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## The social foundations of (in)effective states: Uttar Pradesh's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

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WIDER Working Paper 2022/61

## **The social foundations of (in)effective states**

Uttar Pradesh's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Indrajit Roy\*

May 2022

**Abstract:** A rich and growing literature illustrates the paradox of COVID-19 responses by governments across the world. States with higher levels of authority and capacity have struggled to respond effectively to COVID-19, while states with low capacity and authority have been more effective in containing the pandemic. Subnational comparisons within India appear to support this worldwide finding, illustrated by the official data on pandemic management presented by the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Against such appearances, this paper questions the official presentation of the Uttar Pradesh data. Based on reportage from grassroots sources, this paper argues that Uttar Pradesh witnessed a significant extent of undercounting. However, the paper cautions against assumptions that undercounting of COVID cases and deaths in the state reflects poor state capacity. Quite to the contrary, the paper situates the growing capacity of the state in Uttar Pradesh within its historical context to suggest it improved legitimacy and authority as it transitioned from an ‘elitist social coalition’ between 1947 and 1989 to an ‘inclusive social coalition’ from 1989 to 2017. The poor management of the pandemic by the present government of the state cannot thus be attributed to factors such as weak state capacity, poor authority, or limited legitimacy. What explains this paradox of poor COVID management despite improved state effectiveness? This paper reflects on this paradox by highlighting the ideational commitment of the state government to crafting an ‘ethnic social coalition’ rather than responding to the social welfare needs of the population.

**Key words:** Uttar Pradesh, COVID-19, elitist social coalition, inclusive social coalition, ethnic social coalition, state effectiveness

**JEL classification:** I38

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## 1 The problem

The COVID-19 pandemic has directed attention to the role and diverse capacities of national state institutions (e.g., Ang 2020; Fukuyama 2020; Gisselquist and Vaccaro 2021; Mao 2021; Patterson and Balogun 2021). Less research attention has been paid in this body of work to the role of the state at the sub-national level, with some key exceptions (e.g., Basu and Mazumder 2021; Imai et al. 2021; Kujur and Goswami 2020). However, as Gisselquist and Vaccaro (2021) note, in many countries sub-national state institutions play decisive roles and have significant independent influence on pandemic response and outcomes. Variations in pandemic responses across Indian states appear to bear out the importance of sub-national institutions, as the data suggests that states with relatively weak capacity and authority are more effective at responding to COVID.

This paper critically examines the suggestions that states with relatively weak effectiveness have responded better to COVID. It does so by drawing on the example of Uttar Pradesh (UP), which reported considerably better outcomes in terms of managing COVID than many other Indian states. It questions the official presentation of the data based on grassroots reportage that suggests a significant extent of undercounting. However, the paper cautions against assumptions that undercounting of COVID cases and deaths in the state reflects poor state capacity. Quite to the contrary, the paper situates the growing capacity of the state in UP within its historical context to suggest it has improved legitimacy and authority since at least 2007. The poor management of the pandemic by the present government of the state cannot thus be attributed to factors such as weak state capacity, poor authority, or limited legitimacy. What explains this paradox of poor COVID management despite improved state effectiveness? The paper reflects on this paradox by highlighting the ideational commitment of the state government to crafting an ethnic state rather than responding to the social welfare needs of the population.

## 2 The scope, arguments, and contributions of this paper

The paper begins by critically investigating the claim that Indian states with lower effectiveness managed COVID better than those with higher effectiveness. It does so by drawing on the case of UP, which has become widely celebrated as a model state in its response to the pandemic. After discussing the official presentation of data, the paper notes the extent to which cases and deaths due to COVID in UP were likely to be underreported. As this paper demonstrates, a reliance on official figures underestimates the number of deaths in the state as well as the sheer human tragedy that played out in UP during the pandemic. Death tolls were allegedly underreported, as unearthed by journalists and investigators through use of alternative resources. Stories abounded of unreported cases and uninvestigated deaths in the rural hinterlands, lending credence to voices critical of the state government's response to the pandemic. The toll of the pandemic in the state is likely much higher than has been officially reported.

Was the high number of cases and deaths in UP the result of historically low state effectiveness? While it is tempting to respond in the affirmative, this paper cautions against such a response. Situating state effectiveness in UP within the broader historical context of state formation in the region, the paper highlights its *growing* authority, capacity, and legitimacy since at least 2007. That year, a social coalition led by Ms Mayawati (who uses only her first name), a politician from one of India's historically oppressed Dalit (discriminated against as 'untouchable') community, gave the state its first elected government to last an entire term. Human development indices have continued to improve since then, explaining the preparedness and response of the state vis-à-vis

the COVID pandemic. The elitist social foundation that underpinned the state in UP made way for an inclusive social foundation.

To be sure, state capacity in UP continues to lag some of the more-developed states of the Indian Union, especially those in the west and the south of the country. In terms of key indicators of state capacity, such as per capita gross state domestic product, the state remains relatively weak in comparison to these other more-developed states. But in comparison to its own lacklustre past performance and the performance of its neighbours in the Hindi heartland, state capacity in UP has demonstrated continuous improvement since 2007. The state's poor management of COVID cannot be attributed to historically low levels of state effectiveness.

What, then, explains the abysmal management of COVID in UP, despite improved state effectiveness? This paper notes the emergence of an 'ethnic social coalition' that now underpins the state in UP. This 'ethnic social coalition' is in turn fostered by the ruling party and cultivated by the government, which has been in power since 2017. The state's ideational commitment to crafting an ethnic state in which the dominance of one social group over the other is cemented trumps its commitment to public welfare, as the tragedy that unfolded in UP during the summer of 2021 illustrated.

This rest of this paper is structured along three main sections. Section 3 opens with a consideration of the data pertaining to the state government's response to COVID in UP. It reports official data before considering the criticisms levelled against that data, thus urging us to be cautious about accounts that celebrate the state's management of the pandemic. This section closes by asking whether the poor management of the pandemic can be attributed to historically low state capacity in UP. Section 4 argues against this proposition by locating the growing capacity of the state in UP within a broader historical context. It identifies the election in 2007 of Ms Mayawati, a Dalit politician who sought to build an inclusive cross-caste alliance. This inclusive social foundation not only heralded a departure from the elitist social foundations that had marked previous governments, but also gave the state a level of political stability it had not enjoyed since Independence in 1947. This section describes improvements in key human development indices under her and her successor government, which was also based on a cross-communal alliance of a different sort, but which was inclusive nevertheless. Section 5 reflects on the puzzle of poor pandemic management in a state with increasing state effectiveness. It resolves the puzzle by pointing to the ethnic social foundation of the state in UP since 2017, which was ideationally committed to crafting an ethnic state rather than responding to public welfare. Section 6 concludes.

