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The Political Scenario of Narendra Modi

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ABSTRACT: The Uttar Pradesh electorate created history by voting a party back to power after 25 years. The victory of the BJP government led by Yogi Adityanath is massive as it transcends the 2/3rd majority mark and slightly exceeds the previous vote share of the party in 2017. For an incumbent government to do that, braving anti-incumbency, is creditable indeed. The rival SP and its leader Akhilesh Yadav also did very well as its vote share rose from about 28% to 32%—a gain of 4%—despite his handing the campaign without Mulayam Singh Yadav, his father, and a revolt in the family: many members shifted to the BJP including Mulayam's daughter-in-law Aparna Yadav. So, while Akhilesh lost, the vote share of both the main parties has risen. In this election, the nature of political contestation was bipolar: at one end was the coalition of the BJP, Apna Dal and Nishad Party; at the other, the SP, Rashtriya Lok Dal, Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party and smaller outfits. Hence the contest was stiff and many were unsure about the outcome of the polls. But one needs to ask why the BJP won. Why in spite of price rise, unemployment, stray cattle issue, and anger during Covid, especially over the plight of migrant labourers, did people not move away from Yogi? To answer this, one has to understand a transformation in the politics of India in general and UP in particular where Varanasi happens to be the parliamentary constituency of Narendra Modi, the prime minister.

KEYWORDS: Narendra Modi, politics, Uttar Pradesh, BJP, prime minister, Covid, campaign

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the arrival of Modi, UP has seen three major shifts: one, from exclusionary to inclusive politics; two, from identity to aspirational politics; and three, from caste to class politics. And all this has been done within the rubric of providing law and order and development, and taking care of the welfare of the people. The two caste parties—SP and BSP—had demonstrated a sectional approach to politics and welfarism that injected nepotism, corruption and inefficiency besides leveraging the criminals who ruled the roost. The zero tolerance of Modi on corruption has had its trickle-down effect, though slowly and in spite of annoying politicians of all hues, including those in the BJP. The tough stand of Yogi on law and order using strong-arm tactics, even at the risk of earning him the nickname of bulldozer baba, has brought a welcome change in the state. Covid disturbed the developmental tempo, but Yogi's innovative One District One Product scheme has greatly helped poor artisans whose goods are now getting exported, earning them some money. That had the effect of not only providing them relief, but also attracted outside investments to the state.[1,2]
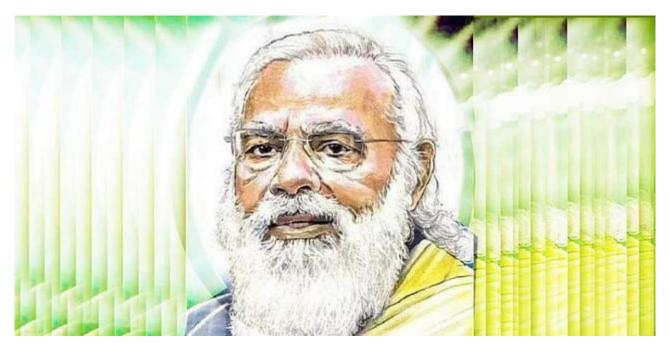
But Modi-Yogi had more in their kitty. They provided financial security by putting money under various schemes in the Jan Dhan accounts of the poor through DBT, health security through Ayushman Bharat, crop security through Fasal Bima Yojana, and social security through better law and order.

It appears that Modi is slowly changing the grammar of politics. This seems to target three major classes that cut across all castes and religions: women, small and marginal farmers, and poor subalterns. From Ujjwala to Beti Bachao Beti Padhao to toilets, etc., he seems to be addressing women. Similarly, he is equally attending to the marginal farmers, putting `6,000 in their accounts annually, and giving them various other reliefs that could enhance their income. The very fact that the protest movement allegedly led by so-called farmers from western UP has not been able to harm the BJP in the western UP speaks volumes about the satisfaction of cultivators with the Modi-Yogi initiatives to better their lives. In fact, many sugarcane mills that were closed in that part have been restarted, new ones opened and all arrears due from previous regimes largely paid. Moreover, the Jats in western UP have also not come out of the 2013 riot syndrome as they still are in a legal trap, whereas they allege that Muslims were let off by Akhilesh at the behest of then minister Azam Khan. That's the reason that the election study conducted by our centre shows that as compared to 34%, this time 71% Jats have voted for the BJP. And the third class, the poor subalterns, had been quite upbeat about getting free ration for the last two years and they confess that during Covid, the government did not allow them to be hungry and actually served good food in abundance. So, the BJP as a political party under the Modi-Yogi leadership has expanded its narrow upper caste, middle class, urban traders voter base by appropriating the wider class constituencies composed of women, small farmers and the poor. Our study shows that as compared to the 2017 Assembly polls, 10% more women have voted for the BJP.[3,4]

