



Policies & Perspectives



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How the BJP Wins... and the Congress Loses

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In the corridors of the Congress where cobwebs of despair and the dank of defeat can repel the most resolute-minded, and where hope has assumed a slouch that speaks a defeatist tale, a whiff of fresh air has passed through. Not enough to arouse memories of a rose garden, but sufficient to inject a new dose of faith and trigger belief that all may still not be lost for the grand old party. There is no empirical evidence yet to suggest a turnaround in the Congress's electoral fortunes — indeed, they remain grim for the immediate months — but there's also nothing in the law to forbid the consumption of small consolations and wish for an escalation of the bounty.

That fresh air, that little consolation, has come in the form of the good Press which Congress vice president and president-in-waiting for long, Rahul Gandhi, has received on his recent trip to the United States of America. True, he did not meet the 'POTUS' (or the President of the US), but he interacted with others — and with apparent good results. A section of the media has been as gleeful as the Congressmen (now pretty much used to a miserable existence), almost as if it had been redeemed in its estimation of the Nehru-Gandhi family jewel. Glorious reports have been filed on how Rahul Gandhi charmed the audience in the US with his 'honest and straightforward' responses — he supposedly called a spade a spade by claiming that India ran on the strength of dynasty, whether in politics, business or entertainment. Not content, he also ran down the Narendra Modi Government for promoting 'intolerance' and stifling 'dissent'.

The Congress leader's enthusiasm at having got a captive audience — back home he often encounters indifferent ones who take his wise words with a good amount of suspicion and eventually reject them as being useless or unfocused — was such that it carried him away to troubled waters. For instance, while slamming the Modi regime for failing to create enough jobs, he let it be known that the Congress-led UPA regime had been booted out because it had similarly erred. It didn't occur to him that through this admission, he punctured the claim of his own party leaders who had been using every available media space to highlight their regime's success in employment generation. He then proceeded to call a host of tall national leaders from the freedom movement as Non-Resident Indians (NRIs).

But let's leave the contradictions and gaffes aside for now. The Congress can be happy — and who is to claim that happiness is a bad thing, though the right to happiness has yet not been specifically included in the ever-expanding definition of 'right to life' as explained in the Fundamental Rights section of our Constitution — that finally, and perhaps for the first time in the over three years gone by since the party's crushing defeat in 2014, Rahul Gandhi has been written about in somewhat positive terms. His earlier foreign trips had been either secretive or inconsequential to be commented upon. The United States, though, is far from home, and the youths of a university in Berkeley, who were spoken to about the reign of Indian dynasts (almost giving it a halo of resounding acceptability), are not going to vote in the 2019 Lok Sabha election — nor will



they in the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh Assembly elections due to take place later this month. As a social media post cheekily observed: Rahul Gandhi may have impressed Berkeley, but what about Bikaner!

Here lies the real challenge. The Berkeley-kind events can fetch a sympathetic, even drooling media; his address to non-resident Indians abroad may get his party some funding. But the votes have to come from among the masses of this country. Does the Congress have a game-plan to realise this goal? It will take more than a Berkeley moment to undo the damage back home — across the country and more recently in Uttar Pradesh. And we are not even speaking of the debacle that possibly lies ahead in the coming elections. Many in the party have, or at least appear to have, given up the fight for the 2019 Lok Sabha poll.

To get back the winning habit, the Congress must first understand why it has been losing and why and how the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been winning. This is not to say that the defeated party hasn't made any effort; maybe it has, but either the study has been shallow or that the lessons which popped up in the course of the study have not been learned. Congress leaders ought to focus attention on material which throws light on the BJP's northward journey (and the near simultaneous decline of the Congress). They do not have to necessarily be tutored by 'Right-wingers' and the latter's supporters in the media and outside. There are 'neutral' sensible voices, credible enough to be taken seriously and balanced enough to be respected. They may not be admirers of the Congress, but they are also not BJP apologists. Indeed they are unsparing of both and yet quick to give credit where it is due. One such recent study is the book, 'How the BJP Wins: Inside India's Greatest Election Machine', by one such voice, author and journalist Prashant Jha.