### **3 COVID response in UP**

#### **3.1 UP's response to COVID: official data**

The state's first encounter with the pandemic was recorded on 5 March 2020, when a middle-aged man with a travel history to Iran tested positive. By 15 March, 12 cases had been recorded. On 17 March 2020 the state government ordered the closure of educational institutions, cinema halls, shopping malls, cinema halls, tourist venues, and gyms for 15 days. A three-day lockdown was declared across 15 districts of the state on 22 March 2020. By 24 March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nation-wide lockdown for 21 days, which of course included the entire state of UP. Violators of the lockdown were threatened with the strictest of punishments, with state government invoking the National Security Act, the Epidemic Act, and the Disaster Management Act against them. The lockdown began to be phased out from June 2020.

By 31 March 2021, the state had recorded almost 600,000 cases across its jurisdiction and 8,790 deaths.<sup>1</sup> Its case fatality rate (CFR) was among the lowest in the country. Although testing figures as a proportion of the population were relatively low, in absolute terms they were the highest in the country.

The state government's response to the first year of the pandemic invited much appreciation. Over April and May 2020, Chief Minister Adityanath (he uses only his first name) had instructed officials to ferry migrant workers stranded in neighbouring states back home. By the end of May 2020, almost 400,000 migrant workers had returned to the state on buses and trains operated by the state government. The government made direct bank transfers to daily wage labourers. Furthermore, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act was augmented through further transfers so that rural households could gain employment and wages. Later in the year, the state government transported at public expense students from UP stranded in other states, back to their homes. The World Health Organization praised the State's 'exemplary' efforts at COVID management (NDTV 2020, 17 November).

However, from April 2021 India was overwhelmed by the second wave of COVID-19. UP was no exception: the number of cases and deaths spiked. Even so, the state government earned accolades from the WHO in its efforts to stem the spread of COVID (WHO 2021, 7 May). Official monitoring teams traversed almost 100,000 villages over five days, visiting homes to test people for COVID-19 using rapid antigen tests (RATs). Almost 15,000 such teams—each comprising two people—were deployed. Consequently, the number of cases and deaths recorded officially remained limited. The state's response came to be celebrated as exemplifying a 'UP Model' (IIT Kanpur 2021). The WHO noted the rapidity with which 141,610 government teams and 21,242 supervisors moved across the state's 97,941 villages to test the entire population of the state within five days, 5–10 May. Each team tested people with COVID-19 symptoms using RAT kits, isolating individuals who tested positive and giving them advice on disease management. All contacts of those testing positive were also quarantined and tested by the rapid response team using the RT-PCR (reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction) at home test. Two mobile vans were allocated to each block within a district in the state to test people with symptoms, even as routine sample collection and testing continued at community health centres.

The comparative data<sup>2</sup> suggest that UP had among the lowest rates of confirmed cases (760 per 100,000) and deaths (10 per 100,000) in the country as of October 31, 2021. The CFR was also relatively low (1.3 per cent). The state tested 37,200 people per 100,000 and fully vaccinated 14.5 per cent of the population. These figures, while lacklustre in themselves, are impressive indeed when weighed against the fact that the per capita net state domestic product (NSDP) is the second lowest in the country (after Bihar). Compared to its neighbouring states in the infamous BIMARU cluster of northern India (see Table 1), the state's response to COVID appeared noteworthy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ndtv.com/coronavirus>.

<sup>2</sup> All data in this section have been drawn from <https://www.covid19india.org>.

Table 1: COVID-19 in UP: a comparative perspective

State	Confirmed cases per 100,000	Deaths per 100,000	CFR (%)	Testing per 100,000	Fully vaccinated (%)	NSDP per capita, 2018–19
Uttar Pradesh	760	10	1.3	37,200	14.5	62,625
Bihar	608	8	1.3	42,300	15.4	40,715
Jharkhand	932	14	1.5	42,700	14.9	75,421
Madhya Pradesh	964	13	1.3	24,700	25.3	90,487
Chhatisgarh	3,502	47	1.3	47,700	25.6	982,54
Rajasthan	1,235	12	0.9	19,200	26.0	107,890

Source: author's compilation based on data from <https://www.covid19india.org> and RBI (2020).

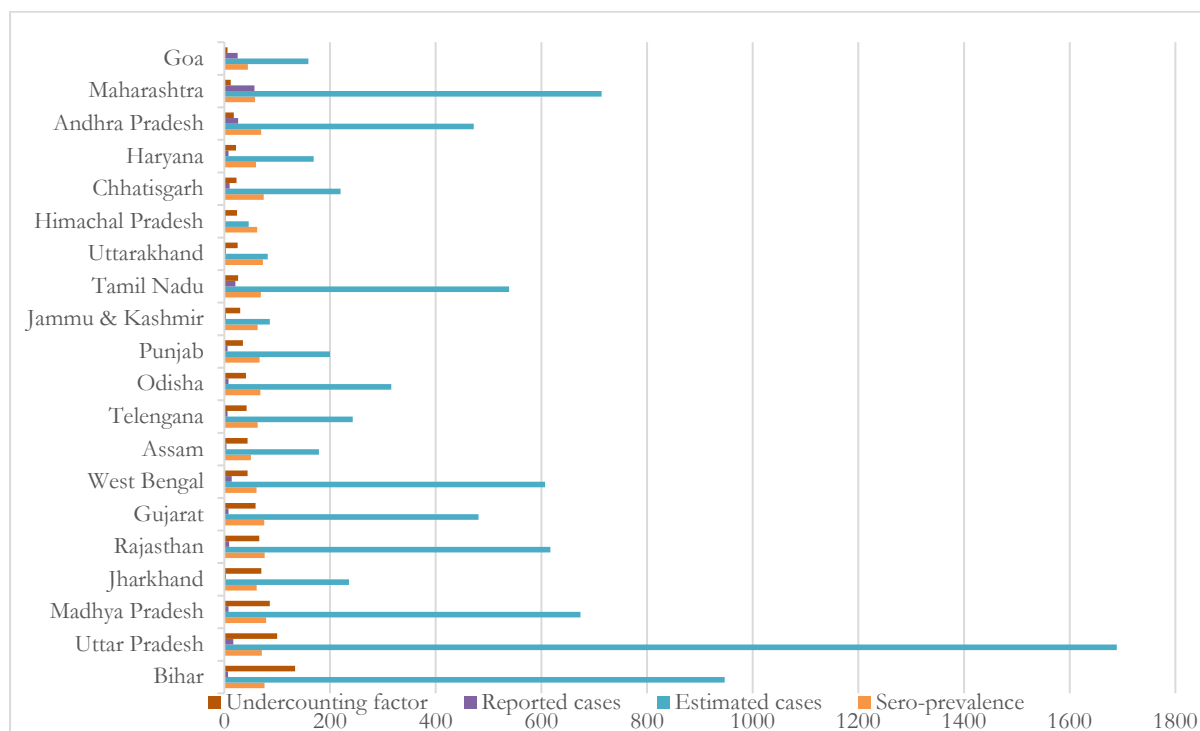
### 3.2 The official response: critical voices

However, the official counting of cases in UP is widely regarded as inadequate (India Today 2021, 30 July). The report celebrating the state government's achievements was criticized for its dishonesty (The Wire 2021, 20 October). Indeed, UP was upheld as an example of what *not* to do during a pandemic (Foreign Policy 2021, 28 May) as reports trickled out about the extent of the carnage caused by COVID (BBC News 2021, 20 April). Intrepid investigators reported on the bodies of people dying due to COVID-19 that were left to float in the river Ganga (BBC News 2021, 19 May). Other accounts showed bodies wrapped in saffron shrouds buried on the sandbanks of the same river, ironically the region's holiest (NDTV 2021, 13 May).

