

YES, NO, IT’S COMPLICATED

# Will Priyanka Gandhi change the fortunes of the Congress?

YES



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Her connect with women and her experience in campaign management will help the party

I believe that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra will make a positive difference to the fortunes of the Congress, albeit for reasons different from what the proponents of dynasty politics would like us to believe. Calculations of realpolitik are responsible for her having come to the forefront of the electoral arena. Until now, her role in politics was limited – at best a “fieldwork in-charge” of Rae Bareilly and Amethi in Uttar Pradesh.

**No pan-Indian parties/ leaders** For one, the Congress understands that the route to power is by taking Assembly elections seriously –

there are no ‘pan-Indian’ national parties, nor are there leaders with such an appeal. The image of a pan-Indian party or leader is manufactured by political advertising done most effectively by active participation in election campaigns. And if victory comes by, then spending State budgets on advertising the leaders – especially their work in development and welfare. It is State politics that has been producing company-style CEOs in a democracy – Chandrababu Naidu was the first amongst Chief Ministers to have been anointed in this way. Nitish Kumar, Shivraj Singh Chouhan

and Raman Singh have all successfully cultivated this image of *vikas-waadi* (pro-development) Chief Ministers.

Eastern U.P. is a cauldron of poverty and underdevelopment, awaiting its turn for roads, hospitals, electricity and other public services. Besides, women have emerged as an important demand group for developmental deliveries. It is in this context that Ms. Vadra’s soft approach, connect with women, and prior experience of campaign management in this region will come to her aid. She can at least connect with poor voters, especially women, and build a constituency that demands delivery of public services.



es. In the process, a Congress revival at the grass-roots level can be a possibility somewhere in the future, if not in this round.

### Politics over the years

However, this argument is open to the criticism whether the Congress elevated her for doing noble political deeds without expecting political fruits. Far from it – the Congress understands that its last round of State politics was played in the 1970s with Brahmin Chief Ministers like Kamalapati Tripathi, Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna, and Narayan Dutt Tiwari, and then in the 1980s with a combination of Rajput and Brahmin Chief Ministers such as

Vishwanath Pratap Singh, Narayan Dutt Tiwari and Sripati Mishra. Thereafter, it has been the Mandal versus Kamandal theme, where power has circulated mainly between Yadavs and Dalits. With Yogi Adityanath becoming Chief Minister (he is known to have a Rajput lineage), it is a revival of the politics of the upper castes in U.P., this time in combination with dominant leaders from amongst the Backward Classes or in alliance with splinter formations of the Extremely Backward Classes. In an overt sort of way, it is this BJP move that gives Ms. Vadra the opportunity to begin discussions with important caste groups such as the Brahmins, and initiate issue-based discussions on reservations for the economically poor

amongst the upper castes.

At the macro level, Ms. Vadra will be an equal to Congress president Rahul Gandhi in national campaigns. She will also help modify the ‘Rahul versus Modi’ pitch. Besides enthusing workers, she will lend an ear to workers and local politicians who have complaints against Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati – not all the anti-incumbency votes will go to the BJP. Meanwhile, her effort will be to bring a crop of *karyakartas* of the Congress on the streets, irrespective of who wins the battle in U.P. Times have changed since the 1970s, and the Congress has realised that the new script of post-Mandal politics holds opportunities in U.P. that Ms. Vadra could very well nurture.

NO



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Her charisma is not enough. The party needs a strong organisational structure and cadre

It seems unlikely that Priyanka Gandhi Vadra’s ‘formal’ entry into politics would drastically improve the party’s electoral fortunes in U.P. in the general election. In electoral politics, a combination of organisation, ground-level equations, caste/community dynamics, and charisma is needed for success, and the Congress seems to be lacking in all of these in U.P. except the last.

**The 2014 election results** In the 2014 elections, out of the 80 Lok Sabha seats in U.P., the BJP won

71; its ally, the Apna Dal, won two; the SP won five; the Congress won two; and the BSP and RLD did not win any. However, the SP and BSP were in the second position in 65 seats, while their ally in the Mahagathbandhan, the RLD, was the runner-up in one seat. Thus, if we go by the past Lok Sabha results, the BJP-Apna Dal alliance will be the primary contestant in the whole of U.P. and will face the SP-BSP-RLD alliance as primary opponents in at least 71 seats. Other than winning two seats, the Congress was a runner-up in only six seats.

