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Clash of the 'Titans': The Management Saga of 2014 General Election



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Abstract

Few elections in the past have generated as much excitement, curiosity, following and interest as the general election of 2014 for the sixteenth lok sabha. This is not without reason. In the lead up to the election, it was pitted as a battle between leaders of the two largest parties in the fray, namely Mr Narendra Modi of BJP and Mr Rahul Gandhi of INC. However, as the time passed, it became clear that rather than it being a battle of equals, as proclaimed by many, it eventually turned out into a classic battle between David and Goliath. Having said that, however, one cannot neglect the buzz which generated around this two political heavy-weights (in their own ways, one being the longest-serving CM prior to the result and other scion of the most distinguished political family in the country with the most coveted political surname) prior to the election.

This research paper would delve upon the issue as is amply clear from the title and the points discussed in the preceding paragraph. Through this paper, the authors would try to gauge the factors which eventually resulted in the success of one of the stalwarts and failure of the other. The difference between the two could not have been starker. It is on the lines of chalk and cheese. The readers would come across how these two politicians left a mark on the overall political scenario of the nation in their own way. What is of interest is that this battle is not only fought through conventional media of campaigning but the modern media as well and it is here that the lead was even more defining and rang the death bell for one of them.

Keywords: Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi, BJP, Congress, Online Presence

Introduction

To begin with, one needs to understand the premise on which an election is fought and won. In India, the elections in general, and regional ones in particular, have been contested on such planks as caste, religion, regionalism, creed, language, so on and so forth along with the might of the leader in contention. In short, the mandate had been given on many occasions not on the promise to work for the electorate but the following enjoyed by the leader owing to her/his caste equation or surname. This mostly lead to a hung house thus compelling the parties to form a coalition government which functioned more on the lines of opportunism than on governance. However, much water has flown across the Ganges in the past few years and the electorate has, more often than not, realized the fact that they have been taken on a ride as well as taken for granted by the leaders whom they have elected.

Based on this, one can safely presume that the electorate wanted to do away with the pattern of giving a fractured mandate owing to the lack of stability in the past governments which negatively influenced the growth story of the country. In this context, the lok sabha election of 2014 would go down in the history as a monumental one as the mandate given by the Indian electorate was for stability and development of the country above else.

At the same time, the events leading to the election were such that two politicians hogged the limelight more than anyone else. They belonged to the two biggest parties in the fray for this election. They were none other than Mr Narendra Modi of Bharatiya Janata Party and Mr Rahul Gandhi of Indian National Congress. Initially, it was pitted as the battle between two politicians who were seen as the frontrunners, in their own respects, by everyone capable of leading the country in the aftermath of the general election. However, the initial euphoria

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surrounding this supposedly '**Clash of the Titans**' fizzled out as election came and went. It turned out to be a one-man show all the way. At the same time, this doesn't mean that it was scenario since the beginning. Both the parties, and their respective coalitions, were dead-serious in terms of matching every step of the other till it became clear that it was anything but a battle of equals.

The focus of this research paper would be on comparing the allure of Mr Modi with that of Mr Gandhi and how they stacked against each other. Also, it would look into the factors which helped in pushing the agenda of one whereas pulling the other out of the reckoning.

