

CHAPTER-5

ECLIPSE of BJP: 2004-2014

Everyone in India, as well as the leaders of the opposition Indian National Congress (INC), was convinced that the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party–led National Democratic Alliance (BJP-NDA) would handily win the April–May 2004 Indian Lok Sabha elections. In the days before the election results were declared, BJP leaders were already jostling for plum ministerial posts in the expected postelection reshuffle, while the Congress party’s leaders were on television trying to reduce expectations before what many predicted would be yet another miserable performance. The BJP had reason to be confident. The country was enjoying near record economic-growth rates, there was improvement on dialogues with Pakistan over the disturbed state of Kashmir, and Indians consistently told pollsters that BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the person they most sought to lead the country. Furthermore, the BJP had done very well in some state elections in late 2003, prompting its leaders to call a premature national election rather than wait until the end of their five-year term in November. Opinion polls suggested that this was the right move. Even though they showed a narrowing of the gap between the BJP-NDA and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (INC-UPA) in the run-up to the elections, most surveys continued to forecast a solid BJP-NDA victory. And then, to everyone’s surprise, Congress won. It was of course far from the kind of crushing victory that the party used to get during the years of Congress system (1950s-1980s), when it often won two-thirds to three-quarters of the seats in the Lok Sabha. This time Congress itself seized only 145 (27 percent) of the 543 seats in entire parliament, just ahead of the BJP, which won 138 (25 percent). But the INC-UPA as a whole won 219 seats (40 percent), compared to 185 (34 percent) for the BJP-NDA, placing it close to a stable majority in parliament. After a few days of consultations with the regional, state, and left-of-center parties, Congress cobbled together a coalition that the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) decided to support from the outside.

Reasons for the Early Election

Elected to office in 1998, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was the first

government in a long time to complete the normal five-year term. In spite of the fact that almost seven of the 1998 original coalition partners left the NDA, Vajpayee worked with the other 18 parties successfully warding off attacks from inside the BJP, from within the coalition, and the opposition led by the Congress Party. Buoyed with the success, and perceiving a “feel good” factor and seeing “India shining”, he declared that he will go to polls early. There were five reasons for his optimism.

First, the opposition was fractured and ineffective. The once hegemonic Congress Party which led India for long without ever having a majority vote, was left in a midpoint. Although the Party controlled 11 state governments, it had only about 100 members in the Parliament since the NDA government took power. The so-called “third front” never was on the horizon. In the absence of any great challenge, the NDA government claimed that it could deliver stability. It went to declare that it would also end the hereditary politics, or the Congress “dynasty” for good.

Second, the economy was doing well. The New Economic Policy of liberalisation was inaugurated under pressure from lenders such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund during the Congress government in 1991 by then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, under the leadership of the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. These reforms picked up speed during the NDA/BJP rule as Prime Minister Vajpayee himself declared: “We are carrying forward a process that was started by the Narasimha Rao [Congress] government and continued by the two United Front governments. But we do legitimately take the credit for having broadened and accelerated the reforms process.”¹⁵⁵

Far from the past “Hindu growth” of 2-3%, the Indian economy started growing at 7-8% annually. Even as the global economy was down, the top 100 Indian companies exported goods worth about US\$15 billion (Rs.700 billion). Taxes were cut, incomes rose, monsoons seemed on time, industry became competitive, and the people began spending. In a poll conducted in early 2004, 85% of Indians felt “most confident” that the local economy had improved, and 89% thought that it would improve the following year.¹⁵⁶

Third, the electoral scenarios looked bright In the December 2003 election, the Congress Party lost in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, and Rajasthan for the

¹⁵⁵ “Newsmaker of the Year,” India Today, 12 January 2004, p. 24.

¹⁵⁶ India Today, 2 February 2004, p. 31.

BJP, and won only in Delhi. In Mizoram, the National Front (a BJP ally) defeated the Congress Party. Sonia Gandhi, who as the President of the Congress Party was thought to be an asset, suddenly appeared like a liability.

Fourth, India's foreign relations improved in recent years. While the concern of the United States with terrorists in general and the Taliban in Afghanistan in particular grew, the relationship with the United States on the one hand and Pakistan on the other had taken on a different hue. Thus, for the first time in several decades the NDA government had friendly relations with the only superpower left on the globe. With its nuclear club membership status, India had reason to look the United States in the eye, if not as an equal, but certainly as a power to be reckoned with, not only in South Asia, but on the world scene. Such self-confidence may be seen from India's claim for a seat on the Security Council of the United Nations. In spite of the debacle of the Agra meeting between Prime Minister Vajpayee and President General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, relations seemed to be on the mend between India and Pakistan. The 1999 Kargil war controversy was put behind, if not forgotten.¹⁵⁷

Fifth, democratic elections in Jammu and Kashmir had show-cased Indian democracy for the world.

Election Campaign and Issues

For the first time, in 14th Lok Sabha elections in 2004, Indian politics witnessed a contest at national level between two serious coalitions, namely the NDA and the UPA.¹⁵⁸ The number of political parties in the fight was around 600 in 2004 general elections. But, the horns were locked between NDA and Congress and its allies.¹⁵⁹ In other words, the first elections of the 21st century turned out to be a 'battle of alliances,' between the BJP led NDA and Congress led alliance.¹⁶⁰ This was reflected in the qualitative move from command to competitive liberal market economy, from one

¹⁵⁷ "Cover Story" in India Today, 26 July 2004, pp. 6-12.

¹⁵⁸ E. Sridharan, "Electoral Coalitions in 2004 General Elections, Theory and Evidence", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXIX, No.51, December 2004, p. 5418.

¹⁵⁹ Vandana Mishra, "Analysing the BJP and Congress", Mainstream, Vol. XIII, No.19, 1 May 2004, p.21.

¹⁶⁰ Aroon Purie, Editorial, India Today, Vol. XXIX, No.11, 22 March 2004, p.1.

party dominance to alliance/coalition politics, from nation building to representation of polarized socio-cultural reality into politics.¹⁶¹

The elections' results demonstrated the division of the polity into two huge, though not united, power blocs (alliance). It was not seen simply as one party replacing another, rather as signaling a fight between two incompatible ideological formations, which focused largely in two opposing somewhat equal, 'political phalanxes'.¹⁶² Further, one can talk in terms of two poles in politics, the pole of 'sectarian politics' and the pole of 'inclusive politics.' The BJP, the caste based parties and regional parties, persisted on the basis of sectarian appeal. The INC and Lefts, pursued to make a genuinely pan-Indian appeal to voters. Besides, the alliance/coalition politics could create compulsions for larger party to woo the smaller ones and not the other way round.¹⁶³

