

KARISHMA (MIRACLE) OR CHARISMA? DECONSTRUCTING THE CHARISMA OF FIREBRAND LEADER YOGI ADITYANATH

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ABSTRACT

The ascent of firebrand Hindutva leader Yogi Adityanath to the position of Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh is not simply the result of religious politics, but is also due to his political “work”, coupled with his personal charisma, that may not have an entirely individual genesis, carrying the trace of religious politics of the past inherited by him from a long line of politically active ascetic figures. The following paper which is primarily a case study, attempts to unpack this formidable political leader’s ‘charismatic appeal’ using historical data and data regarding current political activity on his part using Bourdieuan methodological tools. Finally, it considers the practice of secularism and politics in India, in order to provide a grounded analysis of why certain kinds of religious politics may be more successful than others. The intention of this paper is to muddy the proverbial waters, attempting to highlight a variety of factors that help sustain the charisma of Yogi Adityanath including the practice of religious politics of India, to counter the numerous fleeting causal analyses that do not focus on the historical factors behind such phenomena.

KEYWORDS:Bourdieu, Capital, Charisma, Gorakhanth Math, Hindutva, Nath Ascetics, Yogi Adityanath

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2017, India was surprised at the appointment of a Yogi (a saffron-clad, world renouncing Ascetic) as the Chief Minister of the most populous state, Uttar Pradesh. Yogi Adityanath's appointment by the ruling party BJP came as a massive shock to the secular, educated, intelligentsia, as it seemed to have undone Nehru's (independent India's first Prime Minister) vision of a secular India- not just because a Hindu Mahant (head of a monastery) was chosen, but because of this particular individual's extreme views on the minority Muslim community. A person who unabashedly spoke against Love Jihad (an alleged practice of Muslim youths luring Hindu girls by concealing their identity and subsequently, marrying and converting these "impressionable" girls to Islam), and secularism- when he said that for every Hindu killed, a hundred Muslims will be killed.

Yogi Adityanath clearly stands against whatever Nehru had envisioned for "secular" India (Hazra and Chakrabarty 2016, xvi). With a maturing population that is being democratized at a significant pace, this must not be seen simply as a victory of religious ideology, but should also be seen as a mandate in favor of political work- the work that a politician has to put in today to get elected.

Gone are the days of absentee-landlord like rule, where constituents had to beg and plead for favors from politicians- the public has realized their strength in being able to challenge dynastic politics that is sedentary and corrupt (Hazra and Chakrabarty 2016, 105). This is evident from the massive BJP victory in Uttar Pradesh in the 2017 Vidhan Sabha and the preceding Lok Sabha elections, where Amit Shah's strategic groundwork led to two solid mandates (Hebbar 2017). Where does Yogi Adityanath however, fit into this scheme of political strategy and action?

Major surveys on development indicators and Parliamentary spending can show how Yogi Adityanath has spent money and effort in his Lok Sabha constituency over the years, making it a more 'developed' constituency as compared to its counterparts in other regions of the state: with better sex-ratio, consumption and employment numbers (Kishore and Bhuyan 2017). With such 'effort' combined with gross anti-incumbency in an economically backward state like UP, it was only a matter of political considerations for a leader of Yogi

Adityanath's stature to be selected to lead as the Chief minister by BJP's top brass-considerations I shall be elaborating below.

One may be reminded of Mukulika Banerjee's study of the powerful patron in a Bengal village who built his patronage networks effectively and maintained them by "working" for his constituents (Banerjee 2010). Such political "work" helps establish the brand of a patron across constituencies and makes him/her acquire a charismatic image. The Mahant of Gorakhpur Math (Monastery) Adityanath's image, in addition seems to reaffirm Max Weber's ideal type of a "charismatic" leader, whose followers have an almost divine belief in their leader's charisma, defined by Weber as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which they are considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers and qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person. But are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a 'leader'" (Weber 1978, 241). Yogi Adityanath remains a seemingly remarkable individual, who as a charismatic leader brings with him a great burden of history and culture, unpacking which becomes a necessity if we are to understand where his charisma exudes from and how it is not just his personal abilities that make him one of the youngest chief ministers of Uttar Pradesh from a non-political dynasty, but also the symbolic and other forms of "capital" that he embodies- something I shall be elaborating on later in the paper.