This means it would be the primary opponent in only eight seats. In vote percentage terms, the BJP-Apna Dal got around 43% of the votes in 2014, the SP-BSP-RLD got 42.98%, while the Congress could get only 7.53%. In this scenario, while it’s likely that the BJP-Apna Dal alliance and the SP-BSP-RLD alliance will be in a neck and neck contest, expecting the Congress to reach even the two-digit mark in the State would be overambitious.

Still, the Congress’s electoral fortunes would have turned around for good had it made substantial



progress on the organisation front and mobilised the support of new communities behind it. The party seems to be lacking on both counts. Its organisation has been in poor shape since the early 1990s and continues to have problems such as groupism and a lack of cadres. In contrast, the BJP, SP and BSP, and even the RLD in western U.P., can boast of a robust organisation and cadre. In terms of support of communities, the BJP alliance is influential among the upper castes and some sections of non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits, while the SP-BSP-RLD alliance

has substantial support from the Yadavs, Jatavs, a section of the Jats, as well as Muslims.

### Limited capability

Where does the Congress stand in this highly polarised scenario, and which are the communities that will be voting for it this time, just because of Ms. Vadra? In the absence of an organisational structure, cadre, programmes, and newer social sections rooting for it, the capability of the Congress to efficiently contest and micromanage these elections is extremely limited. That doesn’t mean that the Congress’s numbers would remain static; it may win three-four more seats. But

that will depend more on local factors than the entry of Ms. Vadra. Hence, if the Congress wins in Kushinagar or Barabanki or Saharanpur, credit for it would go to former MP R.P.N. Singh or P.L. Punia or Imran Masood, who have considerable influence and committed supporters in their regions. The local electoral equation is also favourable to them.

In politics, charisma does work, but not without proper organisation and social engineering. Ms. Vadra may be able to revive the U.P. Congress in the long run, if she continues dedicatedly in politics, but that is surely going to take some time. It is not going to happen now.

IT’S COMPLICATED



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She cannot bank on her family name and star status; she needs a narrative

Politics is a complex matrix of multiple variables and it is always difficult to predict which of them will make the final splash. Among them, one that stands out is the ability of a leader to gain the trust of the electorate, which in turn depends on what he or she stands for at a given point of time. Prime Minister Narendra Modi gained the trust of voters by articulating the political moment of his time by combining aggressive Hindutva with development that was along the line of the ‘Gujarat model’. To this he added

the image of being bold, having the ability to take risks, being honest, and having good intent. Today, Mr. Modi is being tested on the same lines. His vote bank perhaps still trusts his intent, but has started to doubt his abilities to manage the economy, create jobs and abate the agrarian crisis, among others. Voters are in a contemplative mood as to what to do with a person who is honest but incompetent.

**Voters’ memories** Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has entered

the fray a bit late, but the moot question is, what does she stand for? What is the narrative and can she correctly identify the moment and articulate it? In the facelessness of the neo-liberal reforms and their consequences, having a face to identify with is something that can be an entry point to gain the trust of the electorate, but it needs to speak to what the people want to listen to. Merely claiming ‘Indira is back’ is symptomatic of lazy thinking. Mrs. Gandhi is still remembered in the hinterlands and especially among the Dalits for the welfare policies



she implemented. In a survey in which I was involved, some time back in Punjab, it was quite a surprise that in Ambedkar colonies, elderly Dalits spoke of Mrs. Gandhi with affection. They narrated stories of being given ration cards, housing and electricity. Ms. Vadra will be tested against such a memory, which could be a boon, but also a bane if she fails to articulate a welfare and pro-poor sensibility in her electoral agenda.

### The need for a narrative

Ms. Vadra’s entry has sent a panic wave in the BJP because of her ap-

peal amongst the youth and first-time voters, as well as Brahmins, Muslims, and women. Mr. Modi captured the imagination of the aspirational youth in 2014. Ms. Vadra can upset this equation in a major way provided she has a narrative. With a persistent agrarian crisis and jobless growth, what substantial difference can she bring?

### Criticism of the BJP

Mr. Modi filled the gap with jumlas and slogans. Perhaps, she cannot resort to any of these, but in that case, what meaningful agenda can she bring to the persistent structural crisis of the Indian economy? Rahul Gandhi entered politics at

the bleakest moment for the Congress, and struggled to find a narrative. Mr. Gandhi today seems to have found not only a narrative but a new purpose in his virulent political criticism of the BJP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. He is, perhaps, the only politician in India today who is creating a fresh narrative against what the RSS stands for. It is this new-found confidence that has made the BJP stand up and take notice.

Ms. Vadra today needs a script in order to make a significant difference. To assume that her family name and star status will see her through would be taking the electorate for granted.