There were many reasons to be sceptical of the official data from UP. Health infrastructure remains woefully inadequate compared to other states, especially in the south. Furthermore, the state held elections to its rural local governments, the Panchayats, during April 2021. The elections were held in four phases and, as is common practice in India, school teachers were deployed on polling duty. The UP Primary Teachers Association estimated that over 2,000 teachers lost their lives on polling duty due to COVID-19, deaths that were not captured in official figures (First Post 2021, 21 May). One report estimated that the death toll in 24 of the state's 75 districts was 43 times that of the official death toll (Article 14 2021, 21 June). Undercounting was rife in UP (The Print 2021, 30 July). These figures compel us to be wary of uncritically accepting the official data on COVID-19 casualties in the state.

That undercounting occurred across Indian states is well established. However, the scale of undercounting in UP was among the highest in the country. Figure 1 compares the scale of underreporting in UP with other Indian states, with UP near the top in terms of incidence of underreporting. It is based on the fourth sero-prevalence survey undertaken by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) to estimate the number of cases in the population who have antibodies against COVID-19. Sero-prevalence surveys are used as indicators of the proportion of the population that may have previously been infected with COVID-19.

Figure 1: Extent of underreporting in selected Indian states, as of May 31, 2021



Source: author's compilation based on data from The Print (2021, 30 July).

As we can see in Figure 1, which estimates the number of cases missed for every detected case, underreporting was rife across India. For every case detected in the country, 33 others were missed by the system. In some states, such as Goa, the undercounting factor was as low as six—which means that for every case detected, six cases were missed. By contrast, in UP the undercounting factor was as high as 100: for every case detected, the system missed 100 cases.

#### 4 Political development and state effectiveness in UP

It is tempting to attribute UP's poor management of the COVID pandemic to ineffective state governance. After all, a rich literature suggests that UP's low achievements in human development results from such factors as low state capacity, a lack of legitimacy, and an inability of the state to exercise its authority that has characterized the state's politics since Independence. In this vein, Atul Kohli (2012) argues that neopatrimonialism has stymied the developmental efforts of the state in UP since Independence. Kanchan Chandra (2003) contends that the tendency of the state's political parties to represent specific caste groups (what she calls 'ethnic politics') inhibits its ability to deliver development for all.

This section situates UP's COVID response within its broader history of political development. As we shall see, UP witnessed a succession of state governments that were marked by elitist social foundations. This elitist social foundation undermined the legitimacy of the state government. Consequently, its effectiveness in implementing development programmes was hindered, lending partial credence to Kohli's (2012) argument about neopatrimonialism inhibiting development in the state. However, this elitist foundation began to be eroded after 1989. Although political instability remained rife, the neopatrimonialism that marked the first four decades of postcolonial politics in the state faced assaults. The emergence of new political parties that challenged the dominance of privileged castes in the state's polity arguably exacerbated political instability, with



adverse repercussions for human development outcomes. Since 2007, however, UP has enjoyed political stability not seen in its postcolonial history. Moreover, at least between 2007 and 2017, the state governments were based on a broader-based inclusive social foundation than before. This inclusive social foundation enabled the state to enhance its capacity and authority, as reflected in the improved human development outcomes since 2007.

#### **4.1 The inheritance of an elitist social coalition: UP 1947–89**

UP was established as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh under the colonial administration in 1902. Sprawled across the Indo-Gangetic plains of northern India, UP emerged as the hotbed of the anti-colonial struggle led by the Congress Party. As India inched closer to independence, UP's Congress leaders saw for themselves a greater role in national politics. With the partition of Bengal, UP emerged as the largest province of postcolonial India, its leaders determined to shape the politics of the country. The result was neglect of development within the state.

The Congress Party dominated UP politics for the first two decades after Independence, mirroring the national trend. Its leadership was almost entirely in the hands of the self-styled 'upper castes'. As Jaffrelot and Verniers (2012) shows, although 'upper castes' comprised only 20 per cent of the population, they constituted almost 60 per cent of the UP Vidhan Sabha, the legislative assembly responsible for governing the state. Furthermore, the Congress chief ministers of UP tended to be accountable to the national leadership of the party rather than to their constituents. Therefore, although the Congress Party won decisive majorities in legislative assembly elections held in 1952, 1957, and 1962, no chief minister completed a full term in the state. The 'upper caste' dominance of the UP Vidhan Sabha, coupled with the upward accountability of the state cabinet, contributed to continued neglect of development in the state.

UP entered an extended period of political instability after 1967. The Congress Party lost power. The Bharatiya Lok Dal, led by the farmers' leader, Charan Singh, formed the state government for a brief period. Charan Singh was the first chief minister of the State who came from outside the elitist 'upper caste' profile of previous chief ministers. However, this government was short-lived, and soon the Congress Party returned to power. Over the next two decades, power in the state oscillated between the Congress Party and rival political parties. Although the social profile of the UP Vidhan Sabha became more representative of the state's population, political instability in the state made it impossible for any meaningful investment in its development.

Upper caste dominance of the state's politics continued virtually unchallenged until 1989. Of the 12 chief ministers who assumed leadership of the state between 1947 and 1989, as many as ten were from the 'upper castes'. Each one of them was from the Congress Party, while the two chief ministers from outside this elitist social profile were both from non-Congress opposition parties.

#### **4.2 Disrupting the elitist social coalition: UP 1989–2007**

This elitist social basis of UP's politics was disrupted in 1989. The Congress Party collapsed in the Vidhan Sabha elections that year. The Janata Dal emerged as the single largest party in the state and Mulayam Singh Yadav was appointed chief minister. Among Yadav's boldest, if politically costly, decisions was to defend a controversial mosque in the temple town of Ayodhya. In October 1990 (mostly 'upper caste') Hindu devotees under the leadership of the emergent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) defied court orders and descended upon the mosque, threatening to destroy it and build a temple in its stead. Yadav ordered troops to fire into the illegal assembly of devotees, thus upholding the law. His actions endeared him to the state's beleaguered Muslim minority as well as his own Yadav community, but alienated the 'upper caste' communities for decades to come.

Yadav was born into a community disparaged as 'lower caste' and officially categorized as Other Backward Class (OBC). Yadav embraced his OBC identity and espoused a politics that explicitly sought to advance OBC interests. He lent his weight to emerging demands for affirmative action in favour of OBCs across India and emerged as a key OBC leader in the country. Yadav's emergence diversified the social profile of chief ministers to govern UP. In 1993 he allied with the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a party that emerged from the anti-caste social movement in the state to advance the claims of Dalits, historically oppressed as "untouchable" in the caste order. Although that alliance was short-lived, it brought the BSP electoral gains and Ms Mayawati took over the reins of power to become the first Dalit chief minister of the state in 1995.

