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BJP IN 21ST CENTURY: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The resounding victory of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in May 2014 Lok Sabha elections has once again stimulated debate among scholars about its past, present and future in the tumultuous Indian politics. BJP's victory has many significant implications not only for the future of the party but also for the entire Indian party system. First, BJP gained 282 seats in Lok Sabha, which was the highest tally in its entire carrier as a political party. This may generate a sense of unity and confidence among its rank and file and encourage political commentators to treat BJP as a viable national alternative. Second, since 1984, it was for the first time that a single party has gained clear majority in Lok Sabha, which may curtail the national roles of regional parties in the short run and change in the very nature of coalition politics at national level. These and other implications need to be tested in the light of contingent factors to analyze BJP's strength and weaknesses in coming decades of 21st century. These implications also underline the need for a careful study of BJP phenomenon, with visible configuration under as well as around the leadership of Narendra Modi. This article is divided into three parts: Part one deals with the theoretical observations; Part two describes the background of BJP as a political organization; and Part three analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of BJP within the given analytical framework.

PART ONE

In popular and journalistic imagination, the BJP is largely perceived and portrayed as a 'Rightist' political party in contradistinction to Communists as 'Leftist' parties and Congress and others as 'Centrist' parties.¹ By the same stroke, BJP is also portrayed as 'Communal' party in the binary ideological framework of Communal vs. Secular categories. Whatever meanings we may assign to these categories, the actual behaviour of Indian political parties exposes the weakness of this *trinary* or binary classification of parties into fixed ideological categories. This framework needs to

be discounted in favour of a spectrum or continuum framework, where these ideological categories are placed at the opposite end and different political parties are placed in different locations according to their behavioural disposition at a particular time period. Without this dynamism, we will be hard pressed to explain such political acts as communal Jan Sangh (former name of BJP) joining hands with other parties to form 'secular' Janata Party in 1977; both 'communal' BJP and 'secular' Communists supporting National Front coalition government in 1989; Bahujan Samaj Party, a secular regional party, forging alliance with BJP to form government in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2002; Samajwadi party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav becoming Chief Minister of UP in 2003 with the blessing of BJP; or more recently Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), a pro-self rule party in J & K, forming government in state with the support of 'Hindu nationalist' party BJP. Scholars may call these events as ideological aberrations, but the underlying lesson emerging from these events cannot be ignored. The lesson is: the ideological categories of political parties should not be treated as fixed elements but be viewed as a dynamic process in the light of prevailing contingencies. Another tendency also needs to be discounted, while analyzing strengths and weaknesses of political parties on the long term perspective. This tendency is the journalistic attempt to reduce the success or failures of parties to a mono-causal or mono-factor analysis. Should we attribute *Modi Lehar* as the sole factor for the resounding success of BJP in 2014 elections? If this is the case why this 'Lehar' became ineffective within few months in the state elections of Delhi and Bihar? The mono-causal analysis tends to ignore the very nature of competitive politics in a democratic political process. In fact, the success and failure of a political party also depend upon the performance of other political parties involved in the competition. During 2014 elections the negative perceptions about the Congress rule, helped BJP to gain foothold with much ease. However, the caution is that though failure of Congress added to the success of BJP due to the zero-sum game political process, yet it should not be counted as a permanent element of strength of BJP as a political party in the long run. With these preliminary observations, this Article seeks to identify those elements or set of elements which impacts upon the strength and weakness of BJP as a political party in the coming decades of 21st century. It will also through light on the issues and challenges which party is destined to confront with in future.

PART TWO

The Analytical Framework

The theoretical study of political parties has always remained at the fringe of political theory. The work of some scholars like Duverger is largely confined to the classification of political parties or understanding their structural characteristics. We still lack a workable framework to analyze the strength and weaknesses of a political party in the long term perspective. We attempt here to outline a three dimensional framework for this purpose:

1. We begin with by raising the fundamental question as to what a political party represents for? This may be a particular ideological orientation or issues, which are proclaimed by a political

party. This may be termed as the ‘representative core’ of the party. This representative core is derived by political parties from the ideological or issue based fault lines inherent in the social, political or economic fabric, where political parties operate. The related aspect of ‘representative core’ is its long term viability in the changing conditions. This is the first dimension of this analytical framework.

