

The Needle's Eye



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Can you imagine Pope Francis being named the president of Brazil, which has the world's largest Roman Catholic population (and the same number of people as Uttar Pradesh)? That is not going to happen, because the 'Western' way of thinking says there ought to be a separation of the temporal and the spiritual, the church and the state.

There has been a similar line drawn in most modern Muslim-majority countries, except when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001 (they are fighting to get back in power). The Ottoman Caliphate was abolished 93 years ago by Kemal Ataturk, and the Islamic State, as we all know, is trying to re-establish a Caliphate using terror and war, although its territory is shrinking and under siege in Raqqa and Mosul.

In India, home to Hinduism, the world's third-largest religion, we have never been shy about erasing the line between religion and politics. Every

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political party worth its salt has used religion as a tool to mobilise mass support. By 2050, the Pew Research Center predicts that India will be home to the world's largest Muslim population, but will remain a Hindu-majority state. So it is natural (but not desirable) as we advance into the 21st century, that religious sensibilities should influence our very noisy democracy. For this reason, Yogi Adityanath's inexorable rise is not a shocking aberration. Frankly, I do not see why there is such a to-do about his anointment as chief minister of UP.

Adityanath has figured more than any other member of parliament in my columns since Prime Minister Narendra Modi won power nearly three years ago, although he did not himself hold any administrative post. In September 2014, the same month he succeeded his guru Avaidyanath as Mahant (head priest) of the Gorakhnath Math, I wrote in 'The tweeting Yogi' about how Adityanath was determined to be the next UP chief minister: "Dilli mein Modi aa gaye, ab UP mein yogi baki hai".

His militancy is not surprising either. Avaidyanath and his guru Digvijay Nath were pillars of the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. In fact, fresh out of college, the former Ajay Singh Bisht was first drawn to

Avaidyanath by the Ram temple agitation that led to the Babri Masjid's 1992 demolition. Ajay Singh became the sanyasi Adityanath in 1994 at the age of 22. Just four years later he became an MP and has held the Gorakhpur Lok Sabha seat for nearly 19 years, winning five elections.

Modi, who was introduced as the 'Disruptor in Chief' to a recent audience, lived up to that appellation on Tuesday when he broke protocol to let Adityanath, three days after he was sworn in as the new UP chief minister, deliver a valedictory speech in the Lok Sabha. Adityanath made sure he spelled out how much he was in control of Gorakhpur and Purvanchal, or eastern UP.

There had been 403 riots in UP over the past five years under the Samajwadi Party government, he claimed, but not a single one in Purvanchal. He vowed to work for every citizen regardless of caste or religion. Naturally, he forgot to mention that just three years ago the Election Commission had hauled him up for raising Hindu-Muslim tension during a by-election campaign. Nor did he mention that he faces three criminal cases, including seven serious charges relating to offences like "rioting, armed with deadly weapon", "mischief by fire or explosive substance with intent to

cause damage", "criminal intimidation", "attempt to murder", and "trespassing on burial places, etc."

Although cognizance has been taken of the charges, which date back to 2000, no court has seen fit to start trial on any of them.

But then Adityanath is not alone. One of his two deputies, Keshav Prasad Maurya, has 11 cases pending against him. A total of 20 ministers in the new 47-member UP cabinet face criminal charges of varying seriousness, as per data collated by the Association for Democratic Reforms. Maurya, who was the Bharatiya Janata Party chief in UP during the recent elections, represents the Phulpur

parliamentary constituency, once the pocket borough of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

Desk-thumping BJP colleagues applauded Adityanath on Tuesday. His farewell Lok Sabha speech was sweet irony: Exactly ten years ago, after he and several companions from the militant Hindutva outfit he founded, the Hindu Yuva Vahini, were arrested and spent 11 days in a Gorakhpur police lock-up, the monk broke down in parliament's lower house. Between sobs, he told Speaker Somnath Chatterjee: "I have been elected three times from Gorakhpur; but there is a conspiracy against me. If this House cannot give me protection, I will leave it and return

home. I chose to be an ascetic; I left my parents and my family, but now I am being made a criminal because I am fighting corruption and terrorism." The UP CM then was Mulayam Singh Yadav.

Although hundreds of thousands of the faithful flock to the Gorakhnath temple in January each year for the Makar Sankranti festival to offer ceremonial khichdi, there is not much else spiritual that Adityanath seems to preside over. He took his oath as a re-elected MP in 2014 in Sanskrit, but you would be hard put to find a YouTube video of him chanting worshipful prayers. You will however find several videos of his hate speeches, threatening all manner of retribution for everything from inter-religious marriages to anything perceived as forcible conversion.

The Hindutva hardliner and his assistants ran a Godfather-like operation in Gorakhpur, helping supplicants prepare petitions to the authorities on everything from pensions to land disputes. Now Adityanath himself will be receiving such petitions in Lucknow.

He has already begun to issue a string of edicts, from asking his ministers and bureaucrats to declare their assets, to forbidding a 'VIP culture' where every official drove around in cars with red beacons on their roofs, to banning illegal slaughter-houses.

For all his Hindu rabble-rousing, Adityanath was no pushover as an MP. PRS Legislative Research's MP Tracker says his attendance was 77% in the current Lok Sabha since June 1, 2014. He took part in 57 debates, asked 284 questions, and tabled three private member's bills, one of them relating to a nationwide ban on cow slaughter.

Adityanath is militant, outspoken, ambitious and ruthless, but he is hardly the first of that ilk in the BJP's top ranks. Uma Bharti, who calls Adityanath her younger brother, wrote the style-book for saffron-clad power. She is a six-time member of the Lok Sabha, from three different constituencies in Madhya Pradesh, and led the BJP to a three-fourths majority in the 2003 state elections that finished the Congress party's, and Digvijay Singh's, hold on power in that feudal state.

It remains to be seen if the new UP administration will pursue any of the charges against its chief minister. But on the Yuva Vahini website, which has its own interesting take on modern Indian history, I was intrigued to find a tab titled 'Shadyantra' (conspiracy). The link did not work.

Will Adityanath tone down his fiery rhetoric in office? He has vowed to turn Uttar Pradesh into Modi's 'dream state', but that phrase can turn out to be double-edged.



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