

# How the BJP Wins



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Inside India's Greatest  
Election Machine

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 juggernaut

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*To  
Rubi  
for being my anchor,  
for the long walks in North Campus,  
and  
for the life ever since*



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# Introduction

## 2014: The Turning Point

If central Delhi is the power centre of the Indian state, then the Windsor Place roundabout is its nerve centre.

Take Raisina Road, the avenue on the west, and you will soon be in front of the Parliament of India. Janpath which runs through the circle leads on one end to the iconic Rajpath, India Gate and Rashtrapati Bhawan; on the other end it heads towards the old city-centre, Connaught Place. Ferozeshah Road will take you past the residences of many politicians, ending at the Mandi House circle, a hub of Indian theatre and arts. A short walk away is Shastri Bhawan, home to key ministries.

On the evening of 12 March 2017, Narendra Modi strolled up from the circle on to Ashoka Road, towards the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) headquarters, greeting supporters on both sides of the road. In the previous

month, five states had held their elections. Four of the five were now in BJP's kitty. The previous day, the party had won a spectacular victory in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, winning over three-fourths of the seats. The BJP had also swept Uttarakhand and would form the government in Goa and Manipur. Only in Punjab, after two terms in office, had the BJP and its ally, Akali Dal, lost power.

The 'Modi-Modi' chant extended from the streets to the party office, where the prime minister was to address the leaders, cadre and the nation, in his moment of victory.

He began by greeting everyone on the occasion of Holi. Elections, he said, were not just an instrument for forming governments but helped deepen the faith of people in Indian democracy. And then he delivered his big takeaway from the election.

'I see the results of the five states – particularly that of Uttar Pradesh, which has the capacity to give India a new direction, strength and inspiration because of its size – as laying the seeds of a New India.' This was, Modi declared, the 'golden period' for the BJP. He acknowledged the role of four generations of leaders, thousands of cadres and party president Amit Shah and his team, whose work had placed the BJP in the position it was in today.

This is indeed the BJP's golden period. Less than ten years ago, the party was being written off. Many declared it had little prospect of returning to power in Delhi. Even five years ago, it seemed inconceivable that the BJP would not only win an outright majority in the

national elections, but also have thirteen chief ministers across Indian states.

Today there is talk about whether it can be displaced at all in the foreseeable future. It has achieved this dominance through the tested ritual of Indian democracy – elections – and this may just be the beginning. Under Amit Shah, the BJP aims not just to expand its footprint across the country but to win every level of elections – from Parliament to the panchayat.

This book tells the story of how the BJP wins these elections, why it has lost when it has and what lies in the future.



The 2014 Lok Sabha elections redefined Indian politics. Since 1984, no party had won an absolute majority in the national elections. India, it was now widely assumed, would continue to have a fragmented polity, two weak national poles around which regional parties coalesced, and coalition governments.

One election changed it all.

The BJP won 282 seats, contesting 428 of the total of 543 seats, leaving the rest for its National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners. This meant that not only had the party achieved a decisive majority on its own, it had won two out of three seats where it was directly in the fray.<sup>1</sup> This was a remarkable strike rate.

Nationally, its vote share was 31.1 per cent, but its

vote share was close to 40 per cent in the seats where it had put up candidates. This was the first time since 1991 that a party had won more than 30 per cent of the vote share. The average margin of victory in constituencies that the BJP won was 17.9 per cent – spelling a huge gap between the winner and the runner-up. So not only did the BJP win the majority of the seats, it won them with a resounding mandate.

Geographically, the BJP won 44 per cent of the vote, and 190 out of the 225 seats, in the Hindi-speaking states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi. With its NDA allies, it won 201 of these seats. In the non-Hindi-speaking states, the BJP won 22 per cent of the vote share, and 92 of the 318 seats, but along with its NDA partners, it was able to garner 42 per cent of the seats. It also went beyond its original areas of influence in urban India to win support from semi-urban and rural India.

This staggering scale of victory was possible because one man, Narendra Modi, stitched together a rainbow coalition.



Narendra Modi was the Hindu leader. He was the development man responsible for the ‘Gujarat model’. He was the strong administrator who had thirteen years of experience running a state, compared to Rahul Gandhi,

who had no personal governance experience and the baggage of the scam-ridden, paralysed United Progressive Alliance - 2 (UPA-2). Modi was the leader who would fulfil the nationalist dream of 'teaching Pakistan a lesson'.

