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Expanding the Vote Base in Uttar Pradesh: Understanding the RSS-BJP Combined Mobilization Strategies

Avishek Jha

- 1 There is a growing corpus of literature that has looked into the Sangh Parivar—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and other affiliates—as the primary and determining pole of India’s social and political spheres in contemporary years. These contributions have studied the effects of majoritarianism on Indian democracy and the political, social and policy consequences of the Narendra Modi-led BJP’s actions on the Indian State (Chatterji, Hansen, and Jaffrelot 2019), the dawn of the fourth party system in India with the BJP’s consecutive victory in 2019 (Vaishnav and Hinston 2019), and the structural shifts that have taken place in Indian politics in terms of greater acceptability of the BJP’s ideological messaging among the majority and a rising trend towards political majoritarianism among the new social coalition that votes for the Narendra Modi-led BJP (Chhibber and Verma 2019) among others.
- 2 Notwithstanding the immense academic value of these contributions, a significant question with regard to the unhinging dominance of the Sangh Parivar remains to be studied. The question necessarily relates to how the Sangh Parivar, an organization traditionally led and supported by upper castes in Uttar Pradesh, has managed to establish its electoral and political dominance, and what roles the various elements of the Sangh Parivar play in mobilizing new voters. This article looks at the Sangh Parivar’s ascendance in Uttar Pradesh (UP), politically the most significant state in India as it accounts for the largest number of seats in the lower house of Parliament. The RSS-BJP successfully outshone the traditional regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the state. The BJP’s victory, especially in the 2017 elections, was particularly crucial as it followed a pattern of single-majority wins in a state previously known for strong party anti-incumbency. The second saffron surge in UP was also markedly different in terms of the communities the

RSS-BJP catered to, castes who could not benefit from the Yadav and Jatav hegemony through the rule of the SP and BSP respectively (Verma 2016:47).

- 3 Within UP, the article looks at the Sangh Parivar's performance and strategies in Rampur. With a high Muslim and Scheduled Caste (SC) population, Rampur has been the political stronghold of one of the Samajwadi Party's most prominent leaders, Azam Khan. The BJP had registered significant victories in Rampur in the days of the *Ram Janmabhumi* movement in the 1990's.¹ However, it has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the district only since 2013–14. The party won the Rampur parliamentary seat in 2014, and two of the assembly constituencies, Milak and Bilaspur, out of the five seats in the 2017 assembly elections. While the RSS-BJP's strategies hinged on several traditional political instruments of mobilization such as religious nationalism, demonization of the Muslim community, strong leadership, and the promise of good governance as against the corrupt rule of Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati (Jha 2017), a focus on the party's localized approach to expanding its vote base presents a significant academic insight into the aspects of party building and representation, organizational management, and interest aggregation in a majoritarian democracy.
- 4 The findings in the article are drawn from the author's fieldwork in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh in December 2019 and January 2020. During the fieldwork, more than 50 interviews were conducted with political actors from diverse parties, primarily the Sangh Parivar in Rampur. After a brief note of contextualization on Rampur, the first section of the article will analyze the Sangh Parivar's strategy of social engineering and politicization of diverse identities who have traditionally not voted for the party. Secondly, it will provide an insight into the RSS-BJP's abilities to respond to local factors and develop political alliances within constituencies with varied demographics without compromising its core principles. Lastly, the article will highlight how the RSS and its multiple affiliates function like a corporation, with a highly committed workforce and clear division of responsibilities, and is engaged in electoral and political mobilization.

A Brief Note on Rampur in Uttar Pradesh: Fieldwork Site and Political Developments

- 5 Located in the sub-region of Rohilkhand, the Rampur district borders the crucial districts of Moradabad, Badaun, Bareilly, Sambhal and Pilibhit in Rohilkhand. It is located in the north-western fringes of the state of UP, roughly 300 kilometers from the newly formed state of Uttarakhand and 200 kilometers from Delhi. Led by Kathariya Rajputs in the past, the region came under the Rohillas later in the 1770s. Nawab Saim Aijaz Khan established the Rampur princely state under the protection of the British in 1774. The Nawabs continued to rule Rampur until the princely state became a part of India in 1949, with the parliamentary constituency of Rampur carved out of the former state.
- 6 Over the years, the total number of voters has increased in Rampur from 606,173 in 2009 to 1,616,972 in 2014 and 1,679,506 in 2019. With a dominant Muslim population, amounting to 50.57 percent of the electorate, and the presence of sizable Dalit and OBC communities, the Rampur parliamentary constituency well exemplifies UP's complex politics of identities (Ramaseshan 2017b). It comprises five assembly constituencies—

Suar Tanda, Chamraua, Bilaspur, Milak and Rampur. The total number of electors in these assembly constituencies is provided in the table below.

Table 1

Number of Electors across ACs in Rampur

Assembly Constituency	2009	2014	2019
Suar Tanda	110,663	292,626	302,619
Chamraua	107,843	290,463	303,723
Bilaspur	139,274	324,587	337,509
Milak	134,567	335,467	344,646
Rampur	113,826	373,829	391,009

Source: Lok Dhaba, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University

- 7 The political history of Rampur can be divided into four distinct phases: the era of Congress hegemony under the Nawabs of Rampur in the first four decades following India's independence, the rise of the Samajwadi Party under Azam Khan in the 1970s and 1980s, the Congress vs. Azam Khan battle over Rampur in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the rise of the BJP in the district in the second decade of the 21st century.
- 8 Due to the close relations of the Nawab family with the national and state level leaders of the Congress, Rampur emerged as one of the most crucial strongholds for the party in UP. One of the most important leaders of the Congress from the Nawab family was Nawab Zulfiqar Ali Khan. Although he fought the first few elections independently and from the Swatantra Party, he joined the Congress party later to represent Rampur four times from 1971 to 1991 (Jha 2004). Barring 1977 when he lost the elections in the aftermath of the Emergency, Khan held a firm grip on the district's politics for nearly two decades.
- 9 Despite the royal sway in democratic politics, Rampur witnessed a fragmentation of the polity with the rise of newer parties such as the Janata Party and the Bharatiya Lok Dal in the 1960s and 1970s. A number of local leaders rose in the district, including Azam Khan, who challenged the Nawab's hold on Rampur. From 1980 to 2017, Azam Khan was elected nine times from the Rampur assembly constituency, excluding 1996 when he lost to the Congress' Afroz Ali Khan. He fought elections on tickets from different parties such as the Janata Party (Secular) in 1980, the Lok Dal in 1985, the Janata Dal in 1989 and the Janata Party in 1991 (Akhtar 2019). Azam Khan's politics, in these initial years, revolved around defeating any candidate who had the backing of "Noor Mahal," the palatial power centre of the Nawabs in the heart of Rampur (Anshuman 2017).
- 10 The 1990's witnessed a series of parallel developments in the constituency. As the BJP became a prominent political force in the region owing to the *Ram Janmabhumi* movement, Azam Khan altered his political style as well. Although many believe that he never engaged in communal politics (Mandal 2019), Azam Khan established himself as

the sole leader of the Muslims in Rampur, and gradually across UP for the Samajwadi Party (Sultan 2019). Increasingly, the Muslim vote was divided between the camps of the Nawabs and Azam Khan.

