



The rise of BJP since 2014 and use of social media to change public opinion

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ABSTRACT: Reversing the trend of coalition governments that India saw for 25 years, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2014 election secured a majority of seats in the Lok Sabha on its own. The party further consolidated its strength since 2014 as evident in the increased vote share and seat share in the 2019 election. There is a precipitous decline of the chief opposition party, the Congress, and a perceptible disarray among the opposition parties in general. Going by the conventional meaning of the term dominant party, the BJP can be said to have established itself as a dominant party if it wins one more term, demonstrating its capacity to stay in power continuously.

After the technological revolution dominated the world and changed our lifestyle and way of exchanging knowledge, social media became the most significant influence on public opinion. With the advent of the internet and social media, they have become a major component of the environment that constitutes and affects human awareness, inclinations, opinions, and even behaviors. It has also become the easiest way to communicate with different people from all over the world, access information from various sources in the easiest and fastest way, and learn the diverse ideologies of different cultures. That is how social media influences public opinion and moves the audience towards the desired behavior.

INTRODUCTION

A glance at the results of the 2019 Lok Sabha election gives us a sense of the breadth and depth of the BJP. From about 7.4% popular vote in 1984, the first national general election the party contested, the BJP's vote share increased to 37.36% in the 2019 election. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) polled 44.84% vote. In these years, the BJP has extended its geographical spread as well. In 2019, the party contested in all states and union territories, either on its own or with its allies. Of the 34 states and union territories in which it fielded candidates, the party polled half or more than half of the votes in 14 states and union territories. The number goes up to 17 for the NDA. It polled between one third and half of the total votes in another nine states and union territories. The number goes up to 11 for the NDA. But more significantly, the BJP polled 46.14% of the popular vote if we look at the vote per seat it contested. The number of seats the party won with more than 50% of the popular vote has increased over the years, from 35 in 1996 to 224 in 2019. The 2019 National Election Study shows that of the people who have reported that they identify with a political party, 41% said that they like the BJP. This marks a huge increase from 25% in 1999 (NES 2019). The party claims a membership of 11 crore, the largest for any party in the political history of the world.

Many political scientists and commentators have explained in their own way the rise of the BJP to dominance. In this article, I propose to analyse some aspects of the emergence of BJP's dominance and its durability which I think have not received due and proper attention.

The Decline of Congress Dominance and the Rise of the BJP

There are four causes for the emergence of the BJP as a dominant party. The first is the decay and decline of the Congress party and many of the regional parties. We all know that it was not the Congress dominance but its decline that became critical to shaping the party system in India. But why did the Congress decline so soon after independence? Was it because the Congress began to decay as it transformed itself from a movement party to a ruling party, as it happened in many postcolonial nations? Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru began the undemocratic traditions of dismissing other party governments, of curbing dissent, and the practice of coupling up the positions of the president of the ruling party and the prime minister. For a long time, Rajni Kothari's model of the dominant party system, applied to India, dominated our analysis of Indian politics and party system. Perhaps, it is time to revisit that model. In retrospection, the Congress system appears to be a problematic construct, both theoretically and empirically. Even in its heydays of the 1950s, the Congress was deficient in the criteria laid down by Kothari: a party of consensus that possessed the characteristics of ideological flexibility, accommodating opposition, and democratic functioning.

As years passed, the Congress became a playground for political entrepreneurs, factions and wily provincial satraps, in their unceasing pursuit of power and wealth, flaunting loyalty to the high command. This was stated by no less a person than the Congress Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. In his famous 1985 speech, as the newly anointed president of the Congress, Rajiv Gandhi lamented that power brokers converted the party into a feudal oligarchy, that corruption became the hallmark of leadership, and that the party was a mere shell without substance. He accused the power brokers and corrupt leaders for the party's decay. Was he not aware of the inconvenient fact that nothing else but lineage parachuted him to the coupled-up positions of prime minister and the president of the Congress? It is ironic that a man who proclaimed lofty ideals functioned like a "king among courtiers" and got embroiled in a corruption scandal accelerating the downfall of the party. Once again, after a generation, Rahul Gandhi is caught in the same predicament of proclaiming a commitment to the lofty ideal of strengthening democracy while he is conscious of the fact that it was the family connection that enthroned him in the highest position, a position he wants to abdicate. The Congress as a party is caught in the toughest political bind; the prospects of the party falling apart without a dynastic leader, and the bleak chances to prosper with a dynastic leader at the helm.

