

The BJP's 'Act East' moment

The party weakened State-based outfits and embarked on the project of superimposing its Hindutva ideology on regional narratives

SUHAS PALSHIKAR

When the 2019 Lok Sabha election commenced, there was not much doubt about the prowess of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as far as north, central and western India were concerned. The curiosity was about the east and the south. In 2014, the BJP had a skewed base and was not able to expand enough in these two regions. Now, that has changed.

Increasing its footprint

Of course, its 'Look East' policy did yield positive results even in 2014 when it won Assam. Assamese society is not just plural like the rest of Indian society, it is also diverse and laden with complications that are of a historical nature. The fact that the BJP had won there was a clear indication that it would be making deep inroads into not just the Northeast, but the eastern region in general. The State that geographically links the east to the northern parts, Bihar, was also captured by the BJP in 2014. This time, the BJP has clearly established its very large and perhaps in-

delible footprint in the entire eastern and northeastern region.

In the case of the Northeast, years of sustained work by affiliates of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh have come to fruition, with many Adivasi communities coming close to the BJP. Besides, its political flexibility has allowed the BJP to also forge local alliances with different players in the region ensuring that any non-BJP formation becomes unviable. This, of course, has a serious caveat which goes beyond electoral successes. There are many small and large insurgent groups and communities that are eager to rediscover or reassess their particular identities. The rise of the BJP in the region can only become a catalyst to the inflation of these myriad identity politics in the troubled region. It would, therefore, be a huge challenge for the BJP to ensure that inter-community negotiations take place along with smart political manoeuvres.

Beyond the Northeast, the BJP must be basking in the glory of its prized possessions of West Bengal and Odisha. In both States, the party was up against entrenched State-based parties. The clash between all-India and State-based parties has resulted in a setback for State-based

parties. This will not only change the politics of these two States, but also serve as an indication of the newly shaping political competition elsewhere. The Congress (both in West Bengal and Odisha, besides Assam already) has been completely sidelined and the BJP has taken over as the main challenger to the State-based parties in both States.

Ideology sidelined

West Bengal presents an even more interesting picture than what appears on the face of it. The BJP has clearly served notice to the Trinamool Congress. A State known for its Left politics will now have a completely non-Left political framework. If in Kerala the Left has suffered because BJP sympathisers are supposed to have rallied behind the Congress, in West Bengal the BJP might have done well because of the support of Left voters. In their exasperation with Trinamool politics, many Left sympathisers are supposed to have rallied behind the BJP to ensure Trinamool chief Mamata Banerjee's defeat. These two possibilities indicate one thing (not adequately evidenced as of now, though our survey in both States points to that): in both States, the intensity of

political competition has sidelined ideological considerations.

In Assam, most other States of the Northeast, and Odisha, there has long been a clearly regional-regionalist flavour to politics. West Bengal, too, has been often described as having a more Bengali Left politics than merely Left politics. With its surge in the entire region, the BJP has not only weakened State-based parties, but done two more things. One, it has neutralised the political requirement that regional sentiment is expressed through a regional/State-based political vehicle. Two, it has audaciously embarked on the project of superimposing on regional narratives its Hindutva ideology as the master narrative, thus, for the first time, subordinating the regional. In its effort to represent regional interests and identities and at the same time tame the 'regional', the BJP appears to have taken upon itself a very hard task. How it balances its electoral ambitions in the region and its more deeply ideological ambitions here will decide the course of politics in the entire eastern region.



"Its political flexibility has allowed the BJP to forge local alliances with different players in the Northeast." Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the 85th Annual Conference of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha in Sivasagar in Assam in 2016. ■ PTI

THE HINDU
CSDS-LOKNITI
Post-poll Survey 2019

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"Despite mass protests last year, 68% of farmers were found to be satisfied with the performance of the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre." Families of farmers from Telangana who committed suicide due to non-payment of loans at the Kisan Mukti March in New Delhi in November 2018. ■ SANDEEP SAXENA

Farmers' issues were not centre stage

PM-KISAN and a nationalistic campaign seem to have worked for the BJP

MANJESH RANA & AMRIT PRAKASH PANDEY

In November last year, thousands of farmers marched to Parliament to highlight the agrarian crisis and demand higher crop prices, full loan waivers and drought relief. There were quite a few such protests in 2018, and considering their scale, many believed that it was likely that the discontentment of farmers, who also make up an important voting bloc given that half the country's population is engaged in farm-related work, would hurt the prospects of the BJP in the parliamentary election. However, with a thumping majority for the second time, the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) seems to have successfully neutralised the anti-government sentiment among farmers.