2. The second dimension of this framework is the operational environment, which may hinder or help the expansion and realization of ‘representative core’ of a party. The operational environment consists of nature, strength, and performance of other political parties, emerging domestic and external tendencies and issues, nature of socio-economic and technological developments and so on. In other words, operational environment is the sum of all factors, which impacts upon the functioning of a political party. The operational environment is always dynamic and beyond the control of a political party. One of the major challenges of all political parties is to manage and sustain the favourable operational environment in order to improve its prospects.
3. The third dimension of this analytical framework is the nature and amount of resources available with a political party to expand its representative core to broaden its support base in a given operational environment. The resources may be human, political or financial. However, for our purpose only three factors- organization, strategies, and leadership are included under the ambit of resources. These resources are the tools by which a political party expands its representative core, manages its operational environment and boosts its power prospects.

The strength and weaknesses of a political party as well as its potential for performance is the net result of the interplay between the three sets of factors outlined in the three dimensions of this framework. The above analytical framework may lack perfection, but it has the benefit of systematizing the facts and information about a political party in a sensible and meaningful manner. Besides being dynamic, it has the potential to analyze the performance of a political party not on the basis of what it claims to be but on the basis of factors, actually impacting on its claims and performance.

The Background of BJP

The BJP, in its present form was established in 1980 under the leadership of its popular leader Atal Bihari Bajpai and second in command Lal Krishna Advani. However, its roots are much deeper and three phases are clearly marked in its career as a political organization: first phase beginning with the formation of Bhartiya Jan Sangh (BJS) till its merger with Janata party on 1977-79; second phase from the formation of BJP 1980 to 1990; and third phase from 1990 to present. During first two phases, in spite of its national presence, the party remained away from political power at national level. However, during its third phase, party became resurgent and came to power four times and emerged as a viable national alternative to Congress party. It was also during this period that all potentials and weaknesses of party came to the fore and also under the public scrutiny.

BJP is the reincarnation of former BJS, which was formed by Shyama Prasad Mukharjee in 1951, allegedly in consultation with Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS was formed in 1925 as a social service organization and espoused the cause of *Hindu Rastra* ('Hindu' Nation). The BJS was perceived as a 'nationalist alternative' to fluid and ultra-liberal policies of Congress under the leadership of Nehru. Mukharjee, a former Hindu Maha Sabha member, joined Nehru's Cabinet as Minister of Industries, but developed differences with Nehru over the issue of Delhi Pact. The Pact, signed by Prime Minister Nehru and his Pakistani counterpart Liaquat Ali, provided for the setting up of minority commissions in both India and Pakistan. Mukharjee accused Nehru of appeasement to minorities and resigned from Cabinet in 1950. This is the genesis of BJS, which as a new political party, also demanded uniform civil code for all sections of Indian religious communities, ban on cow slaughter and scrapping of special status granted to J& K. These issues still continue to surface in BJP agenda also. The BJS participated in 1952 Lok Sabha elections and won only three seats. Mukharjee launched agitation in 1953 for scrapping special status to J & K. He was arrested by the police and died in 1953 under detention.

After Mukharjee's death, Mauli Chand Sharma was elected as new leader of BJS in 1953. However, RSS intervened and the leadership of BJS effectively came into the hand of RSS ideologue Deen Dayal Upadhyay, who remained its undisputed leader for 15 years till his assassination in 1968. It was the first instance of RSS guidance, control and intervention in the affairs of its political wing BJS. Upadhyay espoused the ideas of *Swaraj* and 'Integral Humanism'² and built the organisational base of BJS with the active involvement of RSS. The electoral performance of the party also improved gradually as its national vote share increased from 3.1 per cent with 3 seats in 1952 to 9.4 per cent with 35 seats in 1967. The party registered a marginal setback during 1971 elections but registered a substantial gain in 1977 elections as a part of Janata Party as its vote share increased to 14 per cent and it gained 91 seats in Lok Sabha (Appaiah: 2003). As Janata Party came to power in the wake of popular reaction to national emergency imposed by Congress, BJP also, for the first time, became part of ruling party. Its two leaders: Atal Bihari Bajpai and L.K. Advani were appointed as External Affairs Minister and Information and Broadcasting Ministers respectively in the Janata Party government. With the disintegration of Janata Party in 1979, the way was cleared for the formation of BJP in 1980.

