

# The Unexpected Verdict

## Postmortem of the NDA Defeat and the Congress Victory

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*This essay describes some of the main reasons for the totally unexpected defeat of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the even more unexpected return to power of the Congress Party. In the next issue we will review the significant positive contributions of the NDA government and the implications of this regime change, including the dangers that the Congress Party will face if it forgets that this election was not mainly a vote in their favour. We will also try and outline what steps the Congress needs to take in order not to repeat the mistakes made by the previous government.*

If one had to sum up the unexpected and electrifying electoral verdict of May 2004 in two sentences, I would put it as follows:

- The NDA coalition in general, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in particular, were given a sound drubbing, with 26 ministers of NDA government losing the election. This despite the fact that a majority of voters wanted to give former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee a second term in office, as indicated clearly by numerous pre-poll surveys.

- The Congress, and its allies constituting the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), made a good showing despite the reservations of a large number of people, also indicated in virtually all opinion polls, against Sonia Gandhi becoming the Prime Minister of India.

However, it is noteworthy that the all-India vote shares of the NDA and the UPA were identical at about 36 percent with the BJP getting a

mere seven seats less than the Congress. (138 for BJP as against 145 for the Congress). This is, therefore, a razor-thin victory. The NDA defeat appeared stunning because pre-poll surveys and media projections made it out as though it was due to come back with a bigger bang, and the Congress was likely to get further marginalised.

As has been noted by knowledgeable observers, negotiating the right alliances did the trick for the Congress rather than any dramatic improvement in

its vote share. The Congress got 26.7 percent of the vote share while the BJP got 22.2 percent. Both parties lost a 1.6 percentage points share each compared to the 1999 elections. Last time their allies contributed 118 seats and 17 percent of the vote to the NDA kitty. The Congress had very few allies then. This time, the BJP's allies contributed 51 seats and 13.8 percent of the vote. Congress allies, by contrast, brought 74 seats and 9.1 percent of the vote. Thus, the BJP's allies fared worse than the BJP itself. (Alistair McMillan, "How India Voted", *The Hindu*, 20 May 2004)

A nationwide survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) showed that almost half the population preferred another term for the NDA government. As pointed out by Suhas Palshikar of the CSDS team, those who were satisfied with the Central Government easily outnumbered the 27 percent who said they were dissatisfied. People had a generally favourable assessment of the BJP

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in terms of its ability to solve the problems facing the country at the national level. However, for almost half of the respondents, the performance of the state government was the main consideration in deciding their vote. (See *The Hindu*, May 20, 2004 AE-7).

Since a majority of the states were governed either by the BJP or by the other partners of the NDA, ironically enough, people ended up voting out a coalition that they thought was doing a reasonable job at the Centre because they were annoyed at the performance of most of its constituent parties in power at the state level. The same theme has, however, been played out even in the states where the NDA was not in power. Here too, the results have been most often against the party in power at the state-level – be it the Congress or any regional formation. Thus the Congress took

a beating in states like Punjab, Haryana, Karnataka and Kerala. The only exceptions to the anti-incumbency rule were Delhi, Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal and Himachal Pradesh. Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, which witnessed the installation of BJP state governments just a few months ago, also voted BJP in the General Election, as did Gujarat, though with a near-halving of BJP seats.

The BJP's election strategists seem belatedly compelled to understand that most people's vote preference in India is determined by who they wish to punish rather than who they wish to see in power. Four and a half years ago, people voted the NDA into power because they wanted to punish both the Congress, for their various acts of omission and commission, and other parties, who gave the country a series of unstable coalitions. This

time, in many states, people voted against whoever they thought was capable of defeating the regional party that was part of the NDA alliance. Since the BJP was in power on its own strength in only a few states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh, they ought to have had a more realistic idea of the voter perception of their present and potential allies. BJP leaders failed miserably in this assessment because they assumed Vajpayee's popularity rating would act like a magic wand to bring them back to power.

