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## Election Campaigning in a Transformed India

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*The Lok Sabha elections of 2019 are being held in a country that is very different from what it was in 2009 and 2014. What are political parties offering the new electorate? What will the outcome reveal of the transformation that has taken place?*

### A Changed Context

The general elections of 2019 are being held in an India which has been transformed in multifarious ways. To state the obvious, India has undergone a big change over the past three decades.

Stating this fact and noting its specificities is important to understand the nature of electoral campaigning today. This is an India where more than half of the population is below 25 years and two-thirds is less than 35 (Sharma 2017); the middle class is growing, though the estimates of the size of the middle class vary, ranging from 5% - 6% to 25% - 30% of India's population (Jodhka and Prakash 2016: 7); Census data (2011) shows that more than 30% of India's population lives in urban areas, the number could be much higher if one were to look at satellite data and relax the official definition of an urban settlement (Sreevatsan 2017); the number of smart-phone users is expected to double from 404.1 million in 2017 to 829 million in 2022 (IANS 2018); agriculture's share in GDP has declined to as little as 15% (Statistics Times 2019); and the number of people drawing sustenance from agriculture and allied activities has come down to about 56% (Census data 2011), this would be even lower if one only looks at those with agriculture as their primary occupation in 2018-19.

Literacy and skill levels have grown and yet the organised and secure sector of employment has shrunk and it is the unorganised sector which has absorbed about 82% of the workforce in 2011-12 (PIB 2016).

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There is an upswing in the number of people coming out to vote, a rise in the number of political parties contesting elections and an increase in the number of electoral disputes every election, all of which point to a rising trend of politicisation.

Today, we see an India which is more politically conscious, young, urban, middle class, on the move, more skilled, more connected and exposed to technology as compared to even the last two elections in 2009 and 2014. This also brings into the picture the stark reality that the existing infrastructure of education, housing, health, transport and opportunities of employment are not adequate to cater to this changed demography.

A discussion on electoral campaigning for the 2019 elections thus has to place the campaign in a context of a transforming India. What are political parties offering this transformed electorate? What have they been focusing on and how do they address the voters' aspirations? What is the design and language of campaigns in these elections? How far are they aligned with the issues voters identify with? Asking these questions while discussing electoral campaigning is important. In Rai's words (2009: 80), "there is always a possibility of a disjunction between the issues projected by parties as important and the issues that voters feel are crucial."

The article addresses some of these concerns. It first looks at some of the campaign issues in the 2004, 2009 and 2014 elections, and then turns to the current parliamentary election to gauge what has changed and what has not in electoral campaigning today.

### Election Campaigns in 2004 and 2009

The 2004 parliamentary election campaign is best remembered for the then National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government's "India Shining" slogan. The middle-class centric electoral campaign of the time focused on urban India from where the BJP drew its major support. The campaign tried to project "development" and "growth" as the defining features of a new and upcoming India. It enthralled the middle class and business circles; it was particularly celebrated by the professional and city dwelling demographic. The NDA

manifesto included a commitment to Hindutva through a pledge to construct the Ram temple at Ayodhya. The BJP felt confident of a massive win as did the pollsters. The popularity of the then prime minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, added to this buoyancy. However, large sections of the rural population and those struggling with livelihood issues everywhere saw little meaning in the “shining” slogan. Agrarian distress and growing inequalities had adversely affected them, “development” had passed them by, and the sparkling brand of India as surging ahead did not evoke much enthusiasm among them. This became evident in their voting choices. Belying all expectations, the NDA government was voted out of power in 2004 and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government took office.

The 2009 election was intensely contested. Top leaders of all parties campaigned across states. The Congress-led UPA focused on its developmental initiatives in its five years of rule, such as in the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, Right to Information, etc. It tried to reach out to rural India through its low key campaign titled Bharat Nirman that promised further welfare measures to improve life in village India. Taking on the BJP, the UPA emphasised secular and liberal nationalism as against “narrow communalism”. This campaign was subdued, and it raised issues in a quiet and cautious way. Though there was no “wave” in favour of the incumbent government, there was also no overwhelming opposition to it.

The NDA campaign, on the other hand, was focused more on the leadership of the Congress and on issues like terrorism and national security directed at the Congress and a targeting of neighbouring Pakistan. Its leading constituent, the BJP, dubbed Manmohan Singh as the weakest prime minister ever. The government was branded as weak and indecisive. The poll campaign was tarnished by hate speeches as well, like those of BJP’s Varun Gandhi (in Uttar Pradesh) and Anant Kumar Hegde (in Karnataka), who gave inflammatory speeches against Muslims while campaigning. The National Election Study, 2009 revealed that for the voters, inflation was the foremost issue followed by terrorist attacks, but this did not adversely affect the fortunes of the ruling UPA (Rai 2009: 80-2), which got a higher mandate compared to 2004. The popular schemes of the UPA government were appreciated by the people who voted it back to power (Rai 2009: 82).