Paul Wallace, in this regard, used the term 'tail wagging the elephant,' which refers to the emerging significance of regional parties at national and state levels. The electoral politics confirmed that compromise was essential for national parties to maintain coalition at both national and state levels. The Congress Party and BJP-led alliances, were not incompatible ideological formation but competitors in India's federalist, democratic political system.¹⁶⁴

The significance of such electoral alliance became increasingly clear over the years, a period in which the rise of other regional and caste parties meant that no Indian party was able to win an absolute majority in Parliament.¹⁶⁵ The parties looked for win or majority, by entering into alliance arrangements because, they had strong incentives to aggregate votes through political formation/alliance, by sharing the total number of contested seats, so as not to split but to pool votes. This was because, a small addition of votes had the potential to increase or decrease the winning chance of party. There are many instances, when political parties in order to maximize their gains, shed away their respective ideologies in conditions of extreme incompatibility.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Pramod Kumar, "Contextualizing Religious, Caste and Regional Dynamics in Electoral Politics: Emerging Paradoxes", in Ramashray Roy and Paul Wallace (eds.), *India's 2004 Elections; Gras Roots and National Perspectives*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007 p.59.

¹⁶² Baldev Raj Nayar, "India in 2004: Regime Change in a Divided Democracy", *Asian Survey*, Vol. 45, No.1, January-February 2005, p.77-78.

¹⁶³ Paranjoy Guha Thakurta and Shankar Raghuraman, "Divided We Stand, India in a Time of Coalitions", New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007, p. 17.

¹⁶⁴ Paul Wallace, "Introduction: India Shining Trumped by Poverty", in Roy and Wallace, p. 5.

¹⁶⁵ Steven I. Wilkinson, "Reading the Election Results", in Sumit Ganguly, Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.), *The State of India's Democracy*, New Delhi: Oxford University, 2010, p. 30.

¹⁶⁶ E. Sridharan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5418.

The alliance formation was turning point in Congress Party's fortunes, which proved vital and led to victory in 2004 national elections. While, the BJP yielded to hubris (very great pride), rejecting some key allies such as DMK etc.¹⁶⁷ The BJP played alliance game very poorly by choosing unpopular parties' that controlled the state government and failing to make any tie-up at all in others.¹⁶⁸

The INC now, became 'coalitionable' and made poll agreements in number of major states for the first time. The INC was tied-up with TRS, RJD, DMK, NCP, JMM, PDP and others. The alliance formation facilitated it to form a ruling coalition under Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister of the country. The BJP electoral performance was much below expectations and its key alliance partners, barring a few expectations, did worse.¹⁶⁹

The BJP contested 2004 parliamentary elections on development plank (India shining and feel good factor) rather than contentious issues and took pride in its achievements and leader.¹⁷⁰ The Bharatiya Janata Party claimed that India was on a roll, its economy was growing at the rate of 8.5 percentage, industrialization was taking place, low inflation, low interest government, agriculture was giving good returns and so everyone was 'feeling good', (feel good factor). In brief, never had Indian economy been in better shape. The BJP/NDA was going to the voters on the slogans 'India shining' and 'feel good factor' and other issues, as a stable coalition government as well as, the able leadership of Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee.¹⁷¹

The BJP released the 'vision 2020 document', on 30 March 2004 which put to place development within a character for governance, while, pronouncing a new spin on traditional Hindutva issue, the party leadership believed that document would also serve as a new ideological roadmap. Nonetheless, the RSS cadre felt betrayed. Praveen Togadia, VHP, leader specified that there could be no 'feel good' without Ram Mandir at Ayodhya.¹⁷² The BJP electoral campaign started with L.K. Advani's (Deputy Prime Minister), Bharat Uday Yatra. He toured nearly 8000 K.M., from Kanyakumari to

¹⁶⁷ Nayar, Op. Cit., p. 75.

¹⁶⁸ Wilkinson, Op. Cit., p. 30.

¹⁶⁹ Ramashray Roy, "The Text and Context of the 2004 Lok Sabha Elections in India", in Roy and Wallace, n.54, p. 11.

¹⁷⁰ Nayar, Op. Cit., p. 76.

¹⁷¹ Syed Ali Mujtaba, "Feeling Good? Feeling Terrible", Himal, Vol. 17, No.3-4, March-April 2004, p. 14-16.

¹⁷² Rajeev Deshpande and Lakshmi Iyer, "Inside the Fog of War", India Today, Vol. XXIX, No.11, 22 March 2004, p.22.

Amritsar in the first half and then from Porbandar to Puri, on the other. The key objective of Yatra was to spread the BJP's 'India shining' message to the common people. Advani's well equipped and highly luxurious mini-bus, certainly widened the gap between ordinary voters and political leaders.

The Congress campaigning was based on an effective contrast and exposing the 'feel good façade (false appearance)'. The INC reply was: "hum ko kya mila" (what have we got?) specifying that the common man gained very little from the so-called economic growth.¹⁷³ Sonia Gandhi, President, All India Congress Committee (AICC), alleged that "the NDA ministry was nothing but government of empty slogans and jokes."¹⁷⁴ Ram Vilas Paswan, President, Lok Jan Shakti Party, blamed the NDA government on the ground that "what do 'eight-lane'/road and cheap air travel means for the poor?"¹⁷⁵ The leadership of Congress Party targeted the NDA on different accounts. The eight percentage growth rate of GDP was questionable, unsustainable and misleading. Moreover, they raised issues like growing unemployment, privatization of education, farmer's problems, dissatisfaction among the lower classes and emphasized darker sides of liberalization etc.¹⁷⁶ These were possible issues, which might generate anti-incumbency wave against the ruling NDA. The critics argue that whether it was 'India shining' or 'India cheated.' As a matter of fact, more than a quarter of the population live below poverty line and lack basic amenities, price of necessary commodities were rising, social tension increased and above all, country remained under water and power starved.¹⁷⁷ The Congress Party released 55-pages charge-sheet/broacher under title "a saga of sins, scams and shame" against the NDA which emphasized ground reality and failure of central government.¹⁷⁸ The INC, in its manifesto promised guarantee for 100 days employment to every rural house hold and selective privatization. The Congress Party showed great concern for aam aadmi (ordinary man) by giving the slogan– "Congress ka haath aam aadmi ke saath",¹⁷⁹ (the

¹⁷³ Thakurta and Raghuraman, Op. Cit., p. 75.

¹⁷⁴ India Today, Vol. XXIX, No.6, 10 February 2004, p.35.

¹⁷⁵ India Today, Vol. XXIX, No.5, 3 February 2004, p.32.

¹⁷⁶ Vandana Mishra, Op. Cit., p. 22.

¹⁷⁷ Mujtaba, Op. Cit., p. 16.

¹⁷⁸ Purnima S. Tripathi, "With Dogged Determination", Frontline, Vol. 21, No.8, 22 April 2004, p. 34-35.