- 11 By this time, the Congress' reign in Rampur began facing severe troubles as well. With the death of Nawab Zulfiqar Ali Khan in 1992, his wife, Begum Noor Bano became the preeminent leader of the Congress. Although the Nawab family tried to hold on to its electoral base in the district, the weakening of the Congress party in UP overwhelmed its political capital in Rampur as well. The Begum's son and current titular Nawab of Rampur, Kazim Ali Khan, became infamous for leaving and joining political parties at will, especially those with the ability to form governments in the state, so as to dole out patronage to political supporters and maintain the family stronghold (Jha 2004).
- 12 Azam Khan continued to rise as the most significant leader of Rampur with the turn of the century. With frequent governments of the Samajwadi Party in Lucknow, Azam Khan demolished the last remnants of Nawab domination and established himself as the development man of the district, using his clout in Lucknow to bring 24x7 electricity into the district among others. Many analysts suggest that he nurtured his politics as that of a "socialist *nawab* who delivers justice to the poor" (Joshi 2012)² and "holds regular *darbars* in his palatial office at Topkhana Road in Rampur, symbolically a stone's throw away from the erstwhile Rampur fort" (Ansari 2009).³ Azam Khan also used Bollywood star power to counter Begum Noor Bano's popularity and this led to the election of Jaya Pradha Nahata in 2004.
- 13 While the Azam Khan-Nawab family rivalry dominated the political terrain of Rampur, the social dynamics were changing in western Uttar Pradesh as well. The traditional relations based on caste and communal ties underwent significant changes from being relations of dependence to relations of competition with high levels of socio-economic transformation in the region (Kumar 2016). This led to massive polarization among communities, especially Jats and Muslims, in the region. The Muzaffarnagar riots of 2013 furthered this divide between the two communities. The BJP was able to garner political mileage out of these developments. The riots had a spillover effect in Rampur as well, leading to the consolidation of identities along religious lines during elections. Moreover, Azam Khan's deliberate playing up of differences between communities, especially Muslims and Dalits, for his political benefit further contributed to the BJP's rise prior to the 2014 elections (Anand 2013).
- 14 Coupled with the Modi wave and the BJP's carefully crafted social coalition, the party was able to successfully counter Azam Khan's domination in the constituency. It won the Rampur parliamentary constituency in 2014. In the 2017 assembly elections too; the BJP was able to win two out of the five assembly constituencies in Rampur—Milak and Bilaspur—defeating the Samajwadi-Congress party alliance in the state.

The RSS-BJP's District-level Mobilization Strategies: Organizational and Election Management

- 15 The primary objective of the Sangh Parivar in Uttar Pradesh had been to create a majority of voters in each constituency by bringing together its traditional upper caste voters, the non-Yadav backward classes, and the non-Jatav Dalits. With these goals in mind, the Sangh Parivar mobilized the backward classes through policies of social

engineering, actively politicized caste identities through communal mobilization, often gave recognition to each caste's Sanskritized historiographies and, ultimately, attracted support through the tools of representation and leadership.

- 16 The RSS-BJP was traditionally associated with the upper castes because of the nature of its leadership and the support base it enjoyed in the early years of its existence (Dreze 2020). For a long period, the party was characterized as the *Brahmin-Bania* party of the northern plains. Although, the BJP was able to attract several castes under the banner of the ongoing *Ram Janmabhumi* movement and later with the tactical use of RSS ideologue K. Govindacharya's policy of "Social Engineering," which advocated the promotion of more lower caste leaders in the party hierarchy, it largely remained limited in its reach to the diverse communities of UP.
- 17 With the third consecutive victory for Modi in the Gujarat elections of 2012, the party underwent sweeping changes. His candidature as prime minister enthused the cadres and large sections of Hindu society, including those Other Backward Classes (OBCs) who were staunch supporters of *Hindutva*. Moreover, the party began using his caste identity, an OBC belonging to the Modh Ghanchi community of Gujarat, to advance its political acceptability amongst backward classes in the Hindi heartland. Lastly, these developments sparked an organizational change in the party's state units as well, especially in Uttar Pradesh (Jha 2017:96).
- 18 In 2014 and 2015, the party went on a massive membership drive and used OBC and Dalit influencers to woo fellow caste men and women. This led to an approximate 1.5 million new members for the BJP from the backward communities in UP (Jha 2017:106). In each district, including Rampur, the party created new positions for office bearers and expanded the state executive committee as well (Jha 2017:107). Due to the organizational rejig in 2015, the party had 34 OBC and 3 Dalit presidents out of the 75 district presidents in UP.
- 19 Within Rampur, the party chose district presidents from the dominant caste groups such as Kurmi Rajputs or Sainis or the more influential communities who could sway voters such as the Sikhs. In 2014, the party elected Baldev Singh Aulakh as the district president to woo the Sikh community in Rampur. Suresh Gangwar, a member of the Kurmi community, was elected president of the party right ahead of the 2017 assembly elections. He was followed by Mohan Lal Saini in 2018.⁴ The party's focus on local factors was not limited just to the recruitment strategies in the party hierarchy. As we will see in the following sub-sections, the party took into account all the influential communities of the district and distributed its electoral tickets among them. The idea behind the move was to consolidate the votes of each community across the five constituencies in the party's favor.
- 20 It should also be noted that this policy of graded social engineering was ably complemented by the Sangh's strategy of politicization of caste identities. Christophe Jaffrelot notes that, unlike the emancipatory strain of the lower caste movements in south and west India, the lower caste movements in the north functioned within the ambit of Sanskritization. He quotes M. N. Srinivas to define sanskritization as "the process in which a 'low' Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, 'twice-born caste,' that is the Brahmins, but also the Kshatriyas or even the Vaishyas." (Jaffrelot 2000:756–66) Therefore, social emancipation ends up occurring within the acceptable

values of an upper-caste driven order thus protecting the Hindu way of life. (Jaffrelot 2000:763)

- 21 This was practiced by the Sangh in the 1990's, and again during the rise of Narendra Modi onto the national scene. The cause of *Hindutva* was linked with the idea of social emancipation or status enhancement, thereby calling out the backward classes to form a legion of foot soldiers for the saffron brigade.⁵ The Sangh essentially created a “*Maha Hindu*” identity in opposition to the minorities and enlisted the support of large sections of the OBCs and Dalits among others (Pai and Kumar 2018:19). In order to expand its vote share, the party realized the need to “subalternize the *Hindutva* agenda (to recognize) the political and identarian assertion and rising aspirations of the numerically large other backward classes and Dalits” (Pai and Kumar 2018:4).

Hinduization of Kurmis and Lodhis

- 22 With over 1.6 million voters⁶ in the parliamentary constituency of Rampur, the Muslims form the largest block of voters in the area. Rampur has a sizable population of other backward classes, principal among which are the Kurmis and the Lodhis. These caste groups, with their high population, comprise the next most significant political blocks. Within Rampur, especially for the BJP, the victory in Milak and Bilaspur assembly constituencies was a result of the dedicated support of these caste groups.
- 23 The Milak sub-division in Rampur district is dominated by the Gangwar community, who essentially come from the Kurmi community. The Gangwars have been a dedicated support base for the party since the times of the *Ram Janmabhumi* movement. In the entire Rohilkhand region, the Gangwars are a strong force from the districts of Pilibhit to Bareilly, spilling over onto Rampur as well. In the Milak sub-division itself, they form the largest voting bloc that spreads across the two constituencies of Milak and Bilaspur. In the Bilaspur assembly, the Gangwars range from 60000 to 65000 voters, forming the second largest group after the Muslims.⁷
- 24 Interestingly, the BJP organization in Rampur has a lot of Gangwars amongst its leadership. While Suresh Gangwar was party president in the district, Deeksha Gangwar was the Nagar Chairman of the Milak Municipal Corporation. Currently, the Block head of Milak is Archana Gangwar, another fellow caste member from the party. Owing to the large presence of Gangwars in the Milak-Bilaspur belt, the party gave the Bilaspur assembly constituency ticket to Jwala Prasad Gangwar four times from 1991 to 2012. He won in the 1991 elections only owing to the saffron wave created by the *Ram Janmabhumi* movement. His son, Harish Gangwar, was inducted as the district general secretary of the party in 2020. This representation has an effect on the party's prospects as well, with the community largely voting in its favor across the district.
- 25 The Gangwars are extremely proud of their Kurmi-Rajput identity, which is a Sanskritized derivation of a martial status, and largely associate themselves with the Sangh's commitment to a Hindu nationalist order. Referring to the troubled conditions of Hindus in Rampur and across the country, Suresh Gangwar, former district president of the BJP in Rampur, missed no opportunity to demonize the Muslims.⁸ Gangwar's political rhetoric ranged from the need for Hindus to rise and organize themselves to the need to identify and deport illegal Bangladeshis who had settled in India, destroy its culture and usurp all forms of economic benefits. Sudha Pai and Sajjan Kumar refer to this form of communal hatred born out of a sense of economic hardship in their

study of riots in UP as well (Pai and Kumar 2018). According to Gangwar, Modi had brought the Hindu *samaj* (community) together in his movement to fundamentally alter the image of the country. In successive elections since 2014, the Kurmi-Rajput community has voted in large numbers for the party.

