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DECLINE OF THE CONGRESS AND RISE OF BJP UNDER THE LEADERSHIP OF A.B.VAJPAYEE AND L.K.ADVANI: AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

The result of the 1999 Lok Sabha elections ruled out the possibility of the return to the 'one-party dominance' system in India which was the predominant feature of Indian political system during the first three decades after independence. The gradual decline in popularity as well as the fortunes of the Congress party (Indian National Congress) and the steady growth of influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party as well as the defining role these parties were destined to play in Indian politics makes it imperative to have a thorough probe to understand the making and unmaking of both these parties. This research study is an attempt at presenting a veritable narrative of the BJP's ascendancy in Indian politics and the factors that have propelled the party from the periphery to the centre stage.

KEYWORDS: One-party dominance, Indian political system, Congress party, Bharatiya Janatha party.

JOURNEY OF BJP'S ASCENDANCY

The disintegration of the Janata Party after 1979 did not deter the Hindu nationalist party's quest for broadening its base in Indian politics. That is why, unlike the other constituents of the Janata Party, when Jana Sangh along with some other newly found friends came out of the alliance, it did not go for a revival of the erstwhile Jana Sangh. The party believed that it would have been a step backward because the Jana Sangh's support base was largely confined to Brahmins, Banias (members of the trading community) and the urban middle class in the Hindi-speaking States of Northern and Central India¹. Aiming to capitalize on the gains made during the Janata experiment and to lay claim to established Janata traditions both in ideology and political aspirations, the new party was named the Bharatiya Janata Party. Its leadership, particularly Atal Behari Vajpayee, the founding president of the party, was careful enough to distance the party from the sectarian legacy of the Jana Sangh and tried to build a new image through its ideological pronouncements to moderate its pro-Hindutva posture. It, therefore, sought to include policies and programmes advocated by Mahatma Gandhi, Jayprakash Narain and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya to rebuild the Indian society as well as polity. In fact, the party chose to adopt 'Gandhian socialism' as the cornerstone of its new political ideology. To achieve this goal, Vajpayee emphasized the need for value-based politics, and called upon the new party to mobilize support from the 'poor peasantry, workers, the Harijans, the tribals, and other exploited sections of the population.'² In brief, during its initial days the BJP strove to present its secular image



to the people by demonstrating adherence to the Gandhian philosophy of secularism and socialism.

For defining its role in Indian politics, the BJP formulated a written document committing itself to nationalism, national integration, democracy, positive secularism and value-based politics. While stating its position on these five commitments it condemned the Congress for curbing democratic rights, as demonstrated by the imposition of the Emergency in 1975. It went on to chastise the Congress for its policy of appeasement of minorities, its unprincipled pursuit of power, toleration of corruption in public life and the promotion of consumerism with utter disregard to India's cultural traditions.

In moderating its radical thrust of militant Hindu nationalism and espousing vanguardism against authoritarianism and corruption, the BJP showed a full awareness of its existing narrow support base, both in geographic and demographic terms. Therefore, it expressed its willingness to cooperate with other political parties to help the poor and the toiling masses of the country. It blamed Congress policies for the widespread poverty, economic inequalities, and the loss of morality in public life. The BJP leadership, from the very beginning, was quite vocal about joining hands with other non-Congress parties to oppose the Congress. However, owing to the bitter experience all these parties had as constituents of the Janata government, it did not make a serious effort in this direction during the assembly elections held in May 1980.³ For making that effort, it had to wait till 1982 when a partial understanding between the BJP and the Lok Dal was reached to oppose the Congress in the assembly elections in Haryana and Himachal Pradesh. The results in Himachal were encouraging; it won 29 of the 60 seats and polled over 35 per cent of the votes.