However, political instability continued to mar the state. Power continued to rotate between Yadav's Samajwadi Party, the BJP, and the BSP as no government lasted its full term. This cycle was broken only in 2007, when the BSP under Ms Mayawati won a decisive electoral majority and took power in the state.

### **4.3 Breaking the mould: inclusive social coalitions, 2007–17**

The BSP's absolute majority in UP has been attributed to its inclusive social coalition. Unlike its rivals, the BSP sought to build a rainbow coalition that included Dalits, 'upper castes', and Muslims. It also sought to include the majority of the 'lower castes', except for the Yadavs, who were identified as being beholden to rival Mulayam Singh Yadav. The rainbow coalition forged by the BSP was like the social coalitions that fuelled electoral support for the Congress Party in the early decades after Independence. However, two differences were crucial. One, unlike the state leadership of the Congress that held office at the pleasure of the party's national leadership, Chief Minister Mayawati was also the national president of the BSP. Unlike chief ministers affiliated with the Congress Party, she was not accountable to the national capital but to her electorate. Two, unlike the elite 'upper caste' leadership of the Congress, the BSP's leadership was self-consciously Dalit. As a party committed to improving the well-being of Dalits, or those worst-off in UP society, the BSP also realized the impossibility of doing so without a modicum of support from other social groups. This inclusive vision was outlined by its campaign slogan, *sarvajan hitay, sarvajan sukhay*, which in English translates into 'may everyone benefit, may everyone be prosperous'.

With an eye on improving life for Dalits, the BSP took development very seriously (Business Standard 2013, 21 January). Ms Mayawati introduced and implemented a housing scheme for the urban poor. Of the 100,000 housing units promised, over 90,000 were constructed by the time her tenure as chief minister ended in 2012 (Scroll.in 2014, 19 April). She also inaugurated an integrated rural development programme to supply water, electricity, and roads in villages with Dalit majorities (The Hindu 2007, 14 September). Almost 25,000 villages across the state saw improvements within their jurisdictions, and even her worst critics admitted there had been some development compared to previous regimes (Business Standard 2021, 20 January). Even as the BSP government remained unable to introduce structural reforms that would transfer more productive assets to Dalits, its development programmes did reach populations that had hitherto been largely marginalized (Independent 2008, 4 February). Learning from the experience of neighbouring Bihar, the state government distributed one million bicycles to girls across the state in a bid to improve their access to schooling and general mobility (India Today 2011, 12 November). However, allegations of corruption overshadowed the developmental interventions introduced under her tenure and Ms Mayawati was voted out of power in 2012.

The new government was formed by the Samajwadi Party (SP), led by Akhilesh Yadav, son of Mulayam Singh Yadav. The SP borrowed a page from the BSP's success at forging social coalitions. It cemented the Yadav–Muslim coalition that lay at the foundation of his party's ideology with support from the 'upper castes'. Muslim representation in the UP Vidhan Sabha was at its highest

since Independence, and more closely reflected the community's population than ever before. Although Yadav scrapped many schemes introduced by Ms Mayawati, he also introduced several social welfare programmes, including housing subsidies, pensions, and unemployment allowances. Furthermore, he distributed 1.5 million laptops to students who completed their secondary and senior secondary education across the state. But perhaps the highlight of Yadav's chief ministership was the successful eradication of polio in the state. As of 2013 the state had not reported a single case of polio, a major milestone in global health improvement. The involvement of Muslims in the SP's social coalition helped to overcome worries from community members that the polio vaccine was aimed against them.

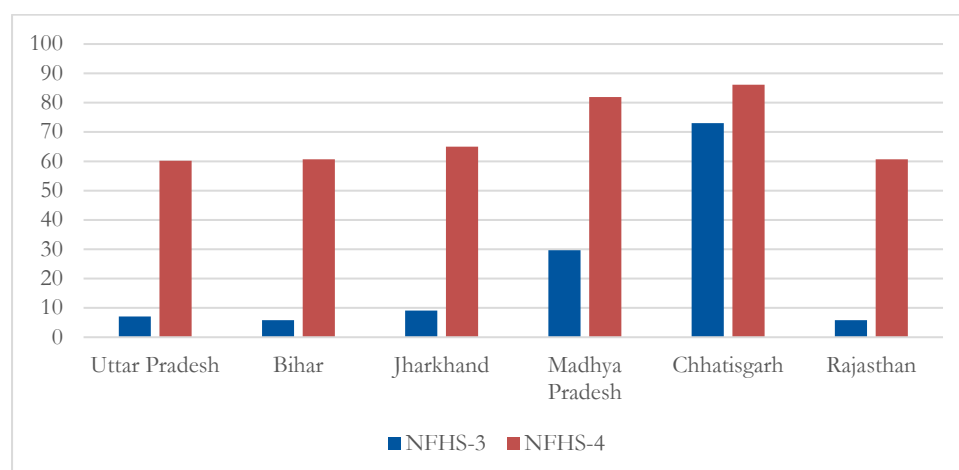
The social foundations of India's national government were also considerably more diverse than the elitist Congress governments of the past. In 2004, the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was voted into power. Although the Congress Party was its most important constituent, it was no longer the dominant force it once was, and relied upon coalition partners to form the UPA government. Between 2004 and 2009 it relied on its communist allies to sustain the government. After the communists withdrew support in 2019 it depended on support from the SP and the BSP (among other state-level parties such as West Bengal's TMC and Bihar's RJD) to run the government. The UPA actively responded to the development challenges of state governments run by its constituents and allies.

#### **4.4 Improved human development indicators in UP since 2007**

The human development outcomes of the inclusive social coalitions that governed UP between 2007 and 2017 are clearly discernible. Several of these outcomes pertain directly to the effectiveness of the state in delivering services. In this section I draw on a comparison of data from the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS) 3 and 4. NFHS-3 pertains to data collected in 2005–06, just a year before the BSP came to power in UP. NFHS-4 data pertains to the period 2015–16, or a year prior to the SP losing power in UP. Both sets of data offer useful insights into the changes in human development in the state through the inclusive governments of the BSP and SP. For example:

