

India: The BJP Breathes a Sigh of Relief

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Despite economic difficulties, state elections in India delivered the ruling party a series of victories

India recently conducted state assembly elections in five states, including the politically significant state of Uttar Pradesh, the results of which were announced on 10 March.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a centre-right party led Prime Minister Narendra Modi, managed to retain its hold on power in four of them: Uttar Pradesh (UP), Uttarakhand, Manipur, and Goa.

The BJP's ideological platform primarily centres on Hindu majoritarianism and hyper-nationalism, leading some scholars to describe the party as Hindu nationalist. The main opposition party, the centre-left Indian National Congress led by the Nehru-Gandhi family, performed poorly and lost in all states.

Of particular importance is the state of Punjab, the hotbed of the farmer's movement that forced the government to repeal three controversial pieces of legislation last year, which Congress lost to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The AAP is ideologically closer to Congress and has slowly expanded its electoral footprint on an anti-corruption and good-governance platform. The internal crisis within Congress, which led to the ouster of Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, paved the way for the entry of the AAP. With a sweeping mandate in its favour, the AAP now holds control in both Punjab and Delhi.

Setting the Agenda

Many analysts had expected the BJP to face tough electoral challenges in all the states, including UP. The party faced heavy criticism for the crisis induced by the pandemic, the slowdown in the economy, civil society protests over several pieces of legislation including the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register for Citizens (NRC), and legislation to reform India's agrarian sector. The BJP's position in UP was also considered difficult, owing to a pre-election alliance between several smaller parties under the leadership of the Samajwadi Party (SP), a regional outfit mobilizing the lower castes and Muslims.

Nevertheless, the BJP managed to win two-thirds of the seats in the state. The importance of the UP results should be understood from the fact that every seventh member of the Indian Parliament comes from the state. The current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, represents the state in the national parliament. As this round of assembly elections takes place mid-way between two national elections, it will most certainly play a crucial role in setting the agenda for the next general election.

These election results are likely to have a significant bearing on the nature and direction of Indian politics. They suggest that the opposition failed to make the economic slowdown and health crisis a primary election issue among many voters, including the poor. Similarly, the effect of the farmers' movement also remains muted in Uttar Pradesh, although it did create conducive conditions for the

AAP in Punjab.

While the BJP continues to maintain its electoral and ideological dominance since coming to power at the national level in 2014, Congress appears to be in terminal decline. In such a scenario, it is important to understand the reasons for the BJP's victory and how the party has managed to make deep inroads among the marginalized sections of Hindu society. The BJP's victory in these elections has yet again raised important questions about the representation of Muslims in Indian politics. Furthermore, the declining strength of India's parliamentary opposition, amidst stagnant economic prospects for millions of citizens, is likely to create fissures which may result in growing civil society protests on various issues.

The Performance of the Left Parties

The Left Parties — the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) (CPI(ML)) — all maintain a marginal presence in the states that went to the polls. In Uttar Pradesh, the Left parties contested only 19 percent of the total seats. The CPI contested a maximum of 35 seats, followed by CPI(ML), which contested 11 seats.

The average vote share on the seats the Left parties contested remained below 1 percent. In Uttarakhand, the Left parties managed to get less than 1 percent of the vote share for the six seats they contested. They were absent entirely in Goa.

The Left used to have pockets of influence in Manipur and Punjab, but their performance remained abysmally low in both states. In Manipur, the CPI contested in alliance with Congress on two seats, but it could barely manage 2 percent of votes on these two seats. The CPI supported some candidates of Sanyukt Samaj Morcha (SSM), a political front floated by some leaders of the farmers' movement in Punjab, but neither the Left nor SSM candidates managed to win votes in the double digits.

The reasons for the Left's decline in these states, and nationally, urgently requires deeper investigation to unpack what is behind this process.

What Fuelled the BJP's Victory?

