

OPINION POLITICS

There Is Much to Be Learned from Modi's Electoral Strategy – Including How to Counter It

Opposition parties have to reach out to the grassroots continuously and come together to ensure their survival.



Illustration: Pariplab Chakraborty.

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Jawhar Sircar



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Now that we are slowly getting over the shock and disappointment over the recent results of elections to five state assemblies, it may be time to stop fooling ourselves.



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From the end of 2021, we tom-tommed that the Bharatiya Janata Party was surely on its way out and we waxed eloquent in our drawing rooms on how massive were the crowds that Akhilesh Yadav was drawing. But we were proved shamefully wrong in four or the five states, and one can never be sure about the fifth – Punjab – and about Arvind Kejriwal's direction.

We scurried back into holes that we had dug after we were knocked out in 2019 – when we had similarly believed that Modi would go – just because we were saying 'boo!'

With fewer than two years left for the fate of Indian democracy to be signed, sealed and delivered till 2029 – if not forever – let us act more mature. It will take much more than just wishful thinking for Narendra Modi's spell to be broken. There are numerous learned analyses available now, on why and how the BJP retained its hold over Uttar Pradesh.

In hindsight, it appears quite inane to have believed that the fortress of Triple H – Hindi, Hindu, Hindutva – would collapse in its heartland like the walls of Jericho because of some non-stop self righteous ranting by those hoping for a change. Let us also not take refuge behind the fact that all prime ministers and regimes become history. Just waiting for

one of the laws of motion to roll out in due course will not do, a good shove is surely called for.

Cool, calculated analysis of how Modi keeps succeeding may actually be better than simply getting angry.

Our first step perhaps may be to admit that this regime is extremely popular, even though its ideology militates against our dearly cherished constitutional values. It is winning repeatedly not because people are too naive or are mesmerised by Modi's oratory, or have suddenly become blinded by Triple H.

These factors do play a role, but let us also be realistic enough to concede that Modi scores better because he has patented his own style of politics backed by funding and large doses of welfarism. In this, audio-visual communication (oratory) is a major advantage and its score is amplified by other factors, like control over the media, more than anyone ever could dream of.

And then, he and his supporters were the first ones to realise the power of the social media in politics and propaganda, especially the latter. Deep pockets helped to keep the shashlik turning on and on. But it was a dedicated group of 'IT' and communication whiz kids of the Hindu right, who clicked

their jackboots and stretched their arms straight in salute to Modi and won the game for him.

But let us move away from these and other well-recognised advantages.

We may begin by playing a mournful dirge for relaxed and complacent jelly-fish parties like the Congress or the Bahujan Samaj Party, who wake up (when they do, at all) just before elections. Parties that spend all their energies in endless factional fights cannot survive in the politics of India where Modi has changed the rules for ever. It is mainly well oiled machines like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh-BJP and the Communists that are better suited to last, though the latter also appears to share, to some extent, the death wish of the Congress.

Also read: [With an Opposition Inactive for 5 Years, It Was the Farmers' Protests That Swung West UP](#)

Regional parties with less dissension in public and a supremo ruling with an iron hand are winning in many states. One cannot be too sure of why – as electoral victory is a seasonal affair in some states, with the chapati being flipped over every five years – it is not “do or die” as in Bengal. It is there that Mamata Banerjee introduced into the Congress *sharada*

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something unheard of, called cadre-based 24×7 politics, and worked from the grassroots (*trinamool*) level upwards.

Constant presence and high visibility are therefore also extremely critical in 21st-century Indian politics, where expectations from local leaders are sky high. On these two factors, too, the opposition scored low in Uttar Pradesh and even the strongest supporters of the Samajwadi party feel that its campaign started much too late.



Akhilesh Yadav at a Samajwadi Party function. Photo:
Twitter/@samajwadiparty

The challenger's 'response time' has also to be very prompt. Delays happen in deciding an action plan because the leader

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or the 'high command' is difficult to reach, or because there are too many intervening layers or barriers. This is suicidal for a party that needs to combat the RSS-BJP colossus.

One witnessed a political response at lightning speed, when, after an unsavoury incident in Tripura, the **TMC decided to send a delegation to the home minister in Delhi within 24 hours flat.**

Another example of instant response was seen in the **DMK decision to send senior leaders to countries neighbouring Ukraine,** to help evacuate Indian students from its state.