A few months later, elections to six states and the Union Territory of Delhi, held in 1983, produced a mixed result for the party. While it felt encouraged by its performance in Karnataka (18 seats and 7.9 per cent votes) and Andhra Pradesh (three seats and 2.8 per cent votes), where it contested alone, its effort to moderate its Hindu face boomeranged in Delhi. Despite its alliance with the Lok Dal (out of 56 Metropolitan seats the BJP contested 50 and the Lok Dal 6) its hope of winning a majority of seats was badly shattered; it could win only 19 seats and 37 per cent of the votes. The debacle was attributed to 'the RSS cadres who did not throw their phalanx behind BJP candidates who did not belong to their hard core' Similarly, in the Jammu and Kashmir State assembly elections the Congress swept the poll in the Jammu region—a traditional stronghold of the former Jana Sangh.

Such results aroused opposition from the hardliners but Vajpayee's crusade to secularize the party and to broaden its base by aligning with other parties continued. Lending support to Vajpayee, L.K. Advani, the then BJP general secretary, admitted that, 'we are not yet a national alternative to the Congress, but we have the potential of becoming that alternative by joining forces with other opposition parties'⁴. Accordingly, the party issued a call for the formation of an anti-Congress democratic front. The pragmatists, led by Vajpayee, were persuaded that given the state of political and communal violence, sluggish economic growth, increased inflation and allegations of widespread corruption, the Congress was unlikely to win a majority in the eighth Lok Sabha elections due in 1985. However, they were equally aware of the limitations of the multiparty system in India which stymied the chance of any single party to get an absolute majority in the Lok Sabha; they thought that only a coalition was likely to emerge. Hence Vajpayee worked hard to present a secular image of the party on the one hand and to minimize divisions in the non-Congress vote by uniting the opposition against the Congress in the forthcoming Parliament elections, on the other. But unforeseen events intervened.

In sharp contrast to the BJP's endeavour to broaden its base both socially and ideologically, the Congress, after its return to power in 1980, pursued the policy of social exclusion. The dismissal of the Akali Dal government in Punjab in 1980 could be considered as the first step in this direction. Even though this was done as a matter of tit-for-tat because a similar fate was met by many Congress-ruled State governments in 1977 after the Janata Party swept the polls in north India, considering the volatility of the Punjab situation it demanded some restraint on the part of the Congress. What is worse, it followed the policy of divide and rule in tacitly supporting Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, a fundamentalist Sikh preacher, to weaken the Akali Dal party led by moderate Sikh leaders. Later, the same Bhindranwale was to promote Sikh separatism, leading to terrorism and demands for the formation of Khalistan. In response, Indira Gandhi ordered 'Operation Blue Star' in June 1984 to flush

out the Sikh leaders hiding in the Golden Temple. A large number of Sikhs, including Bhindranwale, were killed in this operation. This caused wide-spread resentment among the Sikhs. On 31 October 1984, Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her two Sikh security guards, and this produced a wide spread anti-Sikh sentiment among Hindus. Sensing the culmination of its desire to create a Hindu vote bank for the party, many Congress leaders actively participated in anti-Sikh riots and/or incited Hindus against Sikhs wherever possible.

