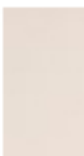


We doubled UP's per capita income, made it India's second-largest economy

Interview/ Yogi Adityanath, chief minister, Uttar Pradesh

 By Puja Awasthi | April 11, 2021 16:20 IST



Yogi Adityanath | Pawan Kumar

Yogi Adityanath was a five-time member of Parliament before he became chief minister of Uttar Pradesh—a crowning that came as a surprise to many in his own party. On March 19, 2021, exactly four years after he took oath, he spoke to THE WEEK about his government's journey. Excerpts from an exclusive interview:

Q/ What is your biggest achievement in the last four years?

A/ In the last four years, we have changed the overall perception of Uttar Pradesh. Now people see the state in a very positive and constructive manner. They realise its strength and potential. This is a matter of pride for the state's people and for me. I give credit for this to the Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji and to his leadership.

Q/ What are the specific sectors where the government's achievements have been most remarkable?

A/ We have worked in every sector in these years. We have managed to create a sense of confidence in every citizen of the state towards the government and the administration. At the time of independence, the per capita income in the state was at par with the national average. In the last 70 years, it became one-third (of the national average). In the last four years, it has more than doubled. We are a state with the largest population, but as an economy we were fifth or sixth. Now, we are the country's second largest economy. On the Ease of Doing Business index, we have improved from the 14th position in 2016 to the second.

There has not been a single riot in the last four years, whereas earlier there would be a riot every two to three days. No matter what the religion of those who are killed in riots, it is society's loss. Every festival in the state is celebrated peacefully. We have shown exemplary teamwork, be it in the management of the pandemic or the organisation of the Kumbh (2019 in Prayagraj), which was the world's largest cultural and spiritual event.

Q/ Despite the size of the state's population and the status of the health care system, the state did comparatively well in Covid-19 management. How was that done? (UP is seventh in terms of total infections and the fatality rate is 1.44 per cent.)

A/ Covid-19 is not just the problem of the state, but of the nation and the world. We were blessed to have the leadership of the prime minister. Every second or third day, he would call up the chief ministers or have video conferences with them. He would also make personal phone calls. He would have all the data with him and would know which district was facing what kind of problem and offer solutions.

At the state level, I had entrusted my ministers with making policies on various aspects, such as for people who were most vulnerable, for maintaining logistics during the lockdown, for running community kitchens, for meeting the needs of migrants and for restarting development work once the lockdown was eased. I constituted a team of 11 senior administrative officers—Team 11—with whom I would meet every day, give them specific tasks and monitor what they had done on the previous day. Similar teams were formed at the district level. I would communicate with the district-level teams as would the members of Team 11. This direct communication brought us good results.

In the first week of March 2020, we did not have the capacity to conduct a single test. Now we can conduct two lakh tests a day. Uttar Pradesh has conducted the most number of tests. From zero, we now have (more than) 1.51 lakh beds for Covid-19 patients. We did a survey of existing district-level health infrastructure to identify gaps. You will be surprised to know that there were 36 districts without ventilators and ICU beds. Now we have ICU beds, ventilators, advanced life support ambulances, trained manpower and other facilities in all districts.



Reinventing learning: A class in progress at a government primary school at Makdihampur in Ghazipur district | Pawan Kumar

From PPE kits to N95 masks to sanitisers, there is nothing that the state does not produce now. For all of this, teamwork was crucial. And while managing the pandemic, we were also successful in bringing in about Rs60,000 crore worth of investment to the state.

Q/ How have the lessons of Covid-19 management helped you to improve the overall status of health care in the state?

