

**Article Title: "How BJP secured pole position: To remain central pillar of Indian politics, it must ensure opponents don't gang up"**

**This article was published in 'The Times of India' on 16th March 2017.**

Shortlink: <https://goo.gl/L2PcD7>

With last week's electoral results across five states, BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi have once again secured pole position in Indian politics. This had happened earlier too, under Vajpayee and after Modi's massive win in 2014, but national or state-level setbacks followed. Is the shift more structural this time around? And what does the future hold for Congress and regional parties?

Most of PM Vajpayee's 1999-2004 tenure had felt like an increasingly post-Congress era. That was right in the middle of a 25-year period of coalition governments, but even on the eve of 2004 general elections very few thought a Congress revival likely.

Nevertheless, Congress did revive and ran India for 10 more years. Can it do so again? To put it mildly, the Congress leadership today does not give the impression of being up to that task. Even the big win in Punjab is being credited to its regional satrap, not its national leaders. It has been decimated in the heartland and, with reduced vote shares and just short of majorities, outmanoeuvred in forming governments in Goa and Manipur.

Congress today suffers from apolitical, out of touch and wrong instincts at its highest levels. Take for instance its visceral opposition to demonetisation, which was immensely popular at the grassroots (even if not enough to fully overcome anti-incumbency in two states). The lack of meritocracy, evidenced by many bright younger Congressmen and women who have been held back for years, has taken a huge toll on its capabilities.

That is the gap the Aam Aadmi Party was widely expected to fill, but did not. In Goa its reported growth turned out to be a damp squib, and in Punjab much less than the hype. So, at least for now, AAP will not be the new Congress.

As for BJP, despite being hard hit by anti-incumbency in Goa and Punjab its success in Uttar Pradesh was resounding, with a whopping 40% vote share. What distinguished its campaign was a resolute return to 2014's development mantra. That focus had somewhat wavered in the interim, such as during the 2015 Bihar elections when the Dadri incident dominated the discourse, but is now clearly back on centre stage.

That is not to say other local issues or caste equations did not matter in UP. They did, and BJP was adept at countering others' alliances and cross-caste tie-ups with a canny ground game of its own. But the overarching theme that secured the landslide was its big-tent, aspirational, development message. And that seems to have helped it grow structurally, beyond its traditional base, attracting younger voters across the board.

It is not as if others did not try the same strategy, for instance the Samajwadi Party with its “Kaam Bolta Hai” (our work speaks for us) slogan. But hoping to succeed by co-opting others’ strategies, despite the baggage of years of entrenched casteist politics and governance, was a case of cognitive dissonance.

Even long term sceptics of BJP are beginning to admit that the PM succeeded in marketing his all-aboard strategy in UP. One of the best-known faces among Indian liberal journalists told me that the party’s victory in heavily Muslim dominated constituencies indicates an unprecedented breakthrough for it.

What all this means is that in more and more places in India, it will take an alliance of all other significant players to stop BJP, as happened in Bihar. In fact, Bihar’s astute CM Nitish Kumar has already said so, giving credit for the UP results to both “people’s satisfaction with demonetisation” and the lack of a Bihar-like mahagathbandhan coalition.

How likely are such all-except-BJP coalitions in various parts of the country? Desperation is the mother of invention, and calls have already been sounded for a UP coalition in 2019 of not just the SP and Congress, but also to include the Bahujan Samaj Party and others.

But though politics does make for strange bedfellows, the likelihood of some of these combinations stretches credulity. The coming together of the main Dravidian parties, for instance, or of Bengal’s leftist parties with Trinamool Congress on the same platform, defy today’s commonsense.

When it comes to parties like the Biju Janata Dal, our core base is the non-Congress voter that the late Biju Patnaik nurtured over decades, through various party iterations. BJD was founded in 1997-98 as a BJP ally, but has been unaligned since 2009. Meanwhile BJP, after years of languishing as a distant third in Odisha, has recently surged to a credible second place in statewide local elections.

Other offshoots of the erstwhile Janata Dal have associated with Congress, as in Bihar. But in BJD, only weeks ago its president Naveen Patnaik initiated disciplinary proceedings against a senior MP for suggesting that a coalition with Congress could be considered.

At any rate, if BJP has indeed become entrenched as the central pillar of Indian politics, then its stratagem should be obvious. Where it already leads in vote share, all it needs to do is manoeuvre such that all its opponents don’t gang up. In these elections, besides the thrust on broad basing its appeal, there was already some evidence of just such a game plan.