The second reason for the BJP's rise to dominance is the failure of the attempts of the non-Congress non-BJP parties to forge stable governments. The decline of Congress dominance in the 1960s and 1970s opened up many possibilities. For a short while after the Emergency, the Janata Party appeared to be a solid alternative giving rise to speculation of the possibility of a two-party system taking shape. But the party was shattered soon by the internecine quarrels of its ambitious leaders. Again, after a decade, the formation of the National Front government led by the Janata Dal in 1989 kindled hopes of forging a formidable third front, consisting of parties that professed secularism and social justice. But this experiment ended in a fiasco. One more experiment in 1996 to form a United Front government consisting again of many disparate parties too collapsed in no time. State-based parties came to prominence in these years of political churning and governmental instability. They claimed themselves to be the representatives of regional interests, guardians of state autonomy, cultural moorings of their people and the aspirations of the backward social groups. But their practice did not match their claims. Many of them had degenerated into family fiefdoms, and outfits of personal aggrandisement, political corruption and bad governance. They have shown how parties can be reduced to personal fiefs and political power can be passed on to family members like private property. The failure of the non-BJP parties to offer an effective alternative to the Congress made people slowly turn towards the BJP.

The third reason for BJP's dominance is its innovative political strategy and ability to adapt itself to the changing times and the changing Indian voter. It could sense the political vacuum in the wake of Congress decay and the disintegration of the third front. But 'mandalisation' of politics and the emergence of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Samajwadi Party (SP), and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) as principal contenders for power in UP and Bihar made the BJP leadership to recognise that in order to come to power, the party has to secure the support of the members of the numerically large lower strata of the Hindu social order, namely the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs). This new political strategy, known as social engineering, contributed to the electoral success of the BJP in the late 1990s. There was a temporary lull in social engineering during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's rule, but got a fillip once again under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, with Modi himself becoming a shining star of the disadvantaged and backward strata of the "Hindu society." In 2014 and 2019, we see a massive surge in the percentage of people from these social groups voting

for the BJP— from 19% in 1996 to 44% in 2019 among the OBCs, from 14% to 34% among the SCs; and from 21% to 44% among the STs (Suri 2019: 236). The political strategy of the BJP under Modi's leadership synchronised well with the structural transformation of the Indian society and the dynamics of democratic politics. The new social coalition of the upper castes, OBCs, SCs and STs that the BJP could forge altered the internal composition of the BJP's electoral support and, hence, the BJP's social character. This massive change in its support base pushed the party to the centre stage.

Some commentators wrongly attribute BJP's overwhelming success in 2014 and 2019 to Modi's personality, calling him a polarising figure; polarising people on the basis of religious identities. Certainly, Hindutva was the foundation for the BJP's success despite its ideological moderation over the years. It remains crucial to Modi's political strategy. But we know that Modi was not the first leader to make it a political issue. Political Hindutva has been around quite for some time, since the 1980s. Polarisation of voters did not happen in 2014. It is not as if Muslims were voting for the BJP before Modi and now under Modi they had moved away from the BJP. The fact is only 2% Muslims voted for the BJP in 1996. In 2014, the percentage of Muslims who voted for the BJP had actually increased to eight percent and it remained at that level in 2019. Can we then say that Vajpayee was a more polarising figure than Modi? So, polarisation was not the reason for BJP's massive victory in 2014. What Modi did was to consolidate the Hindu vote. What the Modi-led BJP achieved was to bind together the diverse social groups within the 'Hindu society' and rally them behind the party. The fourth reason for BJP's success is Modi's popular appeal.

In 2019, about half of the people wanted Modi as the Prime Minister. Close to one-third of those who voted for the BJP said that their voting preference would have changed if Modi was not the prime ministerial candidate (Shastri 2019: 214). No believer in democracy can dismiss this as false consciousness or attribute it to the condition of being misled by propaganda. So, the question we should ask is: How did Modi strike a chord with ordinary people? I can think of three ways. One, Modi was subjected to severe public scrutiny for ten years under the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government which could not indict him despite setting up special investigation teams and carrying on years of prosecution in the highest courts. People empathise with leaders who they perceive are persecuted for political reasons by the regimes of the day, whose leaders themselves are corrupt and cling to power by fair means or foul. Two, his social background. He hailed from an ordinary family. He is not a *janeudhari*, has no famous *gotra* to flaunt, no claims to illustrious lineage or wealth. He is not from Delhi's high society. He has not received education in any premier institution. He does not speak the language and lingo of the urban elite. These traits of a self-made leader who fought against odds and struggled hard to transcend sociocultural barriers to rise to the level of a national leader evoke a strong emotional effect of sympathy and shared feelings.