¹⁷⁹ Deshpande and Iyer, Op. Cit., p. 26.

hand of Congress was with common man). The Congress Party successfully branded itself with party of the poor, pronouncing the BJP to be party of the rich.¹⁸⁰

The 2004 electoral campaign seemed battle between two corporate political giants. The focus of the campaigning was on mechanics of ‘electoral management’, on strategies of alliance making, and on psychological warfare and media manipulation through the fine art of spin healing. These elections were fought without any serious issues, the only issue mattered the future of secularism that made the polls worthy of attentions.¹⁸¹

Manifesto of BJP – “Vision Document 2004”

This document spelt out the “Party’s core beliefs, basic commitments, and ... priority agenda for the next five years....”¹⁸² Two main issues were identified for this election: “good governance and accelerated, all-round development.” Logically, accusing the past “misrule” of the Congress Party and its wrong policies for all the current problems, this document set out in detail 25 points. The proud objective was to make “India a Developed Nation and a Great Power by 2020.” Providing for national security—both internal and external—the party set up a highly admirable, perhaps an impossible, task of advancing economic reforms of liberalisation “based on a self-reliant approach, for sustained double-digit GDP growth rate to achieve complete eradication of poverty and unemployment; end regional and social disparities; and bridging the urban-rural divide.” It also hoped to launch a second Green Revolution to unleash the potential of agriculture and the agro-business, and forecast a world-class infrastructure in the country. To deal with water shortage, it had a three-pronged plan: launch a river-linking project; encourage massive micro initiatives in water management; and clean up river waters. Ideals of social and economic justice, and empowerment of the Scheduled Castes, Tribes, Other Backward Classes and ‘the poor among the Forward Classes’ would be energetically pursued. A consensus on reserving slots in the legislatures both at the State and Central levels would be supported.

Emphasizing its continued opposition to the prevailing separate Muslim civil code, the policy statement, however, was embedded in softer and more attractive language, and that too with a caveat: “The BJP views Uniform Civil Code primarily as an instrument

¹⁸⁰ Nayar, Op. Cit., p. 74.

¹⁸¹ Yogendra Yadav, “The Elusive Mandate of 2004”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXXIX, No.51, 18 December 2004, p.5396.

¹⁸² Bharatiya Janata Party, Vision Document 2004, p. 1. http://www.bjp.org/Press/mar_304a.htm.

to promote gender justice. We believe that social and political consensus has to be evolved before its enactment.” Two other statements were noteworthy. The first was clearly aimed at Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Party President, in that the BJP would pursue legislation to “ensure that important offices of the Indian State can be occupied by those who are India’s natural citizens by their Indian origin.” The second related to their bread and butter issue of Hindutva (Hindu nationalism)—building a “magnificent Ram Mandir at Ayodhya”—by cordially resolving the dispute (whether there indeed was a temple on the site of a mosque that was demolished by Hindu mobs in December 1992) through a negotiation with the Muslims, and abiding by the court’s decision whenever it comes.¹⁸³ Needless to say, the leadership of Vajpayee was praised, and promised to continue. The document also declared that “The Congress era in Indian politics is now over;” the BJP era was on its way.

Considering that economic development alone is not sufficient, but a holistic development is needed, the party wanted what it called as “Integral Humanism,” and emphasised “Cultural Nationalism.” The latter was admitted to be a synonym for Hindutva. Ironically, according to their interpretation, in spite of their emphasis on Hinduism, “...Cultural Nationalism is the most potent antidote to communalism, divisiveness, and separatism of every kind, and a guarantor of our national unity and national integration.” The vision was “to make the 21st Century India’s Century” with India’s destiny entwined with that of the BJP. The party anticipated for an absolute majority for the BJP, and a two-thirds majority for the NDA in Parliament.

The National Democratic Alliance’s Manifesto

The NDA needed a separate manifesto in that the original 20 plus parties in the coalition (reduced by the departure of seven of them) did not share the BJP ideology in its whole. While following the major themes of the BJP, the NDA expected to see India become a superpower by being the “food factory of the world,” with the highest priority given to agriculture.¹⁸⁴ Infrastructure development followed next. The BJP, which at the start did not believe in any “minorities” in India, did speak of minorities in its Vision Document, and the NDA manifesto reflected “A Minorities Development Agenda,”

¹⁸³ Krishna K. Tummala, “Democracy vs. Fundamentalism: Religious Politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India,” in Santosh Saha, (ed.), *Religious Fundamentalism in the Contemporary World: Critical Social and Political Issues* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 207-34.

¹⁸⁴ The quotes are from NDA Agenda for Development, Good Governance and Peace, <http://www.bjp.org/manifes/manife99.htm>

with a three-pronged emphasis: education, economic upliftment and empowerment. National Security ended up as the last part of the manifesto. There was no statement of any Hindutva, or for that matter secularism, and undoubtedly not the building of a Ram temple, or establishing a Uniform Civil Code for both Hindus and Muslims.

ELCTION RESULT and OUTCOME

The results of 14th Lok Sabha came as a jolt to everyone ‘BJP’ in particular and the NDA in general. Most of the observers had been so stunned by the BJP’s defeat that, in reaction, they overstated its amplitude. After all, the BJP was left with only seven less seats than the Congress –138 seats secured by the BJP compared to 145 by the Congress. However, the gap between both parties had become larger in terms of the percentage of valid votes gained (22.16 per cent by the BJP as against 26.69 per cent by the Congress). This means that the BJP, after 20 years of constant electoral rise, had almost reverted back to the position in 1991 when they won 120 seats and 20.1 per cent of the valid votes. Nevertheless, the loss was not as severe as this statistic made it appear. First of all, in 1991 the BJP won 20 per cent of the valid votes (see Table 19) whereas contesting 468 seats; while in 2004 it won more than 22 per cent while contesting only 361 seats. Furthermore, the decline in terms of valid votes was not so dramatic compared to 1999 when it won 23.8 per cent of the valid votes, while only contesting 339 seats. This is explainable because the BJP’s performances had been very unequally distributed in geographical terms.

Table 19. Performances of the BJP over 20 years of general elections in India

Year	1984	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004
Per cent of valid votes	7.4	11.4	20.1	20.3	25.6	23.8	22.2
Number of seats won	2	85	120	161	182	182	138
Number of seats contested	229	226	468	471	388	339	361

Source: Election Commission of India

The BJP’s dominance had remained complete in its old strongholds go with back to the Jana Sangh’s days. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP showed an outstanding degree of resilience: it won 25 out of the 29 seats it contested with 48.1 per cent of the valid votes; in Rajasthan, it won 21 out of the 25 seats it contested with 49 per cent of the

valid votes, and in Chhattisgarh, it won 10 of the 11 seats it contested with 47.8 per cent of the valid votes. These regions are those on which Bruce D. Graham had concentrated to show the emerging area of electoral strength of the Jana Sangh in the 1960s. New Delhi was the only 'old' stronghold where the BJP was defeated this time, winning only one seat.