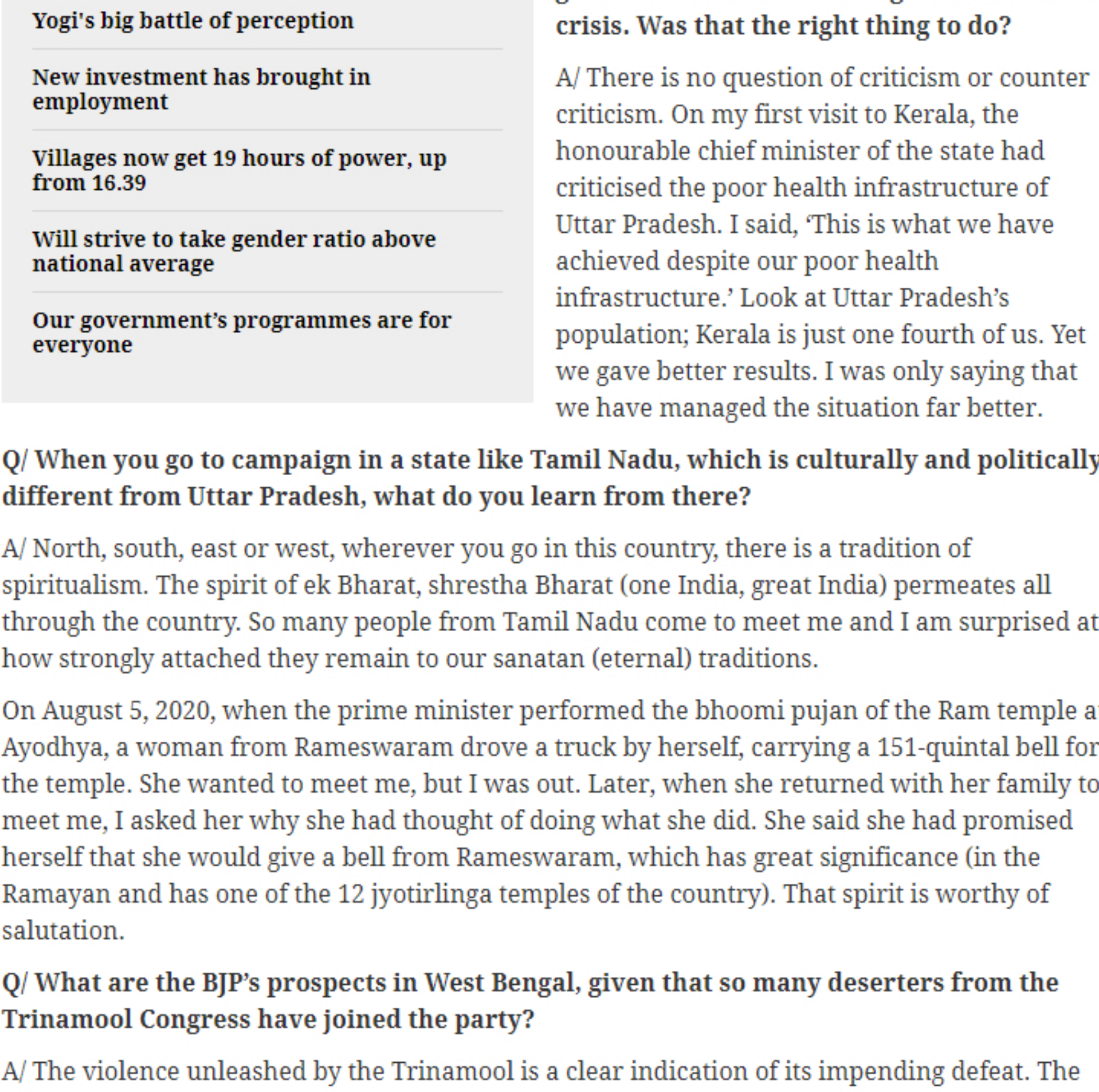
A/ We have been working on health infrastructure since we came to power. The state had only 12 government medical colleges in 2017. We now have 30 more colleges in various stages of completion. There are 16 districts without a single medical college (government or private). We have a plan in place to build colleges in PPP (public-private partnership) mode. Two AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences) have become operational. We have made massive use of technology to ensure that the best health care does not remain limited to the three best institutes in Lucknow [Sanjay Gandhi Postgraduate Institute of Medical Sciences, Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Institute of Medical Sciences and King George's Medical University]. Doctors and physicians in the districts are trained through virtual ICUs. They can have daily consultation with the best specialists.