And three, his political journey. Modi became a renunciate at a very early age when he could have indulged in all the sensual pleasures of life. One may disagree with and oppose his ideology, but he worked as an ordinary propagandist of the ideas that gave a perspective that he could call his own. This is in sharp contrast to other leaders who begin as pragmatists, crave for political power from early on in life and use their position of power to amass wealth and reproduce political power for themselves and for their children. This evokes strong emotional effects of admiration for the leader.

How Durable is BJP's Dominance?

Institutionalisation of greed to amass political power and material wealth through family control of the party, autocratic leadership, and political corruption have come to occupy a central place in India's political practice over the past few decades. These afflictions that began with the Congress party gradually spread to most of the regional parties. For the BJP under Modi's leadership, these afflictions have become the focal point of political attack against other parties, eliciting a positive response from people. Insofar as these parties are run as family fiefdoms by autocratic leaders continue as centres of corruption by unscrupulous political entrepreneurs and remain nests of intrigue by cronies, they cannot hope to emerge as a credible alternative to the BJP. So far, most of these parties have not gone through the leadership turnover test in which leadership succession takes place in a democratic manner according to the procedure laid down in the party constitution.

Hardly they have chosen any person other than the founder or founder's close family member to head the party. The left parties are different and they are akin to BJP in terms of organisation and leadership, although on different sides of the ideological divide. But they too have declined over the years for different reasons and are too languid

to become an alternative to the BJP. In the given situation in which the opposition parties do not have realistic chances of posing a credible alternative, a threat to BJP's dominance from outside in the short term seems less likely.

But a threat to a party's dominance can arise from factors internal to the party itself, which are more difficult to notice than the external threats and difficult to resolve. The BJP received a huge fillip due to a major dealignment of the socially backward groups from the entrenched political parties and their shift towards it. Can the BJP sustain that momentum and further consolidate its position? Would the party's top leadership move in tandem with the logic of the new situation? Would it encourage an equitable sharing of power? Any attempts to erect invisible barriers hindering the rise of leaders from backward social groups into the higher echelons of the party and government would be detrimental to the BJP. BJP came to power on the basis of its promise *sabka saath, sabka vikas* (together with all and development for all). What does this slogan mean to people? They expect the government to come to their help in a variety of ways, including provision of welfare goods, health benefits, financial and material assistance, and expansion of educational and employment opportunities. While the BJP professes Gandhian socialism as one of its five guiding principles, the dominant tendency in the finance ministry and among the policy makers seem to recklessly discard elements of socialism and push India aggressively towards a libertarian paradigm of state and market. Democracy is all about individual well-being and a fair access to opportunities for a good life. Would not this new economic reform policy upset the balance between the imperatives of welfare and economic growth? Finally, a word on the desirability of dominance and dominant party system. The term dominant party, although often used, is not well-defined. Some argued that a system of one-party dominance should be considered a variant of democracy, instead of treating it as inimical to democracy. However, the experience with dominant party systems is not all that encouraging. Democracy depends on the alternation of power between parties and the hope for the losing party to win next election by gathering sufficient popular support. While a desire to rule is inherent to all political parties and leaders, a will to dominate others can become expansive. If pushed to extremes, it can result in a desire to relegate other parties to the status of permanent opposition or a desire to revive the anachronistic dominant party system in which a ruling party claims to represent the will of the nation.

We should not conflate electoral dominance of a party with the establishment of a dominant party system or a system of one-party dominance. Congress, like many other parties that led freedom struggles in various countries, was caught in this trap for some time and suffered from its negative consequences. Unlike the early years of Congress dominance when the opposition was in its incipient stage, the BJP today has to live with the reality of high party competition and multiple formats of party competition at the state level. Different parties dominate in different states and it is not easy to displace all of them. It is not possible nor desirable for the BJP to become like the People's Action Party of Singapore or the African National Congress in South Africa. In this sense, the BJP cannot and need not hope to become a hegemonic party or hope to revive a dominant party system of the Congress type that India saw in the 1950s.

