

Competing Narratives in Indian Politics: A Study of the Congress Party's Strategies in the 2024 General Elections

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Abstract: *This study examines the ideological and electoral confrontation between the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2024 General Elections, focusing on Congress's challenge to the BJP's Hindutva-driven political strategy. The Congress Party, traditionally a proponent of secularism and inclusivity, mounted a significant challenge to the BJP, preventing it from securing a majority. This study analyses Congress's key campaign strategies, including the Bharat Jodo Yatra, advocacy for a caste census, and emphasis on constitutional values, which collectively generated public discourse on national unity, economic stability and social welfare. Drawing on primary sources such as campaign speeches, party manifestos, electoral outcomes, and expert interviews, this study assesses the effectiveness of Congress's response to Hindutva narratives. The findings offer insights into the party's future strategies for promoting secularism and countering identity-based politics, contributing to the understanding of the evolving dynamics of India's democratic and cultural political landscape.*

Keywords: Hindutva, Indian National Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party, Secularism, 2024 General Election.

INTRODUCTION

Political narratives in today's India are spiralling around a common theme of 'Hindutva' as it is projecting itself as the centre of a circumstellar system. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made relentless efforts since 2014 to drag the theme of Hindutva from the peripheries of the 'Indian story' to its core. This is evident in the recent headlines on our political landscape, such as the abrogation of Article 370, the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, the issues surrounding the Citizenship Amendment Act, the push for a Uniform Civil Code, and the campaigns for a beef ban. However, the dynamic body politic of India, led by other political parties, journalists, students, and activists, has timely presented counter-narratives to check the monopoly of Hindutva. This further underlines the historical significance of the Indian National Congress (INC) as a spokesperson for India's secular social fabric. The inclusive, accommodative, and liberal ideological base the INC has amassed over the years has put it at the helm of the *Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance* (INDIA) in 2023. The alliance stands as a testimony to the 'salad bowl model' of Indian society.

It is not just for the ballot count that the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress are vying. Rather, a deep ideological debate on Hindutva drives the two political camps. This debate has mobilised enormous support over the last decade, making it a pivotal moment in the political journey of Indian democracy. Hence, the 2024 general election was a medical emergency on the deteriorating health of Indian polity to analyse its resistance to the polarising Hindutva narrative. This scenario demands an analysis of INC's political agendas and strategies for the 2024 elections to gain insights into how it created a barricade to the contagious tactics of BJP rooted in Hindutva. This study has long-term implications because it sheds light on the possible trajectory of Indian polity in this tug-of-war between Hindutva and Secularism. This study can act as a fortune teller for the 'Basic structure' of the Indian Constitution too.

METHODOLOGY

This article aims to explore the Congress Party's key election strategies for the 2024 general elections. This study relies on primary data, such as data released by the Election Commission of India and election campaign speeches of the most influential leaders of both Congress and the BJP. This study has immensely taken inputs from the manifestos of the Congress and the BJP in examining their electoral strategies. To understand the historical and

ideological tussle between the Congress and BJP, this study resorts to electoral data from the 2014, 2019, and 2024 general elections. This study analyses the election strategies of the Indian National Congress (INC) in the 2024 Indian general elections, with special focus on how effectively the Congress party succeeded in presenting a counter-narrative to the BJP's 'Hindutva'. The historical and ideological tussle between the two parties has been included in the study to critically analyse how it reached its zenith in the 2024 election. This study attempts to highlight the INC's political agenda to dilute the Hindutva wave that stands as a challenge to the 'Basic structure' of the Indian Constitution and the secular narratives in Indian politics. This study also utilised secondary sources of data, such as journal articles, newspaper articles, and electoral analysis of various organisations, to explore the Congress's tactics in countering Hindutva.

The Evolution of Hindutva Politics and Indian National Congress

The term 'Hindutva' was first used by a Bengali litterateur named Chandranath Basu in 1892. He used the term Hindutva in his book *Hindutva-Hindur Prakrita Itihas*, which propounded the Advaita Vedanta school of thought. For him, Hindutva assumed a collection of traditional and frequently contradictory ideas and practices under a common umbrella (Sen 2024). However, Hindutva as we know it today began to be used in 1922 with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's ideological epigraph titled 'Essentials of Hindutva'. Although Hindu nationalist groups such as Hindu Mahasabha were in operation before that, Savarkar's 'Essentials of Hindutva' formulated the ideological base of the Hindutva movement. As a byproduct of dominant Hindutva politics, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was formed in 1925 by Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar saw Hindus as geographical entities that dwelt across the banks of the Indus River, betwixt the mountains of the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean. Savarkar defined Hindutva as consisting of three key components: common country (Rashtra), similar race (jati), and a shared heritage or civilisation (sanskriti) (Savarkar, 2021). After Indian Independence, the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha, which have always upheld Savarkar's ideals, took a back seat and became the cultural face of the Hindutva movement in the country. The Bharatiya Jana Sangh took charge of the political and electoral actions of the Hindutva movement in the initial phase of Indian democracy. After the emergency (1975- 77), the Janata Party was created by the Jana Sangh merging with many political groups. They formed the government in 1977, but it was short-lived because of several internal conflicts. In the 1980s, Bharatiya Jana Sangh transformed into Bharatiya Janata Party. Following the 1996 elections, the Indian president invited the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the party that emerged as the largest in the lower house of the parliament, to form the government. However, it did not hold the majority necessary to govern in the 545-member Lok Sabha; therefore, its time in government was brief. The BJP, as a political party, made its strong presence felt for the first time when it formed the government under Vajpayee in 1998. As the driving force behind the formation of The BJP ran for parliament in 1999 under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), a coalition of over 20 parties.

