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## BJP IN SOUTH INDIA

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*The BJP has made considerable progress in the Parliamentary Elections of 1998 and 1999 in southern States. Does this mean an expansion of its ideological base in southern heartland or is it due to opportunistic electoral alliances? For Vajpayee it is a struggle between head and heart. While his heart goes for the Hindutva, he is aware that in the long-term interest of the party, he has to be realistic.*

A significant achievement of the Bhartiya Janata Party in the 13th Lok-Sabha election, is its nation wide acceptance in general and the southern States in particular. Though, the 11th Lok-Sabha election result in 1996 was a landmark event in the electoral history of the BJP, when it emerged as a single largest party in the Lok-Sabha, the acceptability of the party with the exception of Karnataka remained confined more or less to the Hindi belt.

After the fall of two successive governments of United Front with outside support of the Congress, when the country had to face a fresh poll for the 12th Lok-Sabha, it became a political necessity for the BJP to have an electoral alliance with regional parties in States beyond the Hindi-belt. It became clear to the BJP leaders that until and unless the BJP managed some significant accretions from the peripheral States, the chances of its coming to power at centre were remote. The party made a serious attempt to go for pre-electoral alliance with as many parties as possible irrespective of the image of the parties or their leaders. In its search for allies, the BJP not only compromised with its self attained image of being a " party with difference " with no inhibition in shaking hands with leaders facing corruption charges like Sukh Ram and Ms. Jayalalitha , but also had to put its core agenda of Ayodhya, Article 370 and Uniform Civil Code to the back burner.

For the 13th Lok-Sabha election in 1999, the BJP was left with no option but to manage pre-poll alliance with the DMK in Tamil-Nadu and TDP in Andhra Pradesh. This strategy paid dividends as the tally in these two states could substantially compensate its loss in Uttar Pradesh and the BJP was able to form a coalition government at the centre. Unlike its main political rival Congress, the BJP has a sizeable number of committed cadres in the southern States but they have hardly achieved any noticeable success in " Hinduising " the electorate. The leaders of the DMK and its Dravidian allies in Tamil-Nadu, and Telugu Desam in Andhra Pradesh accepted the BJP only when the latter maintained its identity as a junior partner. While the DMK was mainly interested to keep its main opponent AIDMK away from power, the main challenger for Telugu Desam was the Congress. This game of alliance between the BJP and its southern allies will continue so long as they do not pose a challenge to each other.

The anti-BJP media in its bid to contain the growth of the BJP has already started cautioning the regional parties in south against the alleged danger signal from a "party of north". Its efforts in widening the gap of mistrust between the forces of regionalism and nationalism could be viewed as a potential danger for revival of anti-north feeling in the minds of the people. The opponents of the BJP particularly the AIADMK and the TMC who have faced humiliation during this Lok-Sabha poll are already showing signs of coming together for "secular unity" against the BJP and DMK combine. It will be a testing time for the BJP to overcome the challenge and retain the goodwill for the party in the State.

### **Tamil Nadu:**

The Dravida Munnetra Kazhgam (DMK), while making its debut, defined its politics as " a war for supremacy between north and south as well as Tamil versus Hindi ". "Tamil cultural nationalism" was so deeply entrenched in the minds of the local people that this slogan became a part of the political culture of the State. Anti-Hindi-ism dominated the political scene in the State to such an extent that it was symbolically linked to opposition to the northerners. With anti-Hindi as main political issue during the period between 1957 to 1967, the DMK emerged as a main political force in Tamil-Nadu. Thus, against this deep rooted " Tamil cultural nationalism", there was hardly any attraction for the " Hindu Nationalism" or "Cultural Nationalism" of the BJP in this State.

The electoral achievement of the BJP in Dravidian heartland poses some natural questions whether this "north Indian party" has succeeded in making its ideological dent in the region. It looks that this outcome could be attributed more to the electoral strategy than to the ideological expansion of the party.

Till the 1996 Lok-Sabha elections, the Congress, as the only national party having some pockets of influence in the State, partly due to its identification with freedom movement and partly in the name of Nehru-Gandhi family, remained the sole bargaining player among the regional Dravidian parties-the DMK and AIADMK. In 1998 Parliamentary-poll however, the BJP succeeded in managing its electoral alliance with AIADMK and made its first entry in the Lok-Sabha. In 1999 midterm Lok-Sabha Poll, the BJP managed an electoral alliance with AIADMK's rival, the DMK and succeeded in increasing its strength in the Lok-Sabha to four. In other words, it could be said that the BJP succeeded only because it posed no ideological challenge to the Dravidian parties and made no inroads to the caste ridden Dravidian politics..