## SINGLE FILE

# Small fish in a big pond

Small parties remain outsiders in their own State, but can be coalition partners at the Centre

ANDREW WYATT & C. MANIKANDAN



Political parties in India operate in a federal system. They seek power at the local, State and national levels. Holding office at the State level is the primary goal of most parties. Yet, a succession of hung parliaments from 1989 to 2014 created the expectation that small parties, maybe with a single MP, might be vital for the governing coalition. Cabinet posts and/or other inducements encouraged political entrepreneurs to form parties, most of which remain small and did not grow into regional parties large enough to govern their own States. We define a small party as capable of winning a few seats in a State Assembly and occasionally in Parliament. Small parties do not have the heft to lead a State-level government and may lack opportunities to get a place in a State-level coalition government. Ironically, fragmented national legislatures give small parties more opportunities to participate in coalitions in Delhi. This national toehold helps many of them survive while they have little success in their own States. For example, the Lok Jan-shakti Party found national opportunities relatively easily but got a place in the Bihar Cabinet only recently.

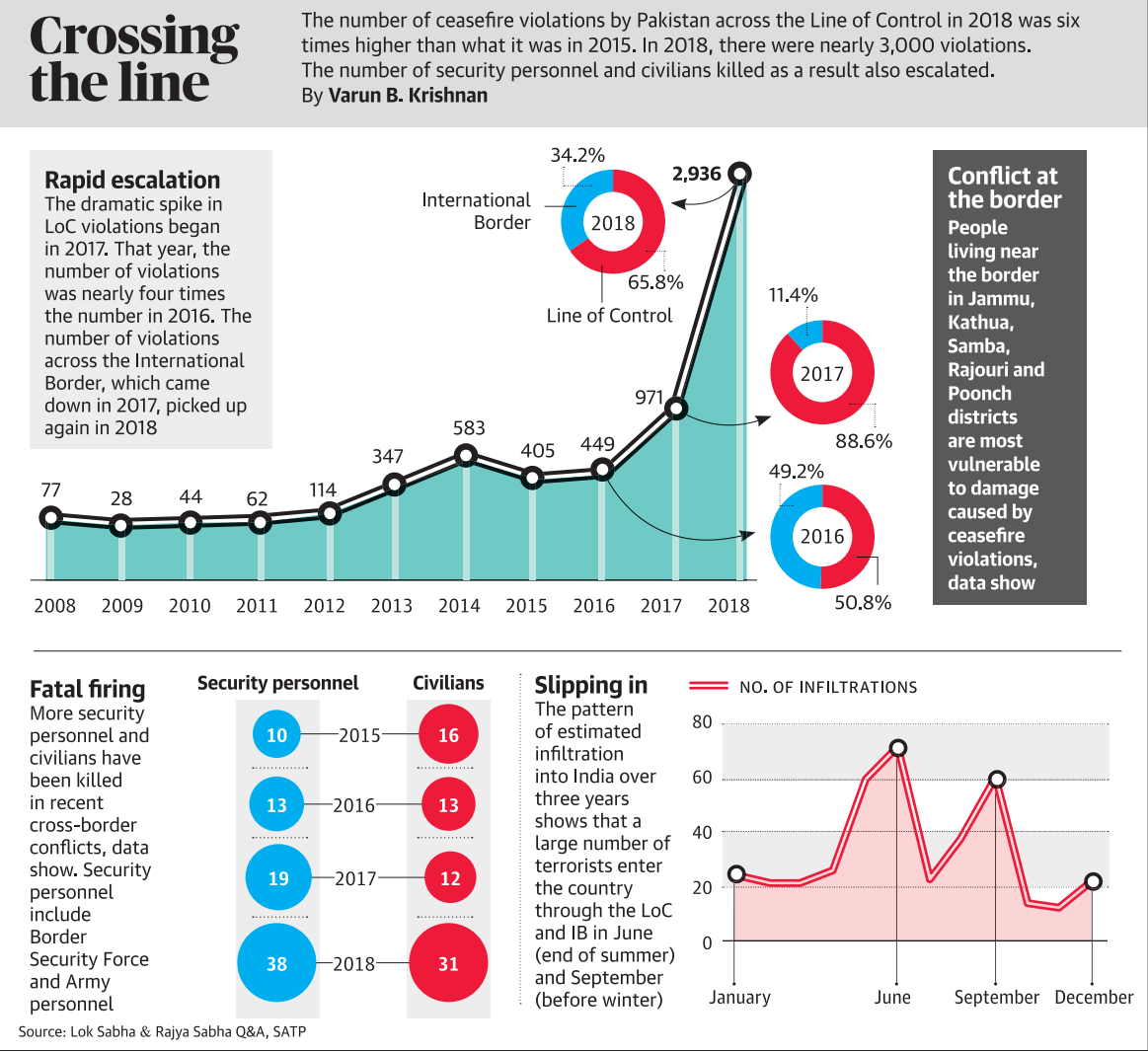
In Tamil Nadu, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) responded to federal opportunities, while being excluded from government in its home State. Outside of the State government, the PMK finds it difficult to establish distinctive positions, apart from its identity politics. On the other hand, it tried to leverage national opportunities for its benefit at the State level. Projects were funded in favoured constituencies and MPs lobbied in Delhi for benefits at the State level. Anbumani Ramadoss used his ministerial experience to enhance his image at the State level, making it the centrepiece of his 2016 Assembly election campaign. A place in Parliament confers prestige on small parties and a national stage on which to perform. Patronage resources can be extracted from the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme and coalition allies. The PMK enters the NDA in 2019 with a promise from the Centre of a new rail connection between Morappur and Dharmapuri.