One of the main reasons for the projection of such a domineering leader as head of the state government is his ability to rise above and control the many patronage factions in a political party as fragmented as the BJP (Pandey 2012) in a state that is regionally quite variable and has lots of different caste, class and religious factions by being a power center in himself and often tacitly rebelling successfully against the top leadership, building a name for himself in the process. McCulloch's argument regarding charismatic leadership being a sort of amalgam for the different historically powerful patronage groups (McCulloch 2014, 217) makes sense for this situation, as the BJP currently has strong Brahmin, Baniya and non-Yadav OBC factions, making it susceptible to internal power struggles.

THE INVISIBLE BURDEN OF HISTORY: Being a leader of the Nath faction of Hinduism, Yogi Adityanath appeals to a wide section of Hindus- upper and lower castes alike as Nath ascetics historically renounced their caste ties once inducted into the ascetic

order(Deccan Herald 2012)allowing them to embody symbolic capital that is non-partisan in nature. This stands in sharp contrast to the previously incumbent Yadavs' appeasement of their own caste patrons and Muslims(Michelutti 2010).The consolidation of non-Yadav, non-Muslim, and non-Jatav caste heads- factions that have not enjoyed much of the fruits of appeasement policies historically(Hebbar 2017), requires a strong figure of the likes of Yogi Adityanath(a leader who appears to have nothing to lose) in order to stay subdued in the party. Adityanath' strong personality coupled with his dedication to the Ram Mandir-Hindutva cause makes him the ideal candidate in many ways(Sharma 2017), to lead aspirational masses who want a hardworking leader to lead the state rather than practice partisan politics.

It is important here, to talk about certain concepts that I will be using in the paper to deconstruct the charisma and power of Yogi Adityanath in the field of UP politics and Indian politics. Pierre Bourdieu's methodology is particularly helpful in this endeavor as he has provided us with relatively easy to use methodological tools to unpack varieties of social phenomena. The key to this method lies in understanding the history of the phenomena in question and having a relatively open mind regarding the nature of cultural and social forces. Bourdieu's greatest contribution to sociology is in his ability to see capital, not just in its economic form (in the form of money, property, etc.) as it is commonly understood, but also in its other socially constituted forms of cultural forces, social networks or symbolic presence. These allow us to see how the social world is indeed, an accumulation of various kinds of cultural, economic and social forces that can be effectively unpacked and studied objectively, to show how these are impactful in the minds of people and how they are perceived.

The first, most important concept is that of cultural capital. Bourdieu defines it as:

“Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e., in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee.”(Bourdieu 1986)

In the current context, embodied cultural capital would mean, the Yogic practices that are passed from each Nath Guru to his disciples, along with other forms of knowledge like political strategies, attitudes and dispositions. The institutionalized form of cultural capital would be seat of the 'Mahant' which is an official position and signifies exactly who is in charge of the legacy left behind by the previous Mahant, and the Math itself which forms a pivotal part of people's lives in Gorakhpur would be objectified cultural capital.

The next form of capital relevant to our study would be social capital which Bourdieu defines as:

"the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word."(Bourdieu 1986)

This form of capital for Yogi Adityanath would entail the social networks already associated with the Gorakhnath Math including devotees, donors, entire families, disciples in the monastery as well as Yogi Adityanath's group of young cadres named "Hindu Yuva Vahini" which has a large base in Gorakhpur.

Finally, symbolic capital, which is relevant in the study of charismatic leaders is what will help us understand the charisma of Yogi Adityanath better. Bourdieu defines it as:

"cultural capital which is acknowledged and recognized . . . in accordance with the categories of perception that it imposes....It is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition."(Bourdieu 1990, 138-139)

The charisma that he embodies, as a fearless, individualistic leader, who is also the favourite disciple of Advaitanath who was firebrand leader himself, acquires a symbolic dimension in the minds of the people which will be further elaborated on later in this paper.

The political involvement of the Mahant of Gorakhnath Temple is nothing new in the political history of Uttar Pradesh. Jaffrelot observes how Digvijay Nath started or rather revived the tradition of being involved in politics by being involved actively in the violent Chauri Chaura incident of 1922 during the non-co-operation movement - he was a member of Indian National Congress then. He later joined the Hindu Mahasabha and was famous for having incited the murder of Gandhi along with his vision of depriving Muslims of voting

rights for a decade. His death paved the way for Advaita Nath who became a member of BJP and was active during the Ram Janmabhoomi movement all the while keeping the Sangh at an arm's length. Both these mahants had been elected multiple times to the Lok Sabha, and Yogi Adityanath retained this quality by getting elected 5 times from Gorakhpur to the Lok Sabha. The seat of the Mahant of Gorakhnath temple thus signifies something that is politically virile(Jaffrelot 2014).