To the upper castes, Modi represented a party which was most in tune with their aspirations and would bring in stability, order and progress; to the deprived castes, Modi was one of their own who would deliver justice and jobs. To the upper middle classes and middle classes, his strongest base, Modi was the man who would make them richer, like he had made Gujarat richer, through liberal economic policies; to the disadvantaged, he was the chai-wala who had made it big, yet was being hounded by the elite. To all of them, he represented hope.

While there was 'unparalleled consolidation of the upper castes and middle classes behind the BJP', for the first time ever, nationally, the BJP got more Dalit and Scheduled Tribe votes than the Congress.<sup>2</sup> In fact, more Dalits and tribals voted for the BJP than for any other party, and out of the total votes received by the party, 40 per cent came from other backward classes (OBCs). This is an important milestone in Indian politics.

All this offers some explicit pointers, and some intriguing hints, about the formula behind the BJP victory in 2014 – and its success, and failure, since then. When it gets this right, it wins. When it does not, it fails.

Modi's multiple avatars worked in 2014. But they did not work in 2015, as the BJP lost two major state assembly elections – Delhi and Bihar. Rahul Gandhi, in his sharpest

political intervention in the past three years, called the Modi sarkar a 'suit-boot ki sarkar'. Suddenly, within a year, Narendra Modi had gone from being a leader of all Indians to a man who was perceived as batting for the rich, and spending all his time outside India.

But clever and astute politician that Modi is, he recognized the dangers of falling into this image trap, and reinvented himself. Through a set of policy moves and pronouncements, and focusing back on the welfare state, he now positioned himself as a 'garibon ka neta', a leader of the poor.

This book tells the story of how this image transformation took place; how Modi is becoming the first choice of a section of India's poor and lower-middle class, even as his original constituents of upper-middle classes continue to stay with him; and how, in the process, the BJP's class base is slowly expanding. This shift enabled the BJP's tremendous success in more recent elections, including Uttar Pradesh.



Twenty-six per cent of the BJP's total seats in the 2014 Lok Sabha came from Uttar Pradesh, giving the party an outright majority on its own, the first time any party had won that in thirty years.

The man behind the UP victory was Modi's closest aide, Amit Shah. Shah brought to UP his Gujarat

experience of managing and fighting elections for over two decades, spent time understanding the state and its complex caste matrix, took over absolute control of the UP unit while managing the existing leaders, weaved together alliances and, most crucially, laid the blueprint for a new organizational apparatus.

The 2014 success led to Shah's elevation as the BJP's national president. In this capacity, Shah now had an opportunity to create a robust organizational network across the country. He wasted no time.

Shah expanded the party machinery, brought in new members, focused on consistent mass contact, and made the lowest level of organizational structure – the party unit at the booth level, where voting takes place – its heart and soul. In the process, he has instituted what can be called the Amit Shah school of election management.

This book tells the story of how Shah has transformed the BJP; the invisible organization men who have driven these efforts on the ground; and how the machine operates on the ground during campaigning and elections – and it looks at how the BJP is advancing in new areas using similar methods. Long after Amit Shah has gone, his abiding contribution to the BJP will be in making it a national party, creating the most formidable election apparatus in the country in recent times and redefining how polls are fought.



As Modi has reinvented his image, so has the BJP.

Today, anyone who sees the party only as an upper-caste party is living in the past. The BJP is becoming an inclusive Hindu party, winning the support of various communities, including the subaltern, which inhabit the broad Hindu fold.

In 2014, the party was able to capitalize on the support of these marginalized segments – backward classes and Dalits – primarily because of the appeal of Narendra Modi and the promise of representation. The challenge for the party post 2014 has been to sustain this by transforming its own character, through its policies, statements and organizational structure, to reflect the diversity of Hindu society.

When it has failed to do so, it has lost elections. In Bihar's state elections of 2015, the party came across as hostile to backwards and Dalits when the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, or the Sangh) chief Mohan Bhagwat suggested that reservations should be reviewed; marginalized communities did not see in the BJP their own faces and leaders. In UP in 2017, by contrast, the BJP's spectacular success stemmed mostly from its ability to become a party of backwards and Dalits.

This book tells the story of the party's ongoing transformation into a more inclusive Hindu party, open to all castes. Neither has it been easy nor is it a linear process, for entrenched upper-caste interests within the party are not entirely comfortable with this shift. The BJP's big test will be its ability to reconcile the contradictions that exist



between its old and new supporters.



The Sangh's support for the BJP has been a feature of most electoral contests. But rarely before had the RSS deployed its entire infrastructure, resources, personnel and sangathan, organization, in the aid of the BJP on the scale that it did in 2014.