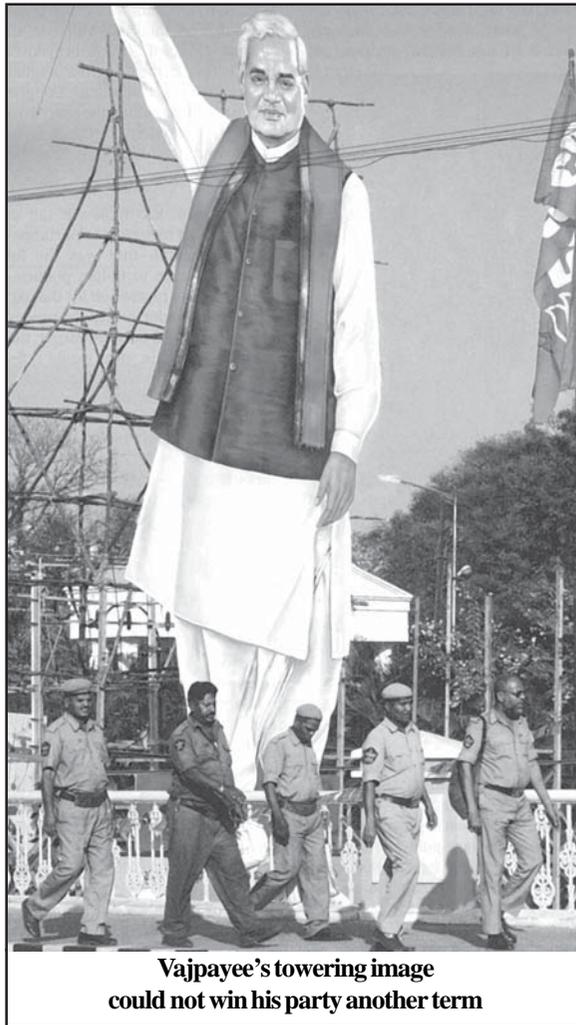
### The Vajpayee Myth

It is precisely here that one of the BJP leadership's most disastrous errors lay. They failed to differentiate Vajpayee's popularity as Prime Minister from that of the BJP as a party. They seemed unable to comprehend that the Prime Minister's image depends on the

persons who carry his message to the country. If local BJP leaders are corrupt and arrogant, then Vajpayee's image cannot shine in the eyes of the ordinary citizen who lives far from the centres of power and has yet to see much shine descend on his or her own life.

BJP leaders mistook the new respectability that Vajpayee, and a few select ministers like Jaswant Singh and Arun Shourie, gave to India's image in international fora and among the corporate sector for the party's own shining image within the country. Voters are not impressed by the Indian government's newly enhanced status abroad, because every contact they have with the representatives of the Indian State, in the form of the village *talati*, the Block Development Officer, the police, the officials of the

tax departments and the municipal corporations, all the way down to the municipal sweeper, leaves them bruised, battered, traumatised and feeling vulnerable and insecure. The performance of a handful of people in Vajpayee's team could dazzle the CEO's of the corporate sector, who found these power wielders responsive to their needs in ways that no other government had ever been before. However, that could not offset the outrage people feel at the conduct of the average BJP *sarpanch*, MP, MLA, corporator or minister. The voter is today more concerned about the law and order situation in his/her village, *mohalla*, city or district than about the



**Vajpayee's towering image could not win his party another term**

improvements in national security, which the BJP-led government achieved by working to build better equations with all our neighbouring countries.

Even though Vajpayee's own credit soared high due to the several courageous policy initiatives and the farsighted breakthroughs he made on many fronts, he did not take care to pick a team of honest, dedicated colleagues for the Prime Minister's Office. The PMO under Vajpayee had a good sprinkling of men widely believed to be of unsavoury character, who overshadowed more dedicated workers. Some of the most high-profile members of Vajpayee's team

are despised by most traditional party workers, as well as by their own cabinet colleagues. Members of the BJP talked about how Vajpayee's own son-in-law was alleged to be running a systematic commission racket in league with some other PMO appointees. Some of these persons appear to have brought the reputation of the PMO to a new low. They were alleged to be not only making money out of various deals, but were accused by their own party members of charging Rs.10 lakh per person for the privilege of having a photo-op and a handshake with the Prime Minister. Two such persons were apparently removed from the PMO at the behest of the security establishment, who are reported to have complained that such conduct gave access to all kinds of shady characters who could be a security risk to the Prime Minister. But even after their removal from the PMO, they remained high profile spokespersons and party functionaries with a prominent role in election management.

