

## **What Should Be the Strategy of Political Parties for 2014 General Election?**

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This is perhaps the most difficult paper I have ever written because I am entering into an area which is virtually a mine field. Therefore, I would seek the indulgence of making a few opening statements. The paper presents certain hypothetical scenarios, but which do reflect political realities as they are today. No party or community or group is being targeted because as far as is possible the paper aims to be objective. Personally I have total faith in secularism in that India is and must be a pluralistic society in which everyone is equal, everyone is secure and everyone has a right to a share of the development pie.

When India became independent, for the first twenty years we had more or less one party rule in that the Congress dominated the political scene. The leadership was strongly influenced by Gandhian ideals and the leaders were personally honest, austere and very much in tune with the average citizen and inspired by Nehru's dream and vision of modern India. There was a distinct ideology in which equity was the keystone, egalitarianism was our objective and the welfare of all citizens was the goal of government. The first twenty years of independence, therefore, were both politically easy and politically sane. The passing of Nehru, the coming to power of his daughter Indira Gandhi, the rapid deterioration of political values and the emergence of a new breed of politicians whose greed was growing and would soon overtake the nation completely transformed the political scene. Nothing epitomised this more than the politics of capturing power through engineering defections by wholesale corruption of legislators. Unfortunately Indira was very much a party to this because when in 1967 Govind Narain Singh engineered defections and D.P. Mishra, the then Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, suggested that the House be dissolved and fresh elections held, the signal which emerged from Indira Gandhi to the Governor of Madhya Pradesh was not to accept this advice and let Govind Narain Singh form a government of defectors. That was the end of ideology in politics, especially Congress politics and we are suffering the consequences right to the present day.

There was a time when the citizens knew where and for what a political party stood. For example, Nehru and his Congress Party were considered left of centre, tinged with socialist ideas of the Fabian genre and heavily influenced by the Soviet model of economic planning as presented to India by Prof. Mahalanobis. The primary role of the State in leading India towards modernity was spelt out and all of us in the Service who joined in the first ten years were both influenced and inspired by the task that government had set itself. We felt excited at being players and partners in this venture and most of us, without having any political leanings whatsoever and strictly maintaining political neutrality as prescribed by Sardar Patel, nevertheless gave of our best for implementing the development goals of government. The underlying ideology was there for us to see and in many ways we were as enthusiastic in implementing a socialist agenda as was done by the British Civil Service under the Labour Government. The difference was that the British Civil Service was intuitively opposed to an interventionist role of the State in the national economy, whereas we in India were committed to it. The similarity does not end there because under Margaret Thatcher the same Civil Service went about dismantling the edifice of the socialist State, just as in India the Civil Service is pushing the twin mantras of liberalisation and globalisation. In both cases there is a definite loss of bureaucratic power as the State steps back from extreme economic interventionism, but both

the Indian and the British Civil Services being disciplined and trained to implement political decisions, they have gone ahead with their tasks.

Here the resemblance ends because in India politics has taken a turn which has moved the whole system away from any ideology, any values, any sense of what is morally right or wrong and, therefore, power has become the only objective. It is in this context that one has to view 2014, which could either be a year of revival or the year of apocalypse. If ideology no longer distinguishes political parties, if even the Left is prepared to compromise with communal ideologies such as the Indian Union Muslim League, then what should be the election agenda of the different parties? Obviously the two major contenders for power in 2014 will be the Congress and the BJP. Most probably it would be power shared with partners, but unless things change drastically one can assume that either BJP or the Congress will be the lead partners of any coalition. It is here that one has to draw the hypothetical scenarios to which I have referred earlier.