#### ‘Modi-centric’ Campaign in 2014

The 2014 election was preceded by the “India Against Corruption” campaign led by social activist Anna Hazare. Though the campaign started in 2011 with its nerve centre in Delhi, its effect lasted till 2014 and it greatly benefited the BJP. The campaign found a big resonance among middle class urban India. It began with the agenda of establishing an independent institution to deal with political corruption (the Jan Lokpal) involving highly placed elected representatives and subsequently focused on removing the “corrupt” UPA-II from power in the 2014 parliamentary election. Though the campaign developed fissures within, it did do the work of building negative publicity against the ruling Congress party over issues like corruption in allocation of coal blocs and 2G spectrum, and in the 2010 Commonwealth Games. “Employment,” “price rise” and “development” also came to the fore along with “corruption” as issues for voters. The BJP supported the Hazare campaign against the Congress and worked to strengthen its own image as “a party with a difference”. While doing this it concentrated all its energies on projecting Narendra Modi as its undisputed leader. The then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh actually lost out to the BJP media blitzkrieg in the run up to the 2014 elections.

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As pointed out by some, this was a “Modi” election whose campaign was “American-style” and “personalised” (Andersen 2015:50), the party relied heavily on him (Jaffrelot 2016). The campaign was largely populist too. Narendra Modi promised to bring back black money and deposit Rs 15 lakh in the account of every citizen and also pledged to create one crore jobs per year. Along with this, “Brand Modi” was created and marketed systematically and effectively with the slogan “ab ki baar, Modi Sarkar.” In 2014, professional advertising hands skilfully transformed Modi from a regional, right-wing, riot-orchestrating politician to a strong, development-driven nationalist leader who could connect with youth (Pande 2014). Social media played an important role in the 2014 elections by popularising Modi’s image as a strong and development focussed leader in Gujarat who could replicate the “Gujarat model” in the rest of the country. It was instrumental in disseminating the political message far and wide, reaching out especially to younger voters. It began replacing the earlier campaign styles of public rallies, wall writing and door to door visits with “one-to-one” message campaigning. While the urban areas were flooded with social media messages, campaigns in the semi-urban areas and villages were monitored and handled by the RSS cadres (Narayan 2014: 12-13).

Techno-campaigning was one of the highlights of the BJP’s electioneering. Life-size 3D digital models of Modi, also called holograms, were used to campaign in areas he could not visit. Digital and lighting technology created sets/stages where he would address the

people and give speeches through holograms. The experience was reported to be so life-like that those who attended these functions were left awestruck and bewildered once the sets and the hologram disappeared. This was seen as adding to the Modi “wave” in 2014. The 2014 election was the costliest ever, rivalling the spending in the American presidential elections of 2012. The BJP spent over Rs 714 crore in the 2014 parliamentary and state assembly elections, the Congress spent Rs 516 crore, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) Rs 51 crore and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) Rs 30 crore according to the officially reported Election Commission figures (PTI, 2015). An independent estimate placed total expenditure, including the unofficial outlays outside ECI norms, at \$5 billion or Rs 30,000 crore in the exchange rates of that time (PTI 2019).

Election data for 2014 did reveal that there was strong support for the BJP and for Narendra Modi among the urban middle classes and the younger electorate among them (Sridharan 2014: 74). In this Modi wave, the UPA lost the general election to the NDA with the Congress decimated to holding just 44 seats in the Lok Sabha. For the first time ever, an absolute majority Hindu nationalist government led by the BJP came to power at the centre. The new Aam Aadmi Party (offshoot of the India Against Corruption movement, which promised to root out graft and practise “clean” politics) formed the government in Delhi in 2013 (with the support of the Congress), and with an overwhelming majority of its own in 2015.

## 2019 Election Campaign

The 2019 elections are being held in seven phases in a fiercely polarised atmosphere. The discourse of political campaigning has been acrimonious and has seen a new low with an unprecedented use of communal, abusive and hateful rhetoric by political parties. It is also an election where Hindutva unambiguously forms the political backdrop – more so in the north, west and east, and less so in the south.

Contrary to what is believed, the 2019 election campaign is an ideological one: Hindu ultra-right wing nationalism is pitted against secular, inclusive and tolerant values that defend free speech and minority rights.