BJP's rise to dominance today is partly due to Modi's popularity as was the dominance of the Congress in the 1950s due to Nehru's popularity. During the Nehru era, Congress faced the question of who would become prime minister after Nehru. BJP too may have to face this question soon: What next for the BJP after Modi? Media is considered to be the fourth Pillars of Democracy, the other three being Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary. The system of checks of balances which is followed among the other well-known pillars, media also keeps a check on the functioning of the three independent organs of government to keep the system intact.

How do media affect the formation of public opinion?

Firstly, public opinion is nothing but an amalgamation of opinions, views, beliefs, and attitudes of individuals which can be on a particular subject matter, voiced by a comparatively significant segment of the society. Human nature is such that it makes them eager to know about their surroundings, the tendency of being informed, such an atypical nature makes them prone to relying upon and getting influenced by the information that they receive without critically thinking about the authenticity of the information. It can be observed that sometimes the information providers not only tell the bare information but also state their opinion along with it. Mass Media including news channels, internet (social media), newspapers, etc. have the power of changing people's perspectives on an issue in hand. All such instances combined help in the formation of public opinion, depending on the authenticity of the news and how the people wish to interpret it.

Media is considered to be the fourth Pillars of Democracy, the other three being Legislature, Executive, and Judiciary. The system of checks of balances which is followed among the other well-known pillars, media also keeps a check on the functioning of the three independent organs of government to keep the system intact. The role of media is to ensure that the people are aware of the social, economic, political developments taking place around them. In performing its role in spreading information, media also plays a pivotal function in creating public opinion. It holds significance in a democracy as a positive public opinion on any subject would mean legitimization and validation from the public. Public opinion matters as with the help of public opinion, several policy decisions can be taken by the government. In a democracy, government policies and programs are people-centric and to know whether the government can create the desired impact through its actions, public opinion is necessary. Mass media works as a medium between the government and the public. Its function is to provide the people with information for them to form an opinion based on the piece of information. The media coverage that was received by Anna Hazare brought the issue of corruption into the limelight. Anna's support to the Lokpal Bill reached masses which helped in the formation of public opinion so as to fight against corruption. Thus, creating awareness is the primary task in the hands of media to make the public capable of forming some sort of opinion because to form an opinion on a particular issue it is vital to be aware of what is going in and around the society.

Role of Media and Social Networking in the creation of Public Opinion

One needs to understand that role of mass media in shaping public opinion can be positive as well as negative. Every coin has two faces to it; sometimes the controversies created by media can help to give momentum to a cause for good whereas sometimes it can prove to be detrimental. For instance, if a local social movement gains media attention on a nation-wide level then it can create an impact on a wider scale which was not originally expected out of it. The Agenda-setting theory of media plays the biggest role in shaping opinions. There are two aspects to this agenda-setting theory i.e. first, media doesn't show the reality rather the reality is filtered and shaped before being telecasted. Second, it is not necessary that the media will show everything that is out there rather importance is the concentration on few subjects which in turn leads the public to think as if they are the only important issues to be dealt with. Now, these aspects need not be presented as good or bad by itself, some issue being more important than the others is not something which should concern an individual but if the audience wants to be informed about the other issues is a choice that they have to make.

The role of mass media including social networking sites becomes even more significant when there is no direct experience or some other knowledge on a particular issue is unavailable. In such a situation, all that the audience has got is what is being presented by the media, where there is no way to cross-check, which gives them the benefit of doubt. Even when there is an availability of other sources to verify, what makes it easier to shape public opinion according to the agenda-setting, is the growing tendency of the people to believe in each and everything which they see that is out there. The important role played by mass media in shaping opinion can be well understood by looking at an example i.e. of China. The Chinese government has complete control over what is being shown to its populace. From television to the internet, the government decides what its citizens need to watch and what not to. The Chinese people are not free to post according to their whims and fancies on the internet, what is worse is that it is not even considered as an infringement of their right to speech.[1] This clearly shows how the government tries to curb the freedom of press and media from shaping any kind of public opinion which goes against the government.