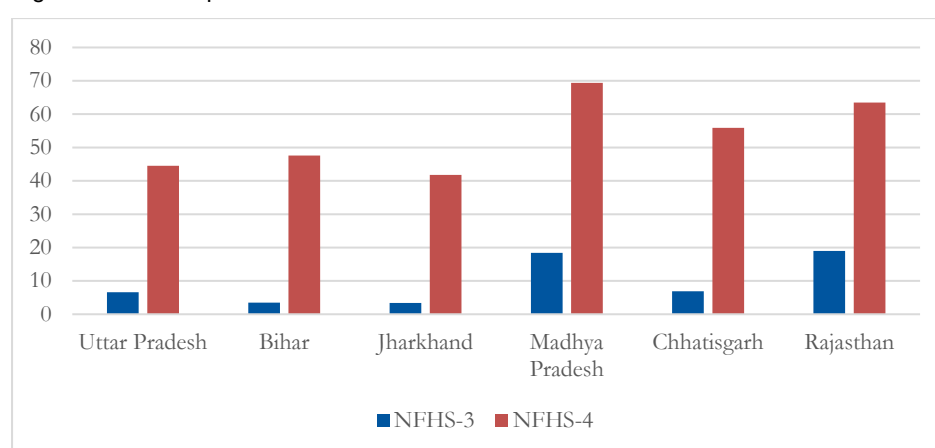
- the proportion of children under five years old whose births were registered increased from a mere 7 per cent in 2005–06 to over 60 per cent (Figure 2)—among UP's neighbours, only Bihar has a similar track record;
- the proportion of births in a public facility similarly increased from 6.6 per cent in 2005–06 to over 44 per cent in 2015–16 (Figure 3);
- immunization rates improved (Figure 4);
- mortality rates were reduced (Figure 5); and
- a larger proportion of women reported a follow-up visit from a paramedic after delivery (Figure 6).

Figure 2: Under-fives registration in BIMARU states



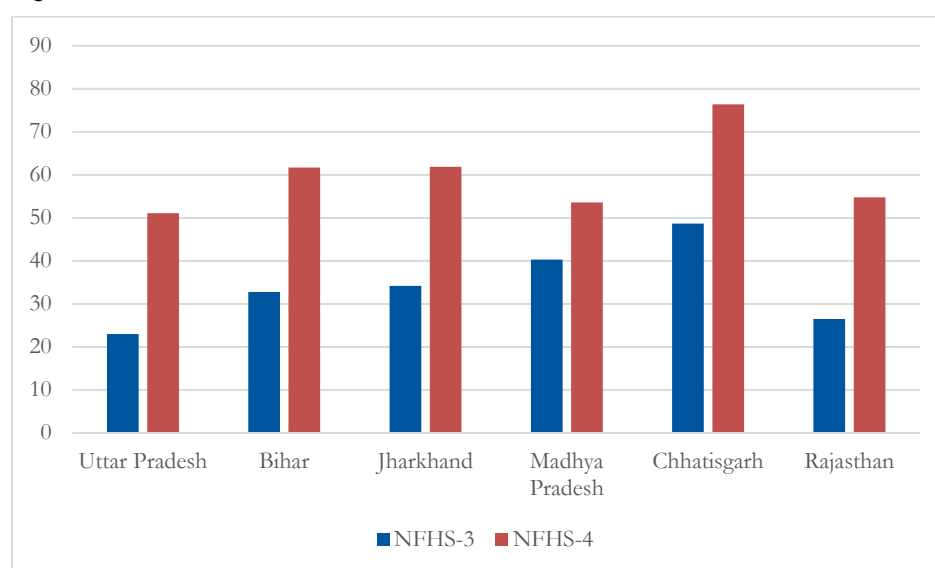
Source: author's compilation based on NFHS-3 and NFHS-4.

Figure 3: Births in public facilities in BIMARU states



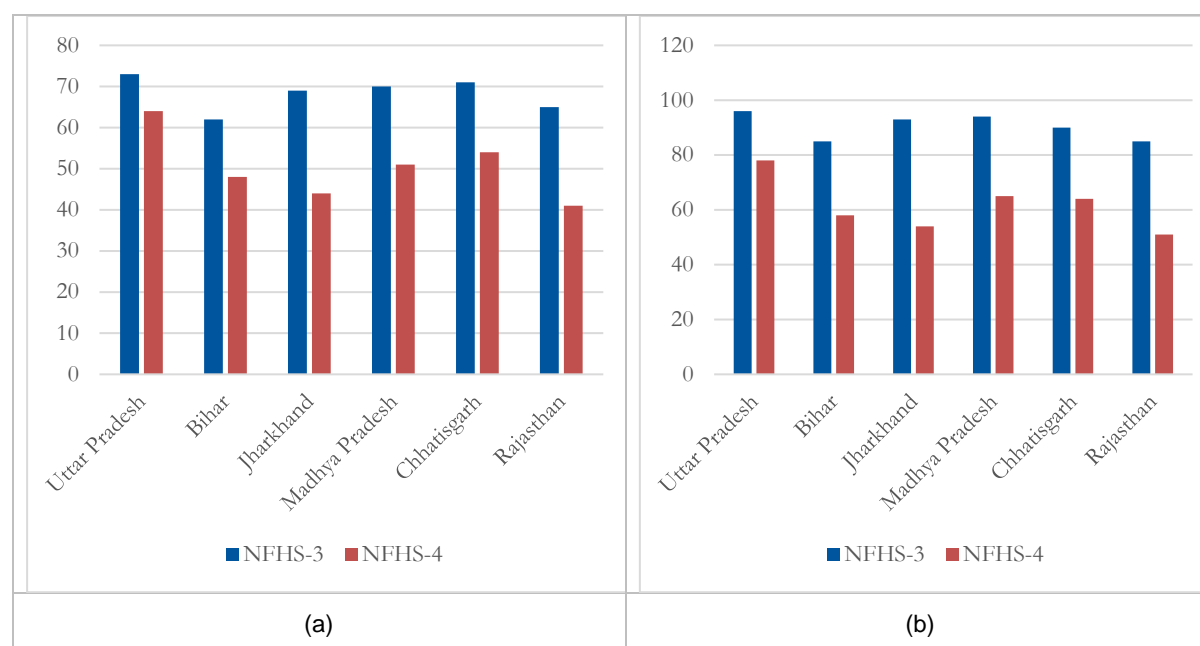
Source: author's compilation based on NFHS-3 and NFHS-4.

Figure 4: Immunization rates in BIMARU states



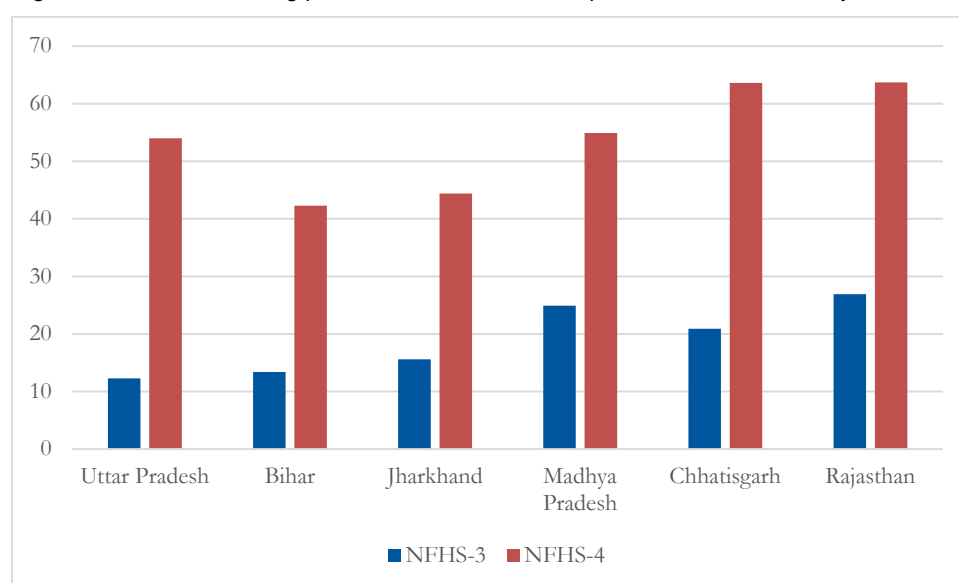
Source: author's compilation based on NFHS-3 and NFHS-4.