The BJP—whose top leadership has set the tone for this divisive Hindu majoritarian campaign—is seeking votes mainly on issues of national security (this means “security” from Pakistan, as is obvious in the election speeches of the prime minister and BJP leaders), terrorism and the “strong” leadership of Prime Minister Modi. The Congress, which is in the opposition, is asking for votes in the name of constitutional democracy and inclusiveness. It is foregrounding economic issues: unemployment, agrarian distress, the impact of the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), corruption and the security of livelihood of the common people. Contrary to what is believed, the 2019 election campaign is an ideological one: Hindu ultra-right wing nationalism is pitted against secular, inclusive and tolerant values that defend free speech and minority rights.

This election campaign has to be seen in the light of the five-year term of a Hindu nationalist BJP government (2014-19). Major decisions of the government and some major events in these five years form the landscape for these elections. The government’s shoddily thought out and inefficiently implemented decisions like demonetisation in November 2016 and GST in July 2017 hit incomes and jobs hard in the informal economy. Economists highlighted that these decisions will have long-term adverse implications even for the formal sector. The ban on sale and purchase of cattle by the BJP government in May 2017 only increased agrarian distress, which has been compounded by instances of stray cattle entering and destroying crops in farms.

Social media sites have been used by vicious and abusive trolls to create a culture of intolerance and abuse

The Hindutva inspired aggressive programmes like *love jihad*, *ghar wapsi*, atrocities on Dalits and Muslims, killing of Hindutva critics and rationalists like M M Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh, sedition cases against students of Jawaharlal Nehru University, ministerial interference in the internal issues of the University of Hyderabad leading to the suicide of a Dalit student, and the overall attack on institutional functioning, freedom of thought, expression and lifestyles have defined the overall politics of the country in these five years. It is a time when unemployment is at a record high, economic growth is faltering, and there have been shocking caste/communal atrocities. One should mention the use of social media where vicious campaigns have been carried out to vilify the victims of these atrocities and killings. Social media sites have been used by vicious and abusive trolls to create a culture of intolerance and abuse, where such a culture is celebrated and violence against the weak and the “Other” is normalised.

The ruling party campaign has stood out, as mentioned earlier, for invoking jingoistic nationalism and whipping up passions against “terrorism coming from Pakistan”, and making divisive public remarks like, “Muslim refugees are like termites”, “Elections are a

contest between *Ali and Bajrangbal*”, “Congress is infected with green virus”, etc. In the BJP’s election campaigns over the years, “Pakistan” has been one of the chosen themes of mobilising support. Whether it is “Miyan Musharraf” (2002 Gujarat) or “Those who oppose Modi, will have to go to Pakistan” (2014 Jharkhand) or “Crackers will be burst in Pakistan if the *Mahagathbandhan* won” (2015 Bihar), Pakistan has been a recurrent theme to attract voters. Before the first round of the 2019 elections, Prime Minister Modi invoked the Pulwama soldier-victims and the subsequent Balakot air strike that aimed to target JeM camps in Pakistan to ask for votes from the youth. In an election rally in Ayodhya district he said that terrorism would be the biggest danger if a weak government came to power at the centre. Along with “Pakistan”, mainstreaming Hindutva is another way of maintaining a grip over the electorate especially at a time when the economy has faced reverses.

This campaign is also much more personality oriented than from the time of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Both the 2014 and 2019 campaigns have hinged on Narendra Modi and his “strong” leadership. The Twitter campaign projecting Modi as *chowkidar* (watchman) of the country with other BJP leaders and supporters following suit with the hashtag *mai bhi chowkidar*, depicts how the BJP is banking on his leadership to carry it through in these elections. This leader-centric campaign stands in strong contrast to a programmatic campaign that usually emphasises the policies of the incumbent government. The focus on the leader is overshadowing the BJP’s highlighting of its policy programme. The BJP has titled its manifesto, *Sankalp Patra* (Pledge Document). It details the economic and infrastructural promises that the BJP says it will fulfil if it continues in power. It expresses the BJP’s aspiration “to make India the third largest economy of the world by 2030”. The document visualises the year 2047 (the 100th anniversary of India’s independence) and sees the next five years as a period of laying the foundation of a new imagined vision to be achieved by 2047. The document projects a hardened Hindutva position with all the core Hindutva issues—Ram temple, Uniform Civil Code, Sabarimala, Citizenship Amendment Bill, Article 370, Article 35A, strengthening border security—finding a place there. The manifesto can be summed up as “A strong Hindutva will save the country and also lead to overall development”.

A programmatic campaign, on the other hand, is being carried out by the main opposition party, the Congress, which is raising issues of employment, economic hardships, agrarian distress, economic growth and high-end corruption. It is also projecting secular-inclusive values as its campaign agenda. Though it has taken part in the Twitter wars with its campaign directed at Prime Minister Modi with the hashtag, *chowkidar chor hai*, and has also been accused of adopting soft-Hindutva, it has raised people-centric issues through its street and media campaigns.