### **Party with a Difference?**

The BJP had won the 1999 election on the promise of being a "Party with a Difference". Before the BJP came to power at the Centre, even its fraternal cousin, the extremist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), held a commendable track record of effective and disciplined relief work during natural calamities. At that time, however, the BJP and its Sangh Parivar affiliates were dependent on

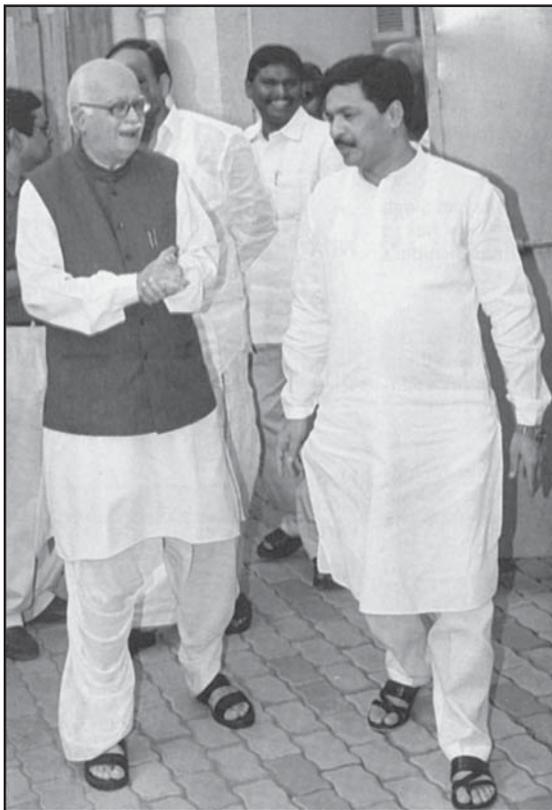
securing donations from supporters, which required a measure of accountability. However, once they got access to government money, corruption seeped in fast. Since this was the first time BJP men came to acquire such high influence, the sudden elevation went to their heads. The level of arrogance displayed by top-layer party functionaries and ministers took even the ordinary BJP-RSS worker by surprise.

One hopes that the BJP recognises that no one was more disgruntled at the behaviour of its power wielders than the ordinary BJP-RSS worker. The BJP worker is led to believe that he belongs to a party of dedicated patriots. What he saw, instead, was that, once in power, his party leaders beat all previous regimes in corruption and nepotism. If the leaders of a self-proclaimed patriotic party are to be seen on camera taking bribes and making dirty deals, then even the rank and file gets seriously jolted and cannot work for their party with conviction. The *Tehelka* exposé, and the BJP's persecution of the people behind it, may not have cost the party that many votes in villages and small towns. But it caused serious damage to the BJP image within its own rank and file. The more honest among the BJP cadres felt demoralised and disenchanted at the arrogance, corruption and lack of commitment of their leaders, once they were in positions of power.

This is an important reason why ordinary party workers, especially those who had either been left out

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or who chose to stay out of the loot brigade, did not have the motivation to put in their best efforts to mobilise votes in the 2004 election. When party workers feel disenchanted by their own party leaders, they cannot suddenly become effective vote collectors at election time. Their level of estrangement from the party was such that they openly abused their



**L.K. Advani and Pramod Mahajan:  
calculations gone awry**

leaders and did not hesitate to express disdain for the conduct of their leaders. While Vajpayee's image soared, BJP workers remained unconvinced of his integrity. They derisively referred to him as a modern day Dhritrashtra, who turned a blind eye to all the misdeeds of his camp followers and family.

The India Shining campaign itself produced an odd mixture of complacency and scepticism among the very people who were supposed, carry it to the electorate. Many BJP cadres, living far away from the glitter and glamour of the Delhi *darbar*, were themselves not really convinced that India was indeed shining because they saw little proof of it around them. And if they gave this message to people living in miserable, disease-ridden slums and neglected villages, reeling under scarcities of every sort from water to power to jobs, the message only caused annoyance. No doubt the incomes of slum dwellers and of village families, especially those that have non-farm sources of income, have risen in recent decades – but so have their expectations. An upwardly mobile person is more impatient with hurdles than people who have accepted economic and social stagnation as their inevitable lot, as they have in Bihar. Today, even slum and poor village dwellers want electricity so that they can watch their favourite TV programme, or so that their children can study in proper light.

### **Insufficient Reforms**

The vote against the NDA is not a vote against economic reforms, as some

people would like to believe, but is a protest against insufficient reforms.

Ordinary citizens will judge the success of reforms by the following criteria:

- That they are not required to pay arbitrary, extortionate and humiliating bribes to government functionaries;
- That they are not needlessly harassed and obstructed in their economic pursuits;
- That they have security of life and property and access to a wide range of economic opportunities;
- That there are efficient and reasonably fair dispute resolution mechanisms, should they face situations where their legitimate rights are violated.
- That the Government provide an enabling atmosphere for people to earn a livelihood, and generate wealth, by providing the civic infrastructure required for economic enterprises and decent living.