The Nath ascetics have been culturally significant in North India throughout modern and pre-modern history. Many of them hailed from lower peasant castes and were thus often close to lower caste groups due to their “unrefined” language. The popularity of Nath yogis is well documented and makes them the perfect fit for political movements as their charisma is not limited certain castes or classes and as they are revered by all sections(Gold and Gold 1984). The symbolic capital that Nath Yogis possess is thus quite staggering and the build-up of even more symbolic capital over the decades by Advaita Nath and Digvijay Nath helps the Gorakhnath Math to become a center of political activity and patronage with an almost imaginary political lineage being drawn from Guru to disciple as observed by Jaffrelot (Jaffrelot 2014) having almost the same effect of a hereditary political dynasty where symbolic capital is transferred from one generation to the other by means of names (here it is done through the post of the ‘Mahant’). In the words of Bourdieu, the efficacy of this is emphasized:

“The competition and conflicts provoked by the transmission of first names provide an opportunity to observe the practical and political functions of these genealogical markers: to appropriate these indices of genealogical position (so-and-so, son of so-and-so, son of so-and-so etc.) which are also emblems, symbolizing the whole symbolic capital accumulated by a lineage, is in a sense to take possession of a title giving special rights over the group's patrimony.”(Bourdieu 1977, 36)

The seat of the Mahant of Gorakhpur Math is not only the repository of a great amount of symbolic capital, but also of great political capital as Yogi Adityanath's own youth organization of cadres called the “Hindu Yuva Vahini” allows him to threaten the BJP into submission as he sees fit(Jaffrelot 2014). The disguise of this political and symbolic capital is even more profound as there is no transference of economic capital for the seat of the Mahant of Gorakhpur Math is reserved for an ascetic- someone who has renounced worldly pleasures and there is no hereditary transference of last names either as these ascetics are celibate with

no children of their own. The apparent lack of economic and other forms of capital seemingly only allow for the greater accumulation of symbolic capital as the ascetic figure is revered for his “own” qualities- a Bourdieuan analysis would reveal the flaws of such assumptions: firstly, the disciples of the Mahant, acquire the cultural capital of Yoga and divine knowledge that the Mahant is in possession of (Gold and Gold 1984), secondly, the symbolic capital that the seat of the Mahant signifies is transferred often to the Mahant’s favourite student- this entails decades worth of political capital and centuries worth of symbolic capital that Nath Yogis have accumulated by their cross-caste associations (ibid). Truly, the seat of the Mahant, currently occupied by Yogi Adityanath is little more than “accumulated history”(Bourdieu 1986).

INSTITUTIONALIZED INDIVIDUALISM:Gold & Gold’s study on Nath Yogis also reveals the highly individualistic nature of Nath yogis who owe their allegiance often to individual Gurus rather than whole orders (Gold and Gold 1984) allowing the Nath yogis the “freedom” to pursue personalized styles of Yogic activity and other political activities including getting acquainted with less than desirable characters (ibid). Thus, even the order of the Nath is conducive to the pursuance of individualistic political activities. While it may appear that a major chunk of the paper is emphasizing on mainly the symbolic capital accumulated by the post of the Mahant of Gorakhnath Math and thus contradicting its own stance of people electing Yogi Adityanath for the political effort he has put into his constituency, it must be stated that Yogi Adityanath has built his support base from what he inherited, with him increasing his vote share manifold since he won his first election despite some not-so-significant dips every now and then(Anshuman 2017). He has been able to cultivate his image further by reopening a fertilizer factory in his area, providing employment to many, making his organizations run many charitable schools and hospitals, making him the ultimate patron in the area(Singh 2017). The crucial factor here is his ability to invest time and effort into his constituency, building on the symbolic and social capital he had already inherited from Advaitanath. Bourdieu has also emphasized the role of time and effort(Bourdieu 1986), in that it helps cultivate crucial kinds of capital- cultural, social and symbolic that provide an already endowed person like Adityanath, the ability to embody a greater degree of symbolic capital, enhancing his own image as a charismatic leader.

This particular point takes us back to the seminal study on South Asian individualism by Mines and Gourishakar, where their study focused on how the Kanchi Shankaracharya is a

“Big Man” who pursues power in the temple settings using rational, this-worldly strategies despite being a world renouncing monk(Gourishankar and Mines 1990). The cultivation of individuality and rational strategies to acquire power both are systemically encouraged, making the monks of the order in question charismatic Big Men who cultivate political capital- an amalgam of social and symbolic capital(Benit-Gbaffou and Katsaura 2012). The cultivation of political capital that adds even more to the already existing social and symbolic capital is then, not unnatural for the Mahant of Gorakhpur Math, making the seat of the Mahant, as mentioned earlier, a site of capital accumulation.