The two most important states where the BJP had made recent inroads and where it recorded a setback in 2004, were Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat. Uttar Pradesh was not a stronghold of Hindu nationalism until the 1990s. In 1989, the BJP was weaker in Uttar Pradesh than in Bihar (it won 7.6 per cent of the valid votes in the former and 11.7 per cent in the latter). Of course, the Ayodhya movement threw the party to power in 1991 (when the BJP multiplied its share of valid votes by a factor of four in two years, with 32.8 per cent of the total) and the party was able to withstand this level of influence until the late 1990s. It seized in 1998 with 36.5 per cent of the valid votes and 52 seats and started to decline in 1999 in terms of valid votes (30 per cent), but not in terms of seats since it won in a record number of electoral constituencies (57 seats). As a result, 2004 manifest a sharp decline in Uttar Pradesh. The BJP gained only 22.2 per cent of the valid votes and ten seats (if the seats in the state of Uttaranchal are included, part of Uttar Pradesh until 2000, then the BJP fell to 13 seats).

The BJP came to power in the 1990s because of its electoral success in Uttar Pradesh – one third of its tally, at least 50 seats, came from that state in the late 1990s. Those days were over. In terms of seats, the party had reverted to its level of 1989. The weakening started in 1999, but speeded during the 2002 state assembly elections when the BJP could only secure 27.1 per cent of the valid votes. The BJP leaders, not depend on the Ayodhya issue any more – either because they did not want to raise it again or because the public was not responsive to it any more – decided to woo the OBC vote by re-inducting Kalyan Singh in the party in February 2004, only a few months before the elections. Nonetheless, Singh could not compete with two parties which were the real winners of the 2004 elections in Uttar Pradesh: the Samajwadi Party which won 35 seats out of 80 and the BSP which got 19 seats. The BJP had lost the general election – and thus power – in Uttar Pradesh this time largely because of these low caste-based parties. In addition, the BJP lost sections of the upper caste vote by running after OBC voters. For example, 18 per cent of the Brahmins voted for the Congress this time.

In 2004, its fortune was also partly wrapped by the electoral verdict in Gujarat. Though it was not defeated there, it lost support, and succeeded to just secure two seats more

than the Congress. In terms of valid votes, the BJP got 47.4 per cent, as against 43.9 per cent for the Congress. In Gujarat, the BJP's support remain around the same as in the 1990s. It gained in 1999 with 52.5 per cent of the vote. Nonetheless, in terms of seats, with 14 victorious candidates, it is as close to 1989 – when it had won 12 seats – as to 1996 – when it had won 16. In May 2004, these results stood in unambiguous contrast with the result of the state assembly elections which had taken place only 18 months before, when the BJP had won a crushing majority. However, these elections had been organised by the BJP Chief Minister, Narendra Modi in the wake of extraordinary riots between Hindus and Muslims in 2002. This event had polarised the religious groups of the state in such a way as the majority community had supported the BJP almost en bloc. Its popularity was clearly much lower in normal conditions.

In 2004, the only states where the BJP further enhanced its performance after recent inroads in the 1990s were in some southern states, a region where the Hindu nationalist movement had been weak for decades, mainly because of its defence of the cause of Hindi as a national language. In Andhra Pradesh and in Tamil Nadu, where the BJP worked mainly through regional allies in 2004 – the TDP and the AIADMK – the party was declining, even though it was already very low. In Kerala and in Karnataka, though, it was making some progress. In Kerala, the BJP crossed the symbolic edge of 10 per cent of valid votes after 15 years of steady electoral gains. In this state, the party depend on the solid network of shakhas (local branches) that the RSS was developing with a great willpower to counter the Communists and the Muslim League. Of course, the main zone of influence that the BJP was carving out in the south was in Karnataka. This was a major development, which shows that the BJP had travelled a long way since the Jana Sangh days. Until the early 1990s, neither the Jana Sangh nor the BJP could win more than a couple of seats in south India. In 1991, the BJP won five seats in the entire south, including four in Karnataka where it polled 28.8 per cent of the valid votes. In 2004, it won 18 seats in the south – all in Karnataka where the BJP, which had won about one fifth of the valid votes in the second half of the 1990s, captured 34.8 per cent of valid votes.

This outstanding achievement further qualifies the notion that the BJP suffered a major setback, especially because it shown that the electoral map of the party was definitely different from that of the Jana Sangh. The rise of the BJP in the 1990s has been sustained by the capacity of the party to make major inroads in the south. So much so, that the share of the north Indian MPs, which represented more than 70 per cent of the

BJP MPs until 1991–96, fell to 61 per cent in 1999, and 56.5 per cent in 2004. The BJP was not only a Hindi belt party, unlike the Jana Sangh which was one during almost its entire career.

As Table 20 shows, the steady decline of the influence of the BJP MPs returned in the Hindi belt – also known as the cow-belt of India because of the strength of the Hindu orthodoxy in the region – may well be one of the reasons for the diminishing interest of the party on Hindutva based issues, like Ayodhya.

Table 20. The share of the Hindi belt MPs of the BJP in 1991–2004

Year	Hindi belt MPs of the BJP	Total BJP MPs	Ratio as percentage
1991	87	120	72.5
1996	119	161	73.9
1998	122	184	66.3
1999	112	183	61
2004	78	138	56.5

Source: Election Commission of India

The notion of a huge defeat of the BJP requires additional nuances, once the observation moves from the BJP to its allies. The very idea of making alliances, instead of going it alone during election time, took a new turn in the 1990s among the BJP leaders when they started systematically to select local partners to penetrate states or social groups where the BJP was weak.

This modus operandi continued to help the party a great deal in many cases in 2004. In Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena remains a very useful local interpreter that facilitated a Hindi-belt oriented BJP to reach beyond the Vindhyas, a region with a specific identity and caste equation. The coalition won 25 out of 48 seats in 2004, with the BJP retaining most of the upper caste vote (48 per cent according to the CSDS exit poll). Meanwhile, the Shiv Sena successfully persuaded significant sections of the Maratha-Kunbi caste

cluster (39 per cent). Likewise, in Punjab, the BJP–SAD (B) swept the poll, winning 11 of the 13 Lok Sabha seats. In Orissa, the BJP–Biju Janata Dal won 18 of the 21 seats. In both cases, the BJP played the role of a junior partner, even more than before. For example, in Punjab, the party won 10.5 per cent of the valid votes, while the SAD (B) gained 34.5 per cent. In Orissa, the BJP won 19.3 per cent (four percentage point less than in 1999). In Bihar, the BJP declined so much, that it trailed behind its ally, the JD (U) with 14.2 per cent of the valid votes, nearly half less than its partner (22.9 per cent). The JD (U) continued to attract large numbers of low caste voters – including Kurmis, caste fellows of its local leader, Nitish Kumar – whereas the BJP was left with pockets of impact among the upper castes.