Caste associations and political domination of their leaders are so deeply rooted in the minds of the electorate that they do not appear to have any interest in the Hindutva agenda of the BJP. In fact, the leaders of various caste groups in the State who had unitedly joined the anti-Brahmin movement in the name of Dravidian nationalism are now claiming to be the champions to the cause of their respective castes. With a view to share power, they started asserting through electoral alliance with either of the two major Dravidian parties and not only won Lok-Sabha seats but also succeeded in securing ministerial berths in the Union cabinet. PMK and MDMK led by Ramdoss and Vaiko who were initially known for their strong sectarian bias and anti-north politics are having no problem in joining hands with pan-Indian and nationalistic forces under the leadership of BJP Vajpayee. Similarly, the Thevars known to be a militant caste in Tamil-Nadu who had supported AIADMK combine in 1998 election changed over to DMK and BJP in 1999.

The acceptability of Vajpayee as a national leader by a sizeable section of educated middle class in the Dravidian heartland is also an encouraging feature. The entry of the BJP, a national party in addition to Congress in a State which has for long been the domain of regional forces appears to be a positive trend for strengthening the unity and integrity of the country notwithstanding the inability of Sangh Parivar to pursue its agenda of Hindu nationalism.

### **Kerala:**

Kerala with twenty Lok-Sabha seats has so far not allowed the BJP to open its legislative account even though the units of the Sangh Parivar started functioning in the region since 1942 when three RSS pracharaks including the present Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh chief, Dattopant Thengdi started their career in Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi, and Kozhikode. The fact that more than two fifths of the population are non Hindus cannot be the only reason for its non acceptance. While the Muslim League continues to maintain its supremacy among the Muslims, the Christians dominated the management of the affairs of the Congress. The Communists maintaining their influence among the lower caste Hindus as well as the radical minded upper castes relegated the BJP to the political periphery of the state. The BJP could not develop its ideological link with either of the two of the largest and influential caste Hindus, Nairs and Ezhavas.

Even though the Sangh Parivar floated over two dozen social, cultural and educational organisations from mid sixties, it is yet to make a dent in the electoral politics. But the RSS cannot be written off in Kerala. With a view to integrate the Hindus of the State into a united political and social bloc, the Sangh leaders organised "Virat Hindu Sammelan" in 1982. It was a congregation of a number of social, religious and caste associations and an attempt was made to ensure that it does not reflect any Brahmanical supremacy. But this Sammelan could not unite the Hindus under a single political umbrella. The Nairs and Ezhavas the two major castes retained their political outfits and were not attracted towards the BJP. Both these castes were strongly opposed to each other on the issue of reservation as one was favouring economic criteria as the basis; the other was rigid for reservation on caste basis.

In an attempt to shed its anti minority image, the BJP fielded O.M.Mathai, a Christian as party candidate for Lok-Sabha election in 1984 and 1996 and appointing another Christian, Dr. Xavier Paul as party's Vice-President in Kerala as well as Managing Editor of its Malayalam fortnightly but in the absence of some dynamic local leaders it has so far not achieved its political goal. While RSS Pracharaks with large number of Shakhas in the state are widely accepted as noble souls, they do not appear to be capable of translating their popularity into votes for the BJP.

## **Andhra Pradesh:**

Improved parliamentary poll performance of the BJP in Andhra Pradesh from four seats in 1998 to seven in 1999 could be partly attributed to its tactical poll alliance with Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the ruling regional party in the state and partly to the consolidation of anti-Congress votes in its favour.

The electoral history of Andhra Pradesh reveals that the Congress party maintained its political hegemony in the state till the emergence of TDP that came to power in 1983. Alienation of voters from Congress was a reaction against frequent imposition of unpopular party leaders as Chief Ministers by Indira Gandhi. The BJP could not make its presence felt beyond the two parliamentary constituencies Secunderabad and Hyderabad. Due to large presence of Urdu speaking Muslims and non-Telugu Hindus, the voters were by and large polarised on communal lines and thus the BJP could for the first time open its Lok-Sabha account in the State in 1984 by winning Secunderabad seat with the support of TDP. It has been thwarted from winning in Hyderabad due to direct or indirect understanding between Congress and Majlish-e-Ittihad-ul-Musalmin, a local level party of Muslims.