Our experience with Japanese Encephalitis (JE) also stood us in good stead as we have been emphasising on clean drinking water and maintaining clean surroundings to contain its spread. There are 38 districts in and around eastern Uttar Pradesh that report JE cases in huge numbers. Every year, there would be 1,200-1,500 deaths in hospitals because of it, in addition to the deaths that would take place at home. Now we have 95 per cent fewer deaths.

Q/ Your father passed away when you were dealing with the pandemic (on April 20, 2020). You chose not to attend his last rites.

A/ I had two choices in front of me—that I fulfil my duties as a son (putra dharma) or my duties as a leader (raj dharma). My faith inspired me to choose a path. The passing away of a parent is very difficult and emotional. However, when you must decide for 24 crore people, you need to set aside your personal feelings.

I mourned my father from here (Lucknow) and continued to work. I do have responsibilities as a son. But my raj dharma tells me that I must share in the joys and sorrows of the people of the state. It is only then that I can ensure that the people's sentiments remain with us. My personal sadness is of no consequence in front of that. I must fulfil the duties that the public and my party have given me.



Harvesting hope: A farmer at Rampur Gomi Khara village near Lucknow | Pawan Kumar

Q/ How would you describe your work style?

A/ I am a yogi. I only know what my duty is. It is to work for the protection, prosperity and facilitation of the people. My teams make presentations before me about what can be done for the people. Whatever I think will be good for the people of the state, I ask to be implemented at once.

As a chief minister, all of it is important—deciding on the priorities, ensuring implementation and monitoring. There can be many ways to reach the same goal. Some paths may be easy, some uneven, some short cuts; some bring fame, some infamy—but decisions must be made depending on what the need of the hour is. Some schemes will lead to short-term gains, while others are medium- or long-term. The important thing is to carry everyone with you.

Q/ The state's bureaucracy has been used to a particular style of functioning. Was it challenging to mould it to your work culture?

A/ The bureaucracy is part of the system. It is a bridge between the government and the public. The bureaucracy reflects the qualities of the (political) leadership. If the leader is corrupt and unethical, you cannot stop the bureaucracy from being so as well. If the leadership fulfils its duties with honesty, it will reflect in the bureaucracy. Whatever my government has been able to achieve is the result of teamwork.

Q/ What is the difference between you as an MP and you as a chief minister?

A/ As an MP, my role was to highlight problems. I would communicate with people and the administration, place problems in front of the government and try to find solutions. As a chief minister, it is my duty to find and implement solutions. There has been a whole generation in this state which had never even heard of good governance, let alone experience it. I am thankful to our then party president and now Home Minister Amit Shah ji and the prime minister for giving me this opportunity. I thank my party workers for standing by me. It is only with their guidance and cooperation that I have been able to implement plans on the ground.

Q/ What lessons have you learnt as head of the Gorakshnath Peeth (in Gorakhpur) that helped you as an administrator?

A/ Every stage is a learning experience. The math, though religious, is dedicated to public service. It has been doing so since 1935, when the country was not even independent. In the 1960s, it started to offer health services. These were given to the most marginalised, those who were untouchables for religion. That was a limited space of work. Now my canvas is much bigger.

Q/ The state has problems that cannot be solved in just four years. The thin forest cover, for instance, has grave implications for the hydrological cycle. What are other such problems that your government has started to tackle?

A/ Our forest cover has increased in the last four years. In March 2017, we planted five crore trees, 11 crores the next year and then 22 crores. Even during the pandemic, we planted 25 crore trees. Uttar Pradesh is probably the first state that has given heritage status to trees that are more than 100 years old. The Jal Jeevan Mission—the prime minister's dream project in his second term—will solve the long-standing problem of water supply to Vindhyaachal and Bundelkhand (eastern Uttar Pradesh).