Clearly for the ordinary citizen none of this has happened so far. Despite implementing several far-reaching reform measures, the NDA government at the Centre failed to improve the quality of governance, and to provide adequate delivery mechanisms for various services. In the post-reform period, the average Indian's quality of life has not improved, even though there have been some limited increases in income, because of the abysmally poor civic services and the sub-human health care and education facilities provided by the Government. Even upper middle class colonies in prestigious South Delhi have broken roads, overflowing garbage dumps, stench-laden open drains, disease-carrying mosquitoes, water shortages and power cuts. The

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situation in small towns and villages and working-class habitations is far more grim.

Today, no political party or coalition Government has the power to fix these conditions because to do so first requires fixing the bureaucracy. For that to happen you need a large and committed body of honest politicians with vision, courage and the will to work as a well-knit team to curb the powers of the bureaucracy, reorganise the entire system of governance and make it truly accountable to the people. For this, inbuilt incentives for good conduct have to be in place, as well as disincentives for

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corruption and inefficiency. Neither the BJP, nor any other party in the country, has such a team. Therefore, individual leaders of good intent can effect very limited changes. The easier route for politicians is to gang up with the *babus* and share the booty. However, politicians can be punished for their irresponsibility and corruption while the *babus* go scot-free.

### **Undermined by Officialdom**

No individual politician, no matter how highly placed, has the power to make the bureaucracy accountable. Any politician or party, who seriously tries to overhaul our hopelessly inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, can never hope to hold power for long. The *babus* can sabotage the best of policies and programmes and not suffer any consequences. To act against our venal *babucracy* is to wave goodbye to any hope of re-election; when threatened, government officials always have the weapon of "leaks" to the press and political rivals, ensuring that even the best of politicians are hounded out of office. Moreover, government employees man the election machinery. They are so adept at ballot rigging that they can easily change the fortunes of any party. The NDA is likely to have paid a much greater cost for the misdeeds and the partisan role of the *babus* than has been hitherto acknowledged.

For example, an important reason why former Rajasthan Chief Minister, Ashok Gehlot of the Congress Party, lost the Assembly Elections in 2003 is that he had cut the pay of striking employees in his state. Earlier, even an honest Chief minister like Shanta Kumar of Himachal Pradesh had suffered the same fate at the hands of his state's *babudom*, because he too tried to

bring them to account. The fortunes of former Andhra CM, Chandrababu Naidu of the Telugu Desam Party, are also likely to have been further dented by his cracking a constant whip on government officials. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, J. Jayalalithaa of the AIADMK became very unpopular due to her imperious behaviour. But she sealed her fate when she sacked striking government employees *en masse*, and allowed them to resume duty only after they apologised unconditionally. The same factor is likely to have added to the damage suffered by the A.K. Anthony-led Congress in Kerala, which performed disastrously in the Lok Sabha elections.

At the Central level too, the process of disinvestments caused the expected alarm and panic, not just among *babus* running public sector undertakings, but also among those in regular ministries and departments. Arun Shourie made the open admission, through several articles published in *The Indian Express*, that the effective way to reform is not to tinker here and there, but to clear the dead wood in the government from the ground up. So unambiguous a statement of intent was unlikely to endear the NDA government to the gigantic, all-powerful officialdom. Even though we do not have any data to prove this, it is likely that the *babus* foresaw that their interests would be much safer in the hands of a left-supported, socialist-rhetoric-prone Alliance. They had reason to hit back – and they are likely to have done so.

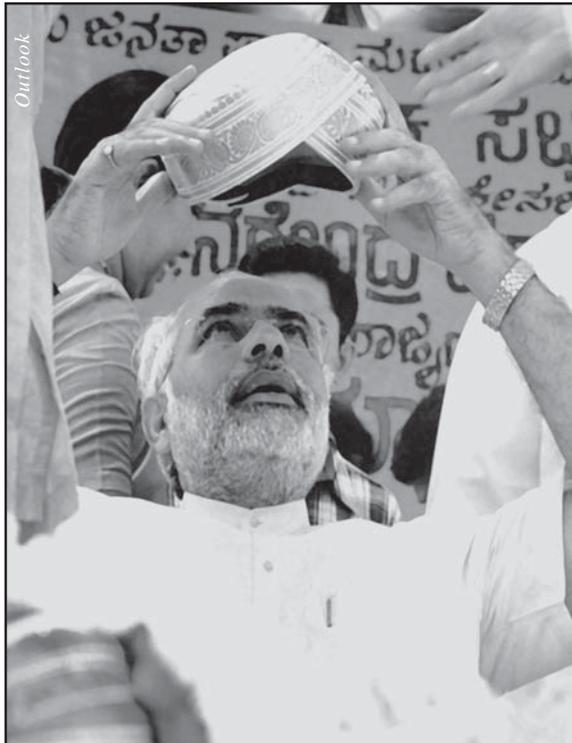
## The Shadow of Carnage

The fact that Vajpayee's credit rating was far above that of any other national leader, and much higher than that of his party, has been interpreted by some to mean that Vajpayee was too tall a figure for the BJP. It is true that in some ways he was head and shoulders above most of his colleagues, but his government suffered a set back

he chose not to sack Narendra Modi after the Gujarat massacre.