- 26 The Lodhis are another community whose active politicization has furthered the BJP's prospects in Rampur. The total number of Lodhi voters in the Rampur district range from 2.5 to 3 lakhs.⁹ This is an important community that has had a close relationship with the party since the 1990's. In the first phase of the party's social engineering, Kalyan Singh Lodhi was chosen as the chief minister of the state in 1991. A Lodhi himself, Kalyan Singh came to represent the rising assertion of a non-dominant caste in UP's politics, especially with his hard line views on religious nationalism.
- 27 Interestingly, the Lodhis draw, too, from a glorious sense of past to showcase their martial nationalism. The Lodhis rooted their past in the achievements of Maharani Avanti Bai Lodhi, the warrior queen of the Ramgarh state in central India. Like Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, she fought against the British in the War of Independence of 1857 and died in the battlefield while defending her kingdom. Not only do the Lodhis worship her as a *virangana*, or courageous woman, but also trace their Rajput status from her. They invoke her battle for freedom against the British to draw parallels with the community's current political battle against Azam Khan and his "rule" in Rampur. The members of the Akhil Bharatiya Lodhi Mahasabha in Rampur celebrate the roles of fellow caste leaders such as Kalyan Singh Lodhi and Uma Bharati in the demolition of the Babri Mosque as a shining example of their commitment to the principles of Hindutva. Moreover, they bear a strong sense of resentment, as do the Gangwars, against the political and economic benefits that the SP or the BSP has extended to the Muslims over the years.
- 28 In the 2014 general elections, the BJP fielded Dr. Nepal Singh Lodhi as their candidate and defeated Naseer Ahmed Khan of the Samajwadi Party convincingly by over 20,000 votes. In the 2017 assembly elections, Mohan Lodhi was given the ticket from the party in the Chamraua constituency within Rampur.

Representation and Empowerment for Sainis

- 29 In the Sangh's caste arithmetic in Rampur, the third most important intermediary community is the Sainis. The Sainis are extremely significant electorally with presence in almost all assembly seats across the state. The people belonging to this community are known by different names in different places—Mauryas in eastern UP, Shakhya or Saini from Rampur to Ghaziabad, and Kushwaha in Purvanchal. With a numerical strength of roughly 150,000 voters,¹⁰ the Sangh Parivar has consistently tried to attract leadership from the Sainis into the party. When Swami Prasad Maurya, a four-time MLA, former Leader of the Opposition in the state and Mayawati's closest OBC aide, moved to the BJP in 2016, a huge chunk of the Saini voters and leaders moved to the party as well, including in Rampur. For the Sangh Parivar, the selection of Keshav Prasad Maurya as state president in 2016 helped attract more voters from the community too.
- 30 According to Prem Pal Saini, the president of the Saini Mahasabha¹¹ in the district, and other leaders, a few of the core factors that defined the politics of the Saini community in Rampur came to the fore. These included mistrust and envy for the Yadavs, a

numerically superior and politically more empowered backward caste in the state,¹² the hatred for the “appeased” minorities¹³ and, lastly, a sense of historical significance rooted in a glorious heritage and demand for recognition.

- 31 The Sainis trace their lineage from multiple sources. According to legends, the Saini-Maurya-Shakya-Kushwahas descend from the family of Maharaja Bhagirath who was instrumental in bringing the Ganga, worshipped in the form of a mother goddess in the Hindu religion, to Earth through his intense prayers and austerity (Bureau 2018). According to mythical traditions, he belonged to the dynasty of Ikshvaku, the king of the Kaushal region with its capital in Ayodhya. Lord Rama, the Hindu deity and warrior prince who defeated King Ravana of Lanka was born into the same dynasty. The members of this caste base their historical authenticity on these Hindu mythical origins.
- 32 The Kushwaha community, especially, traces its roots from Kush, one of the sons of Lord Rama, from whom they have taken their caste name as well (Kumar 2018). On the other hand, the Sainis take their name from a king in the age of the Mahabharata, Maharaja Sur Singh Saini, an ancestor of King Porus who fought against the mighty Alexander. Moreover, according to the Sanskritized version of their history, the warrior emperors Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka belonged to their caste. Kushwahas look up to these leaders as proof of their own exalted status and hail their *kshatriya* deeds and administrative acumen.¹⁴
- 33 Interestingly, the Sangh lends recognition to these narratives by legitimizing these assertions in *mahasabhas* or mass gatherings organized to assimilate the caste elites in the broader Hindutva agenda. During the fieldwork in Rampur, the author attended an Akhil Bharatiya Lodhi Mahasabha meeting in Rampur on 15 December, 2019. The chief organizer of the event was Mohan Lodhi, president of the Mahasabha in Rampur, and BJP’s candidate from Chamraua in the 2017 assembly elections. The RSS-BJP especially invests in local leaders of the concerned communities who can build a network of supporters and mobilize the common folk in their castes for the party simultaneously. Apart from the district leadership of the RSS-BJP combine, the event included community leaders and members of the Lodhi caste from across Rampur: fellow caste party workers, village *Pradhans*, heads and members of cooperative societies, and ordinary citizens among others.
- 34 This event was organized for two reasons: to welcome the newly elected district president of the BJP, Abhay Gupta, and at the same time showcase the new district leadership’s gratitude for the community’s sustained support for the BJP. One of the first tasks performed by the newly-elected district president, Abhay Gupta, was to pay obeisance to the portrait of Maharani Avanti Bai Lodhi, especially installed for the event. Throughout the program, the new district leadership celebrated the Lodhis as the descendants of a warrior queen, thereby extending a sense of respect to these non-dominant backward classes, and promised to support the Lodhi community’s demands for representation as per their numerical strength in towns, mandals and district committees. In his interview, Prem Pal Saini mentioned a similar event was held earlier in the first week of December wherein the new district leadership of Rampur paid respects to the historical personalities associated with the Saini-Maurya-Shakya-Kushwahas as well. According to Saini, the different affiliates of the Sangh Parivar hold such events throughout the whole year for the diverse caste groups.

- 35 From sustained processes of identifying and legitimizing these versions of history, even if for political purposes in the democratic game of numbers, to making basic organizational efforts of celebrating these figures along with the communities through district-level programs, the RSS-BJP is able to project itself as the only organization successfully recognizing the rising aspirations of the non-dominant backward classes and lending value to each and every community and its identity assertions and needs.
- 36 With their high numerical strength in Rampur, the Sainis have become a vital component of the Sangh Parivar's electoral and political strategy. While Mohan Lal Saini was made district president in 2018, Lakshmi Saini was given a ticket during the 2017 assembly elections from the Swar constituency within Rampur.