To understand how the BJP has managed to establish such political dominance, it is instructive to look at the three smaller states of Uttarakhand, Manipur, and Goa, where the BJP was up against Congress. The latter was well-placed to challenge the BJP in each of these states, particularly in Uttarakhand, where the BJP had to change three of its chief ministers in the past year. Yet Congress itself is riven by a series of internal crises, and the party's defeat in these states is part of a pattern since 2014 in which the BJP humbles Congress whenever the two parties face off. In Manipur, Congress's defeat — if not the scale thereof — was expected, as a significant chunk of the party's legislative wing had defected to the BJP and other regional outfits.

The scale of the BJP's victory in UP indicates the long-term potential of the social coalition the party managed to assemble between 2014 and 2019. The BJP's coalition of upper castes and non-dominant lower castes, including Scheduled Castes (SCs), is held together by the ideological glue of ethno-political majoritarianism. It is aided by delivering welfare benefits to the poor, who are mobilized by charismatic leaders like Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Moreover, it is complemented by a deep organizational machinery at the grassroots level and a powerful social media presence.

Second, the BJP's electoral success results from its continuous political alertness and creativity. The party is of course characterized by a level of unilateralism, pushing forward legislation before

sounding out all stakeholders, but it also strategically wise enough to retreat when pushed up against the wall, such as in the case of the controversial farm laws last year.

The party has moved swiftly, creating one ideological wedge after the other and keeping the opposition on its toes. Simultaneously, it also creatively crafted new political categories of beneficiaries of welfare schemes. Many analysts argue that this helped the BJP win votes from some segments of women, poor, and lower-caste voters.

Third, the presence of the BJP as a formidable player in states with a significant Muslim population is likely to trigger bipolarity due to the consolidation of votes along the axis of religion, i.e. the Hindu-Muslim divide. This was most visible in the campaign rhetoric in UP, with top BJP leaders, including Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, invoking language that fuelled religious polarization in voting choices.

The sheer arithmetic weight of this broad-based Hindu coalition is so high that any oppositional challenge needs to be extraordinary to defeat it. The results indicate that even if parties such as the SP improve their vote share, bipolarity along with BJP's strong base will ensure a glass ceiling that is hard to breach in the absence of a new political imagination.

Why are Marginalized Groups Voting for the BJP?

Why are more women, poor, and lower-caste groups such as Dalits — essentially the Left's traditional constituency — now voting for the BJP? The reasons for each group are slightly different, but the case of women voters is quite illustrative. The BJP used to have a gender disadvantage pre-2014, i.e., fewer women were likely to vote for it. In the past eight years, however, the gender gap has not only closed, but the BJP now enjoys greater support among women.

This is surprising, as centre-right parties across the globe continue to be a less attractive option among women voters. In the case of the BJP, especially in UP, there were significant doubts over the party's ability to mobilize women voters, as the government's response in some cases involving rape and murder had been extremely ineffective. The data, however, indicates that more women seem to have voted for the BJP than men in all four states the party won.

While the margin of difference is in the range of 2-4 percentage points, the importance of this turnaround should not be discounted. Consider the more disaggregated data from the aforementioned exit polls: the difference between women voters who voted for the BJP and those who voted for the Samajwadi Party was in the double digits. This means that the SP was actively disadvantaged by its failure to appeal to women voters. At the same time, across all major caste-ethnic blocs in UP, women were more likely to vote for the BJP, indicating that women voters are perhaps making different political choices than the male members of their families.

What is driving women to vote for the BJP in greater numbers? In my view, the current shift is a combination of three factors, and we need more research to understand the complex dynamics at play.

First is the distinct nature of the BJP's welfare policies compared to previous governments. Many discussions have centred around the improved ration delivery (foodstuffs) under the current regime, especially during the peak pandemic months. However, the nuances of what these schemes might be doing are missing. The focus of many schemes on things like food security, LPG cylinders, house construction, LED lights, and direct cash transfers, among others, is to bring welfare to the doorstep. By delivering welfare within the household, the BJP has developed a model that relates very specifically to women, who utilize the goods the government provides.

The second element is the party's rhetoric around safety and security. Even when crime statistics do not attest to this, the image of being tough on law and order, especially centred around women's safety, seems to have resonated with women. Pliant coverage by media channels certainly helped in building this perception.