The main factors that delegitimised the NDA government were the Gujarat riots and the shamelessness with which several BJP leaders flaunted the violence perpetrated on the Muslim community as a badge of honour. Vajpayee's refusal to sack Narendra Modi, and Advani's mesmerised projection of Modi as the party's new strongman mascot, cost them dear. Many in the BJP defended the Gujarat riots, claiming that the Congress Party's role in the November 1984 massacre of the Sikhs was no better.

Without doubt the brutality unleashed in November 1984 was no less outrageous. Neither did the Congress Party behave any better as far as bringing the guilty to justice is concerned; none of those Congressmen charged with leading the massacre were ever punished. However, there is a crucial difference between the mayhem of 1984 and the carnage in Gujarat in 2002. The Congress leaders of 1984 controlled



**Narendra Modi: a deadly asset**

the violence within four days and, thereafter, did not brag about the slaughter as a proof of their macho-power. More importantly, Rajiv Gandhi lost the next election, after the Congress Party's role in organising this massacre slowly became obvious to all. The Congress also lost ground in all those states – especially Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra – where it took a leading part in instigating communal divides and organising the riots that swept

because he failed to rise to the occasion at key moments. Some of the compromises he made, in his attempt to “carry all sections of Party opinion” with him, revealed a man who fails to take a moral position and lead at critical points. Vajpayee proved his inadequacy when he defended his Tehelka-tainted colleagues, when he found himself unable to discipline Murlu Manohar Joshi, holder of the key Human Resource Development (HRD) portfolio, and, most critically, when

Meerut, Malliana, Moradabad, Aligarh, Ahmedabad, Bhiwandi and Surat. If the Congress has found it so hard to regain lost ground in all those states, on account of its role as the perpetrator of communal massacres, it was rather foolish of the BJP leadership to imagine that they could get away with it. The fact that BJP candidates faced humiliating defeats in their three top hot-spots – Kashi, Mathura and Ayodhya – shows that voters are no longer enamoured of having their religious sentiments exploited for violent political purposes.

The BJP also forgot that, with 24-hour, live TV news channels, the happenings in Gujarat became household knowledge in the remotest part of India. At the time of the riots and massacres that took place during the 1980s and 1990s, we had only the state controlled Doodardshan as the sole provider of TV news. Therefore, the ordinary voter in distant states remained relatively unaffected by happenings in U.P. or Gujarat. Not any more. Big crimes committed in any one part of the country, reverberate all over the country thanks to live coverage by a whole array of independent TV channels. This quickly destroys the moral legitimacy of the party accused of such crimes.

**The HRD Disaster**

Letting a control-freak Murli Manohar Joshi run amok in the Education Ministry acted as yet another nail in the BJP's coffin. He not only ran the Ministry as his personal fiefdom, but he also had no eye for locating and appointing talented people for key positions. It is a sad testimony to the quality of the Sangh Parivar worldview that the Hindutva *biradari* has failed to produce high quality academics and intellectuals. The thousands of



**Joshi's agenda alienated academics and the corporate sector alike**

schools run by the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), and the numerous educational institutions they control, are not producing a world-class intelligentsia. Joshi, therefore, had a very shoddy set of people to choose from within the Sangh fold. His politically motivated appointment of sub-standard people to run key institutions, and rework school syllabi as per the Hindutva worldview, pitched him against large and influential sections of the academic community.

Even if the BJP wanted to rewrite textbooks to correct their alleged "leftist bias", a sustained and

genuinely open debate within the academic community was required prior to any such attempt. The endeavour would have had credibility only if it was handed over to competent people known for their integrity, whom, however, the Joshi gang has neither the taste for nor the skills to identify. Even the Communist Party Marxist (CPM), which has perfected the art of ramming down its ideology through school syllabi and educational institutions in West Bengal, makes a show of following due process and winning over a section of intellectuals to its side. Joshi alienated not only leftists, but even liberals among the teaching community. The textbooks were revised in a surreptitious manner by inept ghost authors and imposed on the school system in a high-handed manner.