In the initial years of its second phase (1980-1990) BJP was in the ideological as well as political doldrums, but it came back to its ideological roots at the end of this period. In the wake of assassination of Indira Gandhi and the sympathy generated in favour of Congress, BJP suffered initial jolts in 1984 elections as it won only two seats and its national vote share came down to 7.7 percent. During 1989 elections it shared platform with newly formed Janata Dal led by V.P. Singh, without forging any formal alliance. BJP extended outside support along with to the National Front government led by V.P. Singh. This was the second stint of BJP enjoying political power at national level, but with a difference: wielding political power without being part of the government or being accountable to anybody. As National Front experiment crumbled in 1990 due to its inherent contradictions, BJP was left with no option than to go deeper to its ideological roots and come out on its own. This is the subsequent story of BJP in its third and contemporary phase. We conclude

this part by highlighting two tendencies, which are still relevant in the strategic formulations of the party.

1. The first is fluid and undefined yet close relationship between the BJP (or its predecessor BJS) and its ideological parent RSS. The latter started intervening in and influencing the operation of the BJS in early 1950s and this continues to be the case now. This relationship is problematic in the sense that the party has to go to the people and has to be sensitive to their aspirations and other ground realities, but the RSS wields political power without being accountable to people. The tensions between the two become more pronounced whenever, BJP is a ruling party. RSS is not just an ideological guide but also a major source of organisational support to BJP. People of India may not like behind the curtain role of the RSS and it may hamper durable expansion of BJP support base across different sections of India. Thus, management of this relationship will continue to pose a major challenge to future leadership of BJP.
2. The BJP has shown its ability to join hands with other parties, even those which accused it of communal politics. The so called secular political parties also find BJP acceptable during political exigencies. This ability and experience of BJP will enable it to survive political odds and forge alliances and coalitions as when situation warrants. BJP has also shown time and again (1979 and 1989) to move alone and consolidate its traditional support base, whenever such alliances fail to work. This ability adds to party's strength in the diversified nature of Indian politics, where many caste groups and regional actors play a significant role.

PART THREE

It was during the third phase of its political career since 1990 that BJP has desire to gained centre stage in Indian politics. It reverted back to its grassroots of 'cultural nationalism' in the wake of Mandal politics of other backward castes, launched by other secular political parties. The Ram Mandir agitation, Advani's Rath Yatra and subsequent demolition of Babri Mosque in December 1992 led to the communal polarization in Indian politics and political isolation of the party. The four BJP led state governments were also dismissed by the ruling congress party at the centre as an aftermath of Mosque demolition (Chandra: 1999). But, it could generate same reactions among people at large because Indian citizens were equally disenchanted with the double speak, opportunism, practice of using minorities as vote bank and misrule of secular parties. The net result was the increasing popular support of the party, particularly in North and West India in the face of apparent political isolation. Its vote share as well as seat tally have registered steady increase over the years with minor exceptions in subsequent Lok Sabha elections. It won 120 seats with 20.1 per cent votes in 1991 election; 161 seats with 20.2 per cent votes in 1996; 182 seats with 25.5 per cent votes in 1998; 182 seats with 23.7 per cent votes in 1999; 138 seats with 22.1 per cent votes in 2004; 116 seats with 18.2 per cent votes in 2009; and finally 282 seats with 31 per cent votes in 2014 Lok Sabha elections (Election Commission of India; 2014). With this political growth also came forth the specific agenda of the party, for which BJP is known for. This includes, among other things, uniform civil code, abrogation of Article 370, end of appeasement to minorities and promotion of positive secularism, emphasis on national culture and Indian learning and literature.