CONVERSION OF CAPITAL: The conversion of capital from one form to the other to profit in the field of politics is quite evident in the political leadership of South India and warrants a comparison with the case study in question. Sara Dickey’s work on MGR in Tamil Nadu is quite relevant here as she showed how a legendary film star became a famous, power-wielding politician who later challenged his predecessors and became the Chief Minister. But while such a feat is remarkable in itself, Dickey’s analysis shows how he converted the much necessary symbolic capital effectively in the political field. The personality-worshipping culture of Tamil Nadu allowed him to amass enough symbolic capital to become relevant in politics despite not starting off as a politician(Dickey 1993). Furthermore, his intricate network of MGR fan clubs provided him with the networks that he needed to make his presence felt everywhere. These functioned as heightened forms of social capital, and were effectively mobilized during his political campaigns. Thus, he effectively converted the two most relevant forms of capital needed in a political field to establish himself as a charismatic leader who was almost omnipotent. Yogi Adityanath, on the other hand, had barely scraped through his first electoral victory relying mainly on his predecessor’s political capital to win. But he soon started giving fiery speeches and realized that he had to work hard to retain his seat in the parliament. He also started working in his constituency to establish a name for himself and he was rewarded with a much higher margin of votes in the next election by his constituents(Anshuman 2017). The significant differences here are of the kind of capital each brought and made in his political career. While MGR’s direct transition from legendary actor to politician was one facilitated largely by symbolic and social capital, the larger-than-life image of his got transferred effectively due to the cultural features of Tamil Nadu. Adityanath, had no such image of being legendary or larger-than-life in his first campaign, but was a soft-spoken obscure individual who almost lost his first election. He had to build his image on top of what his guru had left him. MGR’s image is

therefore much more charismatic than Adityanath's, as the latter was not endowed with as much symbolic capital as the former. Adityanath's inherited symbolic capital served as a bedrock, while MGR's was almost entirely constitutive of his image. The quantities of symbolic capital one embodies must also be analyzed to understand why some leaders appear more charismatic than others, and this can be facilitated by comparative sociological analysis that could be a part of different project.

SECULARISM AND POLITICS: One must not see the political involvement of the apparently other worldly men and women as something that is contradictory to their faith or is a violation of the secular principles espoused in India's constitution, but rather realize that the separation of church and state, whereby religion has nothing to do in the realm of politics is primarily a Western concept that is not followed strictly even in the West (Kolluri and Mir 2002). The interpretation of secularism in post-colonial contexts like Indian society in its Western avatar is not only difficult, but practically impossible as secularism is not only denied, having been a Western concept historically, but also because religion in these contexts is perceived of quite differently from the way it is perceived in the West (ibid). While the rational, educated intelligentsia may see the entry of people like Adityanath in the realm of politics as a violation of secularism, such events show us just how deeply the political and religious are entwined in a country like India where even a famous communist leader like Subhas Chakraborty says, "I am a Hindu and Brahmin before being a communist"(Indian Express 2006) or the Communist Chief Minister of Kerala V S Achutanandan alleges Islamic expansion using "Marriage and money" (Times News Network 2010). The separation of religious identity from politics is not possible in societies where the majoritarian religious values form an almost imperceptible social "unconscious"(Kolluri and Mir 2002). However, where even communists (who declare religion to be false consciousness and the opium of the masses) indulge in soft religious politics, the discourse should focus on the political work done by politicians to retain or acquire political power. The assumption of masses blindly adhering to their religious beliefs while voting or participating in political activities is not true either, case in point: the failure of Uma Bharti's (a Hindutva firebrand leader who is also a *Sannyasin* or a female ascetic) own political outfit Bharatiya Janshakti Party after she was expelled from the BJP (NDTV 2014) and the success of Yogi Adityanath's rebellious MLAs under the Hindu Mahasabha's banner (Sharma 2017) makes for two different cases where religious leaders have been either rejected or accepted, showing us that politics that utilizes religious identities and projects religious leaders as political

leaders may not always be successful. Political leaders need to constantly “work” in order to find acceptance in the minds of the masses- however, a religious identity may add to their charisma and image, but it is not always the deciding factor. The bestowal of greater institutional cultural capital on Yogi Adityanath in the form of the post of Chief Minister will be a time tested political strategy by the BJP, and one has to see how time and effort invested by him will pay off in the future.

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