Research Through Innovation

Media Trials and Public Opinion

Nowadays, it is a normal saying that an accused has to face two trials- one is in the courtroom and the other one is outside court i.e. the 'Media Trial'. Trial by media of the under-trials is no more an alien concept, it is very much prevalent in Indian society and there has been media intervention in some high profile cases which have even influenced the judgment of the court. A lot of times it has been noticed that even before the court can pass its judgment, media passes its verdict. Does such passing of verdicts impact the case in any way? For instance, while deciding on matters like awarding the death penalty to a convict, strong public opinion works as an aggravating factor. What happens in real life is that, in sensitive cases like that of rape, strong public opinion is formed with the help of media attention which is completely based on the emotions and morals of the people due to which often the judiciary has to give the decision accordingly keeping in view the aggravating and mitigating factors. Critics have also considered the Nirbhaya Verdict to be one such result of such public opinion. It is not a

very healthy practice for the functioning of the judiciary. A Law Commission report even suggested to abolish death penalty except in the cases relating to terrorism as it doesn't serve the purpose of deterrence and also because of the attached arbitrariness of 'rarest of the rare' case. The Janta Adalat has initiated to interfere in the court proceedings. The much-required difference between an accused and a convict has started to diminish and the age-old basic principle of innocent until proven guilty is not being respected by these public courts. Not only the press but social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, Tweeter, etc. have their own share of the role that they play in passing their own verdict. Even if an accused gets acquitted from the court but the amount of trolling that is received by the person on these networking sites is in itself enough to defame him/her and once that is done even if the person gets an order of acquittal still social bullying not only cause mental trauma but also tarnishes one's reputation.

Social Media Influencers and their Contribution: A Modern Phenomenon

Social Media is also a platform to influence public opinion and this act is done by the social media influencers. A social media influencer can be anyone from a celebrity to a blogger who has the credibility to persuade people according to their recommendations. As social media is a platform where anyone and everyone can express their opinions, influencers have the power to shape opinion as well. For instance, the recent killing of an African-American, George Floyd, by a cop in the USA has gathered the attention of many of the celebrities and this has in turn brought the issue of racism into the forefront yet again. Violent protests are being carried out against police brutalities targeted towards the blacks in the United States. Celebrities in and around America are condemning such practices of the US policy, which is as not only helped in shaping public opinion but has also given momentum to the protests. However, sometimes influencers on social media glorify an event that should actually be condemned keeping in view the principles of justice. Hyderabad's police encounter case in which Hyderabad police killed the 'accused' persons of a murder-rape case in an encounter was celebrated on social media by a lot of influencers. This particular case of encounter like many others was a failure of the judicial system which should have criticized but rather such an act by the police was labeled as heroic and a lot of celebrities tweeted as they thought that 'justice had been served'.

Principles and effectiveness of self-regulation for media

Self-regulation mechanisms are essential to uphold and maintain the quality and also the credibility of media. This is one way of making free media accountable to the public. The self-regulating mechanism might include ethics codes which will help in maintaining editorial standards, complaint commissions will assist in maintaining the quality quotient and an ombudsman to verify the redressal mechanism. Fairness and rationality will make the medium of getting the information more reliable. Freedom of media is necessary so as to curb state intervention. There should be a clear cut division between stating facts and stating one's own opinion if this division is not clear then it can lead to spreading propaganda which is not healthy. Ethical journalism, also with respect to the online information that is available on social media, is the need of the hour and it is being promoted to uphold genuine professionalism. Codes of Ethics might vary from different countries depending upon the traditions but few aspects which are like the basics of such codes are fidelity towards independence, accuracy, and truth. Self-regulation policies should be such that it promotes independence of journalists, right to information of the public, better understanding to form public opinion, and developed redressal mechanism to institute trust relations between the public & media. Media must promote pluralism, be it the news channels or social networking sites, what is important, to present both the sides of the picture to assist people from a better and holistic opinion. Public opinion is the first essential of democracy, and the role played by the media informing this public opinion is immense thus the success of a democracy is very much based upon the effectiveness of such self-regulation practices of media.

Critical Analysis: Conclusion

The question then arises is that, whether media is shaping the world or the way the audience looks at it? It will be really tough to present the impact of media and social networking sites on the minds of the public in black or white. A similar piece of information might force a person to rebel against a community or government whereas it won't even bother the other person. So, what could be the way out other than following the principles of self-regulation by the media? In a world where access to information on the internet is not a big deal for many, one big way out can be if people decide to behave like an informed citizen in real sense. It should be considered as a duty of every individual to cross-check or verify what all they read or hear. As it is there as a well-settled principle in

criminal jurisprudence that hearsay evidence is no evidence, similarly before forming any sort of opinion it is necessary to go through a fact-checking exercise.

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