Ironically, the BJP's success story began with its core agenda of cultural nationalism, but it failed to sustain popular enthusiasm among masses in later years. It merely acted as a launching pad. Rather it was a subdued focus on this agenda, which sustained its growth trajectory. The factors of its steady success lie elsewhere: party's ability to accommodate the diverse and some time incompatible regional groups and interests under the rubric of National Democratic Alliance with devices of Common Minimum Programmes or national Agenda; assimilative and liberal democratic leadership; and focus on national development, particularly infrastructure development; balanced external policy and not the least the popular disenchantment with the rule of its competitors. Anti-incumbency factor is always significant in India electoral politics due to the ever remaining gap between the promise and performance of ruling parties and zero-sum game nature of competitive political process. However, it should not be confused with the durable strength of those parties which are benefitted by it.

Analysis of Contemporary Challenges and Strengths

The success story of BJP and its declared official ideology of 'cultural nationalism' has increasingly come under public gaze and has led to a number of scholarly studies and responses in academic and journalistic discourse on last one decade or so.³ These studies highlight the historical growth of BJP and its ideology of Hindu nationalism. Many of them are highly critical of this ideology and emphasize on India's composite culture and regional diversities. However, we attempt here to identify those factors which impact upon the strength and weakness of BJP in the long term perspective within the three dimensional analytical framework outlined earlier.

1. The representative core of the BJP both in its official pronouncements and popular imaginations is official philosophy of 'Hindutva' (cultural nationalism) and associated notions and issues like positive secularism, national integration, Nation first and so on (BJP: 2015). Opposing special status to J & K and appeasement to minorities, ban on cow slaughter, and pleading for uniform civil code are adjuncts to its core ideology of cultural nationalism. It presupposes protection and revival of Indian cultural tradition and building a strong nation on the basis of that tradition. The cultural nationalism is also called as Hindu nationalism or Hindutva with differing interpretation and meanings. For BJP 'Hindu' stands for Indian, whereas, for its opponents, it stands for people who follow Hindu religion. Jaffrelot (2004) also holds that the notion of cultural nationalism tries to project the culture of majority community as the embodiment of Indian identity.

A Supreme Court Judgment has emboldened BJP's stand as it interpreted Hindutva or Hinduism not as religious doctrines but as a way of life of Indian people, irrespective of their religious faith.⁴ Some scholars have criticized this judgment as a blow to secular democracy in India (Tarkunde: 1996). The party has used this judgment to criticize its critiques. A write up by Arun Shourie (1996) to that effect is posted at the official website of the party. However, for general masses of India, Hinduism refers to a particular religion but Indian-ness is a desirable value in national political life. Significantly, neither BJP nor its opponents want to remove

this confusion as both prefer to use this confusion in their own interests: BJP for cultivating its Hindu (religious group), while maintaining official meaning to address vocal and educated sections and its opponents to browbeat BJP as a communal party.

In spite of controversial nature of cultural nationalism or Hindutva, it continues to be viable 'representative core' on Indian political and social life. It is not the first time that this core has been retrieved and articulated by the BJP. During British colonialism, the same core was consolidated for the cultural awakening of India in 19th century. Since it was a time of national crisis for India, this cultural revivalism was accepted without introspection. This ideological domain was not invented by BJP. It is always available in India's ideological and cultural fault lines. After all we cannot be oblivious to the long indigenous Indian cultural tradition, the trauma of foreign rule, India's long subjugation and perceived or real modern threat to this tradition. If it is not BJP, some other political group would come to the fore and would appropriate this ideological domain. M.N. Buch holds that the assertion of pride in being Hindu is not the creation of BJP. Rather this feeling has strengthened BJP. All that the BJP has done is to focus on this force and exploit it politically (Swain: 2001). In spite of its viability, BJP faces some challenges to expand it for its political benefits:

