

ISAS Brief

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The 2019 General Election in Odisha: BJD vs. BJP?

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and many leaders of the country's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) recently visited Bhubaneswar, capital of the State of Odisha. Their objective was to prepare the ground for a successful campaign in the next State Assembly election in 2019. They hope to capitalise on the second place the party secured in the panchayat (local bodies) election held in February 2017. Despite the BJP's apparently burgeoning power base in the state, it seems difficult for the party to win the 2019 election due to the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) government's perceivably good performance in the state. However, the BJP's future in Odisha will also depend on several other factors such as the sustainability of the 'Modi wave' of popularity and the performance of the BJD government between now and the polling in 2019.

Sojin Shin¹

BJP's National Executive Meeting in Bhubaneswar

India's national ruling party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), organised an executive meeting in Bhubaneswar, capital of the subnational state of Odisha, on 15 and 16 April 2017. The meeting attracted considerable attention because those who attended it included not only

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi but also all 13 state chief ministers belonging to the BJP, including Uttar Pradesh's Yogi Adityanath, and their deputies, besides 45 union (or federal) ministers. Modi was welcomed at the Biju Patnaik Airport by the State's Chief Secretary A P Padhi and Director General of Police K B Singh, on behalf of the Odisha government. Odisha's Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik did not do so as the purpose of Modi's visit was 'political' work of attending a party conclave. During the BJP roadshow, Modi got off his vehicle and walked towards the people waiting for him for hours in the summer heat and greeted them. During his visit, he also felicitated descendants of families associated with the Paika armed rebellion against the British East India Company in Orissa (as Odisha was known) in 1817 and the descendants of other families of freedom fighters in the State.

Inaugurating the BJP meeting held at Janta Maidan in Bhubaneswar, the party's President Amit Shah emphasised several points.² First, he said that the party's victory in the February-March elections in four States – Goa, Manipur, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh – meant the end of politics of caste, dynasty, and the appeasement of minorities, and the parallel emergence of a new era of 'politics of performance'. Second, he said that the 'golden era' of BJP would come only when the party could win in the elections in other states, including Kerala, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and the northeast states.

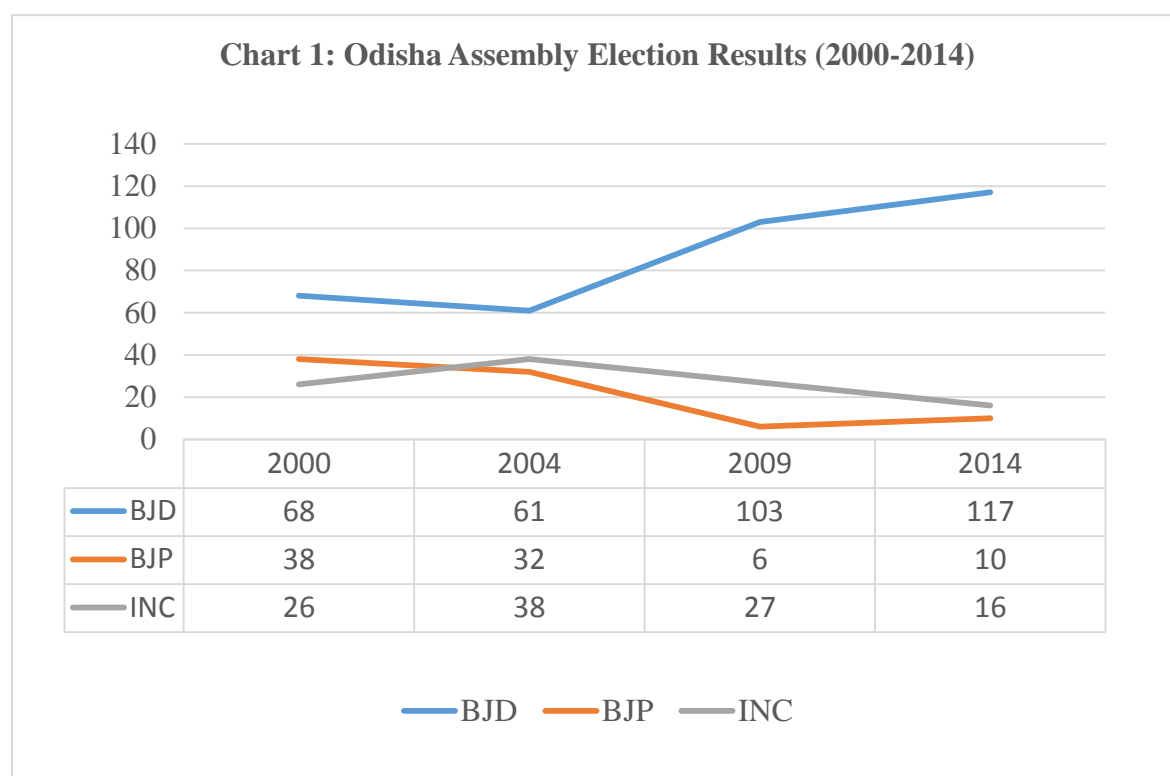
Map of Political Parties in Odisha

Amit Shah's speech at the meeting implied that the BJP would devote its energies towards winning the next elections in states where the BJP was not currently in power. States such as West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Kerala had witnessed the strength of either regional parties or communist parties in previous elections. Odisha is in this category, with the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), a regional party founded by Naveen Patnaik in 1997, having won the Odisha Assembly elections consecutively from 2000.