With the BJP taking home 182 seats of the coalition's 294 seats, the alliance was able to secure a governing majority (Kumar Malhotra, V., & Jaitli 2006). However, it was only in 2014 that the party was able to attain a majority under Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In the 2019 general election, the BJP was able to improve its electoral performance by bringing Narendra Modi for the second consecutive term as the Prime Minister. The BJP's emergence and consolidation of power in the 2014 and 2019 elections strengthened the Hindutva movement in India. The Hindutva movement, founded on Savarkar's ideals, upholds the establishment of Hindu hegemony in India, which is the opposite of the secular values the country has nurtured for a long time. The traces of Hindutva politics in India are evident in the debates related to the Uniform Civil Code, the Ayodhya dispute, and the abolition of Article 370. More interestingly, we are witnessing a shift from Hindutva to Neo-Hindutva. Edward Anderson and Arkotong Longkumer, in their work, "Neo-Hindutva: Evolving Forms, Spaces, and Expressions of Hindu Nationalism", opine that Hindutva has paved the way for Neo- Hindutva after 2014. In contrast to earlier iterations of Hindutva, Neo-Hindutva aims to mainstream its ideology and incorporate it into popular political and social discourses by penetrating the media, popular culture, and educational institutions. Digital channels and social media are essential for upholding the Neo-Hindutva doctrine (Anderson & Longkumer, 2018).

Scholars such as Jaffrelot opine that Hindutva is primarily ethnic and less religious. Jaffrelot quotes Savarkar as saying that "Muslims were the real enemies, not the British" because, in Savarkar's view, Islam represented "a threat to the real nation, namely Hindu Rashtra". Therefore, the liberal world considers Hindutva an ideology that aims to establish Hindu Rashtra and poses a threat to secularism, democracy, minority rights, and pluralism in the country (Jaffrelot, 2021).

Being the grand old party and advocate of Gandhian secularism, the Indian National Congress faced Hindutva forces like the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha several times during the pre-independence period (Guha 2017). The party also opposed proposals made by Hindu nationalists, who demanded the creation of a Hindu state. Meanwhile, some academics, such as Nirmala Srivastava, contend that to broaden its base of support, the Congress took a pragmatic stance and catered to some aspirations of Hindu sentiment. They argue that this involved aligning with Hindu nationalist groups on specific issues, such as temple management or cow protection, but not fully embracing their ideology.

After Independence, the INC was in power for more than six decades. The INC under Nehru adopted a strong commitment to secularism and religious tolerance. Following Mahatma Gandhi's assassination, the RSS was outlawed for the first time in India in 1948. Hindu nationalist organisations, especially the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (later BJP), opposed the INC and accused it of appeasing the Muslim community and attempted to frame the INC as a pseudo-secular party. Under leaders such as Rajiv Gandhi and P. V. Narasimha Rao, the INC adopted a more practical stance in the late 20th century, occasionally siding with Hindu

nationalist organisations on specific issues, such as the Ayodhya issue. The INC's connection with Hindutva has become more complex since the BJP's ascent to political prominence (Singh & Saxena, 2023).

Following the BJP's rise to power in 2014, the Indian National Congress (INC) adopted various strategies to counter the growing influence of Hindutva politics. A notable approach during this period was the adoption of what is perceived to be a "Soft Hindutva" strategy. This demanded the visible display of Hindu rituals and practices by political leaders, including temple visits and the use of Hindu symbols during elections. This was mainly done to counter the BJP's portrayal of itself as the sole representative of Hindu religious interests. The party considered the act imperative to harness majority Hindu votes. The INC strategically used its conceptual clarity to distinguish Hinduism from Hindutva. Dr. Shashi Tharoor's emphasis on the accommodative spirit of Hinduism, as opposed to the politically charged ideology of Hindutva, in his book *Why I Am Hindu is an example of this*. Tharoor intended to present the cultural, spiritual, and traditional aspects of Hinduism (Tharoor, 2018). This was meant to counter the BJP's Hindu political identity narrative.

