

Art of Winning Indian Elections

Diego Maiorano



*The New BJP: Modi and the Making
of the World's Largest Political Party*

By Nalin Mehta

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Nalin Mehta's new book, *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party*, seeks to answer a key question that virtually all analysts of Indian politics have been asked: why does Narendra Modi's party keep winning the elections? This question truly represents a puzzle, considering the numerous crises that India has faced since Modi became prime minister in 2014, including a faltering economy, high unemployment, the aftermath of demonetisation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mehta's answer is multi-faceted, complex and structured around the five parts of this long but eminently readable book. First, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wins because it has expanded its social base, transforming itself from a mainly urban, upper caste party to one that draws considerable support from rural areas, including all Hindu communities, especially the Other Backward Classes. Second, the BJP wins because compared to its rivals, it better conveys political messages across various platforms, particularly social media. Third, the BJP wins because its core ideological foundations largely remain unchanged; but what has changed is India's society that has become more receptive of its ideas – from muscular nationalism to Hindutva. Fourth, the BJP wins because it has the backing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which helps the party garner support through its capillary network of *shakhas* (branches) and sister organisations. Furthermore, Mehta highlights how the RSS and BJP brokered a division of labour, with the former focusing on a cultural agenda – centred around religion and education – whereas the latter's message centres on issues like economic development and national security. Finally, the BJP, despite its extreme degree of centralisation in decision-making, is a different beast in different parts of the country, as shown by Mehta through his examination of the functioning of the party in the North-East (which is now completely controlled by the BJP) and its southern bastion of Karnataka.

Some of the ground and arguments covered in the book will be familiar to observers of Indian politics, but the writing of the 'new BJP' story in a coherent manner is worth engaging with. What is truly distinctive is the impressive array of data that Mehta has collected for this book. These include an original dataset containing the caste of Uttar Pradesh's political parties' office holders and elected representatives; a dataset based on 11,588 BJP documents, analysed with artificial intelligence techniques; a large number of dashboards that use publicly available datasets usefully made available at pollniti.com; and, finally, several interviews. This wealth of data is what makes the book stand out whether one agrees with Mehta's data interpretation or not.

However, this book suffers from two major shortcomings. The first is a disappointing engagement with scholarly literature. This is to be understood if one considers the author to be a journalist – which he is. But Mehta also wears another hat, that of an academic, and in the latter case, one would have expected a different type of engagement with the work of colleagues. For instance, in Chapter 3 (The Caste Game), Mehta engages with the work of Jaffrelot and Vernier (J&V) on the social base of the BJP and claims that they are “wrong” (p. 26). While this view is fine, it must also be noted that J&V’s work is presented in the book in a very partial manner, omitting the part of their work that substantially agrees with Mehta’s, that is, about how there has been a growing “plebeianisation” of the BJP over the last few years. Furthermore, Mehta claims that J&V’s caste database (managed by the Trivedi Centre for Political Data [TCPD] at Ashoka University) is empirically faulty “because they read the caste-names wrong”, implying that the database relied on a simplistic understanding of caste. However, the methodology behind the TCPD’s database is, in fact, far more complex and largely corresponds with the one Mehta uses himself. Finally, defining a colleague’s work as “shoddy” “at best” (p. 30) is not the best way to engage with scholars with whom one has a difference of opinion.

The second shortcoming (which in Mehta's view is, on the contrary, one of the strengths of the book) is the attempt to write a book which sets aside the author’s personal judgments and opinions and to let the data speak for itself. In my view, this is an impossible aim to achieve, and it also runs the risk of omitting important topics for the sake of remaining as neutral as possible. To elaborate further, one obvious element is the use of language, which cannot be neutral, especially when dealing with a divisive figure such as Modi. For instance, if one refers to the Hindu-Muslim clashes in Gujarat in 2002 as “riots” (Mehta’s choice) or “pogroms”, there clearly is a value judgement behind the choice of the words. Similarly, if one writes about the 2020 national lockdown and the migrant crisis that followed without mentioning the crucial fact that migrants were given four hours’ notice before all means of transportation came to a halt (Mehta's choice), then one is clearly failing to attribute responsibility for the crisis.

Further, Mehta chooses not to mention the implication of Modi’s rise for Indian democracy – a topic widely discussed in the literature as well as on national and international media. While one might argue that this was not the focus of the book, it is nevertheless surprising that the author omits this issue apart from a few lines, mentioning the views of Modi’s critics. This is rather surprising, given the recent downgrading of India’s democracy by all major indexes measuring the quality of democracy worldwide. This was indeed an interesting question centrally linked to the theme of the book: why does Modi keep winning despite the erosion of democratic norms?

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the book remains a valuable addition to the literature on the BJP. While one may disagree with Mehta’s interpretation of the data, the wealth of information on which it is based is truly impressive and some of the findings will surprise observers of Indian politics.

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Dr Diego Maiorano is a Senior Assistant Professor of Indian History at the University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’ and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at dmaiorano@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.