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Analysing the Rise of Saffron Politics in India with Special Reference to Seventeenth Lok Sabha Elections

Mr. Rishi Kumar Bhardwaj^{1,*}, Dr. Jyoti²
Corresponding Author's email id. rishibhardwaj722@gmail.com

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Abstract

The strength of the Central government depends on a clear majority in the lower house of the Parliament. With each passing year, the national reach of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has grown, while the reach of the Congress has shrunk. The BJP's gains have largely come at the expense of the Congress. In contrast, the latter ran thirteen states before the last general election (2014); today it governs in just three (also as a coalition partner in Jharkhand, Tamil Nadu). Riding on a massive saffron surge sweeping through most parts of India, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government became the only non-Congress government to return to power in Indian political history. Altogether, the seat and vote gains mark a new high in India's history of saffron politics. The lion's share of the credit for the BJP's resurgence belongs to Modi, who remains the most popular politician in India. This paper is an attempt to analyse the major factors in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections that favoured the BJP.

Keywords: Electoral Politics, Election, Political Parties, Dominant Party, BJP

Introduction

The seventeenth Lok Sabha elections 2019 have established the inviolability of the Constitution as the basic norm of Indian Polity. The peaceful transfer of power after the seventeenth consecutive General Elections since 1952 makes India a truly Democratic nation that stands out as the world's largest democracy, where the roots of democracy are deepening with the conclusion of each election. When India became independent in 1947 and chose the path of a Constitutional democracy, many Western scholars were sceptical about the success of democracy in a nation as diverse as India. Giving universal franchise to a largely illiterate population was a huge decision, as many of the Western countries, including Switzerland, conferred the right to vote to women only in the 1970s. As many newly independent countries of Asia and Africa witnessed military coups and dictatorships, they kept speculating about the survival of democracy in India. Free and fair elections, freedom of speech, expression, and association, political awakening, and an independent judiciary are the fundamental basis of democracy. People's participation in shaping and sharing power in a democracy requires their awareness of the system.

¹ Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Central University of Himachal Pradesh, Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh, India

Elections constitute the cornerstone of our democracy and are the main spring of a healthy democratic life and a barometer of its strength and validity. It is a process by which the political opinion of the people is shaped. Political participation in the election is essential in a real democratic system. Elections in a democracy are the true interpreters of the policies and programmes of political parties. Thus, institution like democracy is considered to be handicapped without the political process like elections (Raisa, 1996: 389).

The rule of law is an essential feature of Indian democracy. Moreover, the party that wins the most seats forms and runs the government. The nature and working of parties are influenced by the nature of the state and society in which they operate is an agreed notion in the literature on party politics. The country's history, national character, culture, traditions, philosophy, and economy influence the parties in the way they shape up and function. Also, the legal framework, the electoral system, and the political environment influence the working of the parties (Suri, Lokniti Survey report 2019). The electoral process is also about mainstreaming of political parties and leaders as they keep reposing their faith in the Constitution to gain acceptance among voters who have become much more mature over the decades (The Tribune, May 2019). In six years since 2013, when Narendra Modi was declared its prime ministerial candidate, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has managed to widen its geographical reach and strengthen its electoral and political supremacy across the country. Today, the BJP is the largest and most dominant political party in India. Ever since Modi became Prime Minister on May 26, 2014, the BJP has been working like a well-oiled electoral machine. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity remained continuously at the national as well as international levels was high during his five-year term as a strong leader. It helps the BJP to win state elections as well as national elections. BJP has won one state election after another and is dominating the national discourse like no other party has done in contemporary times.

Structure of Party Competition After the 1990s

After the 90s, the rise of post-Congress polity resulted in further opening up of the field of party competition. The decline of the Congress meant that political space emerged at the Centre for many contenders, and also that in many states the Congress receded in favour of new political formations. This development has produced a multi-party structure of political competition (Palishkar, Suri, Yadav, 2014: 17). Last 30 years witnessed that the national governments of India have always had either Congress or BJP as their leading partners and even when non-Congress, non-BJP governments came to power, they always depended on the support from either of these two parties. Thus, a large number of regional or state parties in the competition arena are relevant only in connection with the two major national parties BJP and Congress (Mukherjee, 2017: 20).