The Hindu backlash following Indira Gandhi's assassination put the Congress in an unexpectedly commanding position in the 1984 Lok Sabha elections which were advanced by a few months for strategic reasons. The game plan of the BJP was thus badly shattered. Despite its elaborately articulated electoral platform, ideological changes, and the projection as an alternative to the congress party, the 1984 election results spelled disaster for the party.⁵ Excepting Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat where it shared seats with Telugu Desam and the Janata Party respectively, its local adjustments in other States did not work. Out of the 224 seats it contested, only two, one each from Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat could be won. Rajiv Gandhi's image of 'Mr. Clean', the sympathy wave in his favor, and the poor performance of the BJP, especially in north India, was due largely to half-hearted support from its shard co-organizations like the RSS and VHP. Nanaji Deshmukh's appeal to the RSS to support Rajiv Gandhi, in the thick of the election campaign, created a lot of confusion among the RSS workers⁶; many of them in fact worked for Congress candidates in areas where BJP candidates did not belong to their hardcore. The results of the 1984 Lok Sabha elections weakened Vajpayee's position further. Both the moderates and the hardliners within the party became alarmed at the RSS's drift away from the BJP. There were hardly any takers for Vajpayee's insistence that there was no Hindu vote bank and that the Hindu is liberal, secular and he wants a party whose door will be open to all⁷. Moreover, airing their concerns many of the party workers expressed the view that the BJP had become a B team of the Congress. Yielding to the pressure in the National Executive-Committee meeting held in Calcutta in March 1985, Vajpayee appointed a working group, headed by Krishna Lai Sharma, to rethink the party's orientation. The working group's report and the deliberations that took place in the National Executive Committee meeting held in Gandhinagar in October 1985 persuaded the Committee to decide to revert back to Deen Dayal Upadhyaya's integral humanism as the core of the BJP's ideology and it pledged 'to build up India as a strong and prosperous nation, which is modern, progressive and enlightened in outlook and which proudly draws inspiration from India's age-old culture and values'⁸ Thus, without resurrecting the Jana Sangh, the BJP in effect returned to its legacy.

The period that followed the 1984 Lok Sabha elections went, more or less, the BJP way but it was not the same party that Vajpayee had struggled to build. Seeds of the present BJP were visible in 1984 itself when the hardliners began to acquire a salience within the party. Vajpayee handed over charge to Lal Krishna Advani two years later in 1986, but elements of Hindutva had crept into the party soon after the 1984 elections. Aggressive Hindu nationalism supported by demands for the abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution and the formulation of a Uniform Civil Code for all sectors of society became central to all discourses in the party. Advani's proximity to the RSS leadership also helped the party bridge the gap created during Vajpayee's tenure as party president.

But things did not go the Congress way either. The Congress and its government under Rajiv Gandhi were caught in a cross fire. Having exploited the benefits of the 'Hindu backlash' in the 1984 elections, he turned to appease the Muslims. He not only tolerated Z.R. Ansari, one of his cabinet colleagues, who reacted against the Supreme Court judgment on the famous Shah Bano case, describing the judges as 'telis and tamolis (oil-pressers and betel-leaf growers)', but also went on to amend the Code of Criminal Procedure in 1985 to exempt the Muslims from the force of Section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. Then, fearing a 'Hindu backlash' against this he tried to please the Hindus by

opening the doors of the Babri Masjid to Hindu worship of the Ram Lala idol in it on 1 February 1986. Both these actions helped the BJP. While the former lent credence to the BJP's accusation that the Congress followed the policy of appeasing the Muslims, the latter helped the Hindu fundamentalists' desire to build a Lord Ram temple at the disputed site. This was the period when slogans such as, 'garva se kaho hum Hindu hain and 'jo Hindu hit ki baat karega wahi desh par raj karega' were coined by the BJP; they also began to gain acceptability.

Along with its aggressive Hindu nationalist posture, the BJP was also expanding its support base by working with the people, particularly the tribals in south Bihar and Gujarat and the lower backward class communities in UP and MP. As a result, the Congress's support base began to shrink. The formation of the Bahujan Samaj Party and its promising performance in the Hardwar Lok Sabha byelection where Mayawati polled 32.7 per cent of the vote against the 39 per cent of the Congress, posed the threat of cutting into the dalit support base of the Congress in UP. Similarly, the BJP's concerted effort to win over the erstwhile Jana Sangh's Brahmin-Bania combined support weakened the Congress base among Brahmins. The opening of the Babri Masjid to Hindu worship had already aroused suspicion among the Muslims about the Congress party's sincerity about Muslim sentiment.