Nevertheless, in most of the states, the BJP’s allies took a very limited number of seats. In Andhra Pradesh, the TDP, which was the second largest party in the NDA after the 1999 elections won only three seats compared with 29 five years before. In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress could only win two seats compared with eight in 1999. In count to these setbacks, the BJP made an error by dropping some of its allies of 1999 to make new ones in 2004. Tamil Nadu was a case in point. There, the DMK, which had moved allegiance and joined the INC coalition, won 16 seats, while the AIADMK, which had become the BJP’s ally, did not win any. While changes in alliances since the previous general elections facilitated the INC to add 47 seats to its overall tally, the BJP got 27 less seats than in 1999, mostly due to the poor performance of its allies. In fact, the Congress’s allies added 74 seats to the UPA and the BJP’s allies only 51 to the NDA. As a result, the BJP dominated the NDA more effectively than after the 1999 elections since its share of seats had improved from 60 to 73 per cent but the party did not need to congratulate itself for the bad results of its allies anyway.

Table: 21, Electoral Performance of the BJP, 2004 Parliamentary Election

Sr. No.	STATE/UT	Seats			Votes Polled (%)
		Total	Contested	Won	
1	ANDHRA PRADESH	42	9	0	8.41
2	ARUNACHAL PRADESH	2	2	2	53.85
3	ASSAM	14	12	2	22.94
4	BIHAR	40	16	5	14.57

5	GOA	2	2	1	46.83
6	GUJARAT	26	26	14	47.37
7	HARYANA	10	10	1	17.21
8	HIMACHAL PRADESH	4	4	1	44.24
9	JAMMU & KASHMIR	6	6	0	23.04
10	KARNATAKA	28	24	18	34.77
11	KERALA	20	19	0	10.38
12	MADHYA PRADESH	29	29	25	48.13
13	MAHARASHTRA	48	26	13	22.61
14	MANIPUR	2	2	0	20.65
15	MEGHALAYA	2	1	0	8.63
16	MIZORAM	1	-	-	
17	NAGALAND	1	-	-	
18	ORISSA	21	9	7	19.3
19	PUNJAB	13	3	3	10.48
20	RAJASTHAN	25	25	21	49.01
21	SIKKIM	1	-	-	-
22	TAMIL NADU	39	6	0	5.07
23	TRIPURA	2	1	0	7.82
24	UTTAR PRADESH	80	77	10	22.17
25	WEST BENGAL	42	13	0	8.06
26	CHATTISGARH	11	11	10	47.78
27	JHARKHAND	14	14	1	33.01
28	UTTARANCHAL	5	5	3	40.98
29	ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS	1	1	0	33.95
30	CHANDIGARH	1	1	0	35.22
31	DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI	1	1	0	15.56
32	DAMAN & DIU	1	1	0	48.42
33	NCT DELHI	7	7	1	40.67
34	LAKSHADWEEP	1	-	-	-

35	PONDICHERRY	1	1	0	35.65
	TOTAL	543	364	138	22.16%

Source: STATISTICAL REPORT ON GENERAL ELECTIONS, 2004 TO THE 14th LOK SABHA, VOLUME I, Election Commission of India.

Straightaway after the elections, BJP leaders offered their own clarification for the defeat. Departing Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee declared: ‘It is very difficult to say what are all the reasons for the defeat in the elections [. . .] but one impact of the violence was we lost the elections’, clearly an explicit reference to the adverse effect of the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat.¹⁸⁵ Ten days later, L.K. Advani made the opposite comment. In a 40-minute speech to the National Executive Committee of the BJP, he considered that abandon of the Hindu nationalist themes had been one of the reasons for the party’s defeat.

Had the BJP lost because of Hindutva or because of its neglect of Hindutva? Definitely Muslims resorted to strategic voting to help defeat the party whenever they could. But they had been doing so, more or less systematically, for years now in spite of the repeated attempts by the BJP at persuading them. None of the Hindutva themes – including the building of a Ram temple at Ayodhya – was a crucial issue during the general election campaign. However, the BJP was so closely recognized with Hindu nationalist ideology that it did not need to champion it to be seen as associated with it. The defeat of the BJP candidates in the constituencies where Ayodhya, Varanasi and Mathura were situated replicated the diminishing influence of Hindu nationalism over voters. In these three places, the BJP had won repeatedly during the 1990s. In Uttar Pradesh, two champions of the demand for the building of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, Vinay Katiyar – the Uttar Pradesh state BJP president – and Swami Chinmayanand – a former Union minister of state for home affairs – lost their parliamentary seats. But Ayodhya was not an issue in the 2004 elections and the defeat of the BJP, thus, was not a vote for secularism. The CSDS exit poll shows, for example, that there was, among the public, ‘a widespread support for a ban on religious conversion’¹⁸⁶, a traditional demand of the Hindu nationalist movement.

¹⁸⁵ Central Chronicle (2004) Central Chronicle, 13 June.

¹⁸⁶ A. Datar, “A vote for secular politics”, The Hindu, 20 May: AE-2. de Swaan, A. (1973) Coalition Theories and Cabinet Formations: A Study of Formal Theories of Coalition Formation Applied to Nine European Parliaments After 1918, London: Elsevier.

Why then, was the BJP-led coalition voted out of power? Probably for socio-economic reasons.

Following the 1999 general election, Yadav et al. had strongly argued that the BJP trusted on a 'new social bloc' since the NDA parties secured 'the support of 60 per cent of upper caste Hindus and 52 per cent of the dominant Hindu peasant castes (which are not classified as OBCs, such as Jats, Marathas, Patidars, Reddys and Kammas)'.¹⁸⁷

For five years the NDA pursued an economic policy which favoured these groups (at the very least the other ones – which formed a vast majority of Indian society – had this impression).¹⁸⁷

The 2004 exit poll conducted by the CSDS showed that 26 per cent of the 'very poor' and 18 per cent of the 'poor' considered that their economic condition had deteriorated under the NDA Government. Logically enough, among NDA voters, 35 per cent declared that their condition had improved compared to only 22 per cent of Congress voters.¹⁸⁸ One of the key allies of the BJP, the TDP, was clearly punished for what was perceived to be its 'pro-rich policy': 54 per cent of the voters interviewed by the CSDS team considered that only the rich profited from the NDA policy; 39 per cent said that the TDP-led state government had only developed the state capital, Hyderabad, and 81 per cent were of the view that the information technology revolution – one of the priorities of the TDP Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu – had not enhanced the lives of ordinary people¹⁸⁹, at a time when suicides by over indebted farmers multiplied.

