

How the BJP juggernaut chugs along

Unlike the first spell of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has consciously anchored itself to a deeper foundation of political legitimacy, beyond the prosaic imperatives of holding on to political power. Over the last decade, the wider political culture of the country has undergone a thorough process of making and un-making. The political scholar and activist, Yogendra Yadav, had provocatively captured this palpable phenomenon as the "unveiling of the second Indian republic". There are, of course, scholarly disputes about the nature and extent of such stated political transformation. In the midst of a crucial round of State elections, and before the national elections, one might revisit certain questions afresh.

BJP dominant or Modi dominant?

First, can the present political system be characterised as a dominant party system; and if so, can it be more accurately characterised as a BJP dominant system or a Narendra Modi dominant system? Second, how robust and sustainable does the present structure of political dominance appear from a historical perspective? Some political scientists, such as Adam Ziegfeld, have articulated reasonable doubts over the BJP's claims to dominance. They say that unlike the Congress's geographical spread under Indira Gandhi, the BJP's spread still substantially excludes southern and eastern India. The much-vaunted BJP electoral machine has been unable to dislodge a regional incumbent in State elections outside of the so-called Hindi belt. At present, the party does not possess a State government in any southern State and in a large swathe of eastern India (Bihar, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha). Also, unlike the Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru, the NDA has also not fulfilled the gruelling test of regime longevity (a rough rule of thumb being three consecutive terms).

Nevertheless, few might contest the fact that the present majority coalition led by the BJP commands more robust popular support than what the Congress enjoyed in the latter half of the 1980s under Rajiv Gandhi. Between 1985 and 1990, the Congress suffered dramatic reversals in its previous strongholds of Assam, Punjab, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. In the words of the political scientists Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph, the rise of regional parties in crucial States and the consequent de-legitimation of the old centralised Congress system had "reduced Congress' ability to win the super-majorities that had enabled it to be [the] dominant party for so long". Thus, the Rudolphs held the 1989 election loss as both anticipated and much in line with a broader trend of party decline caused by the "cancer of party



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The lack of a clear ideological alternative provided by the Congress and the conflict bubbling under the surface of the INDIA coalition show that the BJP is still powering along with ideological steam

de-institutionalisation, launched by Indira Gandhi, and not addressed by Rajiv Gandhi".

In contrast, one can gauge sharp discontinuities and ambiguities in the political picture gleaned from this round of State elections. While the BJP appears to be struggling in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Telangana, and hardly appears to be decisively ahead in Rajasthan, a State known for its 'revolving door' trend, a heavy dose of caution is warranted before extrapolating this to a national trend.

In 2019, the BJP's victory had largely rested on landslides in north, west, and central India, often exceeding a stupefying 50% vote share. A recent CVoter survey asked voters of poll-bound States to rate their satisfaction with the work done under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi. In Rajasthan, 60% claimed to be very satisfied, with 17.4% exhibiting no satisfaction. Similarly, in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, there were high levels of satisfaction with the national government (roughly 58% each) and low levels of strong dissatisfaction (22% and 17%, respectively).

This is a far cry from the last years of the Rajiv Gandhi government, when the tumultuous Ram Jannabhoomi movement and the onward march of the rural-centric Other Backward Classes (OBC) parties had resulted in the evisceration of public support for the Congress in northern and central India. The present phase bears no similarity to the 1988-89 period, when the Congress coalition was reeling under allegations of corruption, declining support, and intra-party tussles.

Absence of strong State leaders

Arguably, however, the over-centralised nature of the BJP party machinery has weakened State units, reminiscent of the follies of the Congress of an earlier era. The BJP's reversals in several State elections in recent years stem in large part from the absence of strong, credible leaders. This weakness of State leadership is partly a result of the lack of intra-party space afforded to powerful State leaders such as Shivraj Chouhan, Vasundhara Raje, and Raman Singh.

Combing through data from past surveys of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and Axis My India, the political analyst Amitabh Tiwari recently sought to quantify the 'Modi factor' in national versus State elections. In national elections, Mr. Modi's leadership was claimed to be a decisive factor in the BJP vote by a large section (roughly between one-quarter and one-third of all respondents in the last two elections). However, in almost every State election, only around 5% explained the Modi effect as a vote choice (the only exception being Uttar Pradesh where it was reported to be a decisive factor for 10.2% of respondents). According to the political scientist Atul Kohli, Rajiv Gandhi had harmed his own party by hoarding political capital within his own

charismatic leadership, and not divesting decision-making power to State-level leaders. Thus, Rajiv Gandhi had failed to institutionalise political support within the structures of the Congress party organisation. Can a similar fate befall the BJP under the centralised reign of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah?

The indefatigable BJP engine

It is hard to provide any pre-determined answer to that question. This is because, as this writer had argued two years ago (along with the political scientist Rahul Verma), the present BJP system of dominance can be more accurately defined as a BJP dominant system rather than a Modi dominant system. In other words, more of an ideologically pre-figured ethnic-majoritarian coalition rather than one based on any singular charismatic personality. One can provide two pieces of supportive evidence from the present configuration of the political dynamics at large.