Such instances of disenchantment are usual in a competitive political system and are generally overcome through better performance and creation of new constituencies of support. But the Rajiv Gandhi government failed on both these counts. Neither were any new constituencies created nor was the governmental performances anywhere near the aspirations Rajiv had raised during his short spell prior to the 1984 elections. His image of 'Mr. Clean' was badly soiled by the Bofors scandal. 'Instead of eradicating corruption from Indian body politic and distancing himself from the Congress (I) party's manipulators, power brokers, and influence peddlers, Rajiv's administration became identified even further with amoral politics and corrupt politicians' ⁹

Events preceding the 1989 Lok Sabha elections moved fast to bring together different opposition parties to defeat the Congress Government. The merger of various opposition parties of north India to form the Janata Dal, the coming together of important regional parties from the west, south and east and the Janata Dal to form the National Front and the subsequent understanding between the Left Front and the National Front were developments which threatened both the Congress and BJP alike. The Left Front vehemently opposed any deal with the BJP. But the growing popularity of the BJP in north Indian states and in Gujarat forced the Janata Dal to accommodate the BJP in its alliance to avoid a division in non-Congress votes. Realizing the consequence, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI [M]) too, acquiesced in a de facto Janata Dal-BJP alliance. As a result, the BJP succeeded in gaining seat adjustments with the Janata Dal in almost all the north Indian states and Gujarat. In addition to this, it shared seats with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra.

The combined effort by the opposition produced spectacular results; the Congress' strength in the ninth Lok Sabha came down to 197 from 415 in the previous house. Different parties benefited in different states. As far as the BJP was concerned it emerged as the single largest party in Delhi, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and it did fairly well in Bihar, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. Its phenomenal success in as much as six states heightened its hopes of emerging as a national alternative to the Congress.

Support to V.P. Singh's Government at the centre was the part of a larger game plan of the BJP. First, it wanted to reap the benefit of the alliance with the Janata Dal in the forthcoming Vidhan Sabha elections which, in fact, it achieved. Second, it needed time to further its gains. Third, it wanted to demonstrate its ability to act responsibly by supporting a national alternative to the Congress. Fourth, considering V.P. Singh's popularity any opposition to him at this juncture would have been detrimental to the larger interests of the party. And, finally, being highly factionalized, internally divided, and dominated by politically ambitious people, the Janata Dal was unlikely in the BJP's estimation to maintain its internal cohesion, so this government would fall sooner than later. Thus, the BJP leadership thought that supporting the government from the outside would save them from any criticism for non/bad performance of the National Front government. And when it would fall under its own weight, the BJP, in all probability, would emerge as the people's sole alternative to the Congress.

The calculations proved right. Squabbles within the Janata Dal surfaced soon after it came to power. Hard-pressed in the internal power struggle, on 7 August 1990, V.P. Singh announced a 27 per cent reservation of jobs in the Central Government and the public sector undertakings for socially and economically backward castes, i.e., the OBCs to further consolidate his and his party's base among them. While this hastened the disintegration of the Janata Dal, it also sent alarming signals to the other National Front partners who were facing the onslaught of the pro-Mandal leaders. The BJP, already unhappy with V.P. Singh's pro-Muslim stance such as his constant consultations with Syed Abdullah Bukhari, the Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, and his declaration of the Prophet Mohammed's birthday as a public holiday, perceived the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations as a direct threat to its strategy of consolidating the Hindu vote bank by bringing all Hindus, irrespective of their castes, under its own flag. A threatened BJP now decided to return to its old source of identity, Hindutva, and went all out to agitate, organize, and mobilize the Hindus to ensure their support. Encouraged by the rich dividends it had received from the Ram shila puja programme during the 1989 elections, the BJP launched Advani's Ram rath yatra from Somnath to Ayodhya during which the BJP party symbol was prominently displayed to increase religious fervour among Hindus and to mobilize their support for the party.