The Congress manifesto called, *Hum Nibhayenge* (“We’ll Fulfil”) includes economic promises, the highlight of which is the NYAY scheme (*Nyuntam Aay Yojana*). The manifesto also talks about allocating 6% of GDP for education, review of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) for Jammu and Kashmir, crackdown on hate crimes against Dalits, tribals, women and minorities and enacting laws on privacy (concerning Aadhaar). The manifesto addresses economic distress with an inclusive and healing touch.

Campaigning in states which have strong regional parties is converging on certain issues. One has seen several instances of spiteful public speeches by the regional parties and the BJP directed at each other. That the BJP is banking on the personality of Modi to campaign in different states is clear from its rallies. The regional parties facing BJP or its alliance partners in their states have been constantly targeted by Narendra Modi. He termed the National Congress (NC) and People’s Democratic Party (PDP) rule in Kashmir as “dynastic rule” and termed the BJP’s alliance with PDP there as “*mahamilawat*” (adulteration) or a big mistake. He called his former alliance partner Chandrababu Naidu a “U-turn babu”. In Odisha, in an obvious reference to the ruling Biju Janata Dal, he asked people whether they want a “*mazboot* government or a “*majboor* government”. In Uttar Pradesh the term “*mahamilawat*” was used by BJP party president Amit Shah for the grand alliance led by the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party. While campaigning in West Bengal, Prime Minister Modi announced that 40 Trinamool Congress MLAs were in touch with him and they would defect once the BJP won the elections.

In turn, the regional parties have directed their ire at Narendra Modi. He is been variously called as an “autocratic leader” (M K Stalin), a “dreaded terrorist” (Chandrababu Naidu), a “*tanashah*” (Tejashwi Yadav) and a “liar” (Mamata Banerjee). The BJP rule in the last five years has earned the following labels from these regional leaders, “fascist government” (M K Stalin), “*Ravan raj*” (Mamata Banerjee), “by far the most anti-people government in independent India” (Pinarayi Vijayan) etc, depicting not only the poll rhetoric, but also the popular mood about the central government in different states. For his “40 TMC MLAs” speech, Modi drew criticism from Akhilesh Yadav (former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh) who said that the prime minister should be “banned for 72 years rather than 72 hours” from campaigning (the UP chief minister Adityanath and Punjab minister Navjot Singh Sidhu were banned for 72 hours each by the Election Commission of India for election code violation). All these remarks have vitiated the political atmosphere and show the high level of political polarisation in the country.

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Here, one has to mention the functioning of the Election Commission of India (ECI) and the allegations against it. The ECI is a regulatory body which contains an inherent institutional bias within it -- a factor of the institutional design. Since its appointment rests on the incumbent government, it is not unusual for it to face accusations of partial conduct. In each election it has faced such accusations of bias from the opposition parties. Only that this time around, the allegations and complaints against the Election Commission have piled up as never before and its impartiality is being called into question. It is facing allegations on a number of issues: for deciding election dates that suit the ruling party, going soft on the poll violations at the hands of the prime minister and being unduly harsh on the leaders of the opposition. There have been complaints regarding scores of names going missing from the electoral rolls and malfunctioning of the electronic voting machines (EVMs); complaints which say that all this would help the ruling BJP. The ECI is facing a barrage of criticism and public anger that has never been seen before. What needs to be foregrounded here is that the ECI is a constitutional institution, and as such, it must itself ensure that it is viewed as a professional and impartial institution. It should take steps to see that any questioning of its integrity is kept to the minimum.

The election results will indicate the nature of this transforming India, whether it is national chauvinist in its core or if in the final analysis it will tilt towards an agenda of social inclusiveness and secure livelihood.

Looking at the election campaign in a socially transforming India a few things stand out. One, that the ruling party seems determined that the campaign narrative does not foreground economic and developmental issues posed by the Congress and other opposition parties. There is an effort on the part of the BJP to deflect attention from the economic decisions it had confidently taken and the promises it had made in the previous election campaign but has not been able to deliver on. There is definitely an embarrassment about these issues and it is clear that the BJP feels that these are best avoided to save it from discomfiture before a young, tech-savvy India. Two, failure on the economic front has made the BJP bank strongly on Hindutva, so much so that it is not shying away from fielding a terror accused who is out on bail as a candidate from Madhya Pradesh (in fact, it is vehemently defending its decision). Three, the “formidable Other” and its vilification has acquired a centrality in the campaign narrative as never before, courtesy the ruling party. Whether it is “Pakistan” or “Muslim” or “terror” - the Other has become a pivot around which the poll talk is being weaved. The electorate is being given a choice by the BJP: it has to decide if it is for the Other and the Anti-national or wants to join the BJP in condemning them and thus enter the ranks of the “Nationalists”.

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