We have completed irrigation projects that were pending for more than four decades. These projects will irrigate 20 lakh hectares more than what is irrigated now. When combined with drip irrigation, this will go up three times more. We are working on a war-footing to meet these challenges.

Q/ The kind of government you are running (technology-driven, digital) requires specialists. Yet do you think you have treated specialists fairly? For example, the Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam has not paid salaries or pensions for the last many months.

A/ The corporation is an example of a previously very good department (Public Health Engineering Department) that has been ruined by recruiting more people than required and that, too, untrained people. Yes, the government needs specialists and trained manpower, but if you only sit on hartsals and do not perform, the government cannot support you. We have asked Jal Nigam to adjust its excessive manpower in different departments where it can be utilised optimally.

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Q/ In Kerala, you criticised the state government for its handling of the Covid-19 crisis. Was that the right thing to do?

A/ There is no question of criticism or counter criticism. On my first visit to Kerala, the honourable chief minister of the state had criticised the poor health infrastructure of Uttar Pradesh. I said, 'This is what we have achieved despite our poor health infrastructure.' Look at Uttar Pradesh's population; Kerala is just one fourth of us. Yet we gave better results. I was only saying that we have managed the situation far better.

Q/ When you go to campaign, a state like Tamil Nadu, which is culturally and politically different from Uttar Pradesh, in what do you learn from there?

A/ North, south, east or west, wherever you go in this country, there is a tradition of spiritualism. The spirit of ek Bharat, shrestha Bharat (one India, great India) permeates all through the country. So many people from Tamil Nadu come to meet me and I am surprised at how strongly attached they remain to our sanatana (eternal) traditions.

On August 5, 2020, when the prime minister performed the bhoomi puja of the Ram temple at Ayodhya, a woman from Rameswaram drove a truck by herself, carrying a 151-quintal bell for the temple. She wanted to meet me, but I was out. Later, when she returned with her family to meet me, I asked her why she had thought of doing what she did. She said she had promised herself that she would give a bell from Rameswaram, which has great significance (in the Ramayan and has one of the 12 jyotirlinga temples of the country). That spirit is worthy of salutation.

Q/ What are the BJP's prospects in West Bengal, given that so many deserters from the Trinamool Congress have joined the party?

A/ The violence unleashed by the Trinamool is a clear indication of its impending defeat. The BJP will win handsomely in the state.

Q/ There is just one year before the state goes to the polls. What are the areas that you will focus on?

A/ We will focus on taking welfare schemes to the public and improving the state's infrastructure. Rural areas, farmers, women and youth have always been our focus areas and we will continue to work for them.

Q/ There is a section of the media, including the foreign media, which labels you divisive and dangerous. Does that bother you?

A/ Who is thinking what about me makes no difference to me. Jaisi drishti, waisi shrishti (one's vision decides how one sees the world). Those who think negatively view me in that light. For me, what matters is what the people of Uttar Pradesh and India think about me. I do not pay attention to what others have to say.

School education

By Puja Awasthi

In January 2019, the state launched a scheme laying out a clear definition of an out-of-school child and how to motivate principals and education department officials to bring children to schools. Principals, block-level education officers and district magistrates who ensured a 15 per cent rise in enrolment were rewarded.

The dropout rate in primary schools dropped from 9.48 per cent in 2016-17 to 4.92 per cent in 2018-19, and in upper primary schools from 7.34 per cent to 5.80 per cent in the same time. The Kayakalp programme, which remodels schools to be inviting, colourful and child-friendly, covered 1.35 lakh schools. Arush Varma, a Class 4 student at the government primary school in Makhdoompur (Lucknow), said he was proud to show off his school to visiting relatives. His principal, Manish Khare said many parents whose children went to private schools were seeking admission there.

The state has also enhanced existing infrastructure by starting construction of girls' hostels in 107 development blocks, residential schools in 18 divisions, 248 inter-colleges and 771 residential schools for girls.