One very significant factor is the 'Modi voter' in addition to the committed party supporter and the floating voters. In the 2017 Assembly polls, the BJP got 41% votes in UP whereas in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the party got 50%. That clearly shows that the 9% additional votes were simply for Modi. In our study, we have found that 11% voted for the BJP only because of Modi. That's an X-factor that has bailed out the BJP in UP. Modi has been playing smart politics through his Mann Ki Baat where he does not talk about politics at all. That connect, which the PM has developed all over the country, has earned him this segment that we call Modi voters.

II. DISCUSSION

What however surprises us is the total marginalisation of Mayawati. It is very surprising that even many of the Jatav Dalits, her core supporters, have voted for other parties now. Our study shows that earlier 85% Jatavs were voting for Mayawati; this time that has crumbled and only 40% have voted for the BSP. The rest have shifted to the BJP largely and some to the SP. That is a bad omen for the future of her Dalit politics as many now believe that the BJP is taking good care of them. That's why most of the Dalit MPs and MLAs from reserved constituencies are in the BJP's kitty.

The Congress has been decimated. It is doing cosmetic and seasonal politics in UP and seems to be without any direction, ideology, organisational base at grassroots and leadership. It's unfortunate that such a grand old party has allowed itself to be totally marginalised in the recent polls not only in UP but also elsewhere, especially Punjab.[5,6]

However, there are some problems that stare the Yogi government in the face and let's see if after ensuring law and order, developing infrastructure, encouraging artisans and bringing in many development plans, the government is geared to attending to them too quickly. Obviously, people's aspirations are high and that is also a danger signal.

A combination of nationalist rhetoric, subtle religious polarisation and a slew of welfare programmes helped Mr Modi to coast to a second successive win.

In a bitter and divisive campaign, Mr Modi effortlessly fused nationalism and development. He created binaries: the nationalists (his supporters) versus the anti-nationals (his political rivals and critics); the watchman (Modi himself, protecting the country on "land, air, and outer space") versus the entitled and the corrupt (an obvious dig at the main opposition Congress party).

After a suicide attack - claimed by Pakistan-based militants - which killed more than 40 Indian paramilitaries in disputed Kashmir and the retaliatory air strike against Pakistan in the run-up to the election, Mr Modi successfully convinced the masses that the country would be secure if he remained in power.[7,8]

People having no obvious interest in foreign policy - farmers, traders, labourers - told us during our campaign travels that India had won the respect of the outside world under Mr Modi.

"It is all right if there's little development, but Modi is keeping the nation secure and keeping India's head high," a voter in the eastern city of Kolkata told .

III. IMPLICATIONS

Mr Modi's persona has become larger than his cadre-based party, and a symbol of hope and aspiration for many.Under Mr Modi and his powerful aide Amit Shah, the BJP has developed into a ruthless party machine. "The geographical expansion of the BJP is a very significant development," says Mahesh Rangarajan.Traditionally, the BJP has found its strongest support in India's populous Hindi-speaking states in the north. (Of the 282 seats the party won in 2014, 193 came from these states.) The exceptions are Gujarat, Mr Modi's home state and a BJP bastion, and Maharashtra, where the BJP has governed in alliance with a local party.But since Mr Modi became PM, the BJP has formed governments in key north-eastern states like Assam and Tripura, which are primarily Assamese and Bengali-speaking.

And in this election, the BJP - where it contested more seats than the Congress - has emerged as a force to reckon with in non-Hindi speaking states like Orissa and West Bengal in the east.The party's modest presence in southern India still doesn't make it a truly pan-Indian party like the Congress of yore, but the BJP is moving towards it.Twenty years ago when it was in power under Atal Behari Vajpayee, the BJP seemed content being the first among equals - the largest party in a group of parties which tried to run a stable government.Under Mr Modi, the BJP commands an overwhelming majority in parliament as the first party, and there are no equals.[9,10]

He and Amit Shah have adopted an aggressive take-no-prisoners style of politics. The party is not a seasonal machine that comes alive during elections. It appears to be in permanent political campaign mode.Political scientist Suhas Palshikar believes India could be moving towards a one-party dominant state like the Congress in the past.He calls it the "second dominant party system", with the BJP leading the pack, and the main opposition Congress remaining "weak and nominal" and the regional parties losing ground.