Priorities while voting

Lokniti's post-poll survey found that the majority of farmers did not vote on issues that directly concern them. Development ('vikas') was important – 15% of farmers went to the polling booths with this as their single-most important agenda. Unemployment was second (10%). Surprisingly, only 5% had farming or related issues as their most important agenda when they went to cast their votes. This may also be considered a failure of farmers' movements and the Opposition which did not politicise farmers' issues sufficiently in the few months before the election. Farmers' distress was very much on the national agenda until the beginning of the election year.

Despite mass protests last year, 68% of farmers were found to be satisfied with the performance of the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre, with 27% saying that they were 'fully satisfied' and 41% saying they were 'somewhat satisfied' when probed further. The survey found that among respondents who reported agriculture as their main occupation, 39% voted for the BJP (NDA 47%) and 20% voted for the Congress (UPA 26%). These figures are almost the same as the overall vote shares of both parties.

Voting among farmers (%)

	Congress	Congress allies	BJP	BJP allies	Others
Upper Castes	13	5	52	10	20
OBCs	16	6	44	10	24
SCs	18	5	34	8	35
STs	35	7	41	2	15

Farmers who benefitted from PM-KISAN (%)

	Congress	Congress allies	BJP	BJP allies	Others
Credit Centre	8	3	56	9	24
Credit State	25	5	21	8	41

The Balakot effect on farmers

	Voted for Congress	Voted for BJP
Heard about strikes (74%)	17	42
Not heard about strikes (26%)	28	31

In other words, farmers did not vote differently from the rest.

When we further broke down the numbers on the basis of their respective caste groups, 52% of upper caste farmers were found to have voted for the BJP and only 13% chose the Congress. When further segregated, we found that 41% of peasant proprietors voted for the BJP, which is 22 percentage points lower than the rest of the upper caste farmers. The number of peasant proprietors who voted for the Congress was almost the same. However, with 34% voting for the BJP and 18% voting for the Congress, the gap between the Congress and the BJP was much more narrow in the case of Dalit farmers.

Direct cash transfer

The survey suggests that some action by the government at the eleventh hour, such as providing direct cash transfers through the PM-KISAN Yojana, and the ultra-nationalistic campaign of the BJP might have helped the party assuage the angry farmers and shift the narrative from farmers' issues to development and nationalism. PM-KISAN, under which ₹2,000 is transferred to the bank accounts of farmers with small land holdings every four months, seems to have

made them swing in the BJP's favour. Among farmers who had benefitted from PM-KISAN and credited the Central government for the same, 56% voted for the BJP (NDA 65%) and only 8% chose the Congress (UPA 11%). On the other hand, among those who credited the State government, the figures were almost the same for both (UPA 30%, NDA 29%). Interestingly, two-fifths of those who credited the State government voted for parties other than UPA and the NDA.

Among farmers who had heard about India's air strikes in Balakot, 42% voted for the BJP while 17% voted for the Congress. Contrary to this, among those who had not heard about the strikes, the gap was merely three percentage points, with 31% voting for the BJP and 28% for the Congress. Cash transfer through PM-KISAN and the wave of nationalism just weeks before the election seem to have clearly swept farmers' issues away from the centre stage.

With the BJP back in power, it is important to highlight three key promises made by the party to farmers in its manifesto: zero-interest loans for up to ₹1 lakh; extension of PM-KISAN to the rest of the farmers; and pension to small and marginal farmers. Considering the fiscal burden these schemes would add, at the moment it doesn't seem like they will be implemented in their entirety. Will these schemes merely end up as poll gimmicks or will they add anything substantial to farmers' plates? It might be too early to answer these questions.

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When the Left moved right

The duel between Narendra Modi and Mamata Banerjee during the election campaign helped polarise voters in West Bengal



JYOTIPRASAD CHATTERJEE & SUPRIO BASU

It took almost 40 years since its inception in 1980 for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to truly reach West Bengal. In the 17th Lok Sabha election, the BJP not only arrived in West Bengal but almost conquered it.

The result is spectacular for the BJP. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election, it won only two seats and secured about 17% of the votes. In the 2019 election, besides bagging 18 parliamentary seats out of 42, it also raised its vote share to 40%. On both accounts it closely matched the ruling Trinamool Congress, which secured 22 seats (a loss of 12 seats compared to 2014) with a vote share of 43%. The Trinamool managed to maintain its south Bengal bastion while the BJP made big inroads into the northern and western parts of the State. Since the BJP is a relatively new entrant in the map of competitive politics in West Bengal, the saffron mandate raises a number of pertinent questions. Lokniti's post-poll survey data might hold some answers.