Chronic teacher shortage (recruitments have been embroiled in legal battles) was tackled by appointing more than one lakh teachers. A detailed point-based system looks at the circumstances of a teacher (for instance allotting points for women, spouses of military personnel, and the disabled) ahead of transfers. Salary increments are now based on an appraisal system.

Tourism

By Puja Awasthi

The paucity of international airports has been addressed. Three more will be added at Jewar, Kushinagar and Ayodhya (two exist, in Lucknow and Varanasi). The first is the most ambitious as it will also ease traffic at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. There are however logistical challenges to meet, like the three minor irrigation canals that run through the proposed land.

The tourism budget for 2019-2020 (Rs1022.62 crore) was more than double that of 2016-2017, but there seems to be an emphasis on religious sites. In the latest budget, Rs200 crore goes to just Ayodhya and Varanasi.

Problems like poor visitor management at religious sites, inadequate conservation of heritage sites and a paucity of skilled manpower remain, but the state has been on an overdrive to attract private investment. As per data from the state tourism department, 244 proposals worth Rs18,753 crore have been received so far.

Having a BJP government at the Centre has helped get quick clearances for the setting up of airports for short-haul flights such as those in Chitrakoot, which will provide an entry point to hitherto unexplored Bundelkhand. But safety is a concern, especially for women travelling alone. Mill Malhotra, Lucknow-based travel photographer, said: "I have not seen places in the state because I think it is unsafe [to go alone]. Eight of us went on an all-women trip to Meghalaya and felt extremely safe. I had the same experience in Kodaikanal. These are places I would not hesitate to send my 20-year-old daughter alone."

Health care

By Puja Awasthi

With 29 new medical colleges in the pipeline, the state will soon have the highest number of such institutions; outpatient wards are functional in 14. The Gorakhpur AIIMS is up and running. Another one is coming up in Rae Bareilly, which will also house an Ayush University. Medical seats (private and government) will go up to 7,100—almost four times the current capacity.

The current regime has vaccinated the highest number of children so far (7.57 crore). Five lakh families are covered by the Ayushman Bharat scheme. Infant mortality has dropped from 48 per 10,000 in 2014 to 41 per 10,000 in 2019. Maternal mortality has come down from 285 per lakh women to 201 per lakh.

A door-to-door awareness campaign, provisions for clean drinking water, sanitation drives, vaccination and early treatment have brought down Japanese Encephalitis infection rates by 75 per cent and death rates by 95 per cent.

Kafeel Khan, the paediatrician who was suspended and jailed following the oxygen supply tragedy in September 2017, said: "The government has put in a lot of money in medical services in Gorakhpur. A clearer picture of the fall in deaths will emerge if figures of deaths in Gorakhpur division and the deaths because of acute febrile illness [are compared]."

The state's biggest challenge remains the lack of manpower. The community health centre in Itaunja, Lucknow, for example, has only three doctors (six posts sanctioned) and a female doctor visits thrice a week. The 30-bedded centre has 11 nurses and two ward boys, but none of the two sanctioned sweepers.

Industrial investment

By Puja Awasthi

As per data from the state's ministry of industries, of all the MoUs signed by the government, 43 per cent have reached commercial production stage. The national average for this conversion rate is 30 per cent to 35 per cent. These projects will create employment for 1.27 lakh. A further 122 projects worth Rs35,863 crore are under implementation and will create potential employment of 2.05 lakh.

Among the big-ticket projects for which land has been allotted is a Rs900-crore data centre by a Singapore-based firm in Noida, a Rs300-crore integrated food processing unit by Britannia in Barabanki and a Rs187-crore Forever Distilleries unit in Deoria. Foreign investment intents have come in from 10 countries.

The Hiranandani Group is making a Rs6,000-crore investment in a data centre in Greater Noida. Group CEO Darshan Hiranandani said: "UP has a large population, proximity to the capital and most importantly, a pro-investment environment fostered by the government." He rated the government's attitude as "absolutely fantastic... visionary, with great clarity and diligence".

