

Does the Modi Govt Have Its Finger on India's Pulse?

The Needle's Eye



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Maybe I'm starting to see ghosts in dark corners. Why else do we have Mahant Avidyanath, the late head of the Gorakhnath Temple in Gorakhpur, being celebrated every time an election in the Hindi heartland is round the corner?

It does not take an anniversary for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government to celebrate the Mahant, a long-serving head of the powerful temple and a politician who won five terms as a state legislator in Uttar Pradesh and was elected four times to parliament, representing both the Hindu Mahasabha and the BJP. He was also one of the leading lights of the movement to build a Ram temple in Ayodhya, a deeply emotive and divisive issue that is hanging fire in the courts.

In October 2015, just before the Bihar assembly elections, the Narendra Modi government rushed to issue an Avidyanath postage stamp, just a year after his death. A day before that

happened, Avidyanath's protégé and successor Adityanath launched an opinion poll on his website asking his followers if there ought to be population controls on Muslims.

Last week Prime Minister Narendra Modi travelled to Gorakhpur to unveil a statue of Avidyanath. The usually loquacious Modi made a very short ten-minute speech in which he carefully skirted politics and extolled religious lineages and Avidyanath. He had fulsome praise for Mahant (head priest) Adityanath, himself a five-time MP.

Avidyanath's canonisation was super-fast by any yardstick, even though we live in times when ascetics in saintly robes wield tremendous temporal power, win state honours, and steer fast-growing consumer goods businesses.

It cannot be a coincidence that the Uttar Pradesh state elections, technically not due until next year, loom ever larger on the political radar; and that Adityanath is making very clear he has ambitions of becoming chief minister, or at the very least getting a multitude of his followers on to the BJP ticket.

Adityanath is just one of the ingredients in the UP cauldron that Modi and BJP President Amit Shah have begun to stir ahead of the election. Why is UP so important? It alone sends one-seventh of MPs to parliament's lower house. It is a microcosm of India—poverty, caste, religion, size, and over-population. Its 200-plus million people are

two and a half times the size of Turkey's population, so if Turkey is strategic enough to merit world headlines every day, why not Uttar Pradesh? Gorakhpur, or Gau-raksha-pur, is literally "cow protection town".

Adityanath is an upper-caste Thakur, not just a monk. Dayashankar Singh, the BJP 'leader' who abused Dalit supremo and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati, is also a Thakur flaunting his virulent caste bias. Mayawati won power in 2007

Dikshit as its chief UP candidate. Meanwhile, Mulayam Singh Yadav and the ruling Samajwadi Party are also girding their loins. The Muslim vote is going to be crucial, as is the Jat vote, the Yadav vote, the Brahmin vote and the Thakur vote.

Over the next few weeks and months, all these players are going to register their ambition and influence. Do not for a moment start to feel that any one party or politician in Uttar Pradesh is a saint. As they say in Hindi, 'sab ek hi

the proportion of protein-rich foods like pulses in our diets, away from a carbohydrate-rich diet of rice and wheat. A carb-rich diet induces both diabetes and cardiac problems. But we don't produce enough pulses to feed our growing appetites.

Two successive droughts badly hit pulses output, which fell to 17 million tonnes in 2015/16 from 19.78 million tonnes in 2013/14. Last year India imported 5.79 million tonnes of pulses, up sharply from 4.58 million in

crunch, the Modi government has reacted in panic mode, and imposed market-control mechanisms that are downright socialist in nature.

Just before the Bihar elections in October 2015, pulses' prices went through the roof. First, the government imposed stock limits, scaring away traders, driving transactions underground, and reviving harassment by inspectors and taxmen. To make matters worse, stock limits were imposed even on importers. Most pulses are a Rabi crop and get harvested around February and March. Demand peaks between October and December, fuelled by festivals. Panicked importers cancelled shipments on the high seas. About 100,000 tonnes were left unclaimed in dock-side warehouses.

Early in 2016, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley responded to the cries for help by exempting importers from stock limits, but retained the limits on first buyers. Officials raided warehouses, mainly in Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, seizing between 80,000 to 100,000 tonnes. The seized stocks were released in a trickle into the market. Prices continued to rise unchecked. Futures trading in pulses, which could have corrected the demand-supply mismatches, were also banned.

Instead of letting market forces take over, as we have done for years for edible oil, the government decided to create buffer stocks of about 100,000 tonnes. This was poorly executed, be-

cause state governments balked at buying stocks of raw, unmilled pulses that nobody would take off their hands.

The result? Prices of tur (pigeon peas), the most aspirational of all the pulses, hover around ₹200 per kilogram. Supplies have dwindled to a trickle in the market. We are entering peak-demand season, and imports will start only in October-December.

The response? An alarmed government has set up a high-level Group on Cartelization/Hoarding/Speculation in Pulses, headed by Hem Pande, Secretary in the Department of Consumer Affairs. The group consists of state agriculture secretaries and law-enforcement officials. A team has been despatched to Mozambique to incentivise pulses farmers there.

Separately, Chief Economic Adviser Arvind Subramanian heads a committee that will draft a long-term policy on pulses. This will include incentivising farmers to switch to pulses cultivation. Last month minimum support prices for pulses were raised by ₹425 per quintal (100 kg), or by between 7.7 and 9.2% from last year's procurement prices. In response, soybean farmers in Madhya Pradesh, cotton farmers in Gujarat, and mustard farmers in Rajasthan are switching to pulses. Production will go up over the next year. Hopefully, whether or not Adityanath gets to be chief minister, farmers in his eastern Uttar Pradesh stronghold will go back to growing chickpeas.



ANIRBAN BORA

with the help of the Brahmin vote; the Brahmins deserted her in 2012. The BJP's Dalit woes have been made worse by the public flogging of a Gujarat Dalit family for skinning a dead cow and the resulting backlash. Now the Congress party, which has been a has-been party in UP for decades, has barged in from the wings by naming Brahmin politician Sheila

thali ke chatte batte hain' (they all eat from the same plate).

Talking about eating, does the Modi government have its finger on the pulse of what hundreds of millions of Indians need to eat to stay in good health? Not if you look at the facts.

Here are some. If India wants to move up the human-development index, we will have to sharply increase

2014/15. This fiscal year, in April and May alone, we have already imported upwards of 700,000 tonnes. Total imports in 2016/17 could go up to 10 million tonnes. We import pulses from countries as diverse as Malawi, Mozambique, Myanmar and Tanzania to the United States, Canada, Australia, and Russia.

Instead of anticipating the supply

