

# Advertising Campaigns and Strategies of Political Parties

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*[Abstract: There is an impression that ad agencies have been behind BJP's successful campaign in the 2014 parliamentary election and later in that year in assembly elections in Haryana and Maharashtra as well as in 2017 assembly elections in five states of India. This note analyses how over the various parliamentary and state elections since 1989, when, for the first time, professional agencies were brought in for campaigning in elections, the determining factor of election result has been the soundness of political strategy of the winning political party. The role of advertising agencies has been to manage campaigns efficiently within the overall framework of the political strategy worked out by their client political party.]*

Believing that ad agencies have been behind the successful election campaigns of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Lok Sabha election (2014) and assembly elections (2014 and 2017), contestants and political parties in the Delhi Municipal Corporation (DMC) doled out business to more than 100 public relation companies to assist them in managing their election campaigns. It has been estimated that around Rs 250 to Rs 300 crore was spent on campaigning in the DMC election.<sup>1</sup>

The Centre for Media Studies, New Delhi, estimated that India's campaign spend was of the order of Rs 30,000 crores in the 2014 parliamentary election, which was three times the expenditure incurred during the 2009 national poll.<sup>2</sup> In the run up to the assembly elections of Maharashtra and Haryana following the resounding success of BJP around the brand image of Modi built during the 2014 parliamentary polls, BJP had an advertising budget of Rs 25 crores.<sup>3</sup> BJP beat its rivals in ad splash in the assembly election held in 2017.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Chauhan, P. (2017), "MCD Candidates Seek Help of PR Companies," *The Tribune*, April 09.

<sup>2</sup> Ganapathy, V. (2014), "Political Advertising in India – Social Media and the First-time Voter," LinkedIn Slide Shares, April 20. Available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/v.ganapathy/political-advertising-in-india>

<sup>3</sup> Choudhary, V., G. Varma and M. Gadgil (2014), "The Ad Agencies Behind BJP's Successful Campaign," *Livemint*, October 19.

<sup>4</sup> Laghate, G. (2017), "Assembly Elections 2017: For Instant Recall, BJP Beats Rivals in Ad Splash," *The Economic Times*, February 20.

Following the outstanding success of BJP in the 2014 parliamentary polls, ad agencies have taken the credit of building Brand Modi, capturing popular imagination but trumping Brand BJP. To create the image of a “father figure,” the advertising strategy of Team Modi involved tales of childhood, books and comics invariably with tales of heroism involving a precocious Bal Narendra. The child, when he came of age, walked away from his family to devote himself to public cause. The agencies claim that they overcame many challenges when they set out to project him as the country’s next prime minister. He was a regional leader and had to change his medium of dialogue to English to connect with the urban, middle class audience that was becoming politically conscious. Most importantly, he carried the taint of the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat.<sup>5</sup> Some of the senior leaders from BJP were also against the decision to project him as a prime ministerial candidate.<sup>6</sup> The campaign manager made tremendous use of his oratory skills and his capacity to connect with the audience. He attended more than 5000 events and 470 political rallies across the country. In these interactions, he highlighted economic growth, high inflation and lack of new jobs resonating with the young and urban voters. He deftly highlighted the failures and corruption in the Congress-led coalition government, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). His performance as Chief Minister of Gujarat was projected to term him as a progressive leader with a capacity to deliver economic results. All of these efforts proved successful in connecting with the youth and urban voters. In its endeavour, Team Modi benefitted from the dilution of its rival Brand Congress because of its inept and corruption-tainted rule from which it was not able to come out despite its spending power and ability to get the best marketing brains. After all, a product which is sought to be marketed should be market-worthy. Besides, the tight-lipped nature of Congress leadership also helped Brand Modi to outshine.

To magnify the impact of branding campaign, Team Modi bombarded the print, electronic and social media with the themes of his discourses on the failings of

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<sup>5</sup> Pande, S. (2014), “Just the Right Image,” *Business Today*, June 08. Available at: <http://www.businesstoday.in/magazine/case-study/case-study-strategy-tactics-behind-creation-of-brand-narendra-modi/story/206321.html>

<sup>6</sup> Great Lakes Blog (2014), “Six Marketing Strategies Behind Narendra Modi’s Election Victory,” Institute of Management, Chennai, June 11. Available at: <http://www.greatlakes.edu.in/blog/six-marketing-strategies-behind-narendra-modis-election-victory#>

the UPA government and in the process took away the taint of Gujarat riots from the persona of Modi by not talking or commenting on it.<sup>7</sup>

Congress, too, engaged ad agencies of substance to project its programmes and policies and reflect on their fears if BJP was voted to power, yet it came a cropper.<sup>8</sup>

