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Changing Face of Indian Party System : Emergence of BJP - A New Party System or A New Political System

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The seed for the new political play field had been sown in the 2014 elections when the whole nation voted unanimously not for their caste or region but for a cause - say no to corruption. After the 2014 General Elections, the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, with the help of a well-structured digital media team and a strong party cadre network, picked up the battle for the 2019 election. In 2019, we witnessed the BJP making substantial inroads into the states . The narrative of the Congress did not appeal to the electorate and they failed to connect with the voters

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1. Introduction

The 2019 elections has been a landmark election in several ways and one of them has been the dramatic change in the playing field of

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the new political system for all the political parties. The country witnessed the rise of a political battleground which was more focused on centralization rather than decentralization, i.e. focus was on the Rashtra, the nation and not regions. Focus was on a national identity rather than caste or region based identity.

The seed for the new political playfield had been sown in the 2014 elections when the whole nation voted unanimously not for their caste or region but for a cause- say no to corruption, and to bring a clean party to the center to redeem the national pride. The BJP never let go of this strength and despite the disastrous showing in terms of economic growth and development during its tenure from 2014-2019, it came back to power with a resounding victory because the duo of Amit Shah and Narendra Modi had carefully planned the rules of the new political battlefield one step at a time.

Immediately after the 2014 General Elections, the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, with the help of a well-structured digital media team and a strong party cadre network, picked up the battle for the 2019 election, one state at a time to expand its territorial reach. After the loss in the Assembly polls on 2013 in Kerala, there was no time to be lost and the BJP got into election mode and they did not lose any assembly election and by the end of 2014 post the general elections, they had 8 Chief Ministers in India across the northern spectrum and they had made inroads into even the traditional Left dominated state of West Bengal where they emerged as the main opposition party which was unheard of. In a state where Ram was recognized a Hindu God of North Indians and not of the Bengali population, the state saw Ram Navmi being celebrated in a big way and a culture of Hindutva rather than a North Indian or a Bengali culture being the prominent culture in the state.

2. Approach Adopted by the BJP to Mobilize the Voters in 2014 General Elections

During my research the following pattern emerged as the approach adopted by the BJP to achieve this resounding victory had to tackle its opponents on 4 fronts:

- The Congress Party as in Karnataka,
- The State based parties as in Telengana, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal,

- The alliance between Congress and the state based parties as in Jharkhand, Bihar, Maharashtra and others and lastly,
- The alliance between the state based parties as in Uttar Pradesh.

The first opponent, the states where Congress was in power, was an easy target for BJP as the nation after 2014 was ready for a Congress Muktabharat and the strategy of the BJP was to ensure a complete erasure of the Congress party. But the tougher states were the ones with state based parties being present and also performing well.

The strategy of the BJP was to mobilise the votes of the electorate in such states by targeting the non partisan voters and the voters who were affiliated to the small state parties and also those who were not affiliated to closed parties but to open parties

During my research the factor which emerged as a major contributor in decision making for voting for a government at the center amongst such voters was the choice of the Prime Minister and it was actually Brand Modi and national pride which he promised to deliver were factors which helped steer the victory of the BJP and lay down a new political system in our country.

3. BJP and the 2019 Scenario

In 2019, we witnessed the BJP making substantial inroads into the states which were not erstwhile BJP dominated states and this was a result of the mobilization of these voters in these states. During this election BJP not merely increased its seats but also made inroads into areas where they had no presence before as West Bengal, Assam, Tripura. In almost 20 states the BJP received more than 40% of the valid votes in the seats that it contested.

In Uttar Pradesh, BJP faced the Mahagathbandhan where state parties aligned to put a united front for BJP but BJP managed to increase its vote share and win the state. In states where the Congress entered into an alliance with state parties as Jharkhand, Bihar, Karnataka and Maharashtra, BJP scored comprehensive wins in all states except for Maharashtra. In states where the BJP faced state based parties as West Bengal, Odisha, Telangana the BJP could not post a win but even in these states BJP emerged as the second largest party. It was only in states as Kerala,TamilNadu and Andhra

Pradesh which have closed party systems that BJP drew a blank and did not get even a single seat.

In LokSabha elections, factors that move the voters and who are not aligned to any party and in states where there are no closed party systems, is the voter satisfaction with the incumbent Central government and the rise of BJP in 2019 showed that despite the economic disasters of the BJP government, the voters were still satisfied with the performance of the government. This clearly showed that a new political system was forming in India and was being woven by the BJP under the leadership of Modi.

