

Manoj Tiwari

"Gorakhpur's Obama"

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Uttar Pradesh is a state of India that is famous for its religious and cultural centres. One such centre is Gorakhpur, which is located in eastern Uttar Pradesh. This is a city with both Hindu and Buddhist links and was once part of the famous 'Koshla' of lord Rama.

It was in the 12th century that the city grew in prominence when it became the nucleus of the Hindu Tantrik and Ascetic, Baba Goraknath. He has influenced the Indians following his sect and his Samadhi is visited by thousands of pilgrims everyday.

It was in the 20th century that Gorakhpur once again rose to prominence in the history of India. With the burning of a police station in a locality called Chauri Chaura during the Non-Cooperation Movement, Mahatma Gandhi had to withdraw the movement altogether.

Now -- Gorakpkhpur is in the news again for a completely different reason. Ever since Manoj Tiwari, the biggest star of regional Bhojpuri cinema started contesting in the election from the regional Samajwadi Party of Gorakhpur city in Uttar Pradesh, the city is becoming famous all over again.

Tiwari, who began his career as a small-town singer in Bhojpuri (a dialect of Hindi spoken by an estimated 150m people in the two states), is an immensely popular actor.

His first film was released in 2004 and in the past four years, he has increased that to 51. Four more are ready for release. Tiwari's films are a hit with the Diaspora in Mauritius, Fiji, Surinam and the West Indies. A popular Bhojpuri website, bhojpuria.com, has christened Tiwari as "Gorakhpur's Obama".

Tiwari's vision is like Obama, so local people call him "Gorakhpur's Obama".

Dressed with colourful and traditional garb, he looks every bit the small town hero. Many stars and celebrities of Bollywood are directly and indirectly associated with Indian politics. Political parties also use them for enhancing parties' popularity because of their stardom. Tiwari's contribution to politics however, is in a sense not traditional. He is not Bollywood star, but one of the biggest stars of regional Bhojpuri cinema.

In his election campaign, he has chosen to speak in Bhojpuri dialect. He uses stories, anecdotes and songs to inspire people and thousands of them gather at his rallies.

Like Barak Obama, Tiwari stresses on change, specifically towards improving the environment, economic emancipation and social justice.

Gorakhpur and it's surrounding areas are deprived of development and the basic problems are all too familiar - unemployment, mafia control and mosquitoes. The district has a high rate of crime and every year hundreds of people die here from encephalitis.

The actor also emphasises on the need to generate revenue for the region. He says "I'm an actor; I live and work in Mumbai. I shoot my films in Mumbai and then all the post production work is done in Mumbai. So the whole revenue goes to that state. It doesn't benefit the people of Gorakhpur and this region."

Then he gives importance to set up a film city in Gorakhpur which would be fully equipped for post-production work. That would create employment here and generate revenue for this region. Along with this he has promised to restart sugar and fertilizer factories which he says would solve the unemployment problem.

In his films, Tiwari is the hero who defeats the villains and does good for people. But he admits that in real life, it is difficult. He observes a similarity between film and politics. He comments that a hero is like a leader whose visions and activities may impact on the public mind. If he wins the election, he says he will do only three films a year.

The battle in Gorakhpur is unlikely to be easy - he is pitted against Yogi Adityanath and the Bahujan Samajwadi Party's Vinay Shankar Tiwari who belongs to a politically influential family.

Nevertheless, this hero is confident about his victory. He gives importance on public support. He believes that as his intentions are good and because he is seen as representing the ordinary people, his chances of winning are high.