Parties do present themselves differently on matters of performance, both in terms of governance and in terms of leadership style. Similarly, the way in which parties mobilize popular support and engage in expressive action distinguishes them from each other (Palishkar, Suri, Yadav, 2014: 23).

The governments have come to be identified with one supreme leader of the party. Therefore, leadership continues to be an important issue, and quite a few states present the voters with a choice between leaders who are at loggerheads with each other. There are either two contending leaders, as in the case of Tamil Nadu, UP, or Bihar. Even in states like Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, and Rajasthan, leadership operates as a moderately important factor. Finally, the political culture of competitive politics of some states contributes to a greater sense of belonging and participation for the citizens and thereby expands the choice space available

to them. (Ibid, 24). Luckily for the BJP, the opposition remains in disarray. Congress has been slow to rectify the organizational and leadership deficiencies laid bare in 2014. Left parties have seen a precipitous decline nearly everywhere save for the state of Kerala, their last remaining stronghold. The party (BJP) has become the central pole around which politics in India revolves. This distinguished position once belonged to the Congress, but its recent electoral stumbles and the BJP's abundant successes have decisively changed the equation (Vaishnav, 2018: 4).

BJP in Indian Electoral Battle

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) organized in 1980. The emergence of the BJP as a major force in Indian politics soon overwhelmed Congress as the largest party in 1996, 1998, and 1999 and the majority party in the 2014 and 2019 general elections. Over the period of time, this party has become one of the largest political parties in the country. It has challenged the supremacy of the Indian National Congress (INC), which upholds a form of secular nationalism and has held sway over Indian politics for quite a long period. In the journey of political parties after independence, a new dimension is added to the party system, which is the emergence of an alternative to the Congress. In the last seventy years (till 2014), except for Congress, no party was able to get a majority in the Lok Sabha on its own. Being an important institution in Indian politics, it is inevitable to understand the evolution of the BJP in Indian politics.

The Lok Sabha elections of 1989, 1991, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2004, and 2009 witnessed the stabilisation and expansion in the electoral support of the BJP both at the Centre and in the State politics of India. The BJP obtained 86 Lok Sabha seats in 1989, 120 seats in 1991, 160 seats in 1996, 182 seats in 1998, the same seat share obtained in 1999, and 138 seats in 2004 and 116 seats in the 2009 General Elections (Ibid, 17). It is important to explain the growth of the BJP in the 2014 to 2019 general elections because in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections, it obtained only two seats and was a very marginal player in national politics. It seems paradoxical that the party on Hindutva ideology could not get the support of Hindu voters even when the post-partition Hindu-Muslim divide was quite deep because of the post-partition tragedy of Hindu-Muslim migrations. It looks quite paradoxical that Hindutva has come to occupy a central position in Indian politics after seven decades of Indian Independence at a time when inter-community relations had improved as compared with the situation of 1947-50 (Ibid, 47).

In 2013, the BJP was in power in five states- Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, and Goa, and was sharing power with allies - JD (U) in Bihar and Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in Punjab. Its political fortunes have changed dramatically since then. By May 2018, the BJP, either on its own strength or with its alliance partners, was ruling in 21 of the 31 states and union territories, expanding to the regions and states where it had never been in power before. Recently, in 12 states where the BJP ruled, it has its own chief ministers, and in the other six, it shares power with its allies (Mishra, 2018)