Let us begin with BJP, which has recently taken a decision to give command of the election campaign of the party to Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat. Narendra Modi has certain achievements to his credit which even his opponents cannot deny, but he has also been built up larger than life by demonisation by parties which call themselves secular but whose credentials suggest otherwise. Elections are no longer fought on issues and all the parties try and build what are called vote banks. The Muslims, who form the largest minority, are the obvious target. The entire attempt is to isolate BJP as a communal party and persuade the Muslims that they must not vote for this party. The Congress wants them to vote for the Congress, the Samajwadi Party seeks Muslims vote for itself, Lalu Yadav claims to be the champion of Muslim as does Mamata Banerjee and Nitish Kumar, despite his electoral alliance with BJP in Bihar, keeps projecting himself as the saviour of the Muslims. Wooing the Muslims as a community is not considered communal. The logic of this escapes me because the Muslims are being addressed as a religious group, not as members of a particular party because of its ideology. Does this not go against the spirit of secularism as enshrined in the Constitution? Let us carry the argument further. Mayawati has the scheduled castes as her base, but the realities of politics have driven her to seeking upper caste Hindu votes. Her archrival, Mulayam Singh Yadav, appeals to the OBCs and also claims to be the true messiah of the Muslims. Is not an appeal or a campaign based on caste considerations communal? Communalism cannot be viewed only through the prism of Hinduism and Islam. The spectrum is wide because anything which divides on sectarian ground has to be communal. Any party which bases its political strategy on sectarian considerations is ipso facto communal. The only exception I see to this is the Left Front in West Bengal which has to thank the legacy of Jyoti Basu. West Bengal is a State where under the Left Front there was a party ideology and the politics of community, caste, or religion was by and large eschewed. Certainly the Congress is as guilty of communal politics as any other party, which includes BJP.

In this real world of politics what should be the strategy of BJP? This becomes all the more important because L.K. Advani's opposition to Narendra Modi has opened the party to schisms. The BJP must ask itself the question why it has not won individual electoral support to come to power in India. Is it because the Muslims do not vote for BJP? Considering the fact that in India eighty-two percent of the population is Hindu how can a minority keep a party out of power unless the Hindus do not vote for it? The Hindu vote is fragmented. Part of the vote goes to the political party which a particular group of voters has always supported. This could be the

Congress or the BJP. A great deal of fragmentation is caused by caste, with parties appealing to voters to vote along caste line. Certainly in an individual constituency where a particular caste dominates this does have a political fallout. Then there are regional considerations which also influence voters and, therefore, outfits such as Trinamool Congress, TDP, DMK and AIADMK have prospered locally. What should BJP do to counter this? Indira Gandhi at the instigation of Sanjay Gandhi actively decided in the Punjab to keep the Akalis out of power. Sanjay Gandhi's arithmetic showed that Hindus formed the largest chunk of the population and, therefore, the Hindu vote was essential for the Congress to be in power. Therefore, there was a secret pact between Indira Gandhi and RSS Chief Deoras whereby in 1981-82 in the Punjab the RSS supported the Congress and in Jammu the Congress gave BJP a free hand. In other words, the importance of the Hindu vote was better understood by Indira Gandhi than by the BJP.

If the BJP is to win it has to get a substantial chunk of Hindu votes because the minorities are unlikely to vote for it. In other words, to counter minority vote polarisation the BJP must attempt to polarise Hindu votes. There are many ways of doing this. If the Muslim vote is represented as being positively anti Hindu rather than anti BJP there is likely to be a Hindu reaction. The best bet for the BJP would be to forcefully push a development agenda in which it should be made clear that the plurality of India would not be questioned and the minorities would be both safe and assured of development. However, India is basically a Hindu country and Hindu interests would certainly be promoted by BJP. Would this be a communal appeal? I suppose it would, but no more than the appeal for Muslim votes or the appeal for caste based and sectarian votes promoted by other parties. It would be an untenable situation if it is permissible to seek votes on account of the religious identity of the minorities, but not permissible to make a similar appeal to the Hindu to vote for a particular party. Here the BJP would have to tread carefully so that whilst appealing for Hindu votes it avoids being condemned as being anti secular.

Perhaps in Narendra Modi BJP has found a leader who could polarise without dividing, promise a strong government and actually deliver on a development agenda and give a specific sense of direction to BJP which it has been lacking. A Vajpayee type of lukewarm secularism is not very different from what the Congress exudes and it would certainly not propel BJP to power.

How should the Congress react? Obviously it is worried because Narendra Modi will lead the next election campaign. That is why senior Congress leaders are making brave statements that they are not afraid of Modi. Who has asked them whether they fear Modi? At the same time the Congress is acutely aware of the fact that it is no longer a political party but a mere fiefdom of the Jawaharlal Nehru and Feroz Gandhi family as represented by Indira Gandhi and her successors. I do not want to comment at all on the merit of the family, but certainly a political party must have a leadership which goes beyond the daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi and her grandson. Because of the family centric organisation of the party there is no room for any political leadership to develop within the party and this has been its bane ever since Indira Gandhi came to power. Nehru was a giant but he had men of equal stature around him such as Sardar Patel, Maulana Azad, Rafi Ahmed Kidwai, Govind Ballabh Pant, B.C. Roy, Gopinath Bardoloi, K. Kamaraj, B.G. Kher, Ravi Shankar Shukla, Morarji Desai and so many others who were his equals and would not kowtow to him. They collectively made the party stronger because each one of them had a following and a standing and they could all be depended upon at

a time of crisis. Today if Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka were to withdraw how would one recognise the Congress Party?