Mr Modi's strident nationalism as a main campaign plank seems to have overruled the more pressing economic problems facing voters.Some analysts believe that under Mr Modi, India could be inching towards a more "ethnic democracy", which requires the "mobilisation of the majority in order to preserve the ethnic nation".[11,12]

IV. RESULTS

This would look more like Israel which sociologist Sammy Smooha characterised as a state that "endeavours to combine an ethnic identity (Jewish) and a parliamentary system drawing its inspiration from Western Europe".
Will Hindu nationalism become the default mode of Indian politics and society?
It will not be easy - India thrives on diversity. Hinduism is a diverse faith. Social and linguistic differences hold India together. Democracy is an additional glue.
The BJP's strand of strident Hindu nationalism, conflating Hinduism and patriotism, may not appeal to all Indians. "There's no other place in the world where diversity is so spectral and a drive to homogenise so fraught," says Prof Rangarajan.
Also India's shift to the right is not unique to India - it's happening with the new right in the Republican Party in the US, and the central ground of French and German politics has shifted rightwards.
India's rightward shift is clearly part of a wider trend where the nature of nationalism is being redefined and cultural identity is being given renewed emphasis.[13,14]
How valid are fears that India is sliding into a majoritarian state under Mr Modi?
He is not the first leader to be called a fascist and authoritarian by his critics; Mrs Gandhi was called both when she suspended civil liberties and imposed the Emergency in the mid-1970s. People voted her out after two years.
Mr Modi is a strongman, and people possibly love him for that.
A 2017 report by the CSDS showed that respondents who supported democracy in India had dropped from 70% to 63% between 2005 and 2017. A Pew report in 2017 found that 55% of respondents backed a "governing system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts".
But the yearning for a strongman is not unique to India. Look at Russian President Vladimir Putin, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Hungary's Viktor Orban, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro or Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines.
The Congress has suffered a second successive drubbing but for now is likely to remain the second largest party nationally.
But it's way behind the BJP and is facing a major crisis: the shrinking of its geographical space.
In Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal, India's most populous region, the party is virtually non-existent. The party is invisible in southern states like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In the industrially developed west of India, the party last won a state election in Gujarat in 1990, and hasn't been in power in Maharashtra since Mr Modi became PM.[15,16]
Several questions are going to be asked after a second successive general election debacle. How can the party become more acceptable to more allies? How will the party be run? How does the party reduce its dependence on the Gandhi dynasty and open itself to younger leaders? (The Congress is still a party of second and third generation leaders in several states.) How does Congress build a grassroots network of workers to take on the BJP?
"The Congress will likely muddle along, as it has in the last several election cycles. It is not a party known for deep introspection. But there are enough two-party states in India where the Congress is at odds with the BJP to create a floor for the Congress," says Milan Vaishnav.
Political scientist Yogendra Yadav, who's also a politician these days, believes the Congress has outlived its utility and "must die". But parties are capable of reinvention and renewal. Only the future will tell whether the Congress can rebuild itself from the ruins.[17,18]

V. CONCLUSIONS

In the bellwether state of Uttar Pradesh, which sends more MPs to parliament than any other, the BJP is looking at a repeat of its stunning 2014 performance when it won 71 of 80 seats. It is one of India's most socially divided and economically disadvantaged states.
This time, Mr Modi's party was expected to face stiff competition from a formidable alliance of powerful regional parties, the Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party, which was aptly named the "mahagatbandhan" or grand alliance.[19]
Mr Modi's charisma and chemistry appear to have triumphed over the hard-nosed "social arithmetic" forged by these two regional parties who have always counted on the faithful votes of a section of lower caste Indians and untouchables (formerly known as Dalits). That faith is now broken, and it also proves that caste arithmetic is not immutable.
India's regional parties must now rethink their strategies and offer a more compelling economic and social vision. Otherwise, more and more of their own voters will abandon them.[20]

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