Failures of the Congress Party

In every state where the Congress has gone head-to-head with the BJP, voters have given the BJP a huge thumbs up. The harsh reality is this: Congress has emerged even weaker in 2019. Although its seat tally has gone up by 8 from 44 to 52, the bulk of its seats have come from local boosters in three states. It won 15 seats in Kerala against a fast-fading CPM, nine seats piggybacking on DMK in Tamil Nadu, and eight seats in Punjab, thanks to the continuing popularity of its then Chief Minister Capt. Amrinder Singh (Indian Express, May 2019). Without these 32 seats, its tally would have slumped to 20 seats. Now, while the Congress tally

has gone up to 52 seats, its vote share has remained the same pitiable 19.5 per cent. The BJP on its part, won 303 seats- up from the 282 it won in 2014 and in a majority of the states where it has a bipolar contest against the Congress, its vote share crossed the 50 per cent mark, a remarkable feat in India's first-past-the-post electoral system. The principle opposition party could not open its account in as many as 17 states/UTs. The most definitive symbol of the Congress demolition is Rahul Gandhi's personal defeat on the family turf of Amethi (Outlook, 209: 40), where he lost to the BJP candidate Smriti Irani.

While the party's second-worst defeat in the 134-year-old party's history has been ascribed to the overpowering Modi magic. It's also true that a sense of missteps over the last five years, organisational ineptness, misconceived strategic, tactical blunders, and poor or clumsy messaging played their part (The Sunday Express, May 2019). Congress was unable to deliver its Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) message (of a minimum income guarantee scheme) to beneficiaries of the proposal. It got stuck on the 'Chowkidar Chor hai' slogan without realising the backlash it was inviting. Most importantly, it has done nothing through its years in the opposition to stem the rot in the organisation or build an election machine to match Amit Shah's formidable nuts and bolts system (The Indian Express, May 2019).

The Indian National Congress is no more in a position to set the terms of political competition or set the agenda. Its relation with many social sections and various regional parties has been tenuous. Its prospect of retaining power is only contingent. Overall, this condition has been understood as the characteristic of post-congress politics, a condition in which the INC was no longer the central poll of party competition against which all other political parties, termed as non-congress opposition, are arrayed on either side. During the mid-1990s, the decline of the INC appeared to be arrested. It came back to power in 2004, leading the UPA, and in 2009, significantly added to its seat share in the Lok Sabha. This later development allowed the party to retain its role in the politics of the country as the prominent one among the important players and to prevent it from fading away, but it failed.

Once we moved beyond the Parliamentary elections of 2004 and 2009, the picture in the different states of India presents a much more complex story of electoral politics. The volatility of electoral support has come down, at the national level and in many states, as the parties were able to consolidate their electoral support bases over the years (Palishkar, Suri, Yadav, 2014: 2). This development has affected both the party system and the election outcomes.

The party at present does not have a strong leader and workable structure and ideological agenda. Congress needs to rewrite its ideological agenda and open the entry gates of the party for people with rightist views within its broad spectrum of secular politics (Rai, 2017). The party can revive itself by rebuilding the party organisation by repopulating its cadres with foot soldiers and flag bearers at the grassroots level and setting up realistic goals to do a political rebound in the distant future.

Dominance of BJP and its Key Elements

The BJP-led NDA government became the only non-Congress government in Indian political history to return to power. Modi matched the track record of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi and became the third leader to retain power for a second term with a full majority for his own party in the Lok Sabha. The NDA's final tally is 353 seats out of 542, with the BJP itself winning 303 seats and improving on its 2014 tally of 282. In terms of vote share too, it got 37.4 per cent of the votes this time compared with the 31.4 per cent it got five years ago. The BJP and its allies in the NDA touched approximately 45 per cent vote share. Altogether,

the seat and vote gains mark a new high in the history of saffron politics in India. The lion's share of the credit for the BJP's resurgence belongs to Modi, who remains the most popular politician in India.

