

# Why BJP Partly Lost Its Way In Rajasthan

- Party misjudged local political relations ● It imported the 'wrong' caste leaders ● Parachuting a Brahmin debutant MLA into the CM's position proved costly ● Farmer protests took a toll

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For decades, Rajasthan has been a *jhula*-state swinging hard between BJP and Congress, with opposing camps locked in

searing debates on its streets and village *chabutaras*. This year, however, the state wavered.

In 2014 and 2019, BJP did not only sweep the state, it also gained a 25 percentage point vote-share advantage. This time, while it did secure most seats, it received only 12 percentage points more votes. For the first time since 1996, the national rivals have both secured seats in double digits: BJP 14 and Congress-led INDIA 11.

**Meena-Gurjar miscalculation** | It all began last year, when BJP decided to parachute a Brahmin and debutant MLA into the CM's position (the first Brahmin in 33 years to occupy the seat in Rajasthan), swiping aside both the two-time CM and royal Vasundhara Raje and the silverback MP Kirodi Lal Meena. And so, in one fell swoop, Modi alienated the powerful Meena community – losing 4 of 6 seats in Meena-dominated eastern Rajasthan – and the many Rajasthanis for whom Raje is “the Maharani”. In the east, Om Birla, Modi's long-time associate and outgoing Lok Sabha speaker, scraped to a narrow victory against a BJP rebel. If in 2019 he won by 2.8L votes, this time he got only around 40k more.

BJP missed another major opportunity by drastically misjudging local political relations. In 2019, Gurjars, another powerful local community, abandoned Congress for refusing to make their neta, Sachin Pilot, the state's CM. This alone could have gifted BJP several seats, but it didn't. Sidelining many Gurjar heavyweights, BJP fielded but one imported Gurjar, believing that caste identity alone would do the trick. But in Rajasthan,

as in much of India, political loyalties do not work in identitarian ways. Substantially, they track vertical, cross-caste patronal relations, which imported candidates lack. This is also how BJP lost Tonk-Sawai Madhopur, which went to a local neta fielded by Congress. This is how it lost Jhunjhunu, Churu, Sikar, Barmer and Nagaur, where BJP fielded “the wrong” import-Jats.

**Bhil blow** | BJP's misjudgment of local affairs, which cost it dearly in this election, has much to do with its centralisation. Party surveys, which give critical local feedback, and were historically conducted for BJP by



committed party workers, are increasingly passed over to professionals, often Delhi-based youths on bikes prone to faking the surveys.

A young independent Rajput, Ravindra Singh Bhati, generated much media buzz as an anti-establishment rebel, in whom young Rajputs placed their hopes. Bhati lost, but the real star of this election, whom the media overlooked, is Rajkumar Roat, a Bhil from Bhartiya Adivasi Party, who beat a BJP silverback in Banswara by almost 2.5L votes. This is more than an isolated

victory. It displaces Congress as BJP's main rival in southern Rajasthan, where from now on the battle will rage between BJP and BAP.

In northern Rajasthan, BJP's anti-farmer policies took a further chip out of their mandate. Much as in Haryana and Punjab, in Ganganagar the Jats and Jat-Sikhs who led farmer protests against corporate price control of agri products, took revenge on BJP by voting for Congress.

**Urban bastion** | BJP nonetheless held on to urban constituencies. Here, inflation and unemployment had little effect on BJP loyalties and Ram Mandir did have its desired effect. BJP also brought scores of urban middle-class women to the polls, many for the first time.

Fears of Rajput rage against BJP in response to outgoing Union minister Rupala's anti-Kshatriya comments proved unfounded. On the contrary, Rajputs rallied around BJP this year in Rajasthan. In the very Jalore-Sirohi constituency where Rajputs took public anti-BJP oaths, the Congress candidate, son of Rajasthan's three-time CM Ashok Gehlot, lost by 2L votes to BJP. Rajputs also helped carry BJP to victory in Kota, and delivered its biggest state victory in Rajsamand, a Rajput stronghold where the party won by nearly 4L votes.

BJP's Agnipath army recruitment scheme backfired. In Sikar, which sends more men to the army than any other district in India, this resulted in the surprising election of a CPM MP.

Laying bare every one of BJP's troubles – from problematic army reforms to its sidelining of local politics to farmer neglect – Rajasthan is BJP's wake-up call. It can as ill-afford to snub India's countryside, where two-thirds of the country still lives, as try to displace the complex world of local political relations with a centralised politics of identity-as-caste.

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