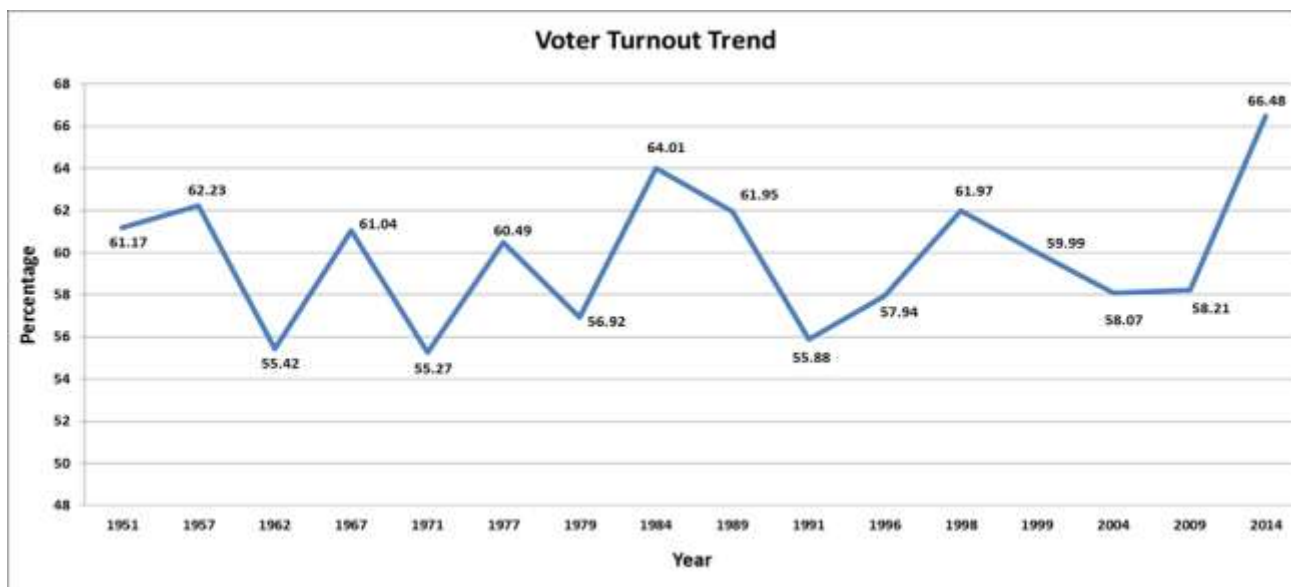
Literature Review

In moving toward a more product-oriented framework, political consumerism has been defined as

the use of market purchases by individuals, groups, and institutions who want to take responsibility for political, economic, and societal developments (Micheletti, Follesdal, and Stolle, 2004).

The complexity of today's politics and the expansive nature of it merits that such entities as contributors, interest groups, party members be a part of the marketing strategy apart from the chief entity namely the electorate.

The extent of political participation reflects in the enhanced level of information about politics and knowledge related to it. This was very much the case in the lok sabha election of 2014 as the participation of the eligible electorate was at an all time high (as displayed in the graph):



It is the consumer-citizen who ultimately finds whether the 'product' is good enough or not solely on the basis of its potential performance and not from its credentials alone

This is not to say that lineage doesn't matter (case in point, Amethi and Mainpuri). But the significance of the same has become limited. If that would have been case then Mr Gandhi would not have been criticized for the lackluster showing of INC-led UPA.

Such was the tide against him that many dissenters from inside questioned the very idea of fielding Mr Gandhi, a political novice, against a veteran, proven and immensely more creditable Mr Modi.

Governance could be made more relevant to the citizens by adopting a consumer-oriented approach to political participation. Mr Modi proved it riding on stupendous success of BJP in the lok sabha election.

Mr Modi had proven his mettle by governing his home state Gujarat for four consecutive terms and that too with some pretty impressive performance and growth to show in various departments.

Mr Gandhi had no such proven records to fall back on.

Facebook and twitter became battlegrounds where tomorrow's India battled out the various election-

Related issues. More on this later in the research paper.

Young people today are interested in non-traditional or alternative forms of citizenship (Owen, 2006, 2013). This holds true for the last lok sabha election as unprecedented youth turnout proved to be historical for the parties.

The Congress started slow in terms of adopting social media for promotion of its cause and was always found wanting with regard to competing with BJP on this front

Besides the BJP and the Congress, another party that effectively used social media was the Aam Aadmi Party. However, its appeal was limited to a small section of the society and it mostly resorted to guerilla social media marketing.

Further, as mentioned earlier, the unprecedented participation of middle class proved one