Collaborating in the pursuit of power is one thing; having a degree of convergence after power has been acquired is another. In the previous NDA government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee, there were visible differences between the Sangh leadership and the prime minister. This had an impact on the ground, for the Sangh often went inert – or did not invest as much energy as the BJP would have hoped – during elections. This was also a possibility when Narendra Modi came to power, for he had a majority of his own, and there was a personality cult around him, something which is said to make the Sangh uncomfortable.

Yet, the Sangh and the BJP – despite differences on personalities, issues and election management – have broadly remained on the same page. The BJP may need the Sangh more before it wins elections, and the Sangh may need the BJP more after it comes to power, but they have worked well together.

This book tells the story of how Narendra Modi and Mohan Bhagwat have ensured a smooth relationship

between the sarkar and the Sangh; how, like the BJP, the Sangh has begun to recognize the need for a more inclusive approach towards Hindu castes, but remains cautious and conservative in its instincts; and how the Sangh machinery – its cadres but more crucially its wider ecosystem of supporters – supplemented the efforts of the BJP on the ground during elections and campaigning in UP, glued together by a common goal: Hindu unity.



In 2014, Modi appealed to Hindu sentiments but was careful not to be explicitly anti-Muslim himself. He adopted a subtle approach, from distinguishing between Hindu migrants and migrants of other religions to decrying what he called the ‘pink revolution’, alleging an increase in cow slaughter and meat export.

But, as anyone covering the rallies during that Lok Sabha election would testify, many speeches of second-rung BJP leaders in the run-up to Modi’s speeches were laced with BJP’s old messages of ultra-nationalism, association of the nation with one religion and attacks on ‘appeasement’ of Muslims. Since the nation watched only Modi’s speeches on television, the build-up was often missed.

The party also exploited the Muzaffarnagar riots in western UP, with Amit Shah explicitly saying this election was about ‘revenge’. The entire BJP machinery in this belt relied on Hindu, particularly Jat, consolidation, with the

message that this was about ‘teaching Muslims a lesson’. It worked. The BJP, according to data of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, won over 77 per cent of the Jat vote.

Since 2014, the BJP has played, in varying degrees, the Hindu card. The Hindu card did not work for it in Bihar – showing that the politics of polarization is only one element in a larger matrix and cannot work in all contexts. But it did succeed in UP, where the BJP – going up to Prime Minister Narendra Modi – sharpened the rhetoric of how the regime had ‘appeased’ Muslims.

This book tells the story of how, in Uttar Pradesh in particular, the BJP slowly from the bottom to the top constructed a narrative of the majority as victims while portraying minorities as pampered; and how it tapped into underlying prejudice, deepened it and stoked hostility and hatred through a web of falsehoods and deception. In this the BJP was helped by opposition parties and their policies and rhetoric around Muslims. Indeed, UP 2017 may, arguably, mark the death of the term that has for so long defined Indian politics – ‘secularism’.



Since 2014, Narendra Modi and Amit Shah have been clear that while they had to retain their strength and consolidate in their areas of success, they had to expand in the rest of the country. Just as the BJP is no longer an upper-caste party, it is also no longer a North Indian party.

Beyond its heartland, it has spread in the most unlikely of spaces, from Jammu and Kashmir to Manipur. These efforts have been shepherded by yet another leader who can trace his roots to the Sangh, Ram Madhav. As the Delhi-based spokesperson of the Sangh, Madhav played a key role as an interface between the RSS and the BJP, before making a transition to the party after the victory of 2014.

The expansion of the party has rested on three key strategies – co-option of existing political elites including former rivals of the Congress; dilution of its ideological core and an attempt to reposition itself as a party that respects diversity and does not seek uniformity; and adaptation to specific realities of different regions. This book tells the story of how Madhav has helped the party become truly national, and how the distinct strategies have led to the installation of saffron governments in Srinagar, Guwahati and Imphal.



A running thread through this book is the multiple failures of the opposition. No leader has been able to counter Modi and Rahul Gandhi's feeble efforts have gained little mass traction. No party has been able to build an organization to match that of Amit Shah. No other party has expanded its social coalition beyond one or two primary castes. No party has gone beyond the old 'secular–communal' binary which, in reality, ends up meaning excessive reliance on the 'Muslim vote' and thus

only helps the BJP. Most of them have fought the BJP separately, and when the index of opposition unity is low, the BJP is hard to beat.