At first glance, the title could put off the Congress wallahs (this includes both party men and their believers) and make them decide to not touch the book with a bargepole. They may well expect a glowing account of the BJP's triumphant march. Besides, there might even be a sliver of arrogance in not wanting to read it — an arrogance derived from their belief that it's universally known how the BJP wins — through communally-drive politics. If that indeed is the case, there is nothing that the Congress is ready to learn. If Congress leaders are willing to set aside their bias for a moment, they will find much in the book that will be useful. Those among them who have read it, will endorse the sentiment. Prashant Jha's book is certainly not laden with eulogies for the ruling party. Indeed, supporters of the BJP are as likely to be shocked and even enraged by the author's analyses. Because in there, also lies lessons and raps on the knuckle for the winner — which can be ignored at the cost of its long-term prospects. Jha may be unsparing in his criticism of some of the BJP's methods but he is also quick to credit the party for its strategy and use of technology to produce a winning formula, or formulae. In doing so, but without too explicitly saying so, Jha also addresses the Congress's failures in relative terms. It's a compact book but not short on insights. Jha's major strength lies in his first-hand understanding of Indian politics through field coverage. How the BJP Wins rely largely on the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election held earlier this year, but that's fine given that the State's experience symbolises nearly everything that the BJP has used from its political arsenal to fight electoral battles across the country, more so since and in 2014. The narrative is reportage in nature, with anecdotal references thrown in to prep



up the content and also reinforce the conclusions the author draws as he goes along.

Jha believes that essentially two factors have swung the battles in the BJP's favour: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's personal charisma and credibility and party president Amit Shah's electoral strategy down to the booth level and the massive membership drive using missed calls on mobile phones, among other things. The first few chapters in the book will please the vast army of Modi (and BJP) supporters spread across the country, and the very first of them titled, 'The Modi Hawa', can send them swooning. The author begins with an observation that few, even those opposed to the Prime Minister, can dispute: "It was not the Bharatiya Janata Party, it was not the state leaders, it was not the candidates and it was not the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Only one man won the BJP the state of Uttar Pradesh — Prime Minister Narendra Modi." But how is it that a political leader, three years into his office, not only does not face the brunt of anti-incumbency but is also stronger than before? Jha says, "Instead of power leading to complacency and eroding his prospects, it has consistently enhanced Modi's popularity." The book rightly contends that the key element to understanding this sustainment of popularity is "faith" that the people continue to have in the Prime Minister. And driving that faith, as Jha points out, has been a "carefully constructed image, a new image" — from Modi being a Hindu leader to a development icon (the Gujarat model being an example) to now being seen as a messiah of the less-privileged (various social sector schemes and demonetisation). The author narrates instances from the ground in Uttar Pradesh where people, despite having been put to great hardship, hailed demonetisation, buying Modi's argument that it was needed to strike at black money and give the poor the respect they deserve. Thus, an economic decision was projected as one of national pride. The author quotes a shop owner in Mirzapur as saying, "I think it is a very good move. If our jawans can risk their lives at the border and protect us for twenty-four hours, can't we stand in the queue for a few hours in national interest?"

Jha deals with the second factor — party chief Amit Shah's strategies — at length in the chapter titled, 'Shah's Sangathan'. Here again, the author's understanding of ground situations, his interactions with many cross-sections of party leaders and workers (the cadre) have contributed to a fair and objective assessment of Shah arguably emerging as the closest aide of the Prime Minister. As firm and decisive as his mentor, Shah lost little time in digging his teeth into the politics of Uttar Pradesh and trusting people once they were given charge. The author narrates an incident of Sunil Bansal, who was introduced at a meeting of office-bearers in Uttar Pradesh in the run-up to the Assembly election. Shah told the gathering, "He (Bansal) will oversee the management of the elections. And when he says something, think that I am saying it." At the core of the BJP's Uttar Pradesh strategy, the author tells us, lay a grim reality — one which Shah was not late in recognising and fixing. "Shah realized the party's arithmetic was all wrong. Muslims would not vote for the party. Yadavs would stay loyal to the SP. Jatavs, among Dalit communities, were fiercely loyal to Mayawati... The BJP had the other 55-60 per cent to play with... He focused on consolidating the upper castes and expanding among the backwards and Dalits." All of these, thus, set the stage for a 'social engineering' which yielded a windfall for the party, and which Jha expands upon in a separate chapter.