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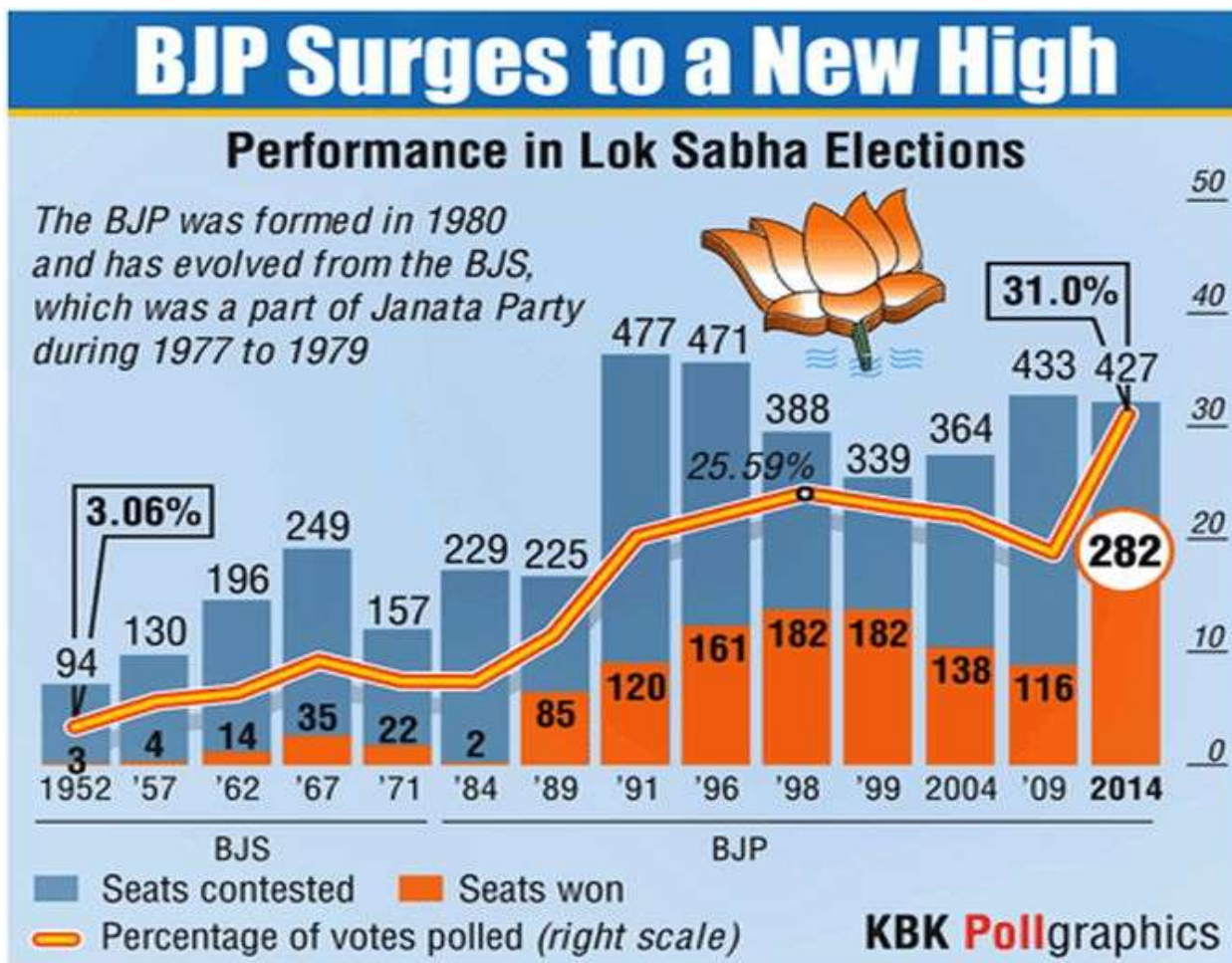
thing that people are fed up of caste-based, religion-based, region-based petty-issues driving politics

Bucking the trend, about 75% Muslims voted for Brand Modi, read NDA. 39 out of 74 seats were won by NDA where the Muslim populace was between 21 to 95% (Source: DNA, May 20, 2014)

Who Held Sway?

Since the beginning of such a build-up, Mr Modi was seen as someone who believed in development-oriented politics more than anything else. He had some solid data to back his claim as a go-getter, being the longest-serving chief minister in Indian politics history, ruling Gujarat uninterrupted for almost one-and-a-half decade. During this period, he made development as the main plank on which he built his image of a no-nonsensical politician with whom majority of the people

identified. It was not without reason that he won four back-to-back mandates to lead Gujarat, a feat which was unprecedented in the country. Though his detractors were not impressed and doubted his claims towards communal harmony, performance of Gujarat on various Humanity indices and used to bring out the ghosts of 2002 at every possible instance, They censured him for not taking stern action against those believed to be the perpetrators in this case and saw him as someone who allegedly promoted the ideology of Hindutva unabashedly. Mr Modi was unperturbed. He knew that if he played his cards right during the general election, people will trust him and back him for the highest political post in the country. As it turned out, he was not wrong.