Figure 5: (a) Infant mortality rates in BIMARU states; (b) under-fives mortality rate in BIMARU states



Source: author's compilation based on NFHS-3 and NFHS-4.

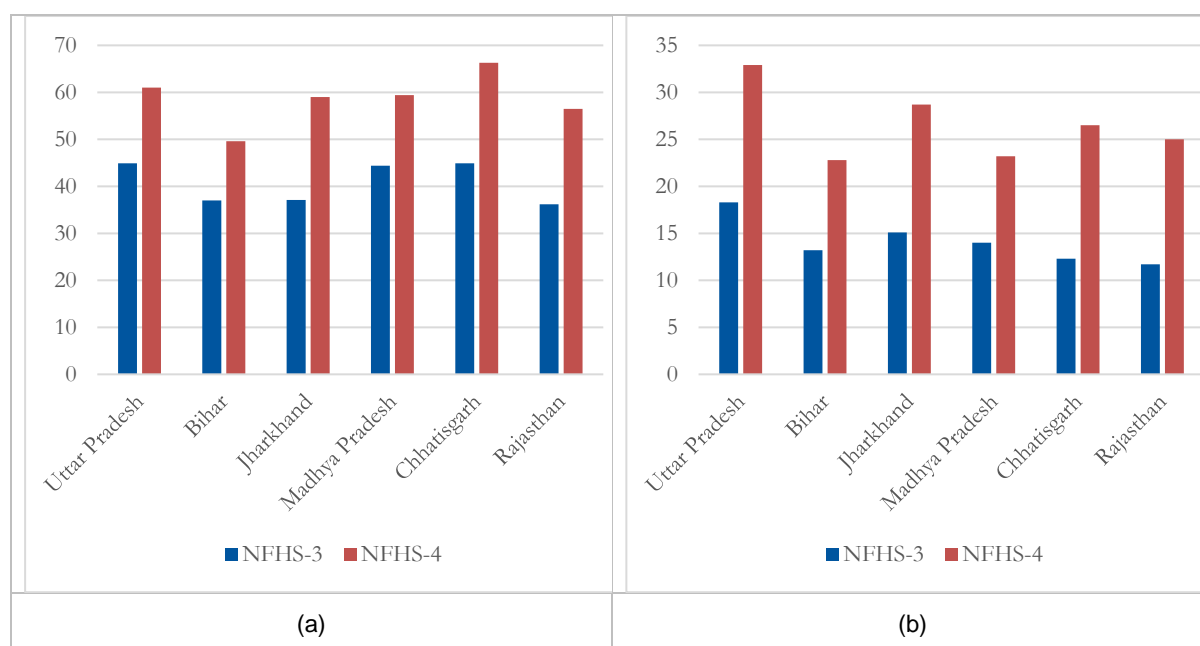
Figure 6: Women receiving postnatal care from health personnel within two days of delivery



Source: author's compilation based on NFHS-3 and NFHS-4.

Indicators of human development pertaining to women's status also registered improvements. Women's literacy rates increased to 61 per cent, the second highest among the BIMARU states, behind only Chhattisgarh (Figure 7). The proportion of women with at least ten years of education also increased, placing UP ahead of the other BIMARU states.

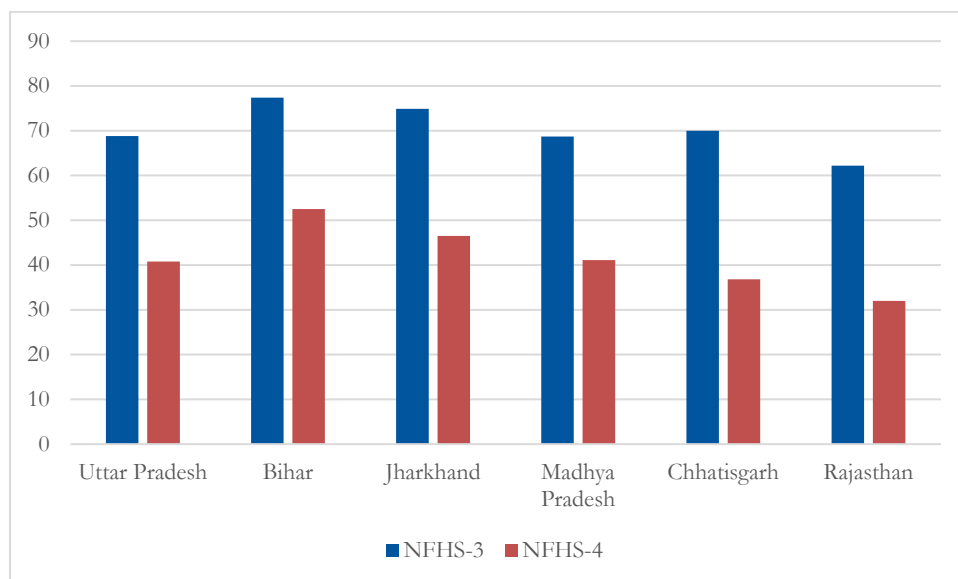
Figure 7: (a) Literacy rates among women; (b) percentage of women with 10+ years of schooling



Source: author's compilation based on NFHS-3 and NFHS-4.

Between 2005 and 2016, UP reduced the incidence of multidimensional poverty by almost 28 percentage points, from 68.8 per cent to 40.8 per cent (Figure 8). Given the size of the state and its enormous social heterogeneity, this was no small achievement.