It is common for political parties in India to give their loyal supporters and sympathisers out of the way preference and key positions at every level in the government. However, the Sangh Parivar went too far in their attempt

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to monopolise all appointments. This was not confined to educational institutions alone, but spread to the police, the paramilitary forces and the judiciary. Only the CPM outdoes the Sangh Parivar in solely recruiting party loyalists, wherever they are in power.

By contrast, the Congress Party is far more liberal and allows a far larger spectrum of opinion reflected in its appointments. That is why even liberal intellectuals made common cause with leftists to oppose the BJP in these elections..

Even more disastrous were Joshi's ham-handed attempts to bring the prestigious Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) under his thumb, and to dry up private donations for the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), by mandating that all such donations be routed only through the government. Till then, the corporate sector in general, and the information technology sector in particular, were among the most enthusiastic supporters of the NDA regime because they identified it with greater economic freedom. The crude attempts at tightening the governmental noose around the IIMs and the IITs alienated large sections of the BJP's erstwhile supporters and admirers.

### **Potential Allies Estranged**

The BJP also managed to adopt a disastrously cavalier attitude to several of its critical support bases. In the last year of their government, the party leadership, including Vajpayee, became casual and dismissive towards their allies. They greatly over-rated their own popularity, and thought they could come to power on their own. Vajpayee felt genuinely fatigued by the pressures and pulls of a multi-party coalition. When he openly

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asked voters for a bigger mandate for the BJP alone because he was tired of running a twenty-three party coalition, he sent a clear message to his tried and tested NDA allies that the BJP now found them dispensable. The short shrift given to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was a product of this mindset; it is likely to have made the allies wary of supporting BJP candidates, lest the party emerge too strong and become overbearing. Combined with the lack of enthusiasm among the BJP's own cadre, this complacency proved fatal.

Another group, whom the BJP-led NDA went out of its way to estrange, were the Non-Government Organisations (NGOs). When the NDA threatened to cut off all bilateral aid to NGOs, they succeeded only in scoring a home-goal. Activists of all hues united in

an unprecedented nationwide alliance, collectively resolved to work against the BJP and support either the Left or the Congress. The BJP was moat unwise in thinking it could get away with evoking hostility among a nationally and internationally highly well-connected community. NGOs may not have the electoral clout to get their own candidates elected. But if they rise in unison against someone, their networks give them enough influence to make a perceptible dent in the electoral fortunes of a party, especially if the party is not riding a wave of success in any case.

The Congress, even at its worst, never alienated the NGO community in this rabid and indiscriminate manner. In the last few years, Congress leaders like Arjun Singh have made special efforts to win over a whole spectrum of activists to the party's side by patronising their projects with generous funds. As a result, several NGOs have emerged as the fighting arm of the Congress Party on major issues – from the textbook controversy, to the *Tehelka* aftermath, the opening up of the Indian economy and the campaigns against Narendra Modi. On each of these fronts, articulate,



**The anti-Sonia campaign did the Congress more good than harm**

high-profile NGOs ran the campaign against the BJP while the Congress Party lent support from behind the scenes.

### Sonia Mania

BJP leaders also relied over-much on television to reach out to voters instead of establishing direct contact with them. The best of their orators were thus busy in TV studios, and not in their constituencies, reaching out to voters in villages and towns. In failing to do so, they lost touch with the sentiments and responses of their electorate. There are few clearer evidences of this than their attempt to transform the 2004 election into a referendum on personalities – Vajpayee versus Sonia. While the BJP was right in estimating that there was substantial resistance to having Sonia Gandhi as Prime Minister, on account of her foreign origin, they blundered in thinking that having her as the Congress Party's Prime Ministerial candidate was their sure-shot guarantee for continuing in power.

The Indian voter has a consistent track record of rejecting leaders who attack or bad-mouth women in public. The Shiv Sena's Bal Thackeray suffered one of his most humiliating defeats during the 1998 election, when he made nasty comments about women. Unfortunately, it took Vajpayee a shining debacle to realise, too late, that the personal attacks on Sonia Gandhi by many BJP stalwarts would rebound; that mud-slinging in general, and against women in particular, does not go down well with the Indian electorate. In fact, a woman who stands up to insult, as did Sonia, gets to be treated with special awe and reverence, as an incarnation of *shakti* herself. The men of the DMK, who disrobed J. Jayalathaa in the Tamil Nadu State

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Assembly, practically guaranteed her victory in the 1991 election, especially since she refused to be cowed down by the ugly assaults on her person. When the Congress and the CPM both began hounding the rebellious Mamata Bannerjee, she, for a time, became an icon of wronged but righteous womanhood, producing a wave of support for her new party. So also with Sonia: by attacking her personally, the BJP made her appear an invincible Durga, braving their slurs with determination.

