

# UP for Grabs: Prize Catch or Poisoned Chalice?

## The Needle's Eye



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The longer the course of a long-drawn election, the coarser the language gets. The strain is starting to tell in Uttar Pradesh. Both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) president Amit Shah have certainly raised the pitch. Shah said hooligans (presumably from the ruling Samajwadi Party) would be hanged by their feet. He did not talk about the criminal elements in the BJP's own ranks—Association for Democratic Reforms analysis shows that more than 30% of the BJP candidates in the four phases of polling so far have criminal cases registered against them.

Modi lashed out at the SP government's bias on caste and religious lines. "This discrimination cannot go on," he told a listless crowd in Fatehpur earlier this week. "Whichever mother's womb you are born from, you should have equal rights... If a village gets a graveyard

(for Muslims) then it should get a cremation ground (for Hindus)."

Who can dispute that all Indians ought to be equal (in life and death) regardless of their caste or religion, or that we must have law and order? It is unfortunate that Modi, who ought to be taking the moral high ground, setting an inclusive tone, and settling into cruise control as he heads into the fourth year of his term, is instead getting more pugilistic and unparliamentary. He stooped too low with his raincoat jibe at former prime minister Manmohan Singh in the Rajya Sabha on Feb. 8. Does he see Banquo's ghost, or is this just steam being let off? Either way, this is probably a good argument to hold parliamentary and state elections simultaneously—you get all the poison out of the way at one go and then get down to the real job of running the country and the economy.

Isn't it interesting that demonetization, or note-bandi, has more or less vanished from the headlines and our nightly news 'debates'? I was hoping that 100 days in, Amit Shah would have published a document listing all transactions conducted since Nov. 8 by party MPs and MLAs, as they were commanded by Modi.

A full reckoning from demonetization will probably have to wait until after the state elections. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), which released its report for the 2017 Article IV Consultation on

Wednesday, called for quicker action to restore cash and avoid payment disruptions. The IMF applauded India's continuing reforms but warned that supply-side bottlenecks and banks' huge non-performing asset burden could impede a robust recovery from the current dip (it forecasts slower GDP growth of 6.6% in 2016/17, going back to 7.2% next fiscal year). There is no question that Modi will have to buckle down to cleaning up bank balance sheets, making faster job creation possible, and reviving manufacturing if he wants to ride into the 2019 elections on a feel-good economic wave. Meanwhile, he has to win Uttar Pradesh.

It is not surprising that Uttar Pradesh is such a rich prize. Nine of India's 15 prime ministers have come from the state (if you count Gulzari Lal Nanda, who held the office for two 13-day stretches in 1964 and 1966).

Three prime ministers, and four current Members of Parliament, belong to the Nehru-Gandhi family. The two mother-and-son pairs sit on opposing benches in the Lok Sabha.

That does not mean that any one of the four is of national stature. So although UP is our most populous state, and sends 80 MPs to the Lok Sabha, it has not thrown up any leader of national stature since Atal Behari Vajpayee. No 'national' party has ruled the state in a long while—the BJP since 2002, and Congress since 1989.

The good news is that voters have a slightly easier choice this time in UP: in the 2012 elections, an average of 17 candidates fought for each of the 403 seats. In the four phases of voting so far, the average is 11 candidates per seat.

Let's look at how major parties per-

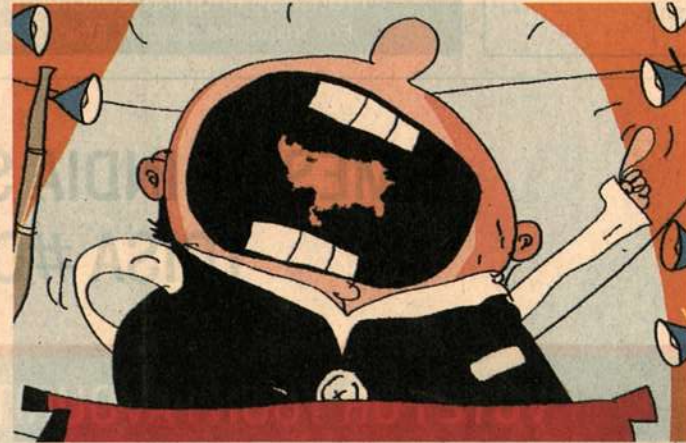
formed in the 2012 assembly election in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP won 15% of votes, and 47 seats; the Samajwadi Party won 29.13% and 224 seats; and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) won 25.91% but only 80 seats. Things changed dramatically in the parliamentary elections just two years later: the BJP won 42.63% of votes, 71 of 80 Lok Sabha seats; the SP won 22.35% and only five LS seats; and the BSP won 19.77% of votes and not a single Lok Sabha seat. Will the numbers flip around again?

Akhilesh Yadav has won some brownie points recently by standing up to his father, wresting control of the Samajwadi Party, and fashioning a poll alliance with Rahul

## DATA AMMO TO MODI



The under-development data provides rich pickings for Modi's stump speeches this month



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Gandhi. He even got moving in the last two years of his term on improving infrastructure. But his progress report is like a curate's egg—good only in parts.

I spoke with Professor Brij Bajpai of the Giri Institute of Development Studies in Lucknow about UP's track record on education. "There is a problem with public attitudes," he told me. "Community participation is very low." UP had slipped to 34th rank in 2012/13 from 27th in 2007/08 on the Composite Educational Development Index, whereas Bihar had improved its ranking from 35th to 30th among India's 36 states and union territories. The dropout rate in primary education in UP stood at 11.85% in 2011/12, compared with an all-India average of 6.5%, but looked better in upper-primary (classes 6-8) dropouts with 3.97% compared with an India average of 6.56%. In 2012/13, 6.4% of children in the 6-14 age group were not enrolled in school; 42.7% were in government schools, and 48.5% in private schools.

These figures are despite the fact that UP got a per-student allocation of Rs 11,453 in 2016/17 under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, far higher than Rs 4,485 for Bihar; Rs 9,363 for Rajasthan and Rs 6,546 for Madhya Pradesh. UP had 23% vacancies for teachers, compared with 34% in Bihar; as of March 2016. This data was gathered by Accountability

Initiative at the Centre for Policy Research.

Other indicators underline the deep poverty in Uttar Pradesh. Only 56% of UP's houses were connected to roads in 2016, up from 36% in 2000, whereas Bihar went up to 85% from 26%. This could partly be because the state government had to spend three times as much as funds it received from the centre under the Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana (Bihar got twice as much central as state funding). Road lengths constructed or upgraded under the Akhilesh government totalled all of 1,710 km (April 2012-Jan 2017) versus 1,913 km in the previous five years.

How has Modi's favourite Swachh Bharat Mission fared in UP? Only 46% of rural households had latrines as of December 2016, up from 40% in 2014/15. Compare this with Uttarakhand, which voted on Feb. 15—rural homes with latrines hit 100% in Dec. 2016 from 77% in 2014/15. This could be because of slower spending in UP, which went up to 65% of available funds in 2016/17 (until December) from 51% in 2015/16 and 41% in 2014/15.

This under-development data provides rich pickings for Modi's stump speeches this month, but you know what they say about being careful what you wish for. Not to put too fine a point on it, if the BJP does win power in Uttar Pradesh, it will carry the can.