There is a total of 147 constituencies in the Odisha Legislative Assembly. Twenty four seats are currently reserved for the Scheduled Castes and 33 seats are for the Scheduled Tribes. In the 2014 assembly election, the BJD won 117 seats, while the Indian National Congress (INC) secured 16, and the BJP 10. Chart 1 presents the Odisha Assembly election

² See the official website of BJP, available at <http://www.bjp.org/en/documents/national-executive-2017/salient-points-of-speech-bjp-national-president-shri-amit-shah-addressing-bjp-national-executive-meeting-at-janta-maidan-bhubaneswar-odisha-15-04-2017>. Accessed on 19 April 2017.

results from 2000 to 2014. It is evident that the BJD has substantially increased its tally of seats in the Odisha Assembly by winning elections since its emergence in 1997. The BJD won 20 out of the 21 parliamentary seats from Odisha in the national general election to the powerful Lok Sabha (Lower House) in April 2014. The BJP could only secure one seat from the Sundargarh constituency which borders the States of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.



Source: Based on the Election Commission of India (various issues of election results).

Why Odisha is Important to BJP?

It is not surprising that the BJP aims at winning the next election in Odisha in 2019. In fact, a senior BJP leader and Union Minister Venkaiah Naidu said that the party would try to come to power in the state in 2019.³ However, it seems difficult for the party to achieve a majority without an alliance with the BJD. The BJP has indeed attempted to expand its political power base in Odisha for nearly 20 years, mainly through a tie-up with Naveen Patnaik's BJD when it was possible. In the parliamentary general election in 1998, the BJP secured seven seats out

³ "Odisha: PM Modi Holds Roadshow before BJP's National Executive Meeting", *The Indian Express* 15 April 2016. Accessed on 21 April 2017.

of the 21 from Odisha through an alliance with the BJD. The INC, which had won a majority of seats in both the Lok Sabha and Odisha State Assembly for long, gradually lost momentum. The BJD-BJP tie-up gained traction in the assembly election in 2000, propelled by an anti-Congress wave that swept Odisha because of the J B Patnaik government's poor response to the super-cyclone in 1999 and also due to various corruption scandals involving his party leaders. The BJD won 68 seats and the BJP got 38 seats, while the INC managed to get only 26 seats in the 2000 election (see Chart 1). The pattern of election results shows that the BJP had difficulties in even coming in second after the BJD parted ways with it in 2009.

However, the dramatic increase in the number of candidates elected with the support of the BJP in Odisha's *panchayat* election in February this year bucks the earlier pattern. The BJP has now become the second largest party in rural Odisha by securing 297 seats out of the 846 *Zila Parishad* [District Council] seats, riding on the 'Modi wave', although the BJD bagged a majority of seats, 473 in all. It marked a huge success for the BJP, compared especially with its 36 seats out of 854 in the 2012 *panchayat* election in the state. A source said that the BJD received a clear majority in most of the districts in Odisha, while the situation in several other districts like Nabarangpur, Gajapati, Rayagada, and Sundergarh remained complicated, with the preferences of the electorate not being clear. Overall, though, the BJP's rise in rural Odisha may pose a political threat to Naveen Patnaik and his party leaders. Recently, Baijayant Panda, a senior BJD leader and Member of Parliament from Kendrapara, pointed out that the party would struggle to face this challenge unless Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik is able to address several issues urgently.

For now, two scenarios of the BJP's strategy are possible: either contesting alone against the BJD or cooperating with BJD through an alliance in the next election. The success of the first scenario will depend on the sustainability of the 'Modi wave' and the strength of the anti-incumbency factor, if any, against the BJD. The problem for the BJP in the second scenario would be how to bargain with Naveen Patnaik whose political relationship with Modi is slightly different from his (Patnaik's) engagement with India's former Prime Minister and BJP leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In 2014, Naveen Patnaik declined Modi's suggestion for a tie-up with the BJP. Indeed, in 2016, Patnaik emphasised that his BJD government had done "exceedingly well" in fulfilling its electoral promises despite the cuts in central (or federal) funds to Odisha. He was responding to Modi's criticism that the BJD

government had gone into a “deep slumber”.⁴ What stood out in Patnaik’s favour was that the BJD government had performed well in poverty reduction and human development.⁵ Compared to the political chill between Patnaik and Modi after 2014, the former, as the Union Minister of Mines from 1998 to 2000, had enjoyed a good political relationship with the then Prime Minister Vajpayee. Such a relationship did help Patnaik secure for Odisha’s disaster rehabilitation purposes a considerable sum of money from the central government. This relationship later became strained when the anti-Patnaik group in the BJD government received support from the BJP in Odisha.⁶ Despite several attempts by the anti-Patnaik camp to displace Patnaik as Chief Minister, he retained the image of a ‘clean and benevolent’ leader for long. As such, the BJP’s prospects in the 2019 election will depend on how well the BJD can perform and pose a challenge to the BJP.

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⁴ “Naveen Govt in Deep Slumber: PM Narendra Modi”, *The Times of India*, 2 June 2016; “Naveen Patnaik’s Reply to Modi: We Believe in Work, Not Publicity”, *The Indian Express*, 6 June 2016 (accessed on 20 April 2017).

⁵ Odisha’s growth rate in 2016-17 was around eight per cent, and 82 lakh people were lifted from the poverty line in the last eight years. The poverty ratio in Odisha declined to 24.6 per cent in 2011-12 from 57.2 per cent in 2004-05. See the various issues of Odisha Economic Survey, Government of Odisha.

⁶ Bhuyan, Dasarathi. *Orissa Politics: From 1936 to Contemporary Politics*, Delhi: Manglam Publications (2010), pp.145-146.