The Sangh Parivar's Response to Constituency-Level Requirements: Two Case Studies of Milak and Bilaspur

- 37 In this section, I will show how the Sangh Parivar has an inherent ability to respond to local factors or constituency-level requirements and, without affecting its core principles or broader characteristic features, to create and sustain its dominance. The BJP won its highest share of votes in the 2014 and 2019 general elections across assembly constituencies within Rampur in Milak and Bilaspur. It also won these constituencies in the 2017 assembly elections. The Sangh's strategies here showcase its unique ability and tactical strategies on the ground.

Consolidating the Jatav Vote in Milak

- 38 Milak is a small town, 22 kilometers from Rampur city. Most of the town is linearly settled along the national highway that passes through the middle of the township from Moradabad to Bareilly. It is the only reserved constituency¹⁵ for SCs in the district, with a considerable Dalit population, most of whom are Jatavs and consider Babasaheb Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar to be their pre-eminent leader. They are followed by intermediary castes such as the Lodhis, Kurmis, and Yadavs. There is a sizable population of Brahmins, Baniyas, Kashyaps, Kumars, and Vaishyas as well. Milak is known for its majority Hindu population across the five constituencies in the Rampur district. The Sangh Parivar considers it to be their front against Azam Khan and his "Muslim acolytes."
- 39 The politics of the Sangh Parivar in Milak largely revolves around issues such as the *H-M mudda* (Hindu-Muslim issue), muscular nationalism and, most significantly, the consolidation of the Jatav vote. The RSS also works extensively in the area, especially among the Dalit settlements.
- 40 The party had been a strong force in Milak in the 1990s during the *Ram Lehar* (Ram Wave of the Ayodhya movement) across the country. The *Ram Janmabhumi* movement not only energized the cadre to struggle for the lost glory of the Hindus, but also united them against a common enemy, especially in Muslim-dominated areas such as Rampur. Even when Milak was not a separate assembly constituency in the 1990s and early 2000s, its people voted decisively in favor of the BJP. Many from the current BJP leadership of Milak were active participants in the Ayodhya movement.

- 41 In a region with dominant Jatav and Muslim votes, the party began creating a space for itself by mobilizing the voters along religious lines after the constituency was delimited in 2008. This included the careful cultivation of leaders from the backward castes and Dalits who would uphold the principles of *Hindutva*. Most of the Sangh Parivar's organizational leaders and political heavyweights in the district are from Milak. These include Jwala Prasad Gangwar, former MLA of Bilaspur, Prem Shankar Pandey, vice-president of the district and Rajeev Saxena "Kadak," former Town President among others. One of the foremost Dalit "influencers" for the Sangh Parivar in Rampur, Dr. Raj Kumar Maheshwari, who helps propagate the Sangh's views among the lower castes also hails from Milak.
- 42 Over the years, and more so in the last decade, the party, aided by the Sangh, used two crucial strategies to consolidate the Jatav vote in Milak.¹⁶ These included a continuous tirade against Muslim appeasement, an emphasis on the cultural difference between the two communities and the spread of Arya Samaj's teachings, especially those of Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Maheshwari contends that Muslim appeasement has been India's biggest problem for a long time. It has led to the diversion of a large chunk of resources, originally meant for the Hindus, to the minorities. Maheshwari has been leading a sustained effort to make people aware of these "facts," especially the Jatav Dalits. His actions highlight the importance of the Sangh in this regard. A part of the strategy of otherization of Muslims included the coordinated effort of the party leadership to create a sense of majoritarian victimhood among the Dalits. Dr. Maheshwari and other leaders such as Manoj Pandey, the current Town President of the party in Milak, continuously propagate rhetoric such as "Hindus are in danger" and "the country is in danger," thereby highlighting the importance of uniting against the "Turks" in the region.¹⁷
- 43 In order to further consolidate the diverse lower caste voters, especially the Jatavs, the Sangh Parivar organizes various festivals to reinforce the feeling of Hindu belonging among the Jatavs and also tackle the party's upper caste image. Rajiv Saxena "Kadak" organizes the *Balaji Shobhayatra* every year, also referred to as the *Milak Mahotsav*, or festival. Organized as a religious gathering, the primary objective of the event is to bring the Hindus of the region onto one platform. Saxena contends that Hindus from almost every household are included in the celebrations and tableaux are made for the festival parade.¹⁸ The leaders of the Sangh Parivar make special efforts to bring the Dalits from across Milak into the festivities.
- 44 The leadership uses divine reinterpretations of Swami Dayanand Saraswati to attract Dalit voters to the Sangh Parivar as well. Saraswati's essential arguments call for a movement back to the *Vedas*, preference for the traditional organic version of the caste system that focuses on individual qualities required for a harmonious society, an inherent ethnic sense of pride in the Aryan race and the critique of the Abrahamic religions (Jaffrelot 2007:30–31). The Sangh Parivar uses this book as a guide for its social and political strategies to cater to the backward and lower castes, especially in Milak.
- 45 Manoj Pandey argues that the party's strategies have led to two significant developments. A large number of Hindus, which also includes a significant proportion of the Dalits in the constituency, have become more aggressive in their demonstration of their religious and cultural identities in Azam Khan's stronghold. Secondly, the strategy has brought a number of Dalits into the party fold as well.¹⁹

- 46 Rajiv Saxena argues that after Modi's victory in 2014 the entire Sangh Parivar initiated a coordinated effort to streamline the party's organizational structure and sharpen its ability to win elections in Milak. The party ensured that a number of people from the backward castes were given space in the leadership structure of the party. The organization was revamped accordingly. Bhukhand Rathore, from the Lodhi community, was made president of the Backward Classes Cell in the constituency while Amit Valmiki, from the Valmiki Dalit community, was made president of the SC Cell of the party. Significant members of different caste groups were accommodated in the sixteen-member executive body for managing elections in Milak.
- 47 However, in Milak, the party still had to work out one of the most crucial elements for the 2017 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections: The choice of a candidate for this reserved constituency. The party eventually settled for a woman candidate named Rajbala. According to Saxena, the choice of Rajbala relied on several assumptions as she had not been a committed party worker and had defected from the opposition just six months before the assembly elections. The party believed that, being a Jatav herself, she would be able to bring some votes from her community who traditionally voted for the BSP. More importantly, she was the wife of the local strongman, Dilip Singh, who belonged to the Lodhi caste. This was a winning formula for the party. Besides Rajbala's votes among the Jatavs, her marital status would attract votes from across the Lodhi community.
- 48 Besides these long-term and immediate interventions to consolidate the Jatav vote in Milak, the party's strategy also depended on two specific targeted measures. Through on-field surveys and the use of the RSS, the party was able to enlist support from a number of independent Dalit *Pradhans* across rural Milak and ensured the defection of prominent Dalit leaders from other parties.
- 49 In one of the largest villages of Milak (not named for purposes of safety), the village *Pradhan*, who had fought the 2015 Panchayat elections in UP as an independent candidate,²⁰ noted that the "Modi wave" of 2014 had convinced a significant number of Jatavs that the BJP could not be defeated. They had given up on Mayawati as they believed that she indulged in "vote bank politics of appeasing the minorities for their support" and had little presence in Milak. During the 2017 and 2019 elections, the *Pradhan* was able to attract about 3000 votes for the BJP from his village. Apart from a desire not to waste their vote on unwinnable candidates, the *Pradhan* contended that a lot of Jatavs had moved away from Mayawati over her decision to ally with the Yadavs in the 2019 elections. The Sangh Parivar roped in several such *Pradhans* from numerous villages across the constituency.
- 50 In terms of defections, the RSS-BJP combine in Rampur enlisted the support of Ravinder Singh Ravi for the party. Having begun his career in the 1990s, Ravi joined multiple parties like the SP and BSP before joining the BJP in 2017. Despite his changing loyalties, Ravi reposed his faith in the RSS.²¹ According to him, the Sangh was the only institution fighting the battle of *Hindutva* across the country, and its representative, Narendra Modi, has been championing its cause.
- 51 Ravi's mobilizational strategies for the Jatav and other Dalits depended on two specific strands of arguments. He railed against the secular formations such as the SP and BSP for their Muslim appeasement at the cost of the Dalits. Ravi argued that, in places like Rampur where Azam Khan held supreme power, the Jatav Dalits had to suffer because of the *varchasva* (dominance) of the Muslims. "Who do you think picks up or abducts our

Dalit girls?” he said. “It is important that the reign of terror unleashed by the Muslims is ended.” Secondly, Ravi used Narendra Modi’s image to further the Sangh’s interests in Milak. He contended that except for Narendra Modi, no leader had honored the legacy of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Among other things, his government ensured the development of the historical sites related to Dr. Ambedkar as memorials called the *Panch Tirth* (The Tribune Staff 2019).