The overall idea that the NDA had followed a pro-rich policy which profited only the urban middle class is possibly an exaggeration since a larger portion of society profited by the economic dynamism showed by India during the NDA Government, but those who trailed behind disliked its policy because inequalities increased. Economic liberalisation facilitated the nouveaux riches to make progress more rapidly than the others – and they showed it.

As a result, the support base of the BJP continued to trust on the same 'social bloc' as in 1999, but this bloc shrank. The CSDS data show that the richer an Indian citizen was, the more likely he was to vote for the BJP. Incidentally, a similar correlation

¹⁸⁷ Y. Yadav, "Electoral politics in the time of change: India's third electoral system, 1989–99", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21–28 August, 1999: p. 2393–9.

¹⁸⁸ K.C. Suri, "Reform: The elites want it, the masses don't", *The Hindu*, 20 May 2004: AE-7.

¹⁸⁹ The Hindu 'Poll graphics'. Online. Available at: <http://www.hinduonnet.com/elections2004/index.htm> (accessed 30 September 2004).

applies in the case of education, namely college graduates and post-graduates vote much more for the BJP than non-literates.

Naturally, these variables are reflected in the caste background of BJP voters. Forty-two per cent of the upper caste people voted for the BJP (two times more than for the INC) and only 11 per cent of the Dalits do the same (as against 28 per cent for the INC). In spite of its repeated attempts at wooing the Dalits – as evidenced by its promotion of Ambedkar as one its favourite icons¹⁹⁰ – the BJP still failed to attract a substantial number of electors from the most important of the SCs such as the Chamars of North India (who support the BSP).

Until now, the BJP could do without the Dalit vote and with the social bloc which supported the party. Why was this not the case in 2004? This time, the BJP was perhaps affected by two simultaneous developments. First, the upper caste urban middle class, though better educated, was showing less interest in the act of voting. In India, in contrast to western democracies, the turnout of postgraduates was 50 per cent lower than that of those who only went to middle school (41 per cent compared to 82.6 per cent in 1998). Likewise, voter turnout by upper castes was much lower than that of the Dalits (60.2 per cent compared to 75.1 per cent in 1998). Besides, voter turnout of those with the highest income was ten percentage points below that of the poorest (46.6 per cent compared to 57.1 per cent in 1998). Finally, voter turnout in urban constituencies was much below that of the rural ones (in 1999, it was 53.7 per cent compared to 61.5 per cent.¹⁹¹ These trends had affected the electoral scenarios of the BJP since it could not mobilise all its supporters at the time of elections. The social bloc might have remained the same, but those who cast their votes were less numerous. In Delhi, the turnout was just above 45 per cent, in Gujarat, just above 47.1 per cent, in Uttar Pradesh just above 48 per cent. Certainly, 75 per cent of the Patidars and 60 per cent of the upper castes voted for the BJP in Gujarat but these big percentages represented smaller groups than before.

In any case, this explanation is only a small part of the story. A true understanding of the 2004 electoral setback of the BJP should lead us to the specificities of politics at the state level, largely because the state have become the most relevant unit of politics in India. In several states, the support of the social bloc that supported the BJP in 1999

¹⁹⁰ C. Jaffrelot, “Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste, London: Hurst. 2005

¹⁹¹ Y. Yadav, “Understanding the second democratic upsurge”, in F. Frankel et al. (eds) *Transforming India: Social and Political Dynamics of Democracy*, Delhi: OUP. 2000.

had begun to fissure. Uttar Pradesh was a case in point. Certainly the BJP retained 77 per cent of the votes among the Banya community, but this was a very small community. In contrast, the Party could keep only 58 per cent of the large Brahmin community because 18 per cent of them had opted for the Congress, as stated earlier. There may be some reasons for the loss of the BJP's support base among the upper castes: the return of prominent OBC leader, Kalyan Singh, to the helm of the Uttar Pradesh BJP possibly displeased them and the BJP's repeated alliances with a Dalit-based party, the BSP, had the same effect. Instead Brahmins, who had paid allegiance to the Nehru–Gandhi family till the 1980s, felt attracted by the entry of Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi into the fight. Likewise, the BJP only retain 50 per cent of the Rajput vote, while the SP gained 28 per cent of them.

However, besides state-centred explanations for the BJP defeat, there are others with a pan-Indian importance. The Congress had definitely been responsible for the BJP's setback in two respects. First, the Congress's leader, Sonia Gandhi, who had not been taken seriously by Hindu nationalist groups demonstrated great campaigning capabilities. Besides Hindu nationalist efforts to criticize her foreign origin had probably backfired, and inclined to transform her into a victimised target of xenophobes. Second, the Congress was quicker than the BJP in adjusting to the realities of the rise of regional parties and its consequence, the new era of coalitions. Therefore, Congress leaders chose their allies much more wisely than the BJP this time.

More notably, the BJP had been affected by the anti-incumbency response that the Indian electorate had developed over the years. Reasonably enough, this factor did not play any role in the states where the party was in command for less than six months, namely in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. In these states the party continued to benefit from the same sentiment of anti-incumbency that had removed the Congress from power. The variable of anti-incumbency had some effect in Gujarat, where the BJP was in office, and in Uttar Pradesh, where it was part of the ruling coalition eight months before. Overall, the electorate's anti-incumbency response affected about half of the BJP's outgoing MPs, since those that had been re-nominated ultimately lost in the election.

Finally, within the Sangh Parivar, the line of conduct pursued by the Vajpayee Government created some dissatisfaction within the VHP. This organisation overtly dissociated itself from the NDA Government when it turned out that the Prime Minister would not support the building of a temple in Ayodhya. Two other components of the

Sangh Parivar, the BMS, the largest labour union in India today, and the SJM, the economic wing of the RSS, disliked the economic liberalisation policy implemented by the NDA Government. The RSS itself shared these reservations and therefore did not enthusiastically support the BJP during the general election campaign. For instance, soon after the general election, the spokesperson of the RSS told The Hindu that:

“The grassroots traditional voter and cadre of the RSS was not so enthusiastic about the BJP. There were some organisational differences. Our cadres did work [for the BJP at the time of elections], but there was resentment on several issues, Hindutva and also economic issues.”

The 2004 defeat was considered by most of the components of the Sangh Parivar to be a rejection of the moderate line of conduct advocated by Vajpayee. The General Secretary of the VHP, Praveen Togadia declared soon after the elections, with his traditionally nuanced sense of rhetoric:

The Bharatiya Janata Party betrayed the Hindus. The BJP left its core ideology of Hindutva and trust on the basis of which they had been voted to power. For votes they tied up with the jehadis.¹⁹²

The RSS spokesperson, Ram Madhav, said almost the same thing. He admitted that ‘there was a perception over the last four to five years that there had been dilution of the Hindutva ideology’. The RSS naturally wanted the BJP to return to a Hindutva-led programme in order to bring back the imagination of the people.