There were several factors which were responsible for the BJP creating the new political system. One major factor was the introduction of the Electoral Bond scheme by the BJP just before the 2019 elections This new policy "opened the floodgates to unlimited corporate donations to political parties and anonymous financing by Indian as well as foreign companies, which can have serious repercussions on the Indian democracy". According to audit reports and income tax reports submitted by parties to the Election Commission, the BJP has been the biggest beneficiary of electoral bonds, garnering 94.5% of the bonds worth around Rs. 210 crore. But merely receiving funding is not enough if it is not used for furthering its gain and BJP did not fail in doing this. In Andhra Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu had no shortage of funds, but he did not know how to use it. The BJP however, used the funding very effectively to build a strong digital media team and a strong cadre of dedicated party workers focused on building Brand Modi and Brand Hindu Rashtriyata. Such strong organizational strength was missing amongst the other political parties and the availability of funds made this task much easier for the BJP. The dedication and commitment of their human resources right up to the grassroots level was unparalleled.

Another factor that helped BJP was the concept of Hindutva and Rashtriyata. Hindutva was very much a part of this election. But for the elitist population that was not seduced by the concept of Hindutva, the team BJP seduced them with the concept of Rashtriyata. The media team of BJP ran a very successful campaign presenting BJP as the party that would regain the lost national prestige, the national interest, national security, and national honor and used every opportunity as Modi's visits abroad, his mass appeal

in international arena, the Pulwama attack and the retaliatory action of the BJP, to build the image of Modi as the only strong leader who could deliver this to a country who wanted something to be proud of. Brand Modi emerged as a decisive and aggressive leader who could take the bull by its horn and who could place India on a global pedestal with world leaders and no longer the underdog as a third world country.

In my conversation with the voters especially in the rural belts another narrative that played a major role and which was projected as big factor was the popular welfare schemes of the BJP government which impacted the life of ordinary people by entering their homes. Schemes as Ujjwala, SBM, roads, and money in bank accounts were all schemes aimed at the common man and while it did reach a large population though not reaching all, the BJP campaign fund was well utilized in ensuring that the narrative of the schemes was communicated in a dominant manner by the party cadre at the lowest levels. If the scheme impacted one person, immediately a picture would be taken and posted on the social media and the narrative communicated to the voters was that if it has reached one it would reach them sooner or later. The promise of Acche din and the impact that it would have on their daily lives was magnified to such an extent by the Media cell of the BJP that it totally eclipsed the disastrous economic situation that the Indian economy was going through as an impact of introduction of GST and demonetization. As one respondent said the individual was being looked at as a beneficiary, a labharthi,and if he received a labh or a benefit or was sure and hopeful that he would soon receive a direct benefit of all other government schemes, he would convert into a voter.

The concept of labharthi was a major vote generator for the BJP. There were several social welfare schemes introduced by the Congress too but the money did not reach the people directly and was always routed through government distribution systems and to a large extent the beneficiary could not receive the money without doling out something to the distribution system managers. But with the introduction of the Jan Dhan Plan, the Aadhar Card and the Mudra Loans, or as they are called - The JAM trinity, direct transfer of public goods and benefits was suddenly possible from the government directly to the labharthi.This gave a sense of financial independence and belief in the government which nothing could

parallel. Under the Ujjwala scheme Gas cylinders were delivered to people and they felt empowered but no one asked the question, where the second cylinder would come from. The fact is these people had never seen the delivery of anything, and even if they got a delivery, they had not seen the delivery of anything without having to pay bribes for it, including NREGA wages in most cases.

One cannot deny the fact that as compared to the opposition, the BJP organization structure and strategy for reaching out to the voters was way ahead by leaps and bounds. The Congress and other state based parties stood no chance in front of the strong and organized BJP party cadre down till the lowest level, the use of social media and digitization in managing the party cadre and the voters. The opposition was still using the old rules of contesting the election, not realizing that in a digital India there as a new language that was influencing the electorate and failed to reach out to the masses.

The narrative of the Congress did not appeal to the electorate and they failed to connect with the voters. The focus of the Congress was to find faults with Modi and on secularism which was not people wanted to hear. They never once talked about the economic and developmental contribution made by the UPA II as the Delhi and Mumbai airports and their successful economic policies. The only glory they talked of was the time of Indira Gandhi and how their family had laid down their lives for the nation. They had forgotten that most of the voters in 2019 were not even born when Indira Gandhi died and they failed to connect with the narrative. Also, people felt that they had been loyal to Congress for their sacrifice for long and did not owe them anymore. Further, though the legend of the Congress party was great but its current leader did not inspire any sense of confidence in the masses.

