

2024: Vote What You 'Believe' In

Analysts complain how much Indian politics revolves around social relations rather than ideologies. But this time, from Hindi belt to the south, for BJP and for INDIA, it may be different

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This year's elections will not be a battle of political parties. These will be a battle of political principles. At the same time, the 18th Lok Sabha will hold few surprises. With BJP facing no national opposition to speak of, we can safely predict that NDA will retain, and most likely expand, its parliamentary supermajority.

Psephologists twiddle their thumbs | The alliance is expected to occupy between 358 and 398 seats out of a total 543 in the House of the People (it now holds 351). In which case, it will have a 66-73% majority, up from the current 65%. These are conservative estimates. With the gains made by BJP in last year's assembly elections, when it wrested Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh away from Congress, the one possible surprise may be the margin of victory.

● To underline, the interest of these elections will lie less in who wins – psephologists have already gone off to nap – and more in the political logics that we will see in action. Unfolding before us will be a struggle between the politics of relations and the politics of ideology.

Modi 'image' becomes a civilisational platform | Analysts of Indian politics have long observed (and complained) that a lot of Indian politics revolves around social relations rather than ideologies; that patronage is rife and political messaging targets particular groups – castes, super-castes, classes, 'vote banks' – not general principles.

● Parties resemble guru cults instead of platform-bound collectives. And elections are popularity contests, in which people vote for colourful personalities, not universal ideals or national policies. BJP is no doubt the world's biggest personality cult focused on 'Modi magic'. But the party is not only about that.

● While working his magic – from holograms to mountain caves – Modi has also laboured hard to construct a mega ideology, a civilisational platform with messages for both India and the world.

Bharat brand grows...Californian | A future-facing, space-bound India, which is also in touch with its

ancient roots, is now a big brand, at least inside India.

● While foreigners are still trying to work out how to pronounce 'Bharat', India's streets buzz with patriotic pride in its globally visible achievements – from the moon landing to South Asia's first G20 summit and the economy snatching Britain's fifth place.

● There is also the world's largest new meditation centre in Varanasi, a Guinness World Record yoga session that had almost 1.5L people bending over in



unison in Gujarat, and another Guinness World Record with more than 2 million diyas lit in Ayodhya.

● This new Bharat is Hindu, but increasingly in the Californian sense of yoga-vegetarianism-meditation.

Old-fashioned Hindutva is slowly scaling down | In a survey conducted recently across Indian cities, 51% supported the new Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, while 49% thought it an electoral ruse. For the first time last year,

this correspondent heard working-class Hindus in northern India describe Ayodhya temple as a distraction from what they want and what India needs.

Ideology: Advantage BJP in UP | As BJP sweeps away regional parties across the north, the politics of ideology will become increasingly important.

● UP, which sends 80 members to Lok Sabha, used to be a fiercely competitive multi-party state, with three or four parties playing political leapfrog for decades. No party won a re-election to the state assembly for decades until BJP did in 2022. In that politically fragmented setting, one could win with 30-35% of the votes using the politics of relations to target particular groups, like Yadavs or Dalits.

● Now that BSP and Congress have virtually vanished from UP (Congress gained 2.5% of votes in 2022), and only two parties remain in play (BJP and SP), victory will require up to 50% of the votes. No social group comprises half of the electorate and parties will need ideology. Something similar is happening across many states in the Hindi belt, where ideology will prove decisive.

Ideology: Advantage Congress in the south | It is precisely ideology – cogent narratives of regional identity shading into sub-nationalisms – that have staved off BJP in the south, so far. In last year's assembly elections, Congress mobilised regional ideology in Karnataka to take the state back from BJP, as it did to hold on to Telangana.

● In the north, while INDIA alliance members are speaking quietly among themselves, releasing no clear public messages, BJP is projecting Bharat's new ideology from the megaphones. On its own, the party actually holds a slim 55% majority in Parliament. To retain this, it will need to sweep the Hindi belt. And it will.

● This politics of ideology, with a coherent political platform, national ideals and global principles may appear more mature and 'modern' than India's bad old personalism, paternalism, and the caste-ism of vote banks. But it is precisely such politics, focused as it is on local relations, affairs and groups that has been the bulwark of India's fragile relative peace. A turn to totalising, doctrinaire ideology threatens this.

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