Although the BJP emerged strongly in many southern states, but failed to win a single seat in three southern States, namely Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala, and the Union Territory of Puducherry. However, it improved its position in Karnataka and Telangana, raising its tally from 17 and zero, respectively to 25 and four this time. BJP made significant inroads into eastern states such as West Bengal and Orissa. Throwing a stiff challenge to the ruling parties of West Bengal (TMC) and Orissa (BJD) it won 18 and 8 seats respectively. The party also swept its traditional strongholds of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Haryana and Himachal, and thwarted the challenge thrown by two "Mahagathbandhans" in two crucial North Indian states, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Frontline, 2019: 8). Of the total 25 seats in the eight north-eastern states (Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura), the BJP won 14 seats, Congress four and three or the BJP's allies in the North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) - the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP), the National People Party (NPP) and the Mizo National Front (MNF) - won one seat each (Ibid, 64). The Congress victory in the region was restricted to Assam and Meghalaya.

While Modi's rivals may have attacked, the mandate indicates all of the messages of Modi and the Modi campaign- Good governance, Nation first, raising India's status in the world, fighting corruption, or teaching a lesson to Pakistan. BJP has focused on the concept of 'New India', glorifying India's past and promising rapid economic progress. The new narrative is about a resurgent India that has shed its 'third world' status. Prime Minister Modi wants the nation to have countless start-ups and become a leader in renewable energy. He wants India to be a ₹10 trillion economy (BJP Manifesto, 2019). Another side Congress has chosen poverty reduction as its main plank, which is not something new. Rahul Gandhi has claimed that he will undertake a 'surgical strike on poverty'. In his election manifesto, Congress has promised a review of the controversial surcharged- Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA) (Congress Manifesto, 2019). This Act was passed in 1958 to counter the growing insurgency in the Northeast and was later extended to Jammu and Kashmir. BJP opposes any such move that will take away the shield from the army and weaken national security.

Thus, the opposition had neither concrete programmes nor alternative politics, nor any charismatic leadership to offer. It was the same old caste and alliance formulas and empty slogans of secularism that they themselves do not practice anymore. The arrogance of the opposition parties and their supporters was palpable as they mirrored the very forces that they were contesting against (The Indian Express, May 2019). The major factors that dominate in this election are:

The first factor that dominated in favour of the BJP was Narendra Modi's Charismatic Leadership. Since Modi was declared the prime ministerial candidate in September 2013, he built an image of a decisive and strong leader, a disruptor for change, a messiah of the poor, and the saviour of Hindutva. At every global event, there were photos of him with key counterparts, hugging or smiling, which were then circulated and publicised as a sign of his bonding with world leaders and his standing on the global stage. If technology helped him to connect with party workers up to the booth level, '*Mann ki Baat*' addresses his bond with the common man.

In an article published in Indian Express, Pratap Bhanu Mehta argued that ‘democracy displays a will to simplicity when the answer to every question, the remedy for anxiety becomes one man and one man alone. The only authentic analysis of this election is two words: Narendra Modi’. According to him “Modi can literally make himself the object of attention every second of public discourse. Many leaders win because the public does not see an alternative. Modi won because he made an alternative unthinkable.” (Ibid.). In parliamentary elections Modi was seen as the great unifier by the party cadres who canvassed for votes in his name, reducing the candidates to non-entities. Therefore, any anti-incumbency sentiment against the sitting MPs did not have an effect. In many places, the Prime Minister’s image was printed more prominently than that of the candidates (Frontline, 2019: 37). The message was that a vote for the BJP was a vote for Modi. The opposition had no answer to PM Modi’s strong emotional pitch. Modi effectively intermixed his personality, his development programmes of the last five years and the ideology in action to generate a strong emotional sentiment among the masses in his support. Modi has had many achievements in the past five years to showcase, reaffirming his nationalist credentials. In fact, this mandate is a proud reaffirmation of the people’s commitment to nationalism. In a way, it is an answer to all those critics both domestic and international, who called Modi a divisive figure. It is the most expansive and inclusive mandate in support of the nationalist idea of India. Modi argued that the situation demanded a strong leader and a coalition government run by his opponents would inevitably be a weak one. Some voters took this “strong leader” rhetoric at face value. Among them, many felt that the opposition did not offer a viable alternative because Rahul Gandhi is not sufficiently experienced (Outlook, 2019: 26). In Modi, people perceived the realisation of the politics of aspiration and more importantly they saw him as one of their own who rose through the ranks facing adversity and resistance.