Last but not the least, the most important factor that contributed to the new system was the powerful tool of communication using the social media platforms to narrate the stories of BJP ideology and Brand Modi while at the same time totally destroying the image of the leader of the opposition as a weak, indecisive leader. The media team of Modi very clearly diverted the attention of the masses from the economic disaster that India was going through with Make in India not going anywhere, Demonetization and GST having severely impacted the GDP of the country, unemployment being at its highest. The focus was on Modi

as a leader who had the guts to rise up against Pakistan in Balakot and was therefore the only leader who could bring back the lost glory of the country. Further, Modi wore Hindutva on his sleeve when his visit to Kedarnath temple before elections were televised and this played a huge role in the electoral verdict when the peole voted not for caste or regionalism lines but on religion and nationalism.

The outcome of the carefully designed strategy by the duo of Modi and Amit Shah using the new digital language understood by the new generation, was the creation of a new party system and in fact a new political system in the country.Since the 2019 election, the second Modi-led government has pushed the transition from a de facto Hindu majoritarian state towards a de jure Hindu majoritarian state through the adoption of controversial policies affecting some of the basic normative tenets of India's old constitutional order, so much so that the BJP's rise to power has transformed not only the party system, but also the political system itself.

Never before had we seen a party spread it's geographical presence across the length and breadth of the country as BJP managed to do in 2019 elections. As one respondent said It was almost like laying down the foundation for a single party system in India with one major player and the others being small state players. Even in these states, BJP was the second largest party having effectively expanded its base in states as West Bengal and Orissa. Barring a few states as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, BJP was a success in all states. The political playfield is today witnessing the decline of the Congress party with no credible leader at the helm of affairs, while the BJP with a strong leader and core team has succeeded to create a voter base who view themselves through the lens of religion rather than caste and state and with the largest majority of Indians being Hindu they are finding it very easy to align with the vision of the BJP which during and after the 2019 elections has worn Hindutva on its sleeve with pride. It looks like as if the political playfield in the future will be dominated by one single party with one vision, one voice and the only challenge they may face would be from state based small parties. It remains to be seen if this is good or bad for the Indian democracy. While several people argue that this is good as it makes it easy for decision to be made and good governance but others argue that it will be the very basis of an authoritarian government.

The 2019 elections also saw a new feature emerging in the Indian political system. For the first time, the Indian election was compared to the Presidential form of election in the United States. Brand Modi was the dominant factor in these elections and the media team of BJP highlighted the leadership and performance of Modi and compared him to Rahul Gandhi, the Congress party leader and their Prime Ministerial Candidate. This was clearly a presidential election, in which the opposition did not have a presidential candidate and that became a huge disadvantage. The BJP had personified their campaign in the figure of Modi, but the opposition, for various reasons, couldn't come up with a candidate who could personify their appeal. Even if the opposition could have come up with a united candidate, it could have created a big difference to voters who were confused, 'If not Modi, then who?' Was there no alternative to Modi jee,? If yes then there is a big question mark that whether we are becoming a managed democracy, like Russia is. In a managed democracy, there is an electoral majority,which can be also called as authoritarian populism, a danger people are looking at as we move forward.

A dominant factor that impacted the voting pattern during the 2019 election was Brand Modi and the absence of Brand Rahul Gandhi. In the absence of any credible leadership in any other party, voters across party lines and affiliations voted for Brand Modi and strong central leadership.

4. Emergence of BJP - A New Party System or A New Political System

The new political party and system emerging with a strong centralized leadership and concept of Hindu Rashtriyata the task for the BJP electoral machinery for the next 5 years is very clear. The focus till the next elections would be to maintain the stronghold that BJP has gained and to keep its opposition in check in the states and work on making inroads in states as Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

 Till 2019 politicians had different electoral maths to follow -Minorities to vote on religious lines, and Hindus were comfortable in their religion. And that is why Ayodhya card of Mr. Advani was not played by BJP and it projected Mr . Vajpayee as a secular face for Prime Minister. But during 2019, BJP did not give any thought to it

and wore Hindutava on its sleeves without bothering for Minority votes. BJP was confident of getting votes of 80% of the Hindu population,. The verdict on the Ram janam Bhumi(Post Election) convinced the Hindu voters of their right decision to vote for Modi.But some serious questions are before the voters who voted for Modi led BJP - Will BJP work always as Pro Hindu ? Others questions - Why no serious actions are taken against offenders who lynched Muslims in the name of cow protection ? Laws on love Jihad in UP and other states will lead to which direction? Last but not the least why BJP not coming ahead to settle scores with the Farmers ,who are also named as separatists, Khalistanis ? Is it because BJP feels they are in majority with Hindu votes. It is a clear signal or sign that We are moving towards a Hindu majoritarian state and a one party system.

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