The first is the lack of a clear ideological alternative provided by the Congress in States where it is in a straight contest with the BJP. In this round of State elections, the State Congress leadership (particularly in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh) has consciously anchored itself to (and thus again legitimised) the ideological mainstream of Hindu nationalism. Indeed, Congress stalwart Kamal Nath declared in as many words that India is already a *de facto* Hindu Rashtra. This proves that the BJP has established itself not just through the remoulding of institutional arrangements, but also through the decisive charting out of the dominant ideological mainstream. This unchallenged Hindutva-inflected political culture has contributed in large part to the sustenance of the Modi charisma. Second, conflict is bubbling under the surface of the INDIA coalition between Mandal parties and the Congress. These two political forces together comprise the primary opponent to the BJP in almost half of all national seats. Their latent (and sometimes open) conflict testifies to the many constraints thwarting efforts to fuse together a coherent ideological platform, particularly on thorny issues such as sharing political ownership of the caste census agenda. The intensity of these skirmishes are liable to increase with (potentially) a growing realisation of being dragged into a zero-sum fight over a stagnant pool of the anti-BJP vote.

Moreover, the Opposition shows a lack of political imagination in connecting welfare promises and caste-based slogans to the larger questions of the political economy. Both the BJP's and Congress' socio-economic agendas often appear to be an undistinguishable potpourri of 'freebies' and 'handouts'. Thus, though support may be frayed around the edges, the engine of BJP dominance chugs along, still powered by its long-gestated ideological steam.

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Recognising the impact of climate change on health

As India gets ready for the 28th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP28), it is important to examine how climate change affects the country's health. India's inadequate health systems make our population particularly vulnerable to the impact of climate risks on health. Climate change affects health directly, causing more sickness and death. In more indirect ways, it affects nutrition, reduces working hours, and increases climate-induced stress.

The precipitating factors continue to be unrelenting. One estimate suggests that if global temperature were to rise by 2°C, many parts of India would become uninhabitable. All nations during the Paris Agreement agreed to cap the rise in temperature at 1.5°C. Clearly, we have failed. The year 2023 saw the highest temperatures and heat waves in recorded history. The situation is likely to worsen for the planet. Climate emergencies – extreme heat, cyclones, floods – are expected to occur with increasing regularity. These will interfere with food security and livelihoods and sharpen health challenges.

Double burden

The double burden of morbidity that India faces from communicable and non-communicable diseases will be worsened by climate change. It could facilitate the growth of vectors such as mosquitoes, sandflies, ticks, and as yet unknown ones, and change the seasonality of infection through changes in their life cycle. It could also facilitate the introduction of vectors and pathogens into areas where they did not exist



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As climate change continues unabated, it could worsen India's double burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases

before, such as mosquitoes in the Himalayan States. Heat also alters the virulence of pathogens. Reduced availability of food and water and the decrease in nutritional value of food increases vulnerability to diseases. Epidemics commonly occur after floods, but extended warm periods also promote the proliferation of water and food-borne pathogens and diseases.

Less well recognised is the impact of climate change on non-communicable diseases and mental health, both of which are poorly managed in India. Heat, physical exertion, and dehydration, a constant state for labourers, could lead to kidney injuries, which are rising in India due to uncontrolled diabetes. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Diseases are exacerbated by increased and extended episodes of air pollution. The risk of dying from pulmonary disease increases by 1.8-8.2% during a heat wave and hospitalisation rates will go up by 8% for every 1°C increase in temperature above 29°C. Depression, aggravated by stress generated by the change in weather conditions, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder invariably accompany a climate emergency. These are rarely recognised in India, much less addressed.

India is urbanising at a rapid pace, in an unplanned manner. Urban areas, not tempered by urban greenery and open spaces and filled with asphalt roads and heat-retaining buildings that physically block air circulation, bear the worst ill effects of climate change due to the urban heat island effect. (Urban areas are warmer than surrounding rural areas, especially at night). Climate change puts further pressure on the weak urban primary health system, already suffering

the ill effects of air pollution; urban planning that discourages physical activity; and work-related and cultural stress.

Mitigation efforts begin with understanding the direct and indirect pathways by which climate change impacts health and assessing the burden. Currently, the health information systems are not modified to gather this data. Since the impact is accentuated by socio-economic conditions, having systems in place for social support and health services will reduce the impact. But the benefits from upstream interventions that focus on better urban planning, green cover, water conservation, and public health interventions will be much larger – not only for health but for many determinants of health.

Action at all levels

Action to control climate change needs to happen at global, regional, and local levels. Pathways of climate change and their impact will determine the appropriate area of intervention. To achieve this, India has to recognise climate change and its impact on health as a problem that can be and needs to be addressed. Researchers who work in this area need to come up with policy options for action. National, State, and local governments have to decide to act on the policy options that have been generated by research. Only when the three streams of problematisation, policy options, and political decision-making come together is meaningful change likely to happen. It will be worthwhile to examine if these necessary conditions have been satisfied before expecting a change in the status quo on climate change and its impact on health.

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