Yadav and Palishkar (2014) argue that identities alone may be becoming inadequate for attracting the voter. Governance issues are emerging as an important consideration in shaping voters' choices. In fact, they argue that caste issues and development issues get combined in political rhetoric and in voter considerations. The new phase of post-Congress polity is that national as well as state leadership does not appear to be in a position to sway the voters and win the election. Thus, elections are about both governmental performance and the image of the leader.

Second, the NDA’s Beneficiary Schemes that Got the Edge. Parties do present themselves differently on matters of performance-both in terms of governance and in terms of leadership style. Parties do shy away from sharp ideological polarizations, and yet choices often present themselves in the form of personality or leadership style, identity markers, and governmental performance. (Ibid.). The National Election Study 2019 found that performance did matter in shaping of the outcome of the Parliamentary elections.

Performance is often seen in terms of the ability of the government to deliver. The use of socio-economic indicators to target the poorest households for its social welfare schemes in rural India appears to have paid dividends for the BJP-led NDA in these Lok Sabha elections. It has won 71 over 60% of seats in constituencies that cover the 115 districts identified by NITI Aayog as “aspirational”. The most number of these districts fall in Bihar (13), and Jharkhand (19) and cover 12 constituencies each. The rural household data from the socio-economic caste census (SECC) has been the basis for the NDA government's outreach to the most backward areas. Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana in the last five years, 15 million houses were completed, including 7 million approved under the Indira Awas Yojana. 10 crore toilets were built under the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Within 11 months of launching the scheme, Ujjwala

Yojana, the government gave out 2 crore LPG connections. After clean cooking fuel, the government launched a scheme to focus on electrifying all the households in the country. Under this till September 2017, nearly 2.63 crore households have been electrified across the country. These schemes not only strengthened the BJP in states where it won in 2014, but they also provided inroads into states where it had not managed to win many seats. The appeal of the schemes also created goodwill among classes that were not intended beneficiaries, showcasing all as directed towards its goal of “Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas”.

Projecting the Congress’s programmes to eliminate poverty as total failures, the Modi government overhauled many of the schemes. The BJP succeeded in convincing people that the Jan Dhan Yojana had financially empowered them; Ujjwala Scheme for LPG connections to the poor had provided a clean cooking; the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana had made affordable housing possible; Ayushman Bharat had ensured quality healthcare and PM-Kisan Yojana would take care of the small and marginal farmers. His emphasis on open defecation-free villages and toilets made him a Prime minister concerned with the health of the poor. The message was consistently hammered home that the total beneficiaries of these schemes are 22 crore (The Indian Express, May 2019). Ahead of the general election, efforts were made to track beneficiaries of welfare schemes initiated by the central government and mobilise them as the party’s core support base.

Third, was the BJP’s Organisational set-up. Both in terms of governance and in terms of the party’s growth and expansions, it has been an unparalleled phase in the annals of post-independent India’s political history (Outlook, 2019: 26). Right of centre is the BJP in the contemporary Indian party system. The phenomenal rise of the BJP in late 1980 and early 2014 has been the most significant development in Indian politics. The powerful organisational network of the BJP has changed the political agenda as well as the map of the party system in India. The prominent non-BJP parties have come together and ranged themselves against the BJP (Ahuja, 1994: 241). The BJP has been able to expand its political base in the country because of various factors, including superior electoral strategies, planning, hard work, and a voter outreach programme that was far better than those of its rivals. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP President Amit Shah, the party devised electoral strategies taking into account micro details of caste, sub-castes, religious compositions and other specifics of the constituencies while selecting party candidates (Mishra, 2018: 6). Another side the organisational set-up of the BJP is highly cadre based. The party’s organisational structure spreads all over India, starting from the national level to the booth level. Different party cells also contribute to the organisational strength of the party (Swain, 2001: 102).