The BJP failed to understand that Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin evoked negative sentiments among only a section of the educated elite – most of whom don't even take the trouble to vote. The average citizen – farmer, fisherwoman, street vendor or impoverished weaver - is so enraged

by the behaviour of her/his *swadeshi* tormentors – the local politician, the lower level *babudom* and the police – and is so sick of being trampled upon by brown sahibs and that he/she does not see much danger in having a *videshi* ruler.

Many of the Indians who migrate to foreign lands in search of jobs and career opportunities are in effect voting with their feet and communicating the same sad but understandable message: Indians can thrive only under the rule of non- Indians. If we could have a vote on how many people would like citizenship in North America, Australia or a prosperous European country – and on how many prefer to live under the Indian government – we would get a good idea of how Indians rate their *desi* rulers. They see a real threat to their well being from a whole range of *sarkari* parasites, whose main function appears to be to routinely tyrannise and fleece hapless citizens. The collective self-esteem of our people has been so trampled upon by our very own brothers and sisters, who man our government offices, that most of us can't imagine that any *videshi* will treat us any worse.

Moreover, voters all over the world are fascinated by leaders who have imperial airs, imperious



**Internal rivalries diluted the BJP's appeal**

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mannerisms, behave like royalty and yet graciously condescend to make themselves accessible to the ordinary *janata* every now and then. In India, despite the “simple living, high thinking” platitudes we routinely mouth, what we are really captivated by is the Paris laundry syndrome, that is, by those who boast of sending their laundry to Paris. We don’t like our leaders to be “like us”, either by way of status or morality. We prefer them to be creatures that descend from above and represent special power. Even the great Mahatma was apparently not totally immune to this sort of fascination: how else can one explain his choice of Jawahar Lal Nehru as Prime Minister over much more talented sons-of-the-soil leaders like Sardar Patel or Rajagopalachari?

Moreover Sonia Gandhi has managed to acquire many of the mannerisms of royalty despite her humble origins. This gives her a special aura because she makes even the big bosses of the Congress Party tremble in fear before her. Being of foreign origin, she has no caste or ethnic loyalty, so that she appears to stand above the various social and regional divides of Indian society. People believe that, at the most, she will promote her children, not a whole army of caste brethren. The corruption and misdemeanours of *desi* leaders may daily be testified to in every village, town or state capital. By contrast, Sonia Gandhi appears relatively pure, at least from a distance, because she lives in isolated splendour and appears only to give *darshan* or listen to *faryads* once in a while. Ordinary people, even her own party workers, can’t monitor her daily conduct. She gives the impression that she could take on the high and mighty, strike fear in her party stalwarts and could



**Leaders of the UPA at the release of the Common Minimum Programme**

keep them in line. Hence her appeal among a significant section of the people, especially the poor.

Despite the trappings of democracy, people in India have been taught to appear before their rulers as supplicants, as hapless subjects pleading for favours rather than asserting their rights. If one has to appear as a supplicant in a *darbar*, then the presiding deity of that *darbar* had better look and act like royalty. If one has to kowtow, it may as well be before a Sonia Gandhi rather than a Bangaru Lakshman or a Pramod Mahajan, who appear plebeian no matter how high the office they are placed in.

By their obsessive focus on the personality of Sonia Gandhi, the BJP strategists gave her a larger-than-

life image. The fact that she did not buckle under pressure but, rather, fought back valiantly, created an atmosphere of sympathy in her favour, even though it did not significantly increase the Congress vote share – even in Uttar Pradesh, the home state of the Nehru-Gandhi family.