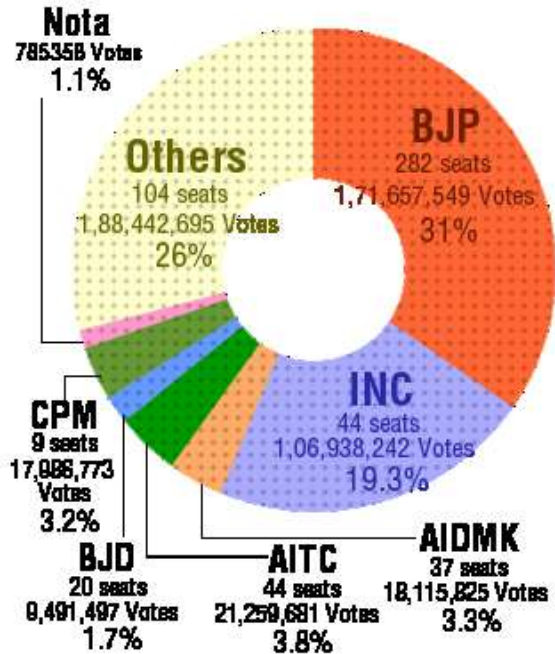


When one talks about the other politician who was seen as a contender for the top job by his supporters, Mr Rahul Gandhi, he was everything which Mr Modi was not. In contrast to the humble background from which Mr Modi came (the 'chaiwala' remark given about him by a top Congress leader was smartly played by Mr Modi, another fine example of how he created opportunities out of adversities), Rahul had the most illustrious and coveted political lineage in the country and hailed from

the political family which ruled the roost for the better part since general elections took place in the country. As many experts opined, his background was something which added more burden for him rather than value to his overall persona. His case is akin to that of Abhishek Bachchan who found it difficult to break away from the towering shadow of his father, the iconic Amitabh Bachchan. His detractors went to the extent of commenting that the only thing commendable about Mr Rahul Gandhi is his surname.

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The pie chart given below shows the break-up of votes as won by each major party. There is a clarity in the pattern of votes as is evident from the chart.



The Online Battle : Who Mattered and Who Didn't

PM Narendra Modi and Congress Vice-President Rahul Gandhi were the two most searched politicians in the months leading to the general election, albeit mostly for different reasons.

What was interesting was the fact that a politician like Mr Rahul Gandhi, in his 40s, should have been the center of attention for the young voters and a veteran like Mr Narendra Modi, aged 63, should have found the going tough on the issue of connectedness with the online population.

However, the situation was just reverse! It was the young who turned most defiantly away from his Congress worldview, and towards a 63-year-old leader. Narendra Modi won a sweeping victory partly because he broke with convention and campaigned in presidential style. According to exit polls, it was first-time voters aged 18-22 who backed the BJP more strongly than any other demographic. This is something which not even the most staunch BJP-supporters would have imagined in the beginning. This goes on to prove that Mr Modi cracked the code of online campaigning, fully realizing the might of the same. On the other hand, Mr Gandhi was conspicuous, either by his absence or by mere token presence, on most of these platforms.

Mr Modi had a staggering 5.5 million Facebook 'likes' at the time leading to election which has jumped to a mind-boggling 267 million since he became the PM (www.facebook.com/narendramodi). His main rival, Mr Rahul Gandhi, the Congress party's undeclared candidate for PM, however, didn't even have a personal website. However, INC featured him prominently on its website (www.inc.in). The official presence of Mr Gandhi on Twitter is still surprisingly missing

In the build-up to the general election, he didn't even have a facebook page. Currently, his official page

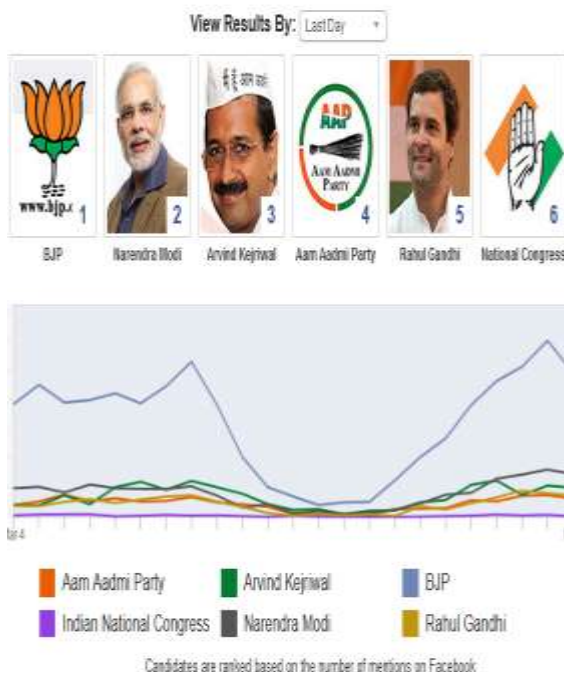
has a measly 300k likes on facebook (facebook.com/India.RahulGandhi), no match to Mr Narendra Modi. But it hardly comes as a surprise owing to the fact that despite being age on his side, he was never as popular among the youth as proclaimed by his party. Mr Modi was smart enough to gauge the pulse of the youth and he took internet by storm thus making his presence felt in every possible manner. He has his own website (narendramodi.in) along with the party website (www.bjp.org) as well as a website named www.india272.in in which highlighted his ambitious plan for the LS elections which he surpassed (BJP got 282 seats). A full-fledged and well-structured team of professionals manage his social media strategy. In contrast, there is hardly any buzz with regard to Mr Rahul Gandhi. Most of the online conversation featuring Mr Gandhi is in derision than for any other reason. The Modi campaign spent nearly \$10 million on digital advertising alone, more than the rival Indian National Congress. Their selfie campaign generated over 100,000 responses in around 72 hours. These are impressive numbers indeed. Figures which even the most staunch critics of Mr Modi and supporters of Mr Gandhi would find hard to deny.