Minority Exceptionalism in Bilaspur

- 52 After Rampur town, Bilaspur is the largest town in the district. It is riddled with large temples and *Gurudwaras*, residential complexes and has few recreational parks. Apart from a few government buildings, the town houses a number of business centers, big and small marts and two or three-star hotels among others. It is the adjacent non-reserved constituency to Milak and the only other seat that the party won in the 2017 elections. There are roughly 300,000 voters in Bilaspur, out of which Muslims count for nearly a third. They are followed by the Kurmis, accounting for nearly 60–65,000 voters, about 30,000 voters from the Saini community, roughly 20,000 Sikh voters, 25–30,000 voters from the Dalit community and 15–16,000 voters from the Brahmin and Bania castes.²²
- 53 Over the years, unlike other parts of Rampur, a unique trend emerged in terms of the diverse set of individuals who won from the Bilaspur constituency. The seat has changed hands regularly between the Congress, the right-wing Swatantra and Janata parties, and even the Bharatiya Kranti Dal for a while. Most importantly, out of the twelve election cycles, a Sikh candidate was elected five times from the constituency, irrespective of party allegiances.²³ Bilaspur has largely been a competitive seat over the years. More importantly, as the trends show, the Sikhs are a powerful force in the area.
- 54 A large number of Sikhs settled around the Terai regions of Uttar Pradesh after the massacres of Partition (Gupta 2014). These were Sikhs who had crossed over from West Pakistan during the communal violence of the era. They largely settled in twelve districts of then Uttar Pradesh. These districts included Rampur in the past, but are today limited to Pilibhit, Bahraich, and Lakhimpur-kheri among others. The Sikhs in the region have grown extremely prosperous. They own some of the most fertile agricultural lands, factories and industrial setups, and business outlets. As a result of their economic resources, they employ a significant number of agricultural laborers on their lands, and workers in their factories. This has led to the creation of relationships between the Sikhs and their employees based upon control and power over land and commercial resources, which ultimately yields immense political influence in the region as well. Consequently, over the years, parties have tried to give tickets to Sikh candidates owing to their ability to sway the elections through their expansive connections and local influence.
- 55 With the elections of 2017 coming closer, the BJP wished to come up with a winning political formula based on local factors that could complement Modi’s charisma. First of all, the party had so far failed to win the seat as it focused on a single caste formula by nominating Jwala Prasad Gangwar from the Kurmi community as a candidate. Secondly, the party knew that the Sikhs had not won the constituency since 1993. Although they had sided with leaders of the SP and Congress respectively in subsequent elections, they wished to install a candidate from their own community. Consequently,

the party knew that fielding a Sikh candidate would attract additional support from the community.

- 56 Under these circumstances, the party zeroed in on Baldev Singh Aulakh, one of the most influential leaders in Rampur. The party's strategy stemmed from the idea that a Sikh leader would bring additional voters to its already stable coalition of Kurmi and Saini castes, and help defeat the numerically dominant Muslims in the region.
- 57 Baldev Aulakh was the only Sikh candidate to get a ticket from the BJP across Uttar Pradesh in the 2017 elections. The party effectively adopted a policy of minority exceptionalism in Bilaspur. Since 2014, the party has hardly given political representation to minorities, especially Muslims. In the 2014 elections, the BJP fielded seven Muslim candidates. However, as all of them lost the elections, the ruling party did not have a single Muslim MP (Chatterji, Hansen and Jaffrelot 2019:48). In 2017, although it won more than 300 seats in the UP assembly elections, it did not field a single Muslim candidate across the state (Daniyal 2017). Even among the Sikhs, although they have equitable representation in accordance with their population, their political representation is largely confined to the state of Punjab itself.
- 58 For the BJP leadership in Bilaspur, the selection of Aulakh was based on several local factors. Although many in the party considered the Sikhs to be opportunistic in changing sides with the change of power,²⁴ they were aware of the need for a political alliance between the Sikh and Hindu communities in Bilaspur. According to Kulwant Aulakh, brother of Baldev Singh Aulakh, the party knew that the Sikh vote would decide the elections in 2017.²⁵ If the community voted as a block in the assembly, whichever party the Sikh vote consolidated behind would win. Consequently, the Sangh Parivar tried to assimilate the Sikh support in a larger campaign for the Hindus' battle against the Muslims. First of all, the local leaders used strategies to project Sikhism as an extended part of the larger Hindu religion, which was conceived in this country and shared a lot of common Hindu traditions and beliefs. Secondly, Baldev Aulakh himself ran his campaign along communal lines. He exhorted the Sikhs of Bilaspur to keep the pride and honor of the *pagdi* (Turban) intact. His campaign often rallied around the line, "If a Sardar is elected anywhere, it would only be in Rampur's Bilaspur." According to party sources, he campaigned extensively in the Sikh-dominated areas and asked them to unite. Such a campaign strategy not only brought the two communities together, but also helped target the other minority community, the Muslims, through latent political messaging.
- 59 Thirdly, the BJP leaders from both the communities also stressed historical roots and appreciation for each other's past as a bridging tactic. Kulwant Aulakh stressed how Yogi Adityanath was cognizant and respectful of the Sikh traditions. He was the only top leader of the state to celebrate *Prakash Parv* or the birth anniversary of the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh, unlike others who regularly attend *iftar* parties during Ramzan (a hint at the "minority appeasement" of the SP and BSP). Other BJP leaders also used such rhetoric to consolidate the voters of the two communities on different occasions. I witnessed an example of such rhetoric in Mohan Lodhi's speech, the BJP candidate from Chamraua, at the Akhil Bharatiya Lodhi Mahasabha²⁶ in Rampur. He claimed that the Sikhs and Hindus of Rampur would fight the Muslims together as Guru Gobind Singh had fought the Mughal emperor, Alamgir Aurangzeb.
- 60 The BJP's decision to choose a Sikh candidate arose from other considerations as well. Although the party was aware of the Gangwar dominance in the region, there were a

number of candidates in the fray. Former MLA and senior leader Jwala Prasad Gangwar and Milak's municipal chairman Deeksha Gangwar were both vying for tickets to the assembly elections. However, the party thought that if any Gangwar were chosen over the other, there would be factionalism that might hurt its electoral prospects.

- 61 The party was also fearful of the extent of Dalit support before the elections. Bilaspur has a sizable Jatav population, followed by a number of Valmikis, Dhobis and Dalits from the Sagar community. The party had to establish its base among these communities before the elections through continuous campaign drives and recruitment strategies. Anil Madan, former Town President of BJP in Bilaspur, stated that the BJP had offered a number of positions to the Dalits in the party hierarchy before the elections. Amarnath Valmiki, one of the most influential leaders of the Valmiki community, was made SC Cell head of the party in Bilaspur. The party also campaigned in areas dominated by the Valmiki community and promised to build a Valmiki Mandir if voted to power; this had not materialized though when I visited Bilaspur in January 2020.