- (a) The ideology of cultural nationalism is a protest ideology of national crisis. India needs to be projected in crisis mode to enhance its appeal. Thus the one of the major challenge of BJP in coming decades is to turn this ideology of crisis into an ideology of ruling party. Modi understands this difficulty and would like to ride the bandwagon of 'rising India' and dilute the representative core initially to enhance the acceptability of cultural nationalism latter. The TSS may not like to dilute this core at any stage, as it questions its own relevance.
 - (b) The second challenge emerges from the equally strong and well articulated notion of 'composite culture' of India, which is a potential contender for political space in secular India. India's cultural diversity always sustains the ideas of political culture. It is well in tune with liberal and tolerant culture orientation of India and goes well with peace, harmony and development of all. While adhering to the notion of cultural nationalism and at the same time avoiding direct confrontation with the tradition of 'composite culture' requires a great balancing act on the part of BJP leadership. And here also the RSS may not permit this balancing act.
2. The operational environment also produces mixed fortune for the BJP in coming decades. Domestically, the real political challenge to BJP is likely to emerge from the regional actors. 'regionalisation' of India politics is nearly complete as except Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, the regional political parties have well entrenched presence in major parts of the country (Sanghavi: 2000). Both co-opting and competing with these regional forces requires different type of resources and flexible approach, which may be difficult to mobilize for a national political party like BJP. Though Congress faces leadership crisis, but with its national presence and well knit oragnisational structure, it remains a viable national alternative to BJP. BJP still continues to be urban based party and the rising middle class may sustain its support base in urban areas. It is estimated that Indian middle class will reach to 200 million by the year

2020 due to rapid economic growth in past two decades. However, its cadre and organization is still not suited for expansion in rural areas of North India. It has yet to come in terms with dynamics of caste politics, which continues to define political process in many parts of the country. It tried to rope in OBC groups in north India during 2014 elections though direct entry of non-RSS cadre, but it led to tensions between the RSS cadres and non RSS entrants in the party. The assimilation of these diverse groups and interests poses potential challenge for BJP in coming decades. It needs to evolve a 'BJP system' in line with what Rajani Kothari called as Congress system. It requires churning in ideology, organization and its relations with RSS, all at the same time. The party appears unprepared for this churning at this moment.

Ironically, external environment is conducive to BJP's political growth in India. Globalization per se goes against any form of cultural nationalism, but it has produced contrary results for BJP. First, the process of globalization has been criticized for its negative impacts on marginalized groups. There are sections in India which are apprehensive of negative impacts of globalization on Indian cultural values and norms, which is often debated in popular discourse. If BJP is projected as the guardian of Indian culture and values in the face of external threats, its popular support base may increase. Second, in order to sustain the momentum of economic growth, India policy makers are in search for foreign investment and attractive choice is Indian Diaspora, settled in foreign countries. Modi has carefully cultivated this constituency by addressing huge rallies of India Diaspora in foreign lands. His emotive appeal and the slogans all prefixed with 'India' goes well with the BJP's philosophy of cultural nationalism. Third, the rise of terrorist and extremist groups of Islamic genre like Taliban, Al Qaeda, and now Islamic State has raised global concerns. India too faces threats from such groups. These concerns ultimately strengthen BJP's representative core of cultural nationalism. It makes Muslim community defensive everywhere. Similar nationalistic tendencies are on rise in European countries in face of in the face of rising terrorist activities in Europe. Fourth, the issue of strong defence raised by BJP catches popular imagination, particularly among youth in the face of potential threat posed by China and Pakistan to Indian security interests. In these cases, soft line of the government is perceived by people as a sign of weakness. In brief, the operational environment of BJP not only poses daunting challenges, but also provides opportunities for growth and expansion.

3. The review of resources of BJP in terms of organization, strategy, and leadership also gives mixed signals. Though BJP has its own organizational structure, its election management is dependent of RSS cadres, which is a useful organizational resource. But it has certain drawbacks. This undermines its organizational autonomy, creates problem of coordination between two sets of party functionaries trained in different political culture, and restricts its functioning as a mass based party. Its political recruitment process is restricted and needs further diversification.

As BJP inched towards becoming a ruling party on its own in 1990s, it came closer to ground realities of Indian politics as well as popular aspiration and needs. Along with its core cultural nationalist agenda, came its development agenda and strategies to implement the same. During

its full term as ruling party (1999-2004) it continued to support the process of globalization and laid the focus on infrastructural development to sustain the growth of economy. During its second inning BJP under Modi has adopted a more ambitious model of development strategy focusing on seven core areas: Modi Mantra focusing on connectivity, jobs and education, vision of Modi with eight point development model, good governance, security, and nation first (BJP: 2015a). Rising India, Clean India, Digital India, and Skill India are some of the practical manifestation of this strategy. This has raised high hopes among youth, women and rising middle classes. BJP would like to consolidate its gains of 2014 by successful implementation of this development strategy. If it succeeds, it will enhance the representative core of the party, but if it falters, the popular backlash may undermine the very credibility of the party.