Nasser Salim, media panellist, Samajwadi Party, said that a lot of the momentum had been created before the current regime. "It was under the SP regime that Ratan Tata said that he was losing his heart to UP," he said. "We introduced the industrial grievance system which is now the Nivesh Mitra. The government is claiming our achievements as its own."

Regional imbalances

By Puja Awasthi

There is wide disparity in the prosperity levels in the state's east and west. This is not only because of low income levels, but also because of what is economically termed deprivations in human development. This includes not having quality housing, access to water, good sanitation and electricity. Eastern UP, Bundelkhand in particular, fares badly on these parameters.

This regime has allotted land for many big projects in the east. The defence corridor has nodes in Jhansi and Chitrakoot. Land has also been allotted for a Rs750-crore yeast manufacturing unit in Chitrakoot and a Rs187-crore distilling project in Deoria. The 340.82km Purvanchal expressway and the 296.07km Bundelkhand expressway will improve connectivity. The piped water scheme has covered 891 revenue villages out of 4,513, so far.

Vinod Shanker Singh, a professor of social work, said: "In the last 25 years, there has been no improvements in infrastructure. The government must consider small dams at distances of 20km-25km. The region has ponds spread over a large area and their digging and cleaning should not be limited to work under MGNREGA. The region has varied arts and handicrafts and would benefit if it could be sold in places like Dilli Haat (a space for selling crafts managed by Delhi Tourism where stalls can be rented for 15 days)."

Agriculture and irrigation

By Puja Awasthi

Agriculture contributes 26 per cent to the state's GDP; 59 per cent of the population depends on it. There was an 8 per cent increase in food grain production from 2016-17 to 2019-20. Farm loans saw an increase of 13 per cent in the same period, while seed distribution went up 23 per cent. The number of kisan credit cards issued went from just over one crore to 1.61 crore and the state was first in terms of the number of soil health cards distributed. The government also waived farm loans worth Rs25,233.48 crore.

Lal Bahadur Yadav, a farmer with an acre in Rampur Gomi Khara village (Lucknow), said the government was providing everything from seeds to fertilisers at reduced rates, but many "around him" took loans with the intent of not paying back.

There is greater use of technology to ease processes such as e-procurement. The state has been able to increase its irrigated area by 3.77 lakh hectare. Concerted efforts are being made to remove regional imbalances—Bundelkhand got 75 tubewells, freshly dug ponds in 13,645 farmlands and an electricity rebate of 50 to 75 per cent.

Pratik Ranjan Chaurasia, former head of the state's minor irrigation and groundwater department, said that while the government's pace was commendable, more work was required. "Farmers need to be taught [the difference between] drip and sprinkler irrigation," he said. "Water availability needs to be improved by massive increase in green cover." He also said the Groundwater Act, which shall penalise commercial establishments for misuse of water, was much needed.

Women's welfare

By Puja Awasthi

Under the Kanya Sumangala Yojana, a sum is allotted for raising and educating a girl. The money is deposited in a bank account at five stages, from birth till she enrolls for a degree or diploma course.

Mission Shakti focuses on training programmes that will encourage women to report crimes. Ruchita Chaudhary, deputy commissioner of police (women crime), Lucknow, said: "We are receiving complaints about unnatural sex and abuse in live-in relationships." She said women were not comfortable reporting such issues earlier, but thanks to the training, they are reassured. "We do not counsel (them to) patch-up unless the woman wants it," she said. "There is no point in sending a woman back to an abusive environment." All 1,534 police stations in the state now have women help desks, while 218 fast-track courts have been set up to expeditiously dispose of cases.

The state is first in the construction of toilets (2.28 crore). In addition, 651 municipal corporations now have public toilets for women. Around 1.1 crore women are now linked to self-help groups. The banking correspondent scheme provides employment to women in rural areas. They will also get loans to set up enterprises. Shashi Thakur, a Kanpur-based entrepreneur, said the government must also consider setting up help desks for women entrepreneurs.