Among the other variables stated above, the role of the other political parties was vital. In the 1990s, the Hindu nationalist party ended to be an objectionable coalition partner. Opportunist candidates to some alliance with the BJP, which had stigmatised this party in the 1980s unexpectedly began to appear from all quarters as soon as the BJP emerged as a powerful political force. These partners even came from within the fold of the Socialist Party, with George Fernandes associating himself with the BJP in 1995 and Sharad Yadav doing so in 1999. At the same time, the BJP became adept at coalition making, exemplified by the formation of the NDA. However, the rules of the coalition

¹⁹² The Hindu, 15 May, 2004.

game implied that the BJP agenda got diluted, mostly since former socialists and other self-proclaimed secularists could not support Hindutva-oriented objectives, such as the building of a Ram temple in Ayodhya, the proposed abolition of Article 370 of the Constitution regarding the autonomy of Jammu and Kashmir, and the calls for the introduction of a Uniform Civil Code. With the approval of the RSS, the BJP put these issues on the backburner. Hence the contradiction in which the party found itself after the 2004 general election: on the one hand the RSS made it clear that it wanted the BJP to return to its core ideology, but on the other hand several constituents of the NDA had strong objections to this approach.

However, the 2004 general election had transformed the context considerably for the BJP's allies. First, the BJP turned out not to be an important electoral asset to some of its partners, like the JD (U) in Bihar, which won in their own strongholds. Second, the general atmosphere had changed in such a way as the dominant repertoire was not as much saturated with Hindu nationalism as it used to be in previous elections. Instead, social issues were back on the front stage – and the BJP had precisely ignored issues that concerned millions of Indians at its own cost. On the other hand, the INC emerged as the natural spokesman for the masses. In this changed context, coalition partners of the BJP – who swallowed the Gujarat pogrom without objecting – began to concern about their Muslim voters. They also grew worried about any return to a more aggressive Hindu nationalist agitation. For example, soon after the NDA's defeat, the JD (U) informed the BJP that it would leave the coalition if the party returned openly to adopt Hindutva issues. Right after the general election, the National Executive Committee of the JD (U) issued a resolution to this effect. It declared that:

We joined the National Democratic Alliance only after the three controversial issues (construction of a Ram temple at Ayodhya, Article 370 and Uniform Civil Code) had been removed from the agenda of the NDA. If any effort is now made to revive them, we shall have to take another road.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ The Hindu, 2 August, 2004.

The TDP, another BJP ally, had adopted a similar line of conduct to that of the JD (U). For instance, the TDP's spokesperson announced that 'if the BJP chooses to adopt the communal agenda, we will sever ties with it'.¹⁹⁴

Perhaps for the first time, the party seemed to be virtually divided between moderates and radicals. For long, this division had been a functional one: the party projected a moderate face – Vajpayee – when it was in need of a widely acceptable leader for constituting coalitions; it projected a more militant one – Advani – when it needed to galvanise the party activists for Hindutva-oriented agitations. After the 2004 elections, both strategies were debated in the Party as two full-fledged alternatives. Before the hardliners had taken up the propositions from the VHP or even the RSS, the moderates launched an unexpected offensive. Vajpayee, who had declined the post of leader of the opposition – which instead was taken up by Advani – argued that the BJP had lost partly because of the mismanagement of the Gujarat riot by Modi. This move, at least, moved the debate to another level, thus avoiding Vajpayee's opponents from blaming him for the NDA's defeat.

In August, the BJP hosted a three-day chintan baithak (brain storming session) in Goa in order to take stock of the party's post-electoral situation and to analyse the reasons for its defeat. On the one hand, Madan Das Devi, representing the RSS, declared that the Sangh expected the BJP to remain firm on Hindutva and publicize its ideology. On the other hand, Vajpayee stressed the need to keep the NDA intact. The ten point 'document of conclusions' resolved to focus on ideological orientation and to continue with the NDA experiment. It maintained a moderate tone, in the sense that the meeting's resolutions did not even mention the word Hindutva.

At the same time, it devoted itself to get closer to the RSS exactly when this movement had decided to monitor more effectively the BJP's organisation and strategy. In August 2004, a new administrative position was created within the Party, that of 'regional organisation secretary' to improve the coordination between the Delhi headquarters and the state units. It was significant that the first six holders of this new position all came from the RSS, in fact, they were all pracharaks (full-time cadres).¹⁹⁵ On the other hand, the reshuffling of the party leadership which took place after the defeat did not

¹⁹⁴ The Hindu, 5 August, 2004.

¹⁹⁵ The Hindu, 7 August, 2004.

make any significant change: Venkaiah Naidu remained as the BJP's party president, Pramod Mahajan kept his post of General Secretary, Arun Jaitley and Rajnath Singh made the transition from the Union Government to become the Party's secretary and spokesperson respectively.

Based on the August meeting in Goa, it seem that the BJP had either not yet made up its mind and was still wavering between two strategies, or that it may try to combine both strategies. In terms of organisation, it would rely more on the RSS cadres, whereas in terms of electoral politics, it would continue to value the NDA and therefore retain the same leadership. This was consistent with the assessment of the situation by the RSS. The Sangh Parivar knew that any return to a radical brand of Hindu nationalist politics by the BJP would isolate its allies and delay the party's return to power. Though the BJP cadres were not happy with the dilution of its Hindutva agenda by the BJP, the RSS leaders were happier with the NDA experiment.

The attempt at combining the pursuit of the NDA experiment and a closer association with the RSS also reflected the thinking of Advani, who should have been the natural candidate for a radical reorientation of the party. In March 2004, Advani articulated very clearly the party's dilemma:

A country as vast and pluralistic as India cannot be ruled only by an ideological party such as the Jana Sangh. It has to be an aggregative party [. . .] I propounded that either we limit our objectives as an ideological party and fight election in some states or corporations, but if we aspire to become a ruling party in India, we cannot be limited as an ideological party [. . .] To rule India, we have to be inclusive.¹⁹⁶

Government policy has always been an important parameter in the shaping of the Jana Sangh's strategy, and then of the BJP. Whenever the BJP thought that the state would not strictly enforce the secular principles of the Constitution, they opted to agitate and unleash communal violence. When they feared repression, their strategy was more circumspect. Although the INC under Indira and then Rajiv Gandhi indulged in a new form of communalisation of politics, and the BJP grabbed this opportunity to enforce its own ethos, the INC in 2004 fought the general election on a secularist plank and the

¹⁹⁶ The Hindu, 23 March, 2004.

UPA had been formed on a secularist platform. In fact, the strongest cementing force in the coalition was the opposition to Hindu nationalism.