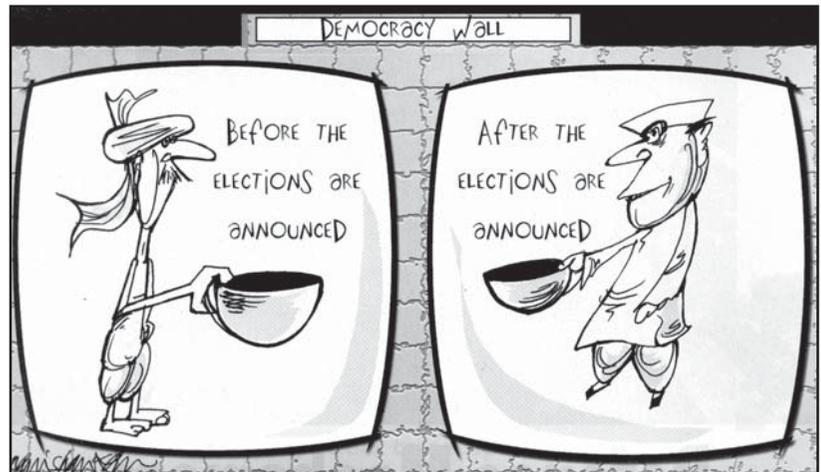
### **Internal Problems**

Internal rivalries among the BJP’s second-rung leaders, namely Pramod Mahajan, Sushma Swaraj, Arun Jaitley and Venkaiah Naidu, who all see themselves as prime ministerial aspirants, also played havoc with the party’s fortunes. For example, Sushma Swaraj, who is an effective orator and crowd-puller, was kept grounded in Delhi, rather than being sent off on the campaign trail, because her self-righteous airs and overwhelming ambition irk the rest. So also new entrants, like Feroze Varun Gandhi and his mother Maneka, were grossly under-used, even though they had offered to do extensive campaigning. When party leaders saw how effective a crowd-puller Feroze was turning out to be, dozens of his public meetings were cancelled at the last minute, all to

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prevent him from emerging as a leading light of the BJP. He was not the only good performer to be immobilised rather than put to use. The BJP's excessive reliance on flimsy film stars to win votes made the old guard feel somewhat redundant and sidelined. By projecting glamour boys and girls as their prime movers and shakers, the BJP behaved as though its ideology and track record were not capable of winning the elections on their own strengths.

The BJP kept its own cadres confused and disoriented by the pendulum swings in its relation with the minorities, especially the Muslims. On the one hand, the organisation has insisted on justifying the outrageous conduct of the Narendra Modi government in Gujarat, and has even used him as proof of their continuing commitment to *Hindutva*. On the other hand, the BJP began wooing Muslim leaders and initiated important dialogues with them so as to find a mutually acceptable, negotiated settlement to the contentious Ram Mandir issue. Another landmark initiative was the Sindhu Darshan festival organised at the behest of L.K. Advani himself, with representatives of virtually every religion in India, including the minuscule Bahai and Parsi communities, all brought together for a multi-religious dialogue. This was a sure but subtle move away from the divisive *Hindutva* to *Sindhutva* as a potential unifier of various religious and regional communities. Emboldened by some of these initiatives, especially by the attempts at peaceful settlement with Pakistan, Muslims had started gravitating towards the BJP in small but significant numbers. If this had been sustained, and backed up by genuine efforts at building bridges, it could



have transformed not just the face of the BJP but also the character of Indian politics. Some Muslims did begin to think that perhaps the BJP would bring in “genuine secularism”, as opposed to the “pseudo-secularism” of the Congress they had been attacking. However, when near the elections, BJP leaders bought out the discredited Shahi Imam of the Delhi Jama Masjid to issue a *fatwa*, ordering Muslims to vote for the BJP. With that one stroke the Party lost the little credibility it was gaining post-Gujarat among not just the Muslims, but also among Hindus, including its own workers. For all these years, the BJP had attacked the Congress for using Muslims as a captive vote bank and for buying over or cultivating their obscurantist leaders. Now it was stooping to the same techniques.

The average BJP-RSS worker's intellectual and emotional foundations have been built on a regular diet of “anti” sentiments. The extensive work the RSS and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) have done in opening schools in tribal areas is motivated more by the desire to keep Christian missionaries at bay than by any intrinsic concern for the marginalised groups of our society. Sangh Parivar workers can easily be

rallied around anti-Muslim, anti-Christian, anti-Pakistan, anti-Sonia Gandhi planks. Except for being pro-*Bharat Mata* in the most mushy, rhetorical sense, they have not been trained to be pro-anything else. They are good at hate campaigns, at mobilising anger through whisper networks, and at building a siege mentality among the public, but they have not been trained in carrying positive messages.

This time around the message that percolated from the top was of a “Shining India” ready to conquer the world. That made them complacent. Most sat back assuming victory was assured. By contrast, the Congress Party was fighting a desperate battle for survival and, therefore, decided that offence was the best form of defence. A beleaguered Congress went into indiscriminate attack mode and was able to take the sheen away from many significant achievements of the NDA, precisely because of the excessive hype of the “India Shining” campaign. While the BJP deserved the abuse it got on some issues, on others the attack was unwarranted. But, during election time, negative propaganda has more effect on even moderately disgruntled voters. □

(To be continued in the next issue)