of giving more representation to non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits along with attempting to forge a political unity despite the prevailing antagonism between dominant OBCs and Dalits that have kept the two parties at loggerheads since the mid-1990s - the hegemony of BJP would meet a powerful challenge as was the case in the victory of SP candidates in the by-election in Gorakhpur and Phulpur.

In the final analysis, irrespective of the electoral outcomes in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, UP would be mired in the privileged status of identity politics along the polemical discourses of Hindutva and Bahujan, both constituting development and good governance from their respective vantage points where the 'other' is predefined. A desire politics of development and identity mainstreaming the occupational self of the people seems nowhere in sight.