So far so good, for the BJP and its backers as well as readers who lean to the Right. Jha now changes track and decides to deliver some home truths to the party. The chapter, 'The H-M Chunav', deals with the contentious issue of religious polarisation in the Uttar Pradesh election. The author is unsparing in his criticism of the BJP and its senior leaders for seeking to communalise the contest, but also willing to acknowledge that a certain amount of polarisation is necessary for the BJP to win elections in many States of the country. He says, "In all these states, Muslims constitute 20 per cent or more of the population. And the party starts with a minus 20 disadvantage — Muslims neither vote for the party nor is the party interested in their votes. To consolidate the rest of the electoral playing field, it needs to be internally inclusive of Hindu castes..." Jha expands the subject by observing, "To achieve this, the BJP and its ideological affiliates have relied on the most sophisticated, yet most crude, propaganda — sophisticated because of the innovation and use of technology, crude because of the nature of the messaging and recourse to straight falsehood. They have been actively complicit in anti-Muslim riots and violence — and benefited from the anger and anxieties such moments produce." The author believes that such a strategy works towards the "larger ideological goal of uniting Hindu society".

There is no doubt that the consolidation of Hindu votes played a critical role in the BJP's victory in Uttar Pradesh. It is also true that the party played to an extent on anti-Muslim sentiments. BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, did construct slogans that seemed questionable on the face of it. And so, a perception was created which helped the party. Yet, the author appears to have missed a key point, which is that perceptions, while important, have limited value if they not backed by ground realities. Minority (read Muslim) appeasement had been indulged in by previous regimes and had caused justified resentment among the majority community. The accusation that power supply was ensured during Muslim festivals but not so during Hindu celebrations, must have been true to some extent for the charge to stick. The Muzaffarnagar incident did have various BJP leaders spewing the communal language, but it would be naive to assume that the party won on that mere basis alone: Instances of the then State regime adopting a partisan attitude that enraged the majority population, have been recorded.

Could the BJP have managed to court the Muslims had it been less trident? Jha quotes a Muslim cleric at Deoband as saying, "They (the BJP) want to show us as the problem and unite everyone else. How can there be any conversation then?" While this is a profound observation, the same could be equally applied to the minority community: 'The Muslims want to show the BJP as a problem. How can there be any conversation then?' Clearly the issue is not unidimensional. Both sides have grievances. Besides, let's not forget that, if the BJP was aggressively wooing the Hindu community cutting across caste barriers, the other parties were as vigorously ensnaring the minority votes. There is an element of phobia in Jha's contention that the BJP seeks to impose "Hindu rule", though his belief that the party is working towards "Hindu unity" is not unfounded. The Hindu rule idea has perhaps come from the party's supposed anti-Muslim stance and its successful consolidation of Hindu votes as well as its failure to give a single ticket to a Muslim candidate. But Jha has himself explained the strategy with accuracy: With Muslim and Yadav votes unavailable, and with Jatav



votes largely in Mayawati's kitty, the BJP had no option but to get the largest chunk possible of the Hindu community. Hindu unity is not synonymous with Hindu rule.

Yet, Jha has done well to red-flag the concerns. The BJP has been saying that it is not anti-Muslim, but there is a lot it needs to do to appear believable on this count. Also, the dangers of playing the communal card — and this applies to all parties — is all too obvious: Social divides, violence, destruction of property and loss of lives are the outcomes. Given that the BJP is now in pole position, there must be harmony between its words and action.

Meanwhile, if the Congress doesn't get its act together by 2019, Jha could look forward to writing another book titled, 'How the Congress Loses'.

(The writer is a senior political commentator and public affairs analyst)



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