It is only fleet footed Davids who can take on an apparently invincible Goliath. Others may really need to do push-ups to regain flexibility and tenacity, before time runs out.

The UP election has demonstrated that the grassroots cadre or workers of the BJP and the RSS were certainly doing a far better job than their counterparts, in marketing the schemes of the prime minister and their chief ministers. To urban liberals and sceptics, Modi's craze to rename and repackage schemes is a bit of a joke. It would, however, be wrong to dismiss his passion (and the skill of his expensive agencies) for playing scrabble with acronyms to convert them into meaningful phrases.

Thomas Franco, former general secretary of All India Bank Officers' Confederation **analysed the role of banks in Modi's win**. Writing for Centre for Financial Accountability, he has shown how Modi's much derided PM Jan Dhan Yojana actually succeeded in opening 44.23 crore accounts. This is more than the number below the poverty line in our population of 135 crore. In the state of UP, the number of Jan Dhan accounts was as high as 7.87 crore among the 15 crore voters. Very impressive, indeed. Among them, 5.34 were issued Rupay cards that permit owners to avail of small credits.

It was, indeed, a bold government decision of the present regime to allow the poorest to open Jan Dhan accounts with 'zero' funds, but now, the total amount in these accounts is Rs 1.45 lakh crore. Since most of these accounts are in public sector banks, obviously pressure must have been exerted by the PM from the top, the CM in the middle and the DM at the district level – to ensure such staggering numbers.

The point is that it also helps to have a party machine that works at the micro level and reports through a computerised feedback system. Few can match the BJP-RSS combine that has taken to management practices with as much gusto as Hindutva. So, let's stop laughing at khaki knickers and realise

that jackpots do need a lot of cerebral matter and lots of hard work to be hit.

This was only one of the several schemes that got voters to press the lotus button on EVMs – defying all left-liberal calculations.

Among other schemes, Franco mentions the PM Mudra Loan Scheme that offers graded loans from Rs 50,000 to children to amounts as high as Rs 10 lakh to young men and women. A total number of 34 crore beneficiaries have been sanctioned loans under it, amounting to Rs 18.26 lakh crore.



File image of a PM Mudra Yojana event. Photo: PTI

In 2019-20 alone, UP had 59 lakh beneficiaries with a loan kitty of Rs 31,000 crore. Though figures for the next two years have not been released, the numbers are likely to have gone up by 10 times. Franco estimates that 3.4 crore voters/borrowers in UP have benefited from loans worth Rs 1.8 lakh crore. He says that since UP had 3.34 crore households (as per the 2011 Census) “it means every household had access to a loan that could give credit to the Prime Minister Modi and least 2 persons in every household have opened an account with the banks.”

No wonder all the Rubik's Cube games with matching caste colours of Other Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslims failed.

There are more PM schemes than one can remember. After all, he has usurped all existing ones, repackaged most and rebranded them with the prefix 'Pradhan Mantri. Some **7.8 lakh street vendors gained from the PM Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi** or PM SVANidhi Scheme in UP, out of the total number of the 33.4 lakhs who benefited in the whole country.

Since most loan schemes are covered under the Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises (CGTMSE), bankers do not hound those who do not repay.

If one thinks that using banks like this is unfair, let us remind one that thousands of ‘loan melas’ were held by previous Congress governments from the 1970s, and billions were ‘lost’ through the ‘loan waivers’ they granted. The difference is that while they fired showers of tiny pellets into the air hoping to hit a few flying birds, Modi uses rifles with telescopes to shoot his targets.

Whether one likes it or not, the competitive welfarism Modi has introduced can only be responded by bettering him.

Even so, he could not win West Bengal in 2021, as voters there possibly felt that the TMC government’s welfare schemes like ‘**Duare Sarkar**’ (government at your doorstep), were better intentioned or more effective. Pinarayi Vijayan’s welfarism and administration in Kerala must have ensured his historic win, while Telangana’s Rythu Bandhu scheme for farmers was and is a roaring success.

Amartya Sen and Jean Drèze had espoused the inherent virtues of transferring benefits from state coffers to the poor in their 2013 book, *An Uncertain Glory – India and Its Contradictions*, and though Modi hates them, he follows their dictums quite sheepishly. His Ujjwala Yojana did help crores, though **many cannot afford gas costs any more**, and the Indira Awaas Yojana that he hijacked and re-bottled also breasted the winner’s tape.