The style and ability of leadership are valuable human resource of a political party. The greatest contribution of Modi to the BJP is not to lead it to resounding victory, but to impart a sense of unity, enthusiasm and confidence among the rank and file of the party. His past development experience with no corruption scandals behind and his image of leader with determination and vision are likely to endure in popular imagination, particularly among youth, which has been given special focus in his eight point development programme. Yet his undemocratic style in handling inner dissent as well as concentration of authority may not go well the development of regional leadership or the second rung of leaders within the party. In many states, party is faced with the crisis of leadership and Modi may not be a substitute for such roles. This appears to be new challenge for the party in future.

Notes

1. The terminology of 'Right and Left' originated in late 18th century during the debates of National Assembly on the nature of reforms. Those who supported radical reforms were sitting on the left side of the Chair and were called as Leftists and those who supported the existing institutions were sitting on the right side of the Chair and were called the Rightists. However, the use of these terms as fixed categories in the classification of parties is problematic as we are aware that both sets of parties have compromised with their designated positions in the face of political exigencies. At best, these categories should be viewed as the two opposite ends of a continuum where political parties shifts their positions from time to time with changing conditions.
2. The philosophy 'Integral Humanism' was propounded by Deen Dayal Upadhyaya in 1950s and it remained official doctrine of BJS and continues to be the official philosophy of BJP even today. It rejects individualistic overtones of capitalism as well as collectivistic tendencies of socialism and pleads for making human beings the focus of all development. This has been projected as indigenous model of development as it pleads for balanced development of all four attributes of human beings: body, mind, intellect and soul. It criticized both socialist and capitalist models of development as both focus on only body and mind and ignore the development of intellect and soul (Bhatt: 2001). Integral Humanism has never caught popular

imagination like its sister concept of cultural nationalism, though it continues to be part of official philosophy of BJP even today. However, it was used by the party to highlight its distinct identity in the Indian political landscape. Its relevance to the present debate lies in its close association with Indian cultural tradition, which constitutes the ‘representative core’ of BJP.

3. Some of these studies are: *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The origin and Development of Bharatiya Jan Sangh* by B.D. Graham (1990); *Hindu nationalism in India: The Rise of Bharatiya Janata Party* by Yogendra K. Malik and V.B. Singh (1994); *The Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics* by Christophe Jaffrelot (1996); *India under Atal Behari Vajpayee: The BJP Era* by C. P. Sharma and Devendra P. Thakur (1999); *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu nationalism in Modern India* by Thomas Hansen (1999); *Coalition Conundrum: The BJP's Trials, Tribulations and Triumphs* by Ramesh Rao (2001); *Bharatiya Janata party: Periphery to Centre* by C.P. Bhambhri (2001); *Bharatiya Janata Party: Profile and Performance* by Pratap Chandra Swain (2001); *Hindutva: Ideology and Politics* by Parvathy Appaiah (2003); *Politics of Cultural Mobilization* by John Zavos and others (2004); *Bharatiya Janata Party and Resurgent India* by Gurdas M. Ahuja (2004); *The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence and India's Future* by Marta Nussbaum (2008); and *The Saffron Tide: The Rise of the BJP* by Kingshuk Nag (2014).
4. The Supreme Court of India delivered its judgment on the meaning of ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Hindutva’ on 11 Dec 1995 (Ramesh Yashwant Prabhoo vs. Prabhakar Kashinath Kunte and others) in an appeal filed against the judgment of Bombay High Court. The court held that the terms ‘Hinduism’ and ‘Hindutva’ should not be construed narrowly to mean the religious practice of a group, but should be interpreted as the way of life of all people living in India, irrespective of their religious faith. The decision has vindicated BJP’s interpretation about these terms. Now BJP is armed with legal tool to counter allegation of being communal against itself. However, these technical and legal interpretations have no meaning for general Indian masses.

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