

# Lok Sabha polls: BJP Way Ahead of Others

*The BJP led by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has so far been successful in recasting its core nationalist ideology. The 2019 elections may then become a ground breaking for the BJP in a way different from what 2014 was.*

BJP's effort to build on the surge in nationalist sentiment after the Pulwama attack is based on the calculation that this X-factor will give Modi a decisive edge ahead of next month's election. But purists argue that the RSS brand of aggressive cultural nationalism hasn't found big electoral resonance in the past.

Even in 1999, when BJP's first PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee contested a reelection amid a pervading post-Kargil nationalist sentiment, the party won the same number of seats it had secured a year earlier in 1998. Surely, the Kargil War helped Vajpayee's image and appeal. But it did not quite result in a windfall by way of a nationalist wave sweeping the country.



But the comparison between then and now ends. This omnipresent 'optimism' now is largely because, unlike Vajpayee, Modi may have showed the courage to break away from India's self-imposed 'nuance' with Pakistan and carried out strikes inside the latter's territory – a move that's seen to be in sync with BJP's core nationalist ideology.

The nub of the RSS-BJP narrative on nationalism goes fundamentally against Pakistan. And BJP, at one level, has come to believe that there's been a fundamental shift away

from the Nehruvian 'Congressi' nationalism towards a more decisive 'RSS-BJP' nationalism. In other words, BJP's gamble with its campaign is that there's now much more demand, acceptability, resonance and support for the 'anti-Pakistan' aggressive brand of nationalism.

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Even if this true, this alone, purists think, is not sufficient to translate sentiment into votes. Therefore, BJP is counting on combining this new pitch with Modi's original pro-poor campaign. Again, this is the other big BJP move, nursed and developed over the past five years, that will bear fruit.

### **Target Economic Development**

Like its upper crust nationalist narrative, BJP's penetration among lower castes in the heartland was indifferent. Tech savvy Modi, however, used a more effective and communicable 'anti-elite' pitch to make the point that benefits have gone to only those lower caste groups that dominate regional caste-based parties.

BJP has tried to combine smaller caste groups that loosely fall under a common economic profile, and has sought to target them through big budget government schemes in health, housing, electricity and energy.

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In January, this was 'moved' with the reservation of the poor among the 'general category' (including upper castes) to consolidate both its old and new support base. But let's not forget that BJP was not the first – and will not be last – to have big-budget schemes or reservations. The political package only becomes effective electorally when combined with a larger message: of fighting a privileged class.

Post-Pulwama, BJP's hope is that Modi can combine its model of nationalism with its version of class politics to stir up an infallible victory narrative. But the challenge is equally significant. On nationalism itself, there are as many strong subnational narratives – of caste, religion, ethnicities and tribes. Is the RSS-BJP brand of nationalism inclusive enough to involve all? The challenge for Modi will be to get his newly created class of voters to associate with strong anti-Pakistan, aggressive nationalism.

### **Pakistan Play**

The problem here is not about the targeting of Pakistan not getting enough traction. It is more about the fear of unbridled aggression. In many lesser developed parts of India, the State's aggressive behaviour is often seen as a precursor to the State being seen as becoming oppressive.

Here, a lot would depend on the PM's messaging. Modi is best placed, both institutionally and as a political communicator, to recast his party's core nationalist ideology in a way that it domestically generates confidence, not fear. That would be vital for BJP to reap any pan-India advantage ahead of elections.

Yet, it must be granted that this possibility is there today for BJP because of its growing reach. Over the past five years, it has expanded its footprint across India faster than any other political party. It's in power in states where it had no proper presence until recently. The fact that BJP is banking on major gains in eastern India underlines the confidence its leadership has with the qualitative, not just the quantitative, expansion of the party. Next month's general elections will, however, be the true test on whether the reach is deep enough to recast a nationalist campaign pitch to votes.

In effect, BJP is on test over nationalism, class politics and the qualitative extent of its growing reach. The nationalist

script is still to be watched while the other two have been completely recast over the past five years.

In fact, it's because of the growing reach of the party, and the new class of Modi voters, that the anti-Pakistan nationalism pitch has a chance of impacting the election. And if it does, it would be a significant assertion of both ideological legitimacy and authority by the political right.

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