The BJP was overwhelmed by the enthusiastic response to the rath yatra. It was already sick and tired of being branded as a communal party; so the BJP hardened its stand on the temple issue through an impressive manifesto entitled 'Towards Ram Rajya'. The party president, Murli Manohar Joshi, also promised that the Ram temple would be constructed at the janmabhoomi in Ayodhya as soon as the party came to power. And slogans such as '*Jo Hindu hit ki baat karega wahi desh par raj karega. 'BJP ko lana hai, ramrajya banana hai' and 'Sabko dekha baar-baar, hamko parkhen ek baar clicked. While the first two echoed the feelings of Hindu fundamentalists, the last appealed to all sections of society. The job of whipping up religious fervour was entrusted to leaders like Ashok Singhal, Uma Bharati, Sadhvi Ritambhara et al, while the star campaigners of the party, A-B. Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, focused on the party's ideology and programme to present the BJP as the right alternative.*

The campaign paid off; the BJP performed very well in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections. Notwithstanding the sympathy for the Congress after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, in the elections held in the second phase, the party increased its seats from 86 to 120 and garnered support from one-fifth of the total votes polled. In addition to this, it captured power in Uttar Pradesh, where elections for the Vidhan Sabha were also held. And, finally, it made substantial gains in the southern as well as eastern zones of India. All this proved, for the first time, that the BJP had the potential to emerge as a national alternative to the Congress.

The Congress, on the other hand, despite having got a lease of life after the death of Rajiv Gandhi, still lost a good deal of its popular appeal. It did increase its seats from 197 to 244 but its vote share declined from 39.5 percent in 1989 to 36.6 per cent in the 1991 Lok Sabha elections. This reflected a perceptible decline in its support from amongst Muslims, Dalits, upper castes, lower OBCs and Scheduled Tribes. While the former two seemed to have switched to other non-BJP opposition parties, the latter were by and large attracted by the BJP itself.

The BJP now became conscious of its role as the main Opposition party and it wanted to demonstrate to the people that it could act responsibly in the Lok Sabha. There could not be a better opportunity, for the minority government of P.V. Narasimha Rao needed the BJP's support, not only for its survival but also for its smooth sailing in the Lok Sabha. Accordingly, when the Rao government, immediately after assuming power in June 1991, introduced far-reaching liberalization of the economy, reversing the Nehruvian model of command economy, and bringing about drastic changes oriented towards a market economy, the BJP supported the move. Such changes had, in any case, formed part of the BJP's own economic policy as it had been advocating liberalization of the economy for quite some time. Nevertheless, the BJP took advantage of the situation. Advani also developed a good rapport with Rao, leading to frequent consultations and a cooperative relationship between the leaders of the two parties. By extending support to the Rao government, the BJP bargained for central aid and assistance for the four States (UP, MP, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh) where it was in power.¹⁰

However, such cooperation did not last long; yielding to the pressure from the hardliners, leaders of both parties hardened their attitude against the other. The Congress was emboldened by the success in the February 1992 elections held in Punjab; it won all the 13 seats from that State and having been assured of the support from smaller groups like the breakaway faction of the Telugu Desam and independent MPs, Rao too fell in line with the hardliners in his party. Echoing Arjun Singh's line of argument in the plenary session of the All India Congress Committee held in April 1992, Rao asserted that non-secular parties (including the BJP) had no place in a secular State and called for a ban of such parties. Such developments in the Congress in turn strengthened the position of the hardliners in the BJP. In May 1992, the party's National Council strongly denounced the Rao government for what it called its all-round failure, including its policy of economic reforms, and criticized it for mortgaging the future of the country to multinationals. By the end of 1992, 'the BJP leadership declared that construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya was an issue of faith and not of law'. This spurred the VHP to mobilize thousands of karsevaks to march on Ayodhya. On 6 December 1992, the disputed mosque was demolished while leaders like Advani and Joshi reportedly watched helplessly.

This was a great shock to the nation, including the top leadership of the BJP. Accepting the moral responsibility for the demolition of the Babri mosque, Advani resigned as the leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. In fact, the BJP initially adopted a very defensive posture; it was willing to do anything needed for a rapprochement. But the indiscriminate over-reaction of the Rao government in dismissing the BJP-run State governments in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, arresting thousands of party functionaries, imposing a ban on organizations like the VHP and RSS, and its own declaration to rebuild the Babri mosque, brought the BJP, once again, into a confrontationist stance. Fanatic tirades pitting the Hindu Lord Ram against the invader and conqueror Babar came in handy for the BJP to enrage Hindu sentiment in its favor.