The Reddys and Khammas, the two dominant agriculturist castes continue to maintain their political domination in the State. Unlike their counter parts in Tamil-Nadu and Kerala, they have been relatively more liberal towards national mainstream parties and have not floated any caste based party, but there is a general impression that by and large both Reddys and Khammas continue to maintain their hegemony in Congress and TDP respectively. Despite the factional fight within the Congress and family feud in TDP, the BJP could not become a serious challenger to any Lok-Sabha seat in the State. It was only when a sizeable section of educated middle class turned towards the BJP, that it could improve its tally in Lok-Sabha from one till 1996 to four in 1998. In spite of being a junior partner, BJP's support did result in improved performance of TDP from 12 in 1998 to 29 in 1999 Lok-Sabha election. The BJP has the potential to improve its performance and be a force to reckon with.

## **Karnataka:**

Karnataka is considered to be a strong base of BJP among southern States of the country. Against this popular impression, on analysis it is found that its success was more due to political factors.

The BJP opened its Lok-Sabha account from Karnataka in 1991 when it won four seats and was placed in second position in 12 seats. It also secured first position in 59 assembly segments in this election. It is a fact that unlike their counter parts in other southern States, the people of the State by and large remained committed towards national mainstream politics. But the party or its previous incarnation the BJS despite contesting the Lok-Sabha election since the first general election in 1952, could neither field more than 7 candidates nor could secure more than 4.7 percent of votes in the State till 1984. In 1989 Lok-Sabha election in the anti-Congress wave due to Bofors issue, it had fielded only five candidates and could secure only 2.6 percent of votes

Karnataka remained the political domain of the Congress and Janata Dal till 1989. But decline in JD's influence partly due to its internal problems and partly due to alienation of two dominating communities Lingayats and Vokkaligas in the State following the implementation of Mandal Commission report by its own party at centre and poor performance of the Congress party's government in the State as well as severe factional conflict within it added with a general belief among these two communities that both the Congress and the JD had abandoned them in favour of backward castes - appeared to be the principal reasons behind the progress of the BJP as an alternative to them.

In 1990 Virendra Patil, a Lingayat Chief Minister was deposed by the Congress high command and a backward caste leader Bangarappa, who succeeded him did not give due representation to these two communities in his cabinet. In 1991 Lok-Sabha poll, these two communities with their dominant social status and money power and with two thirds of State population, started deserting both the Congress and the JD, and turned towards the BJP. Exploiting the situation, the BJP gave party tickets to many of them including those who were ex-Congress and ex-JD members.

In 1994 Assembly election when JD leaders belonging to various factions led by Deve Gowda, a Vokkaliga, S.R.Bomma, a Lingayat and R.K.Hegde, a Brahmin fought unitedly, it came to power in the State but the BJP also secured forty assembly seats in the bargain and pushed the Congress to third position. In 1998 Lok-Sabha poll the BJP increased its strength to 13 from Karnataka which created an impression that gradual electoral gains of the party was an indication that the people of the State are attracted towards the Hindu agenda of the party. The outcome of 1999 parliamentary poll was depressing for the party as it could win only seven seats. Neither the Ram temple issue nor the memory of communal riots in the State had anything to do with the electoral politics. Except a few urban based small pockets at grass root level, the party does not appear to have a durable structure in rural Karnataka.

**The RSS factor:**

There is no dispute that the BJP due to the leadership of Vajpayee has succeeded in influencing a sizeable section of educated middle class in non-Hindi speaking States including south, but the claim of RSS Sar Karyavah, H.V.Sheshadri in annual Vijaya Dasami rally at Nagpur on October 19 that the outcome of 1999 Lok-Sabha poll " is an endorsement of the spirit of Hindu nationalism " does not appear to be convincing when the BJP suffered a 2.4 percent decrease in its national votes in comparison to 1998.

The decline in number of Lok-Sabha seats in U.P. and also the reduced victory margin of Vajpayee in Lucknow have sent a loud and clear message to the BJP that the ideological basis of the party is no more intact. This has become a cause for concern to the "Sangh Parivar". The RSS leadership therefore, in all probability might try to tighten its control over the functioning of its political front for devising some means to ensure that the ideological agenda of the party is not progressively diluted. The tactical ambivalence of the BJP towards its core agenda may not be allowed to remain in cold storage for long. Though, Vajpayee was allowed by its parent body to emerge as a leader with a "moderate image", he as a prisoner of his own allies does not appear to be in a commanding position to tackle the junior partners in the coalition government. Learning hard lessons from his experience of two unsuccessful confidence votes sought by him in the floor of the Lok-Sabha in 1996 and 1999, Vajpayee's preference is more for pragmatic politics than pursuing the ideological agenda of the party. But the RSS leadership may not be concerned about the stability of the BJP led government at the centre, as being in government is not an end in itself for them. Its main concern is the expansion of party's agenda all over the country.

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