Fourth, the Modi-Shah mutual bond is undoubtedly the biggest story of the unprecedented 2019 mandate. They have the same goal of seeing saffron in India. They have placed great importance on expanding the BJP’s footprint into parts of the country where it traditionally has been weak. It was party president Shah who had backed the idea of Modi contesting from Varanasi in 2014 to strengthen the party in eastern UP (Outlook, 2019: 29). In 2014, Shah was the party general secretary in charge of UP, so he had a limited role. This time, they worked in tandem to expand their footprints beyond the Hindi heartland. Modi is not treating him as a protégé anymore but as a partner. Shah enjoys complete freedom in party affairs. He enjoys the full support of Modi, stands firm in his decisions, and brooks no interference from any leader.

Amit Shah, a man with the avowed aim of having the BJP rule from ‘Panchayat to Parliament, has built up his party into a formidable machine after he took charge in July 2014. The electoral

map of India has turned almost saffron, signalling the rise of the BJP as a dominant player in Indian politics. Shah was 17 years old when he met Modi in RSS Shakha at Ahmedabad's Naranpura for the first time. Then, Modi was an RSS pracharak, in charge of youth affairs in the state of Gujarat, and Shah was an ABVP activist. Modi saw a spark in Shah, and that bond has only grown since. Modi taps into Shah's sharp strategizing and ingenious execution. Shah works with single-minded determination and loyalty. They together broke the Congress stranglehold over Gujarat and have now done the same in almost the entire country.

Fifth, Modi Challenged Caste-Based Politics. The result also marked a full circle for Mandal politics, which held sway in vast swathes of the country since the late 80s and shaped the nature of the Central government since the mid-90s. In the 2014 General elections, the BJP's presence in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar changed the paradigms. This time BJP succeeded in winning almost 85 per cent of seats in these two states. It is best reflected in the BJP's success in politically crucial UP, Bihar, and Karnataka again in the 2019 elections that witnessed a major political realignment against the BJP (Ibid.). Mandate 2019 has challenged caste-based identity for the first time in 30 years since the Mandal Commission's report to give job reservations to the OBCs came into effect in 1990. It spawned backward-class politics, changed the power balance, and threw up a crop of backward-class leaders all over North India, Like Mulayam Singh, Mayawati, and Lalu Prasad Yadav. In one stroke, the 'Modi wave' has washed away caste-based alliances (like 'Mahagathbandhan') in UP and Bihar. Mandal and Kamandal have fed into each other in the last three decades- the regional parties, like the SP and BSP, relying on caste mobilisation and the BJP on Hindu consolidation. Election 2019 has diluted caste loyalties, but it has further reinforced religious identity. In his first post-victory statement, Narendra Modi gave a new definition of caste identity. He said that there were only two castes, one of the poor and the other of those who wanted to alleviate poverty (The Sunday Express, May 2019).

Conclusion

Both in terms of governance and in terms of the party's growth and expansion, it has been an unparalleled phase in the annals of post-independence India's political history. The rapid political and geographical expansion of the BJP and its emergence as a main political force were due to its ability to delicately redefine itself and its social base and forge alliances with regional parties having different social bases. The BJP's decisive victory this time has been attributed to the party's 'India needs a strong leadership' rhetoric. The voters were convinced that their interests were safe only in the hands of the Modi-led BJP government. Altogether, the seat and vote gains mark a new high in the history of saffron politics in India, and all the credit for the BJP's resurgence belongs to Modi, who remains the most popular politician in India. A strong and effective organisation has been another important factor that contributed to the growth of the party in Indian politics.

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