At the same time, it is important to underscore that the BJP government in the state under Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath catered specifically to the issue of women's security from its first day in office. While some of its measures have rightly been criticized for impinging on individual freedoms, the reality of everyday life for women in India's "heartland", as UP is often called, should not be ignored. These are places where women's movement outside the home is heavily sanctioned and scrutinized, often by older women themselves. To them, it seems that constant and harsh police policies are a welcome move, as they provide a semblance of security in a precarious world.

And finally, one cannot underestimate the masses' emotive connection with the BJP leadership. After all, SP leader Akhilesh Yadav insisted on cleaning up his party's soft-on-crime image. Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi led a highly visible campaign in UP on the platform of women's rights and agency. Yet the results show that women remained unimpressed by both. The signal to political parties is clear: perception only sticks when the intended message is combined with a credible face. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has carefully and consciously cultivated this image over the years.

Can the Trend Be Reversed?

What must non-BJP parties do to increase their presence among women voters and marginalized sections of Indian society? Simply put, learn from leaders such as Mamta Banerjee in West Bengal and Nitish Kumar in Bihar, and make concerted outreach efforts towards women voters and lower castes. This requires substantial forethought and strategizing and an overhaul of party structures and patronage networks. At the moment, these tilt heavily towards favouring the upper segments of Indian society.

For example, women voters continue to face various obstacles in the political arena. They are less likely to be vocal in community meetings and are substantially less present on social media. It means that reaching them through caste-community networks is more challenging.

Party workers, especially women cadres, are a more viable medium for connecting with such voters. If the opposition parties are serious about challenging the BJP's electoral dominance, then such strategies are essential to regain the lost support among other marginalized sections of Indian society.

The Road to 2024 and Beyond

The BJP may breathe a sigh of relief for now, as the party has struggled to win state assembly elections after their historic performances in the 2014 and 2019 general elections. The victory in the four states, especially in UP, has made things easier for it as far as the presidential election, scheduled to take place in July, is concerned.

It will also boost party morale against the backdrop of economic distress, the ongoing pandemic, and continuous attempts to ally with opposition parties. While it may be premature to suggest that the BJP will comfortably return to power in the 2024 general elections, the party undoubtedly is in pole position for the race.

However, this does not mean that the party's road to 2024 will be smooth. Next year, the BJP will likely face significant electoral challenges in Karnataka, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, the potential for which can be seen in the current results. Concerns related to the

economy, unemployment, and inflation are real issues which the BJP ignores at its own peril.

Survey data from all states, especially UP, indicate that the BJP is no longer the most preferred party among young voters, as was the case between 2014 and 2019. The BJP also fares poorly among students, unemployed, and low-wage labourers. Herein lies the opposition parties' chance to mount a challenge by mobilizing these groups.

Can the BJP weather the brewing storm among young Indians anxious over their economic prospects? Given the current state of the parliamentary opposition, it seems likely.

While the BJP may continue to face significant electoral challenges in the state elections, the party is riding high at the national level. Electoral losses and crises at the top levels of the Indian National Congress have further pushed the party into political oblivion. The AAP's rise in the short term will help the BJP, as the former will eat into the Congress vote. AAP's attempts to quickly expand may also shake up the frozen patterns of political competition in several states in northern and western India. Thus, Congress must brace itself for another round of attrition with the AAP's sweeping mandate in Punjab.

While it would be too early to suggest that the AAP is likely to emerge as the main national challenger to the BJP, it could prove costly for anyone to ignore the perceived traction of the former's so-called "Delhi Model" of governance. The AAP's raw ambition and Congress's stubbornness will continue to impede any genuine oppositional coalition that could challenge the BJP electorally.

Are we then likely to see more protests and mobilizations involving students and unemployed youth in the absence of a credible and effective electoral opposition? Will such protests remain effective only in the civil society arena, or could they be mobilized in the electoral arena? Can they develop a more holistic narrative to challenge the ideological dominance of the BJP, or will they remain single-issue movements? The answer will determine the course of Indian politics in 2024 and beyond.

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