The record of professional advertising campaigns for political parties has not always been creditable and the contrary has remained dismal. For example, in 1989, Rajiv Gandhi ventured into formal political advertising when he hired well-known professional agencies to carry out the election campaign of the order of Rs 20 crores. The campaign brought the 'Mr Clean' concept for the Prime Minister. Despite heavy campaigning through electronic and print media, Congress lost the general election to the third front headed by Vishwanath Pratap Singh. The year 1996 witnessed further actions on the political advertisement front when other political parties, besides Congress, also engaged ad agencies to reach out to the general public. The prime ministerial candidate of the ruling Congress Party, P.V. Narsimha Rao, was labelled as Chanakya, who could rule a diverse country like India. He was tagged as a thinker and a reformist. The 'balidan' of the Gandhi family was made the central theme of the campaign. The main opposition party, i.e. the BJP, opted for a patriotic fervour in its campaigns.<sup>9</sup> Yet the election resulted in a hung parliament. BJP formed a government for 13 days when it was succeeded by a United Front government and finally fresh election was held in 1998.<sup>10</sup> During the 1998 election, both the Congress and the BJP had task forces of media professionals to project their brands. BJP projected Brand Atal through theatres and cable networks. The Party also embraced the modern communication platform, i.e. the internet, and launched its website. On the other side, the Congress could not come out of its 'Gandhi dynasty' mindset and also projected its capacity for good governance. Its leader Sonia Gandhi had the foreigner tag attached to her and could manage to campaign in different regions with somewhat

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<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.* 5

<sup>8</sup> Pande, S. (2014), "Advertising and Political Parties: A Failed Experiment?" *Business Today*, January 08.

<sup>9</sup> Kumar, A. and P. Pathak (2012), "Political Advertising in India: A Perspective," *Management Insight*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 15–29.

<sup>10</sup> Wikipedia (Undated), "Indian General Election, 1996." Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_general\\_election,\\_1996](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_general_election,_1996)

limited communication skills.<sup>11</sup> BJP emerged as the single largest party and was able to form a short-lived government along with its allies and front called the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and fresh election was called in early 1999.<sup>12</sup>

The 1999 general election witnessed the rise of political advertising. BJP created a special media cell to create image building and brand positioning strategies. The BJP contested as a part of NDA and required its partners (spread over different states across the country) to perform well. It had to overcome anti-incumbency which it did by injecting the 'feel good' factor, factoring in the performance of the BJP-led government in 1998, its role in the Kargil conflict and also the historic decision of exploding its nuclear device in Pokhran. With these campaigns, Brand Atal got the better of any other advertising proposition. All these culminated into slogans like "Leader you can trust, in war, in peace" (for Atal Bihari Vajpayee). Looking positive and handling the opposition's (Congress) campaign were marketing challenges for BJP. Rural voters were addressed through melas and haats, folk dances and street theatres. Congress and its ad agencies had a dozen print runs through national and regional dailies based on stability plank. Sonia Gandhi got positioned as the undisputed leader of the Congress and successor to Indira Gandhi. Its strategy was to project itself as a party with vision and the one capable of performing with harmony through secularism. The fight got refined to Vajpayee vs Sonia rather than BJP vs Congress. Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin and lack of political familiarity dented the progress of Congress.<sup>13</sup> The results were decisively in favour of the BJP-led alliance NDA, which lasted its full term.

For the 2004 general election, the use of information technology (IT) was on the cards. BJP became hi-tech and started getting poll feedback daily with analysts doing their calculations. Building up a database and approaching the electorate through e-mails and SMSes but with caution was its strategic intent. The 'India Shining' campaign was the buzz call of the BJP-led NDA. A massive advertising campaign

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<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.* 9

<sup>12</sup> Wikipedia (Undated), "Indian General Election, 1998." Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_general\\_election,\\_1998](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_general_election,_1998)

<sup>13</sup> *Op. cit.* 9

around the focus of India Shining was launched by its ad agencies. The ads highlighted the accomplishments of the five years of NDA regime—from social to economic betterment. Print and electronic media were extensively used across the country. Besides, hoardings were put up across highways and select city roads. E-media was used for tech-savvy electorate. BJP leader L.K. Advani undertook the ‘Bharat Uday Yatra’ to cover the distant areas within the country. The entire effort was directed towards making the common man feel good through ‘India Shining.’ The Congress Party strategized to take gloss out of the ‘India Shining’ campaign of BJP by questioning the unfulfilled promises of the NDA government. The Congress made the common man (aam aadmi) its USP with the tagline ‘Aam Aadmi Ke Saath.’ It capitalised on the weak link of the BJP campaign—education and employment. It was able to obtain directives of the Election Commission for removal of government-sponsored public hoardings on schemes like the Golden Quadrilateral highway project. Congress was thus able to project the use of public money on such hoardings.<sup>14</sup> The result of the 2004 election was decisively in favour of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which ran its full term.<sup>15</sup>

During the 2009 general election campaign, according to certain estimates, the total ad spend could have crossed US\$3 billion (more than US Presidential Election). Television, radio, mobile services, other digital media and outdoor media along with print media helped political parties expand their reach to the ‘new’ and young India—the first-time voters. BJP used social media more than the Congress, even for raising funds. Mass media marketing, direct marketing techniques were also restored to. Blogging was also part of political campaigning. However, because of low internet penetration in 2009, the parties depended heavily on traditional media.<sup>16</sup> The result went decidedly in favour of the Congress-led UPA alliance which, once again, lasted its full term.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Wikipedia (Undated), “Indian General Election, 2004.” Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_general\\_election,\\_2004](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_general_election,_2004)