The Sangh Parivar as a Corporation: RSS Expansion in Rampur

- 62 The RSS-BJP functions like a corporation with a highly committed workforce and clear division of responsibilities. The Sangh Parivar is able to mobilize voters because of the preponderance of resources and organizational outfits, implementing the Sangh's objectives even in distant districts. The Sangh matrix effectively corresponds to various elements of the society and mobilizes these communities throughout the year.
- 63 The RSS expansion in Rampur has been influenced by the dominating presence of Azam Khan and an urge to organize Hindus in a Muslim-dominated district. In total, there are 108 *shakhas* (RSS branches) and 12 units of the Sangh in Rampur.²⁷ The Sangh tries to organize temporary *shakhas* (branches) in every panchayat across Rampur. It also organizes weekly, bi-weekly and monthly *shakhas* (branches) across the area in random villages with high Dalit population. Generally, four to five *swayamsevak*s (volunteers) travel to these villages and set up mobile *shakhas* (branches) in different places. They raise the *Bhagwa Dhwaj* (Saffron flag) and initiate the Sangh's activities among the local communities.

RSS' Activities in Rampur: Harmony, Service and Power

- 64 The activities of the RSS, specifically Milak and Bilaspur, can be dissected along three specific areas. First of all, the RSS is engaged in a sustained quest to consolidate the Hindu community. However, such consolidation requires the Sangh to break down its traditional Brahmanical image and establish roots among the backward castes by promoting harmony through a diverse set of services. Consequently, the second strand of work includes wide-ranging social work and "apolitical *sewa*," or service provision among the Dalit communities. Lastly, the RSS oversees and actively participates in political mobilization and electoral work in aid of its political arm, the BJP.
- 65 The Sangh leadership prioritized its role in consolidating the Hindu community in the region. First of all, the Sangh functionaries in Rampur actively propagate religious and

cultural education among the backward classes and Dalits. According to them, the OBCs and Dalits in the region are not aware of any form of religious or cultural sacraments intrinsic to the Hindu order. The *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) are charged with assignments in different slums to work among the backward and lower caste populations and impart knowledge of Hindu customs.

- 66 Secondly, the RSS utilizes diverse measures to eliminate the influence of caste-based politics, especially in its strongholds in Milak and Bilaspur as well. It must be noted that the RSS' rhetoric against caste-based politics is directed only against the Opposition, such as the SP or the BSP, that are traditionally associated with single caste groups. Besides foreign domination and aversion to the presence of non-Hindus in the country, the Sangh also wishes to fight against the perils of social divisions such as caste. The Sangh's approach to caste has been informed by the writings and works of its third *Sarsangchalak*, Madhukar Dattatreya Deoras who argued that the caste system and untouchability were social evils that needed to be castigated (Kumar 2018b). However, the Sangh is also aware that the everyday practicality of electoral politics demands that the BJP cater to caste groups and mobilize them in terms of their identity. Consequently, the RSS performs the necessary roles needed to complement the efforts of its political arm.
- 67 According to Dayalu Sharan Sharma, former teacher at the Saraswati Vidya Mandir at Milak and RSS ideologue for Moradabad, the Sangh functionaries go beyond the traditional bounds of caste to help the so-called lower castes in different ways.²⁸ He states that during the Milak's municipal elections in 2015, the RSS organized a program in the *Harijan basti* (Dalit Slum). Although everyone left after the program, Sharma and the Dalit influencer in Milak, Dr. Maheshwari, stayed back and ate food with the members of the Valmiki community there. In another program in Ashoknagar, (in the constituency), the Sangh's functionaries helped a family of sweepers from the Valmiki community with money for their daughter's marriage. These measures help the Sangh project itself as a platform that despises notions of purity and status among the communities while upholding a harmonious, non-elitist caste identity.
- 68 One of the primary activities of the Sangh also includes the organization of inter-caste activities to create a sense of social inclusion among the lower castes. The Sangh in Milak and Bilaspur specifically uses religious and cultural occasions to bring the Dalits within the RSS fold. Mahima Pandey, *Nagar Seh-Sarkaryawah* (Joint General Secretary) of Milak, stated that the Sangh uses these occasions to invite members of every Hindu household in the area.²⁹ Community kitchens are set up and members of all castes, high or low, dine together without any sense of discrimination. On many occasions such as Holi or Diwali, *Sehbhoj* (companionship) events are organized wherein families from the Valmiki and Sagar castes are asked to bring food for the program. Satish Agarwal, who had been the RSS coordinator for the 2014 and 2017 elections in Bilaspur, argued, "When the Dalits see that the Brahmins are eating their food and not discriminating in any way, they are attracted to our ideology."³⁰
- 69 However, the Sangh tries to go beyond token gestures and mere ideological positions to expand its vote base too. The RSS and its affiliates engage in what Tariq Thachil (2011) defines as non-state service provision, which ultimately helps the BJP electorally by expanding its acceptability among the lower castes. Such a strategy does not alienate its core voter base of upper castes as it "neither entails economic concessions of a programmatic redistributive strategy nor the political compromise of a social

engineering tactic” (Thachil 2011:443). With the convergence of interests of the politically motivated service providers and the political actors, the success of such a strategy depends on the provision of services “over multiple electoral cycles without linking provision to the quid pro quo protocol that underpins clientelist exchange” and the embedded presence of the *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) in the concerned region (Thachil 2011:443).

- 70 In Rampur, the Sangh engages in special service provision through educational and socio-cultural activities. According to Mahima Shankar Pandey, the Sangh conducts regular surveys with the help of the teachers at Saraswati Shishu Mandir (SSM) and Saraswati Vidya Mandir (SVM), schools run by the RSS’ educational wing *Vidya Bharati*, and the organization’s *basti sarkaryawahs* (Slum General Secretaries). These surveys help identify the poorest Dalit families and their children across Milak. They are provided with free education throughout their lives. The SVM principal of Bilaspur, Rajeev ji, stated that the Sangh had made it mandatory to include 10% of the students from these communities in every school. They are given free education, books, and uniforms.³¹
- 71 In Milak and Bilaspur, a group of *acharyas* (teachers) are given nominal sums of money to go and teach the underprivileged kids from the SC communities in their slums as well. Known as *ekal vidyalayas* (single teacher schools), the Sangh employs a solo teacher who goes to these slums and teaches for an hour (Andersen and Damle 2018:30). Besides these, the Sangh organizes *baal shakhas* (branches for children), almost every day from 4:30 to 5:30 in Milak. In these branches, students from the upper and backward castes are given lessons on India’s culture and history. They are taught about those deemed great Indian heroes by the RSS, such as Veer Savarkar, and their contributions to the country. In many places, the Sangh has also opened up vocational centers which teach stitching to adults as well.
- 72 The Sangh also runs *Sanskaar Kendras* (cultural centers) wherein *swayamsevaks* go to the backward and lower castes across Bilaspur and talk about patriotic values and nationalism. They try to impart Indian values and morality to these communities. Sometimes, they also try to talk about great personalities from their castes such as Babasaheb Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai and present them in a Hinduized light. The members of these castes are mobilized as descendants of these great Hindus and exhorted to unify against the evil practices of casteism.
- 73 Lastly, the Sangh engages in dedicated political work during the elections as well. Among other things, the Sangh’s electoral work primarily entailed providing feedback on the BJP’s candidates, issues, campaign fervor and voters’ reactions on the ground to the state and central leadership, through designated chains of command. It also provided the manpower for the multiple mobilizational events, both in terms of organization and supervision.
- 74 In Rampur, the Sangh had been active during the 2014 and 2019 general and 2017 assembly elections. Before the 2014 elections, the RSS in Milak organized a number of *upakrama shakhas* (undertaking branches) across Rampur on specific assignments. For example, one such undertaking was initiated among the businessmen of Milak. The *swayamsevaks* went among the *vaishya* community and spread messages on good governance, thus indirectly garnering their support for the party. The RSS created these community-based influencers and mobilized them to campaign in favor of a united Hindu front to help Narendra Modi win in the elections.