When the opposition has got its act together, the story is different. In Delhi, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) had a leader with wide appeal, a narrative, an organization, a social coalition. It was also aided by the collapse of the Congress, whose votes shifted to AAP. The BJP, to be fair, retained its vote share but was left fumbling. An even better example is Bihar, where the opposition alliance firstly spoke to a wider social base and secondly was careful not to create any grounds for communal polarization.

When these two factors are combined with a credible incumbent like Nitish Kumar, the formidable machinery of the BJP can crumble. It is another matter that in July 2017 there was a realignment in Bihar politics. Nitish Kumar dropped Lalu Prasad and allied with his old partner BJP – and the party was back in power despite losing the election. It revealed Narendra Modi and Amit Shah’s hunger, but this book largely confines itself to the story of the 2015 electoral loss and the lessons the BJP drew from it.



To understand the macro success of the BJP, this book focuses on the party’s micro transformation in Uttar Pradesh. There is a compelling reason to focus on the political churn in India’s largest state.

Uttar Pradesh defines Indian politics. Clichéd as it is,

there is more than a grain of truth in the view that the road to Delhi lies through Lucknow because of the sheer weight it has in Parliament.

The state has also been central to the rise of the BJP as a national outfit. Whenever the party has succeeded in UP, it has flourished nationally. Whenever it has faltered in the state, it has lost power miserably.

The party's political and ideological projects intersect here. Both its prime ministers – Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Narendra Modi – have been elected from the state. Its parent organization, the RSS, has, since the 1930s, focused on UP, picking a large pool of recruits from institutions like Allahabad University and Banaras Hindu University (BHU). The state is also home to Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura, associated with the three temple movements the BJP made its own in the 1980s and 1990s.

The Ram Janmabhoomi agitation, in particular, helped the BJP rise from a paltry 2 seats in the Lok Sabha in 1984 to 120 seats in 1991. Fifty-one of these seats were from UP.

In 1996, when Vajpayee came to power at the centre for the first time, the BJP won 52 seats in the state. It improved on this performance and won 58 seats in the 1998 general elections.

In the 1999 national elections, the BJP won 29 seats from the state, a rather sharp dip. But do note it remained the largest party from UP. Once again, it formed the government. In 2004 and 2009, the BJP won only 10 seats in UP, and it was consigned to the opposition benches in the Lok Sabha.

But it was in 2014 that the centrality of UP was firmly re-established in Indian politics. The BJP's sweep of the state redefined the rules of the game and allowed Narendra Modi to become India's all-powerful prime minister.

And in 2017, with its spectacular victory in the assembly elections, the BJP ensured that for the first time in almost three decades, the same party – enjoying an absolute majority on its own at both levels – would rule both Delhi and India's largest state. The win has put the party in pole position to win the 2019 national elections; it has also introduced a new element of aggression in the party's political and cultural project.

All the major themes the book tackles – Modi's appeal, Shah's organization, BJP's social engineering, the use of communal polarization and hatred to build political strength, the fragmentation and weaknesses of the opposition – have played out in UP.

There is also a personal reason for focusing on UP. I extensively covered elections in the state in both 2014 and 2017. In the run-up to the assembly polls, for over a year, I returned to the state almost every month to track its changing political contours. And as voting kicked off, I drove across UP – from Saharanpur to the west to Mirzapur to the east, from the Tarai's Shravasti to the north, bordering Nepal, to Bundelkhand's Chitrakoot, clocking 5000 kilometres – for a month.

But this book also focuses on the party's defeat in Bihar, another battleground state I have reported out of for the past five years. It looks at how the party's expansion

strategies worked in other pockets of north and west India. It also examines how through a mix of innovative strategies the BJP today is becoming the dominant party in the most unlikely of regions, the North-East.



This book illustrates how the BJP wins elections. It does not deal with what the BJP does after winning elections, and so stays away from the more controversial actions and events that have taken place under BJP rule in recent times.

It also makes no forecast for the future. Political processes in complex societies with regular elections and multiparty competition are unpredictable. That the BJP is dominant today does not mean that it is invincible. Indeed, even in the past three years, there have been defeats, and enough vulnerabilities of the BJP have come to the fore.

The BJP's rise, through that quintessentially democratic practice of elections, is one of the most fascinating stories of contemporary India. It has altered politics, created new social coalitions, dissolved older fault lines, generated new conflicts, empowered some, alienated others and is having a profound impact on state institutions. When a charismatic national leader, a powerful strategist, astute social alliances, a formidable ideological and organizational infrastructure, religion and a ruthlessly ambitious, pragmatic and flexible culture merge, politics, and democracy, can change, perhaps irrevocably and in unanticipated ways.