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.* 9

From the foregoing narrative of political marketing resorted to by the political parties in India since 1999 and up to the 2014 general election and further to the assembly election of 2017, it became clear that political marketing can offer no guarantee of winning an election. At best, it can offer improved performance and more appropriate ways of making decisions and managing campaigns.<sup>18</sup> In fact, politics of the day has a pervasive influence on society's thinking and its voting preference. Political parties operate in an intensely competitive and constantly changing environment. Political parties will ultimately achieve their objectives more efficiently if they understand the needs of the 'target' voters and are able to assess the past performance of the contending parties. In the 2014 general election campaign, the Congress Party was not able to address the various allegations of corruption levied against it during its tenure from 2009–14, as a result of which voters remained unforgiving.

Accordingly, the final outcome (result) of an election would depend upon the strategy worked out by the political managers of a party who would capture factors weighing on the minds of the voters when they go to vote. As an illustration, the political managers of BJP had reclaimed that Brand Modi remains etched in the minds of voters since his build up in the run-up to the parliamentary poll of 2014. Therefore, for the 2017 assembly election, the political managers of BJP built the narrative around Modi and preferred not to project candidates for the post of chief minister in any of the states going to polls lest projection of any other name may boomerang by alienating some castes/communities and persona. To cater to the political aspirations of non-Yadav OBCs during the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election, a clear message was sent to them that Keshav Prasad Maurya, a non-Yadav OBC, will be the President of the state unit of the Party. Assured by the inclination of the upper castes towards BJP, the Party invested most of its energy in consolidating the non-Yadav OBCs through various means, including 'Pichhada Varg Sammelan.' However, no such attempt was made to woo the Dalits in appreciation of the Party's focused strategy to concentrate

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<sup>18</sup> O'Cass, A. (1996), "Political Marketing and the Marketing Concept," *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 30, Nos. 10/11, pp. 37–53.

on castes/communities rather than committed voters of other parties.<sup>19</sup> The BJP assumed that Muslims as well as a majority of Yadavs and Jatavs would not vote for the party. This would leave 55% to 60% of the electorate for the BJP to target. Thus, BJP had to expand its social base. In 2014, Modi's OBC identity, besides other factors, struck a chord with the backward communities of the State. The upper caste base stayed with it. Dalit sub communities drifted towards the BJP. This was replicated in the assembly election. To do this, a three-pronged strategy was deployed: appoint someone from a non-Yadav OBC community as state president, appoint office bearers in districts from these communities, and, give them the highest number of tickets. This was ambitious social engineering, for it ran the risk of alienating the 'other' supporters of the Party. The political managers took a risk which paid off.

A pool of active leaders at the rural level across districts was created when the Party contested the panchayat election in the year 2013. BJP's political managers identified 60 seats in Uttar Pradesh where their party had never won an election. For these seats, they happily imported leaders from other outfits—even at the cost of ideological dilution. In another 20 seats, it was vulnerable—it was even willing to look elsewhere for these seats. When others join a party, they bring their associates also, some of whom need to be accommodated. So in 100 seats, tickets were given to people who did not have a history with the organisation. Many of them were from communities beyond the core base of BJP.

Thus, the BJP had very carefully and meticulously planned its strategy—even to the extent of transforming its own character.

Adjacent to the above strategy of wooing non-Yadav and non-Jatav voters was the strategy of keeping its Hindu card in the fray. In western Uttar Pradesh, BJP candidates proudly declared themselves to be the epitome of Hindu pride. Even Modi himself, couched under the framework of non-discrimination, bought up Diwali and Ramzan, Kabristan and Shamshanghat. BJP president accused the Samajwadi Party of

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<sup>19</sup> Peoples Pulse (2017), "A Quick Look at Marketing Strategies Parties are Using in U.P. Elections 2017," *Youth Ki Awaaz*, January 18. Available at: <https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2017/01/uttar-pradesh-political-marketing-strategies/>

dispensing benefits based on religious and caste identity. Thus, the Party strategized to cash in on the latest resentment among a section of Hindu communities at what they perceived as the administration's pro Muslim tilt.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, political managers of BJP crafted state-centric strategies to carry the conviction with voters. In Punjab, despite massive ad splash, the BJP played a junior partner to the Akali Party where their alliance lost out to the successful campaign by the Congress Party which cashed in on upon the anti-incumbency of the ruling coalition.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, it is entirely up to a political party how well it is able to navigate itself through the complex maze of political nuances to lay down its strategy which, an adept professional group through quantitative techniques would advance through its designed campaigns without losing essence of the strategy of its client political party. No matter what the intensity of political campaign, election would depend upon the soundness of the political strategy worked out by the political party.

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<sup>20</sup> Jha, P. (2017), "Assembly Elections 2017: How Narendra Modi Won Uttar Pradesh," *Hindustan Times*, March 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.* 4