Nature of polarisation

It appears to be a highly polarised verdict; since the Trinamool and the BJP almost equally shared a mammoth 83% of the votes polled, they relegated the Congress party and the Left to the point of near irrelevance. Such moments often imply churning and volatility. The survey shows that about two-fifths of the traditional Left voters shifted to the BJP and about one-third to the Trinamool Congress. Similarly, 32% of old Congress voters moved to the BJP and 29% moved to the Trinamool.

The moot question, however, pertains to the nature of polarisation. Given the much-publicised Hindutva agenda of the BJP and the alleged Muslim appeasement of the Trinamool, the issue of communal polarisation immediately crops up. This gets bolstered by the fact that among the sampled Muslim electorate, there was overwhelming support for the ruling Trinamool. And not just Hindu upper castes, but also Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes voted for the BJP in large proportions.

More than the communal split, the electorate appears to be polarised politically. One part of the electorate supports the Trinamool and another the BJP. This is evident from the fact of a majority of the electorate deciding who to vote for either during the campaign or after. The Narendra Modi-Mamata Banerjee duel witnessed during the campaign helped in this polarisation. Our survey shows that 48% of those who decided who to vote for during the campaign ended up voting for the BJP. Mr. Modi addressed 17 public meetings in West Bengal in which he relentlessly tried to break the hege-

mony of the Trinamool and challenged Ms. Banerjee's popularity.

Although 43% of the voters liked Ms. Banerjee more than Mr. Modi as a leader, Mr. Modi was not far behind (37%). Mr. Modi's popularity at the national level prevailed over Ms. Banerjee's popularity – 42% of the respondents preferred him as the next Prime Minister, while only 13% who preferred Ms. Banerjee. This finding is significant considering that all surveys done by Lokniti between 2017 and 2018 had found that Ms. Banerjee was far more preferred than Mr. Modi for the post of Prime Minister. Interestingly, voters' assessment of the State government was slightly better than their assessment of the Central government – while 64% said they were satisfied with the performance of the Mamata Banerjee government, 61% expressed their satisfaction with the Modi government. Yet, Ms. Banerjee could not capitalise on this.

A successful campaign

In his public meetings in West Bengal, Mr. Modi spoke at length about the developmental achievements of the National Democratic Alliance government at the Centre and termed Ms. Banerjee as the "speed breaker" in Bengal's development. He stressed the need to restore democracy in Bengal, which under the Trinamool regime had been seriously undermined. Unable to counter Mr. Modi politically, Ms. Banerjee resorted to personal attacks. This resulted in more voters moving towards the

BJP. Mr. Modi's strategy was successful in influencing the electorate in general and the younger voters in particular. The BJP's success vis-à-vis the Trinamool was quite noteworthy among those aged between 18 and 35 years – it was ahead of its rival by six percentage points among this segment. On the other hand, the Trinamool was ahead of the BJP by 10 percentage points among those aged above 35 years.

The decisive entry of the BJP into West Bengal obviously raises the issue of further communal polarisation in a State where a strong non-Hindu population can be a potentially sensitive factor. But the survey data suggest that despite political polarisation at the moment, full-fledged communalisation may not occur immediately. Besides the fact that only a tiny segment of the electorate supported the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, a huge majority (about 84%) holds that India is a country of all religions equally, not just Hindus.

The West Bengal verdict is indicative of the emergence of the BJP as a strong challenger to the ruling Trinamool. This has implications for national politics as well. For the State, it means that bipolarity may continue to mark competitive politics in the State.

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Switching sides

	Voted BJP in 2019 (%)	Voted TMC in 2019 (%)	Voted Left in 2019 (%)	Voted Cong in 2019 (%)
Traditional Left voters	39	31	30	-
Traditional Congress voters	32	20	4	32

Hindus behind BJP, Muslims behind TMC

	Voted BJP (%)		Voted TMC (%)		Voted Left (%)		Voted Cong (%)	
	2014 LS	2019 LS	2014 LS	2019 LS	2014 LS	2019 LS	2014 LS	2019 LS
Hindus	21	57	40	32	29	6	6	3
Muslims	2	4	40	70	31	10	24	12
Upper castes	24	57	38	31	27	9	5	3
OBCs	21	65	43	28	26	4	4	2
Dalits	20	61	40	27	29	6	8	4
Adivasis	11	58	40	28	41	12	5	2



BJP supporters celebrate the party's performance in the Lok Sabha election in Kolkata, West Bengal. ■ PTI