In nutshell, 2004 Lok Sabha election indicates a watershed election that completely surprised and nullified the dominant belief and the popular perception generated by the media and pollsters that BJP will again come back to power. Very few people thought that there were chances of a NDA defeat. Even the Congress leadership, initially, during the first phase of election was not confident enough for its victory. But this drummed-up ‘Hegemonic Prophecy’ projecting the wish fulfilment of the vocal, powerful and the rich proved to be wrong.

There was a prevalent ‘India-shining’ and ‘Feel Good’ campaign perpetrated by the BJP, which did not appeal to common people. Interestingly, in 2004, BJP was also routed in its traditional strongholds of urban centres. Nobody could ever think that Congress would emerge as the single largest party with 145 seats in this election. On the other hand, the NDA got only 189 seats with BJP lowering its tally from 182 seats in 1999 to 138 seats in 2004—a loss of 44 seats for BJP and 89 seats for NDA. By contrast, the Congress and its allies together got 222 seats, a gain of 69 seats from 1999 for the alliance and a gain of 31 seats for the Congress.

The election analysis of 2004 raised hue and cry among the political analysts, commentators and the media. The outcome of this election was almost puzzled. The verdict also reveals the fact that the common people of our country do not take the mainstream media very seriously at least in the case of ‘predicting’ elections. Moreover, this verdict reflects the political assertiveness and matured political consciousness of the Indian electorate. In a comfortable political environment, the BJP preponed this election by 5 months in April-May that was scheduled in October 2004 after winning the assembly elections of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in December 2003.

The verdict of 2004 was fundamentally different from the 1996 when neither the Congress nor the BJP could form the government. It was different from the 1996 United Front alternative because the BJP at that time was still a rising force and had the potentiality to reckon with which was proved in the successive elections of 1998 and 1999. Though BJP had a dismal performance in 2004; it was still the chief opposition party in the Parliament at least in numerical terms.

However, there was an argument given by some political commentators that the 2004 verdict was definitely a protest-vote against BJP but it was not a mandate for any particular party. Secondly, this verdict cannot be seen as a verdict against Hindutva and economic reforms as argued by Pratap Bhanu Mehta. It is true that this election was not a single-issue election but it would be rather amateurish to say that 2004 verdict was a fractured mandate because it does not present a comprehensive picture of political reality. To say that “2004 election was not a vote against Hindutva or economic reforms”—this argument only complicates things which is otherwise very crystal clear. To some extent, this election was a socio-political response towards economic reforms. The whole India Shining Campaign, which showcased the BJP, was only meant for upper and upper middle classes. The neo-liberal economic policies which were implemented for over a decade only benefited the dominant alliance of ruling classes in India and contributed to mass misery, unemployment, regional disparities, class-income disparities and agricultural crisis leading to farmer’s suicides. The key issue for BJP was economic growth and not economic development for the vast majority. BJP had a vision of 2020 to build India as a superpower. For BJP, the Sensex became the parameter for judging India’s prosperity. But the social reality only reflected a prosperous India for the top 20% of the Indian population while the rest were doomed in hopelessness. All these factors culminated in the form of a popular anger against the ruling establishment and the ‘Feel Good Factor’ turned out to be a flop show for the BJP.

Apart from being a protest vote against the BJP, this vote was also a reaction to the process of economic reforms that can be further proved by the results of both Vidhan Sabha and Lok Sabha polls in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, which were held simultaneously. The IMF-World Bank poster boy Chandra Babu Naidu and his party were completely routed both in Assembly and Parliamentary elections in 2004. In Andhra Pradesh Assembly, out of total 294 seats the TDP got 47 seats while its alliance partner BJP secured only 2 seats making the NDA tally of only 49 seats.

It is also hard to say that Hindutva did not make a difference to the electoral outcome, simply because in Gujarat, within one and a half year the BJP faced serious problems. The December election that followed the Gujarat pogrom in 2002 witnessed a two-third majority for the BJP. In 2004 Lok Sabha, in an Assembly segment’s leads the Congress was in a majority, leading in 92 out of 182 seats. Even in the Lok Sabha, out of 26 seats there was a neck to neck fight as Congress got 12 seats while the BJP managed to get

14 seats: 6 seats less than that of 1999 tally. Moreover, the BJP got tremendous setbacks in its traditional bastion of Hindi speaking North India. Barring Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh BJP and its allies had lost a good number of seats and vote share that became a costly affair for them. In eight important states of North India namely, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand and Uttaranchal; BJP and its allies lost 58 seats. Thus, out of 89 seats that the NDA lost in this election, the North India contributed to a loss of 58 seats (in percentage terms a loss of over 65% seats) and a loss of almost 7% of votes on an average. This can be interpreted as a declining tendency of the Hindutva forces in the Hindi heartland from where the Hindutva movement itself was launched. In recent past, there had been growing ideological polarization between the BJP led NDA and the rest on the issue of secularism. BJP was currently seen as an anti-system party as it is opposed to secularism—a foundational principle of the Indian political system. Thus, 2004 election marked an election for tolerance and pluralism apart from the verdict against both economic reforms and communalism.

BJP did not make Hindutva an important issue in this election may be because they were too pre-occupied with ‘India Shining’ campaign or maybe they had a fear of losing some votes if Hindutva and Gujarat became the issue. This trend of moderate line on the part of BJP was questioned by the important elements of Sangh Parivar like the VHP and some senior leaders like Uma Bharti who knows well that extremism had always given richer electoral dividends for BJP.

The role of identities like caste and religion that previously set the agenda of Indian politics had also shown a minimizing tendency after this election. In fact, the most significant outcome of 2004 election had been the shift in the foci of India’s electoral politics from identitarian mobilisation towards a politics of issues and interests. These identity blocked in the name of upper caste consolidation behind BJP, Dalit mobilisation under Mayavati’s BSP and Yadav-Muslim combination in favour of Mulayam’s SP became very evident in the Parliamentary elections of 1996, 1998 and 1999. This type of caste and religion based mobilisation is more seen in north India than any other parts of the country, although a minimalist degree or intensity of caste alignment with specific political parties and its appendage symbolic issues centering on the factors of caste and community can be also observed in southern, western and north-eastern India. But, after 2004 verdict, the issues of the day were neither Mandal nor Mandir. Material issues and economic interests centering on State vs. Market

debate were making the headlines. A resurgence of class issues was being noticed after the 2004 verdict.

Thus, it can be said that a secular space for interest and issue based politics was in the making which can show a glorious destiny for Indian politics. Therefore, the 2004 election can be viewed as a changing discourse from identity based politics which was dominant in the 1990s to a more issue and interest based politics with the changing political reconfigurations. No doubt, the dimensions of caste and religion are still haunting the battleground of electoral politics in India, but the verdict of 2004 compels us to think positively about the possibility of an alternative that goes beyond the aspects of identities.