- 75 Away from the BJP, the Sangh also made a separate list of voters at the booth level. Then, the teachers who work across the schools under *Vidya Bharati* in Rampur were utilized to go among the voters in every booth and mobilize support for the party. In each of 21 villages, the Sangh employed three teachers from the SVM. In places such as the village Param, which is the biggest panchayat in the Milak sub-division, Sangh functionaries worked in parallel with the party organization. Each local administrative division was led by a *sarkaryawah* (General Secretary), who was then assisted by *acharyas* (teachers) from the SSM and SVM.
- 76 Satish Agarwal stated that the *swayamsevaks* travel to the different households and form relations with them well before the elections. Teams are formed wherein each worker has to visit at least 20 families in their locality. Besides having *swayamsevaks* at the booth level, the Sangh also appoints *panna pramukhs*, volunteers in charge of looking after voters in a page of the electoral sheet. In urban areas, the towns were divided into different zones. Bilaspur town, for instance, was divided into five zones. A zonal *pramukh* (head) was appointed in each zone, who led a team of 20 people. These were called *Gathnayaks* (leader of the group), who formed their own teams of 10 people in their localities.

Nationalistic Vigilantism of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Jagran Manch and Hindu Yuva Vahini

- 77 In Rampur, the Sangh is ably supported by a number of affiliate organizations. Significantly, these affiliates are most active in the Hindu-dominated areas of Milak and Bilaspur, and also find their core leadership and manpower from these areas. The organizations include the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM). Separately from the RSS, Yogi Adityanath's Hindu Yuva Vahini (HYV) is also a strong force here.
- 78 The VHP and the HJM are primarily involved in mobilizing members of the Hindu community every year through different commemorative events which keep the ideals of Hindutva alive. They honor the *kar sevaks* from Milak and Bilaspur who were part of the demolition of the Babri Mosque and celebrate the *Shaurya Diwas* (celebration of the demolition of the Babri Masjid) with pomp on the 6th of December every year. Both the VHP and the HJM in Rampur have also been planning to initiate a mobilization drive to visit Ayodhya as the temple construction begins, along with aims of collecting donations for the making of the Ram temple from every Hindu household in the district as well. With the success of the *Parishad* in consolidating Hindu support for the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, the VHP has begun a well-wishers campaign to further its popularity among the people (Khas Khabar Staff 2019). Prince Gupta, president of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in Milak town, has been at the forefront of this campaign in Milak and Bilaspur.³² More than 1000 members were enrolled in Milak through this membership drive.
- 79 Besides mobilizing the Hindu community, the VHP and HJM play a crucial role in what they deem as a civilizational fight against Muslims, especially the followers of Azam Khan. They RSS and its affiliates have established a detailed network which helps them aggressively tackle even rumors of alleged religious conversion or Love *Jihad* in the area. According to Raju Gupta, head of the Manch in Milak,³³ the members of the VHP and HJM have broken into Muslim localities to forcibly bring back the girls who have

been “trapped” by young Muslim men and, on several occasions, have tracked eloping couples across the borders of the state with the help of the HJM network in the country.

- 80 Probably the most aggressive of the Hindu right-wing outfits in the region is the *Hindu Yuva Vahini* (HYV). The organization was created by Yogi Adityanath in 2002, when he was a member of Parliament. Before 2015, the HYV had a minimal presence in Rampur. However, in order to take on the dominance of Azam Khan in the region, a group of men from Milak formed a local unit of the HYV in 2015. Everyone is allowed to be a part of the HYV, except for Muslims. The primary objective was to take on the Muslims, violently if need be. According to Rakesh Kumar,³⁴ the district convener of the HYV, there are three crucial elements of the Vahini: its devotion to Maharaj Yogi ji, its battle against the *Turks* and protection of its core agendas of *Gau-Ganga-Gauri* (cow, river Ganges, Hindu woman). Much of the work of HYV in the district—from closing down slaughter houses in Muslim-dominated localities to implicating Muslim men in cases of “Love Jihad” that is, allegedly trying to convert Hindu women on the pretext of love—revolves around these themes.
- 81 Besides the hyper-religious and nationalistic vigilantism, these organizations provide several resources to the BJP during elections. According to Raju Gupta, members of the VHP, HJM and HYV mobilize crowds for election rallies, campaign for the BJP candidates across localities, and appoint electoral polling booth in-charges who, although they work separately from the BJP workers, complement their efforts in every village. They are charged with ensuring that every Hindu, especially those who support the BJP, votes during the elections. This sometimes includes the task of arranging transport options for these voters and bringing them to the voting booth safely, if necessary, as well.

Status of the Opposition

- 82 The BJP’s near hegemonic dominance and organizational resources have severely dented the capabilities of other parties. With a series of legal cases against Azam Khan and his family, the SP strongman has been hemmed in with little scope for political posturing in the constituency (Express News Service 2020). As a result, the BJP has been able to tackle one of the most effective opposition leaders in Rampur since the formation of the Yogi government in 2017. Despite its massive electoral losses since 2014, the Samajwadi Party has not initiated any changes or rejuvenation campaigns in the region. The party depends entirely on Azam Khan and his sway over the loyal Muslim vote for its political comeback. Local leaders such as Vijay Singh, the former MLA of Milak from SP, contend that the Yadav and Sikh voters who went to the BJP in 2017 will come back eventually once the attraction of *Hindutva* wanes.³⁵
- 83 The Congress’ footprint has been considerably reduced in Rampur since Begum Noor Bano’s loss in the general elections of 2004. During an interview with Begum Noor Bano at the famed Noor Mahal in Rampur, the royal stated that the Congress had been weakened as it sought to stick to its secular brand of politics in Rampur, which proved ineffective against the communal mobilization of both Azam Khan and the BJP.³⁶ The Nawabs in Rampur have been trying to make a conscious effort to mobilize against Azam Khan and win back the Muslim vote. However, the party has failed to win a single election in the district since 2012.

- 84 The Bahujan Samaj Party remains the weakest outfit in the Rampur constituency. Its core voter base of Jatavs has largely remained with the party. However, it has faced several high-profile defections from both OBC and SC communities to the BJP. Secondly, the BJP has been able to lure a sizable chunk of Jatav and other non-dominant SCs in Milak and Bilaspur towards it, thereby contributing to its victory in the 2017 assembly elections. The party has begun the process of reviving its former *Bhaichara Committees* and *Bahujan Volunteer Force* to counter the BJP-RSS mobilization drives and service-oriented strategies across Dalit villages in the region. According to Sunendra Singh Sagar, state minister in Mayawati's government from 2007 to 2012, the party has begun appointing two conveners to every community with more than 5000 voters across the five assembly constituencies of Rampur.³⁷ These conveners have been tasked to form a team of ten members from their communities and to engage in awareness campaigns to counter the Sangh Parivar.

Conclusion

- 85 The Sangh Parivar has effectively dismantled the conventional understandings of Indian politics and challenged the ways in which it has been understood. As these findings suggest, the Sangh Parivar's success comes from its ability to combine the different registers of *Mandal* and *Mandir* in a state like Uttar Pradesh, motifs that were previously used to differentiate between political parties. While *Mandal* signified the era of backward class politics led by the SP and the resurgence of the lower castes under the BSP, the RSS-BJP has combined it with its register of *Mandir*, the active use of religious nationalism and amalgamation of identities to turn the tables against the regional parties, who get beaten at their own game.
- 86 The RSS-BJP model of mobilizing voters works along three unique strands: creation of a majoritarian block while feeding on majoritarian impulses and an ability to mutate the definition of the Hindu identity, tactical response to local factors, and the utilization of a corresponding model of corporation-like voter management abilities. The RSS-BJP has been able to use the grammar of democracy, the rule of the majority via electoral competition, legitimately to further its political and electoral agenda, although this majority is bereft of identities that do not conform to the precepts of majoritarian identity or imagination.