The post-1993 elections was a period of introspection for BJP leaders; they perhaps began to realize the limits of their Hindutva card. It had served its purpose to the extent that the BJP had emerged as the sole protector of the Hindu cause; if there were a 'Hindu vote bank', only the BJP would encash it. However, further expansion in its support base had to be managed by going beyond this rubric and this was possible only by holding out the promise of better performance, a disciplined organization with clean and competent leaders, and the willingness to accommodate and articulate sectional interests otherwise neglected by other political parties. People's memory being short, the stigma of having demolished the mosque began to fade. Also, thanks to the poor performance of Congress governments in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka, when elections to these state assemblies were held in 1994-95, the BJP performed quite well. It captured power on its own in Gujarat, in alliance with the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and it polled 12.8 per cent of the votes and won 65 seats in Karnataka. It also fared well in Andhra Pradesh

With its recent successes in the Vidhan Sabha elections, the BJP showed a determination to present itself as the national alternative to the Congress party. A series of corruption charges, such as the sugar scam, leading to the sacking of a cabinet minister in the Rao government, the urea scandal implicating blood relatives of some of the top leaders of the party, and the bribing of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha MPs to manufacture a majority in the Lok Sabha had tarnished the image of the Congress to a great extent. Moreover, factional feuds within the Congress not only resulted in a bad selection of candidates for the 1996 Lok Sabha elections, they weakened the campaign as well. In sharp contrast to this the BJP ran its campaign very effectively; its star campaigners, Vajpayee and Advani, while aggressively attacking the Rao government for its all-round failures including a wide range of corruption charges and for mortgaging the swadeshi interests by allowing free trade to multinationals, carefully chose to underplay the Hindutva card.

All this produced very favorable results for the BJP in the 1996 Lok Sabha elections. Its seat tally went up to 161. The BJP now became the single largest party in the Lok Sabha. The Congress party's strength in the house came down to 140 from 244 in the 1991 elections and major gains were made by regional parties. The remarkable feature of this election was a shift in the Congress support base, away from those identified as the traditional supporters of the party. Deserters from amongst Muslims and

Dalits switched to the Janata Dal and/or other regional parties, and the tribal voters along with Hindus moved to the BJP. The BJP was able to attract more support from among the better placed and better informed voters, support that cut across caste boundaries. This was precisely the group the BJP had targeted for swinging in its favor when it argued before the nation soliciting support for Vajpayee's government. It is another matter that government had to resign on the 13th day of its existence in power.

The United Front (UF) governments at the centre, first under H.D. Deve Gowda's and then under I.K. Gujral's leadership, were pulled down by the Congress by withdrawal of its support. This unscrupulous move showed both the party and its leaders in a very bad light. Throughout its tenure as the main supporting party to the government, albeit from the outside, beyond minor concessions, personal favors, and self-promotion, the Congress hardly took any bold stand on public policies and issues of governance.

As expected, the results of the 1998 elections went the BJP way. It increased its seat tally from 161 to 179 in the Lok Sabha and polled 25.6 per cent votes as compared to 20.3 per cent in 1996. More importantly, with its tactical alliances, it not only succeeded in mustering complementary support for the party but, it also consolidated its position among the voters who turned towards it in search of an alternative to the Congress. In contrast, despite Sonia Gandhi's influence in arresting further desertions from amongst its traditional supporters, i.e., Muslims, Dalits and tribals, the share of the Congress vote came down from 28.8 per cent in 1996 to 25.8 per cent in 1998 although it got almost the same number of seats (140 in 1996 and 141 in 1998) in the Lok Sabha. This corroborates the argument that the BJP made further inroads into the Congress party's upper caste and class support bases.