On April 9, the Google scores of Mr Modi stood at 85 and of Mr Gandhi at 62, an indication of their popularity based on searches.



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LEADING CANDIDATES AND PARTIES AT A GLANCE



So.....?!?!?!?!?

The Gandhi dynasty scion's one problem seems to be an inability to extend his private charm to the public stage. He picked issues selectively, spoke passively, lacked aggression and was overall seen as a non-serious contender for the top-job even by his die-hard supporters who didn't find him to be of any match to the might of Mr Narendra Modi at any stage of the campaigning. On the other hand, Mr Narendra Modi's campaign, like Obama's, was high on public-speaking, and plugged into mobile phones. His handlers successfully built-up his persona and his image on line, backed by Mr Modi's unique ability to draw big crowds at political rallies. Such traits, which are must for succeeding in elections were found missing on the part of his 'younger' opponent.

Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that the general election of 2014 would go down in the history as one which gave decisive leadership to the country in the form of Mr Narendra Modi. Also, it would be seen as the election which sounded the death bell for dynasty politics and was more like obituary of the Grand Old Party of India as it was reduced to below-par performance and that too of embarrassing scale.

More than that, this election would also be remembered as the one which pitted the scion of the 125-year old party, with almost no political record to back him up against the longest-serving chief minister in Indian political history. The rest, as they say is history. Congress became a thing of the past in more than one ways and BJP is being seen as the party to beat so much so that arch-rivals like Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav have teamed up for the upcoming Bihar assembly polls, with Congress being an outsider in the

scheme of things, with the sole purpose of defeating BJP.

All this was unfathomable even a year ago. This has been made possible with the rise and rise of Mr Narendra Modi who has single-handedly wiped out unstable governance at the central level and made it a thing of the past. In many ways, his sojourn reminds you that of the veteran actor Anil Kapoor in Shankar's movie Nayak what with his opponents from various backgrounds coming together to stop the unstoppable Modi juggernaut!

However, what remains to be seen is the lasting period of this Modi wave, the signs of which are already on display by the gaffes being committed by the members of BJP itself and the rise of hardliners grabbing negative limelight thus bringing bad publicity for the party. But for the time being, those who participated in the general election of 2014 would remember it as the election when Mr Modi mattered more than anything else, even his own party!

Apart from the above discussion, what needs to be understood is that India being a multi-party democracy where for the past two-decades-and-a-half, regional parties influenced the national politics in a big way, with coalition politics being the order of the day. A single-party majority government at the center has become a reality for the first time in almost three decades (the last time it happened in 1984 in the wake of Late Indira Gandhi's Assassination). This goes on to prove that the electorate has matured and realizes that frequent elections serve no purpose other than bringing political uncertainty in the country which has direct bearing on the societal and economic status of the nation.

he electorate, specifically the youth of the country majority of whom were first-time voters, came out in droves and voted for a stable government. The detractors of BJP were proved wrong who were apprehensive that the minorities would warm up to the idea of having Mr Modi as their prime minister and they were proven wrong (as evident from the seats won by BJP in Muslim-majority constituencies highlighted above). The voter turnout was highest in Indian political history (close to 67%) which proved the fact that that the electorate has realized the power of ballot sooner rather than later. Such a clear mandate could not have come at a more appropriate time when India is at the cusp of radical changes.

This election would serve as the benchmark in the Indian political history with regard to its outcome and the implications of the same. It highlighted very significant aspects about the behavior of the voters which went on to prove that the era of disillusioned politics has taken a back seat for a change. There is pragmatism in the way voters are choosing the candidates. They are aware of the choices which they are making and this means a lot for a democracy like India where political stability has been elusive for the past many years. The political parties would do well to remember that the preferences of the voters have changed and the past rhetoric would not serve the purpose in the new-age politics. They need to make themselves relevant and contemporary in the wake of

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the outcome of this election if they intend to do well in the coming years. Change is in the air. The need is to smell it and act accordingly.

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