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NOTES

1. The *Ram Janmabhumi* movement catapulted the BJP to the national scene in the late 1980s and 1990s. The political movement was built around the dispute over the birthplace of Lord Rama, one of Hinduism's most revered religious figures. According to the Sangh Parivar, the Babri Mosque, built in Ayodhya after Mughal Emperor Babur's name, was constructed after destroying the temple that marked the site of Lord Rama's birthplace. They contended that the structure denoted the civilizational decline of a once glorious culture. In the late 1980's and early 1990s, the BJP, with the help of different elements of the Sangh Parivar mobilized vast numbers of the majority community to expand its political base and demanded the recapture of the then disputed site. The movement was led by Lal Krishna Advani, a veteran BJP politician, which unleashed unprecedented levels of communal violence throughout the country and ultimately culminated in the illegal demolition of the Babri Mosque on 6 December 1992 by angry *kar sevaks* (religious volunteers).
2. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/indianews/article-2127943/WHIPLASH-My-Khan-I-AM-RAMPUR.html>
3. <https://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-amar-politics-queers-pitch-for-sp-star-in-rampur-1245629>
4. Author's field work collection
5. Christophe Jaffrelot notes that, unlike the emancipatory strain of the lower caste movements in south and west India, the lower caste movements in the north functioned within the ambit of Sanskritization. Therefore, social emancipation ends up occurring within the acceptable values of an upper-caste driven order that protects the Hindu way of life (Jaffrelot 2000).
6. Election Commission of India, "General Elections 2014," <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/2785-constituency-wise-detailed-result/> (Retrieved March 5, 2020).
7. Anecdotal evidence from interview with Devkaran Singh Gangwar, Chairman of the *Zilla Sehkari* Bank in Rampur and BJP leader, 20 December, 2019.
8. Interview with Suresh Gangwar at Rampur *Zilla Sehkari* Bank on 14 December, 2019.
9. Data collected from local sources in Rampur during the author's fieldwork.
10. Data collected from local sources in Rampur during the author's fieldwork. These are estimates made by local leaders, political party sources and other affiliate organizations.
11. The Saini Mahasabha in Rampur is a branch of one of the caste-based affiliate organizations of the larger network of the Sangh Parivar in the district which specifically caters to the Saini-Maurya-Shakya-Kushwaha community. There are such caste-based affiliate organizations under the Sangh Parivar across north India.

12. Yadavs are one of the most prominent castes among the Other Backward Classes in Uttar Pradesh. They have dominated politics in the state especially since the rise of the OBCs as the primary political force in the 1980s and 1990s because of their numerical majority. Through her work on the Yadavs of Mathura, anthropologist Lucia Michelutti writes about how the community derives its descent from the Hindu god, Lord Krishna, thus sanctifying its social status and pride as a political community and introducing newer strategies of mobilization in India's vernacular democracy. The Samajwadi Party, led by regional heavyweights such as Mulayam Singh Yadav and his son Akhilesh Yadav, considered a party of the Yadavs derives its strength from this powerful community.

13. The Sangh Parivar, over the years, has been blaming the Congress, and all like-minded secular parties, for appeasing the minorities, that is the Muslims, in exchange for support during the elections. This appeasement involves, according to the Sangh Parivar, "providing for minority rights in family and education among other things that goes against the spirit of religious equality and assurances given to Muslims in terms of educational or economic preferences." Hilal Ahmed, "From Rajiv Gandhi to Modi, nobody defines 'Muslim appeasement' but all use it for votes," *The Print*, November 14, 2018, <https://theprint.in/opinion/from-rajiv-gandhi-to-modi-nobody-defines-muslim-appeasement-but-all-use-it-for-votes/148566/>.

14. The *kshatriya* status ranks second in the four-fold classification of the varna theory in India. It is associated with warrior-hood and the ruling class.

15. According to the Indian Constitution, constituencies are reserved at the national, state and local levels for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes across the country. The political parties have to field candidates from these categories to compete in the elections. The reserved constituencies for Scheduled Castes are allocated on the basis of the proportion of the Scheduled Castes in a concerned state to that of the total population in the lower house of the Parliament under Article 330 and similarly in respective states under Article 332 of the Constitution respectively.

16. Interview with Dr. Raj Kumar Maheshwari at his clinic at Bilaspur Road in Milak on 13 and 24 December, 2019.

17. Most Sangh Parivar leaders in Rampur use the term "Turks" to identify the Muslims. The use of the term denotes a certain sense of alienation from Indian identity as against a foreign alien imposition.

18. Interview with Rajiv Saxena "Kadak" at his residence in Milak on 16 December, 2019.

19. Interview with Manoj Pandey at the BJP Party Office in Milak on 14 December, 2019.

20. Interview conducted by the author on 19 December, 2019.

21. Interview conducted with Ravinder Singh Ravi at his residence in Rampur City on 18 December, 2019.

22. Data collected from local sources in Rampur during the author's fieldwork. These are estimates made by local leaders, political party sources and other affiliate organizations.

23. Election Commission of India (<https://eci.gov.in/statistical-report/statistical-reports/>)

24. Interview with Chitrak Mittal and Anil Madan, 10–12 January, 2020.

25. Interview conducted with Kulwant Singh Aulakh at his residence in Bilaspur on 10 January, 2020.

26. Just like the Saini Mahasabha, the Akhil Bharatiya Lodhi Mahasabha is a branch of one of the caste-based affiliate organizations of the larger network of the Sangh Parivar in the district which specifically caters to the Lodhi community.

27. Information obtained from the local RSS office in Rampur district.

28. Interview with Dayalu Sharan Sharma at SRM Inter College in Milak on 24 December, 2019.

29. Interview with Mahima Shankar Pandey at Saraswati Vidya Mandir in Milak on 13 December, 2019.

30. Interview with Satish Agarwal on 13 January, 2020.

31. Interview with Rajeev ji in Bilaspur on 13 January, 2020.
 32. Interview with Prince Gupta on 13 and 22 December, 2019.
 33. Interview with Raju Gupta in Milak on 26 December, 2019.
 34. Interview with Rakesh Kumar in Milak on 26 December, 2019.
 35. Stated during an interview with Vijay Singh, former MLA of Milak from Samajwadi Party, at Azam Khan's office at Topkhana Road, Rampur City on 16 December 2019.
 36. Interview with Begum Noor Bano at Noor Mahal in Rampur Town on 14 January, 2020.
 37. Details about the BSP's work in Rampur obtained during interview with Sunendra Singh Sagar, former state minister during Mayawati's reign as chief minister from 2007 to 2012, at his residence in Rampur Town on 11 January, 2020.
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ABSTRACTS

The Sangh Parivar has essentially merged the registers of *Mandal* and *Mandir* by way of creating a viable political block for themselves in Uttar Pradesh. Based on an ethnographic study of the Sangh Parivar in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh and through interviews and participant observation, the article examines the roles played by various elements of the Sangh Parivar in expanding the vote base of the party. First of all, the article analyzes how the Sangh Parivar uses the strategies of social engineering and politicization of diverse identities to attract communities who traditionally have not voted for the party. Secondly, it examines the Sangh Parivar's abilities to respond to local factors and develop political alliances within constituencies with varied demographics without compromising its core principles. Lastly, the article documents how the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh functions like a corporation, with a committed workforce and clear division of responsibilities, and engages in electoral and political mobilization.

INDEX

Keywords: Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Bharatiya Janata Party, Uttar Pradesh, Majoritarianism, Samajwadi Party, Bahujan Samaj Party, Narendra Modi, Hindutva

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