Maurice Duverger famously argued that small parties, without geographically concentrated support, cannot win in a plurality voting system such as India’s. Voters will turn away from small parties that lose. For their part, small parties are likely to die out or seek mergers with larger parties. The working of India’s federal political system gives small parties opportunities to join alliances. Small parties might ‘lose’ by failing to join governments in their home State, but they can claim to ‘win’ when they join a national coalition government. Thus, they remain outsiders in their own State, but can be a coalition partner at the Centre. With the national outcome uncertain in May 2019, small parties have been able to bargain for seats in Lok Sabha with renewed vigour. Soon, we shall see if they hold the balance of power.

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## DATA POINT



## FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 1, 1969

### Deficit finance of Rs. 250 crores

The Union Budget for 1969-70, presented to the Lok Sabha today [February 28, New Delhi] by Mr. Morarji Desai, envisages a deficit of the order of Rs. 250 crores. Mr. Desai said the revenue receipts for the current year (1968-69) were Rs. 2,749 crores, Rs. 11 crores less than the estimated Rs. 2,760 crores. Expenditure was also higher by Rs. 116 crores, at Rs. 2,629 crores. For the Budget year 1969-70, Mr. Desai estimated the revenues at current rates of taxation at Rs. 2,900 crores. Mr. Desai said the total gross revenue of the Centre including additional taxation in 1969-70 would be Rs. 3,519 crores of which Rs. 519 crores would accrue to the States. He assumed credit for a higher level of internal borrowing - Rs. 106 crores in 1969-70 against Rs. 81 crores in 1968-69 - and external borrowings Rs. 691 crores against Rs. 685 crores in 1968-69. Of the fresh tax yield the Centre’s share would be Rs 100 crores - Rs 80 crores from excise, Rs. 11 crores from direct taxes and Rs. 9 crores from customs. The States would get Rs. 27 crores as their share. The deficit for the current year is Rs. 30 crores less than the original estimate of Rs. 290 crores. The revenue estimates for 1969-70, Mr. Desai said, showed an increase of Rs. 151 crores, at the existing taxation level.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 1, 1919.

### Murder of Police Officer.

Further details are to hand of the outrage on the lives of a Reserve Police Searching Party at Mavoothanpatti, near Ammayanayakanur Railway Station in the District of Madurai, the news of which I telegraphed to you this morning [February 28]. For over a year and a half, I am told there have been reported a series of cases of thefts of bags of rice, chillies or other food-stuffs from running goods trains during nights between stations Kodaikanal Road and Ambaturai: and the attempts made on the part of the Railway Police on various occasions to apprehend the criminals and to recover the property lost had been fruitless. Even quite recently a few days ago a similar theft of four or five gunny bags of chillies had occurred and the Railway Police have been taken to task for their want of sufficient vigilance.

## CONCEPTUAL Differential reproduction

### BIOLOGY

This refers to the difference in the reproductive success rate of various individual members or groups within a species. Differential reproduction could be due to a number of reasons including the specific genetic make-up of individuals or groups which might make some of them better suited for the purpose of reproduction when compared to others. Characteristics like height, intelligence, disease resistance, etc. are some examples of factors that could explain the differential reproductive success of different members within a species. Reproductive success is considered an important determinant of groups that are favoured by the process of natural selection.

## MORE ON THE WEB

Watch: How the famous ‘kadalai urundai’ is made at Kariyapatti near Madurai

<http://bit.ly/kadalaiurundai>