Without entering into the complexity of formation of the Vajpayee government in March 1998—the tussle within the BJP for ministerial positions, not allowing the prime minister a free hand to pick his cabinet colleagues, divided loyalties of some of the BJP ministers as alleged by the prime minister's office that 'cabinet ministers like Yashwant Sinha, P.R. Kumaramangalam and earlier Sushma Swaraj reported directly to Advani and by implication undermined Vajpayee's authority' accommodating unreasonable demands from coalition partners, especially from Jayalalitha of the All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), and the discredits all these earned for Vajpayee and his government—it must be recorded that the BJP was very severely punished for its non-performance by the voters in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Delhi where state elections were held in November 1998. This was the period when the popularity graph of both Vajpayee and his government was at its lowest and the Congress showed the potential to make a comeback. The image of Sonia Gandhi and her party shot up and pollsters began to predict a return of the Congress at the Centre.¹¹

The BJP was alarmed by its poor performance in the November 1998 State elections. It thereupon began an operation to improve its image as a party and in the functioning of the government. Vajpayee assumed an assertive role in the functioning of his government and in dealings with his coalition partners, particularly Jayalalitha. His determination to improve relations with Pakistan, opening of a direct bus route between Delhi and Lahore, his own bus journey to Lahore and the warm reception he received from his Pakistani counterpart brought his image on to a recovery' path. The Congress, which professed not to indulge in any activity in destabilizing the Vajpayee government, suddenly got scared and went on to dislodge the BJP-led government. It manipulated the withdrawal of AIADMK support to the government, almost forced a presidential directive to Vajpayee to prove his majority in the Lok Sabha, and managed to make the government lose the confidence motion by one (controversial) vote.¹² But Sonia Gandhi's claim to form an alternative government and her failure to mobilize the requisite support earned a lot of sympathy for Vajpayee and his government. The Congress, on the other hand, had suffered a setback, first for joining hands with Jayalalitha, and second for Sonia's inept handling of the situation after Vajpayee lost the confidence vote. In the event, Vajpayee continued as caretaker prime minister and yet another election was thrust upon the unwilling people.

An immediate election, as it appears in retrospect, may have helped the Congress. But the prolonged tenure of Vajpayee's caretaker government and its firm handling of the Kargil conflict with Pakistan changed the situation drastically. An apparently docile Vajpayee proved to be a strong leader,

strong enough to say 'no' to the US president. As the opinion polls suggested, he became the most preferred leader to lead the country. Side by side, the BJP also managed to forge alliances in most of the States while the Congress was still clinging to the idea of forming a single party government. Moreover, a split in the Congress on the issue of Sonia's foreign origin strengthened Vajpayee's image vis-a-vis Sonia Gandhi even further.

Belying the earlier predictions, the Congress suffered a major setback in 1999; it could win only 113 seats in the Lok Sabha and polled 28.3 per cent votes. The BJP, on the other hand, won 182 seats on its own while the NDA along with its other allies managed to get a majority in the House.¹³ In the process, as the survey data suggests, the BJP did not only enhance its reach to wider segments of society, but also seems to have firmed up its grip among the voters moving away from the Congress since the 1991 Lok Sabha elections.

EMERGING PATTERNS OF PARTY COMPETITION

The BJP seemed to have completed its journey from the periphery to the centre. Its dream of emerging as the national alternative had also been actualized in the sense that it has expanded its reach in almost all parts of the country and had gained acceptability across the ideological spectrum, except of course the Congress and the communists. But the constraints the BJP was facing in gaining acceptance among Muslims, the Scheduled Castes, Christians and, above all this, among the poor segments of society, severely restricted the possibility of its further expansion. Given these limits, even if the BJP manages to get majority support from among the privileged sections of voters, it will hardly suffice to produce a clear majority in the Lok Sabha. The only recourse then left with the BJP is to align with other parties to acquire power. This provides fair play to regional/ local parties in governance not only at the State level but at the Centre as well. The later history proved it to be true.

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