The response of the Congress to the BJP cannot be a Narendra Modi phobia. It has to first rebuild itself as a party in which there is collective leadership based on a whole hierarchy of people who, through their work, have a standing at the tehsil, district, pradesh and national level. In other words, without showing any disrespect to Sonia and Rahul the party has to develop a strong grass-root leadership which can both support the party and evolve local strategy and tactics to build the party at cutting edge levels.

The party also has to decide what its ideology is and what its programme will be for the next few years. If the party is able to present a workable development agenda it can certainly have a strong weapon to counter the BJP onslaught, which itself is likely to be based on a development agenda. The Congress also has to reiterate its secular credentials. It must spell out its own definition of secularism, it must stop making sectarian appeals and it must begin to understand what the Muslim of India is today. This applies to the BJP also. Next to Indonesia India has the largest Muslim population in the world and the sheer numbers of this population carry it beyond the status of a minority. The Muslim of India today is not the Muslim of 1947. He is an Indian who happens to follow the Islamic faith, just as there are Indians who happen to be Hindu, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Animists, Agnostics and Atheists. An average Muslim is happy to be in India even if he has complaints about his status. I cannot think of a single Muslim who would like to go and live in Pakistan and the aspirations and expectations of the Muslims as those of every other community. The Muslim wants security, he wants to educate his children (this is a welcome development), he wants employment opportunities and a chance to earn a good living and he wants to share with every other Indian the fruits of development so that he, too, can prosper. In fact Narendra Modi seems to have, perhaps unwittingly, recognised this fact because in the last ten years Gujarat has not had any communal riots, it has the largest proportion of Muslims serving in the police with an average of ten Muslim policemen per police station and certainly the Muslims have not been kept out of the development agenda of government. One important point to be noted is that there has been no large-scale migration of Muslims from Gujarat after the 2002 riots, which means that the Muslim has made India his true home. The Congress, therefore, must not treat him as a vote bank, but should help the community to upgrade its own educational and economic status, whilst at the same time eschewing the politics of caste. A resurgent Congress which is middle of the path, has an ideology, has developed a strong grass-root leadership and has a definite secular and development programme can take on BJP.

The Left must start rebuilding itself because a loss in West Bengal cannot spell the doom of an ideology which is truly egalitarian and whose leadership has provided an island of personal integrity in the sea of political corruption. It is ironic that in a country which has so much poverty and unequal distribution of wealth the Communist Party cannot first come together under one single umbrella and then present itself either as an alternative to government or as a strong opposition which unites people with similar thoughts.

The one community which emerges with flying colours is the Christians. They educate their children, they are good employees, hard working, honest and loyal, they are disciplined and wherever there is a sizable Christian community there is both personal and civic hygiene. One example will illustrate my point. In Betul District there is a township called Shahpur on the Machna River. It has a police station, a block headquarters and has now been made a Tehsil.

Twenty-two miles from Betul on the national highway linking Nagpur with Bhopal, Shahpur has a hamlet called Motidhana populated by Christian Gonds. The contrast between Motidhana and the other components of Shahpur is striking. There is a neat white washed church, all the houses are well maintained, the hamlet is scrupulously clean, the children though poor are cleanly dressed, all of them go to school and the hamlet is completely free of crime. The Christians are excellent citizens and their contribution to the Civil Services, Police and Armed Forces is far greater in proportion to their total population. It is about time the political parties wooed them because despite their small numbers they would certainly add value to any political party. Kerala is a good example of this because in that State, where the Church pioneered education, a model which the Nairs then followed, that party wins whom the Christians support. The regular change of government indicates that the Christian support is well reasoned and issue based, they are not a vote bank to be captured, but they do punish a non-performing government. The whole electorate must think and act accordingly and the political parties must help the voters to do so by presenting them an ideology, a programme and a raft of issues.

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