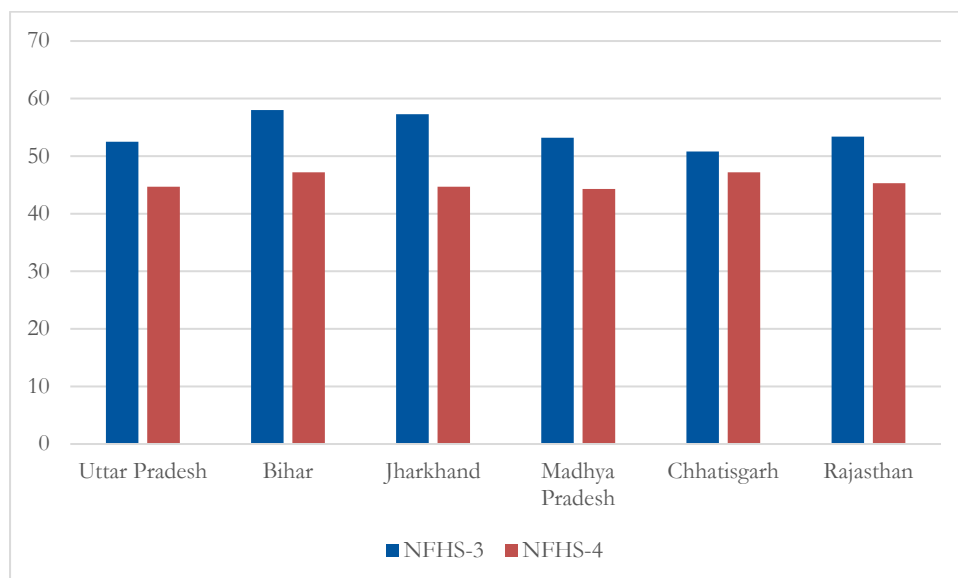
Figure 8: Decline in incidence of poverty across BIMARU states



Source: author's compilation based on NFHS-3 and NFHS-4.

Not only did UP reduce the incidence of multidimensional poverty during this period, it also reduced the intensity of multidimensional poverty (Figure 9). Alongside Jharkhand, the state reported the lowest intensity of multidimensional poverty among the BIMARU states.

Figure 9: Decline in intensity of poverty across BIMARU states

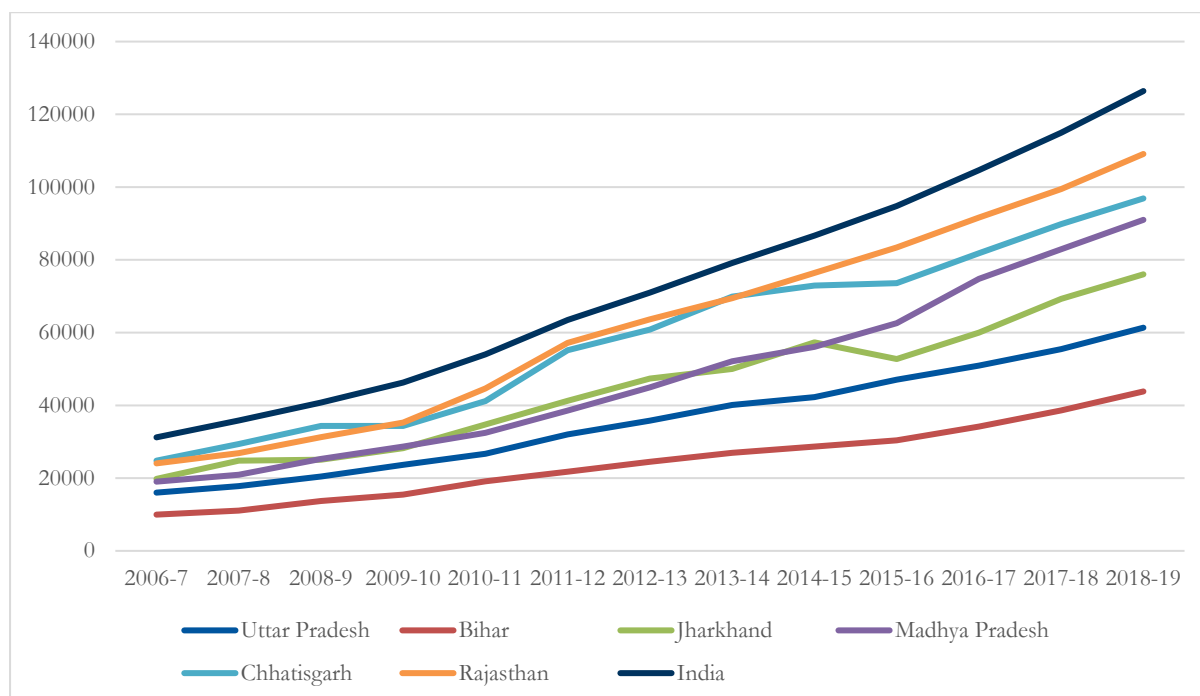


Source: author's compilation based on NFHS-3 and NFHS-4.

#### 4.5 Improved state capacity since 2007

Since 2007, state capacity in UP showed important improvements, especially compared to its own turbulent past. The per capita NSDP increased threefold between 2007 and 2017, and has continued its upward trajectory since (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Per capita NSDP: UP in comparative perspective



Source: author's compilation based on data from RBI (2020).

In 2017, UP's electorate handed a massive mandate to the BJP, rejecting both the SP and the BSP. Despite the 'upper castes' regaining their dominance of the UP Vidhan Sabha, the 'clear plebian character' of the BJP's electoral victory is undeniable (Verniers 2017). Furthermore, many

communities marginalized within the ‘lower castes’ and Dalits have increased their representation in the Vidhan Sabha, albeit at the cost of Muslim representation, which now stands at a mere 6 per cent, the lowest since Independence (Scroll.in 2017, 14 May). Its inclusiveness vis-à-vis various Hindu castes was based on the exclusion of Muslims.

The BJP’s election to power in UP was followed by the party’s re-election to the Lok Sabha in 2019. Mr Adityanath (who also uses only one name), who assumed the position of chief minister, was a Hindu monk who was a leading light of the Hindutva movement in the state. The party’s reach now seemed to mirror the Congress Party’s dominance of Lok Sabhas and Vidhan Sabhas during the first two decades after Independence. Unlike the Congress chief ministers, who held power at the whim and pleasure of the national leadership, Mr Adityanath was a powerful leader in his own right. Like Ms Mayawati and Akhilesh Yadav before him, Mr Adityanath relied on his support within the state to hold the position of chief minister rather than the good wishes of the national BJP.

The state government formed by the BJP in 2017 benefited from the improvements in state effectiveness initiated by the previous governments led by the BSP and the SP over the previous decade. Where the BSP oversaw the investments required to improve health and educational facilities, the SP continued to support these improvements, culminating in the campaign to eradicate polio from the state. With the collapse of the Congress machinery, the state government was freed from its accountability upward to the national leadership and began to be accountable downward to the state’s population. However, political instability continued to wrack the state, ending in 2007 when the BSP under Ms Mayawati was voted to power with a decisive mandate. The political stability enjoyed by the state after 2007 under chief ministers who were accountable to the people of the state rather than a Delhi-based leadership ensured that governments were able to effectively deliver development.

The state’s investment in health personnel bears out this improvement. In 2005, the state government recruited 75 per cent of all required health workers and auxiliary nurse midwives in its sub-centres and primary health centres. By 2015, it recruited 98 per cent of all required personnel (RHS 2015: 30). Figures for recruitment of doctors in 2005 are not available, but by 2015 Yadav’s government had filled 48 per cent of all sanctioned vacancies. Mr Adityanath’s government had filled 70.9 per cent of all vacancies within two years of his tenure (RHS 2019: 109). Likewise, figures for recruitment of nursing staff in 2005 are not available. However, by 2015 almost half of all required vacancies had been filled, and by 2019 the state government reported a surplus of nursing staff. To be sure, the population coverage of community health centres, primary health centres, and sub-centres continues to be suboptimal, but the gradual improvements in the capacity of the state in UP cannot be ignored.