Also read: In Telangana, TRS's Flagship Farmers' Welfare Scheme Could Be Its Downfall

The dark memories of **corpses littered** all over in 2021 and the public anger at Modi's inept handling of COVID-19 were completely forgotten by voters (much to the chagrin of Modi's detractors), once he flooded them with free food. All his beneficiaries were not so abysmally poor, but most were above 18 years and were surely voters.

Minister Piyush Goyal replied on March 4 to my letter saying that Modi distributed a humongous amount of 750 lakh metric tonnes of food grains in less than two years, 2020 to 2022, under his Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana. Modi insisted that this munificence was 'his' (not public expenditure) and he repeatedly claimed it as 'his own' namak, personal love and care.

He is blasé about the 100-day's work scheme NREGA, as it does not carry his name or designation, but he released a historic high amount of Rs 1.11 lakh crore to those who were unable to find work during COVID-19. This was factored into the BJP's propaganda and found its place among voters as a 'top-of-the-mind recall'. These tactics drill in the hypnotic messaging – "PM-PM", "Modi-Modi" – all the way to the polling booth.

The minister also revealed what we had suspected all along – that the Central pool was overflowing with rice and wheat, as approximately 90 to 100 lakh metric tons of additional food grains were flowing in every year for the last three years. These must led to problems of finding storage and preventing rot. The past master of opportunism, who had utilised the tragedies of Godhra and Pulwama to full advantage, did so with excess food grains. According to the minister, even after so much free distribution of food grains as ‘Garib Kalyan’, India’s total food reserves in the Central pool is 2.5 times its ‘stocking norms’. Voila!

Also read: [How Will India Fare in the Brewing Global Food and Fertiliser Crisis?](#)

The pink newspapers that worship mammon with more passion than *bhakt*s have for Modi, are however, genetically programmed against ‘doles and subsidies’. They scream ‘waste’ every time inclusive social and economic policies bestow some benefit to classes that can’t play the market like them and make ‘killings’. They shriek, thus, at Aam Aadmi Party’s freebies, the DMK’s 10-year vision document or at Mamata Banerjee’s Kanyashree scheme for girls that **even the UN has lauded**.



People queue up at a polling station to cast their votes for the fourth phase of UP Assembly polls, in Unnao, Wednesday, Feb 23, 2022. Photo: PTI

Our simple point is that those opposition parties that hold power in several states have, at least, the wherewithal to respond to Modi – provided they are on 24×7 mode, visible and active round the year. They must, must fight back with this spirit of audacious welfarism – but be prepared for non cooperation by the same banks that are propping up Modi.

The opposition has no option but to get together or face sure extermination. The three machines of funding, propaganda and electoral victory that Modi has perfected can hardly be improved while others learn to catch up. Even a loose confederation is good enough as we know full well that a section will always side with the enemy.

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It is for history to add their names after Mir Jafar, Jai Chand or Jivaji Rao Scindia. BJP-ruled states present an uphill case, and the opposition has to get together to bring out a common manifesto with well thought-out programmes like Universal Basic Income, better health and education.

There are reasons, however, to mistrust the EVMs and the electoral process in certain places. The Election Commission has also been damaged, almost single-handedly, by Sunil Arora, the last CEC and just a couple of unscrupulous sidekicks. It will take several decades to repair the Commission's neutrality and we need to remember this. The first step that a united opposition can do is to petition the Supreme Court to rekindle justice that former Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi had hurriedly poured sand over.

We refer to the demand for 100% counting of single-name ballot slips that come out of Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail automatically. They do so at every polling station anyway – thanks to an old order of the Supreme Court. In 2019, **Gogoi ruled quite strangely** that these papers need not be counted – except for five out of approximately 250 polling stations.

Crores are spent on them as they constitute the cross-check mechanism to find if votes have been recorded correctly, but

based on Sunil Arora's misleading statement, Gogoi decided not to count 100%.

Lakhs of tons of this evidence are thus incinerated by the Election Commission and the opposition must convince the court to decide coolly and fairly – as the fate of India depends a lot on this.

We just cannot waste any more time in discussing amidst air-conditioned surroundings, the virtues of secularism and democracy and how terrible are Modi and his cohorts. Every one of us has to shell out time, energy and money. If some need to do these with more discreetness, so be it, but for God's sake, realise that we have to transcend ranting and act if we are ever to retrieve the India we were born into.

Jawhar Sircar is a Trinamool Congress (TMC) MP.

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