Nevertheless, these improvements in state capacity do not appear to have translated into effective management of the pandemic. Despite celebratory accounts offered by the state government and international organizations such as the WHO, ground reports compel us to take note of the veritable massacre that ripped through UP, especially during the second phase (The Caravan 2021, 30 May). The extent of casualties will perhaps never be known, but is estimated to be several times greater than has been officially reported, as shown in Figure 1.

## **5 Ideas in and about effective states**

Why did UP perform so poorly in managing the pandemic, despite increasing state effectiveness? If state effectiveness may be measured in terms of capacity, legitimacy, and authority, there is clear



evidence that the state in UP was well-endowed with them all. We have already noted the improvements in state capacity above, as evidenced by improved human development indicators in such sectors as education and health. We have also noted the increasing legitimacy of the state, as the elitist social coalition that underpinned the Congress governments in the first two decades after Independence gave way to a more inclusive social coalition headed first by Ms Mayawati and then by her rival Akhilesh Yadav. The legitimacy of the state in UP arguably expanded under Mr Adityanath, who took office as chief minister after the BJP's massive electoral win in 2017. The BJP won almost 40 per cent of the popular vote at an election that witnessed unprecedented voter turnout (61 per cent), which was much higher than the BSP had managed in 2007 (30 per cent, with voter turnout of 46 per cent) or the SP had garnered in 2012 (29 and 59 per cent, respectively). The authority of the state has also vastly expanded under Mr Adityanath's chief ministership, as the state government has showed little compunction in cracking down on dissent.<sup>3</sup> Despite the improved state capacity, expanded legitimacy, and growing authority, the government's ideational commitments prevented it from effectively addressing the pandemic.

### **5.1 From an inclusive social coalition to an ethnic social coalition**

The spectacular win of the BJP in the 2017 Vidhan Sabha elections was followed by the appointment of Mr Adityanath as the state's chief minister. Mr Adityanath combines his chief ministerial position with responsibilities as the head priest (mahant) of the Gorakhnath math, a prominent Hindu monastery in the north-east part of the state. A strong votary of Hindutva, the principle that Hindu ideas and traditions ought to be mainstreamed into politics and governance in the country, Mr Adityanath affirmed his commitment to establishing a 'Hindu Rashtra' (Hindu nation) in India (Hindustan Times 2017, 6 April).

The BJP's massive electoral victory was underpinned by a coalition across Hindu castes. Post-poll results suggested that the party won 62 per cent of the upper caste vote and 58 per cent of the OBC vote, but a mere 17 per cent of the Dalit vote and a tiny 2 per cent of the Muslim vote (India Today 2017, 18 March). The party's attempt to consolidate the Hindu vote was clear from the exclusion of Muslims from even the distribution of party tickets: not one Muslim candidate was fielded by the party in the 403 seats contested by the BJP and its allies. As a result, Muslims made up a mere 6 per cent of the legislators in the Vidhan Sabha, the lowest ever (Verniers 2017).

The ethnic social coalition cultivated by the BJP was ideationally committed to delivering on its commitment to Hindutva. In its electoral manifesto, the party had promised to commence constructing a grand temple to honour Lord Ram in Ayodhya, at the same site where its workers had razed the disputed mosque back in 1992. To that end, preparations for the construction of the temple continued in UP, despite the pandemic. On 5 August 2020, even as the country witnessed an upswing in the number of COVID cases, the prime minister himself, accompanied by Chief Minister Adityanath, came to Ayodhya to preside over the temple's ground-breaking ceremony. The construction of the temple continued apace, uninterrupted throughout the subsequent year, including when the second wave of COVID ripped through the countryside. Likewise, work proceeded on the Kashi Vishwanath Temple Corridor, another project aimed at restoring a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, throughout the two waves of the pandemic, demonstrating the

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<sup>3</sup> The state government under Mr Adityanath has been notorious for using political repression on dissidents. For example, soon after coming to power in 2017 it hounded Dr Kafeel Khan, who highlighted the shortage of oxygen in the public hospital where he practiced. During early 2020, in the wake of protests against the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the government confiscated properties of protestors. As Mahmudabad and Verniers (2021) show, 'Cash rewards were promised to those helping with their arrest, and photographs of protesters, along with their addresses, were plastered on giant hoardings in Lucknow. It also revived the 1986 Gangster and Anti-Social Activities Act to unleash India's largest state-sponsored wave of police encounters.'

government's commitment to Hindutva. The ideational commitment of the state government and the underlying ethnic social coalition together suggest an orientation of political priorities away from responding to the pandemic.

The second wave of the pandemic coincided with local government elections in UP. These were held to elect representatives of the three tiers of local government beneath the state government. These included 58,176 gram panchayats (village councils), 826 kshetra panchayats (block councils) that included 75,852 wards, and 75 zila panchayats (district councils) that in turn included 3,050 wards. Over 1.3 million candidates contested these elections to some 800,000 posts (Indian Express 2021, 11 May). Although local government elections are not contested on the party symbol, candidates are often aligned with and supported by the various state-level political parties. Against calls to postpone the elections, the BJP government insisted on conducting them as scheduled—perhaps hoping to consolidate its inroads into the rural areas of the state (Hindustan Times 2021, 5 May). Although the party's performance at the village level may not have been as good as it had expected, reports suggest that it swept the elections to the posts of the district council presidents, bagging 67 of the 75 presidencies. These elections were crucial to the party's efforts at consolidating power in the countryside ahead of the Vidhan Sabha elections scheduled for February and March 2022.

## 6 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed diverse state capacities across the world and within countries. The capacity of the state in UP has attracted much attention for its effectiveness in handling the pandemic. While there are enough reasons to be circumspect about the data emerging from that state, it is also important to situate the evolving capacity of the state within the broader context of political development.

The transformation of UP's polity from its narrow elitist social base to a broader-based inclusive social coalition arguably lay the social foundation of an effective state. Improvements in human development indicators, reduction in multidimensional poverty, and eradication of polio arguably prepared the state to contain the worst of the pandemic. The enhanced legitimacy of the state, bolstered by its inclusive social foundation, certainly lay the groundwork for an effective state. Further research is required on the social profile of the leaders, managers, and frontline workers who constitute the state; the social coalitions in which they are embedded; and the ideas that motivate them. These are essential so we can gain comprehensive insights into how states break the mould and are effective in improving the quality of life for their citizens, especially during crises like the COVID pandemic.

However, these improvements did not translate into an effective response to the raging pandemic. Under the ethnic social coalition spearheaded by the BJP under Mr Adityanath, the state demonstrated its ideational commitment to Hindutva rather than to public welfare. The result was the gruesome tragedy that befell the state during the summer of 2021.

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