The 2019 general election was crucial for Congress, both politically and ideologically. The INC faced a huge setback and realised that its strength lay in its foundation built with inclusive and secular blocks. The election was a lesson to unlearn the counter-narrative they built on "Soft Hindutva". The Indian society, known for its civilizational ethos, demanded that the INC return to its true secular spirit, and the Congress rerouted to the same. Post-2019, Congress has shed practices such as public religious displays. The party's decision not to attend the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya was a significant symbolic act to show its change in approach. The INC also tried to re-establish itself as the voice of minorities and the marginalised during this phase.

Deciphering 2024 General Elections

The BJP was overconfident about the 2024 elections, which is evident from its slogan "*Abki Baar 400 Paar*" (This time surpassing 400). The BJP misinterpreted the public image of Narendra Modi along with INC's past election performances. Even the media followed a similar tone, projecting that the NDA may win around 400 seats through the exit polls it conducted. News 24-Today's Chanakya projected 400 seats for the NDA, while India Today-Axis My India anticipated 361-401 seats for the NDA. Similar projections were made by other exit polls, such as Times Now-ETG (358), Republic Bharat-P Marq (359), and ABP News-C Voter (353-383).

However, the reality of the 2024 general elections turned out to be different. The BJP failed to attain even a majority to form a government. It secured 240 seats, a decline of 36 seats from its last general election. The BJP-led NDA won 293 seats which was well below expectations. The Indian National Congress, which returned to its secular narrative, won 99 seats, signalling a comeback from the 47 seats it gained in the 2019 election. The broader INDIA Alliance, a coalition of opposition parties, secured 234 seats, falling short of the majority by only 38 seats. These results allowed the INC to claim the position of 'Leader of the

Opposition' for the first time in a decade, with Rahul Gandhi taking on the role.

Compared to 2019, the BJP's 2024 vote share has marked a fall of around one percentage (36.6 vs. 37.3 percent). This implies that the BJP's popularity has not changed significantly on an all-India basis. However, its total number of seats fell sharply from 303 in 2019 to 240 in 2024, suggesting that the geographical distribution of that support has shifted. The BJP's vote share rose in the eastern and southern states, where it had historically been weaker due to the overwhelming majority of regional parties, while it saw a dip in its conventional beacon, the Hindi heartland. The BJP's vote share fell in five of the seven biggest states in the Hindi belt, in contrast to its rise in the south. In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, the BJP's vote share increased by less than two percent. A legislative majority was unattainable due to the BJP's disappointing electoral performance in Haryana, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, which resulted in a large loss of seats. In these three states, the BJP secured 96 seats in 2019; by 2024, this number had dropped to 52 (Vaishnav & Mallory, 2024).

Examining the share of votes, the Congress Party's vote share increased slightly from 19.4 percent in the 2019 elections (19.3 percent in 2014) to 21.2 percent in 2024. This vote share was the third worst performance ever. It only appears remarkable when compared with the previous elections. Coalition agreements in determining states like Uttar Pradesh, wherein the Congress Party's prospects were strengthened by regional allies, had contributed to partially increased the party's vote.

2024 General Elections: INC and its Key Strategies

The major change in the INC's approach to the 2024 elections from past years was its shift from a reactive political counter-narrative to a concrete ideological stand. This was the result of prioritising a long-term ideological victory over instant political gains. The withdrawal from 'Soft Hindutva' was evident in every action it embraced. The goal of an inclusive India was highlighted through the party's words and deeds. This shows a more calculated and futuristic political vision aimed at reinforcing the party's ideological foundation and long-term relevance. The main strategies adopted by the INC in the 2024 general elections are listed below.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra: Rahul Gandhi's two Bharat Jodo Yatras had played an impactful role in re-energizing the INC as argued by scholars such as Yogendra Yadav. Focusing on the themes of inclusivity, social justice, and unity, these nationwide campaigns contributed to revamping the public perception of the Congress Party and mobilising its grassroots support. The Yatra, a 150-day march covering more than 4081 km throughout India, aimed to interact with common people, address social concerns, and oppose the divisive politics of the Bharatiya Janata Party. It transformed the political image of Rahul Gandhi from a dynasty heir to a common man dedicated to fighting 'the vicious market of hate'. As a result of Rahul Gandhi's yatra passing through urban and rural areas, listening to local problems, initiating talks with common people, and displaying perseverance, he gained favourable media attention and increased his popularity at the regional level. To attract young voters who were growing increasingly

discontented with the present political system, the Yatra focused on issues including economic concerns, job creation, and societal polarisation. This helped him project an image of a leader who was aware of the goals of the youth in the country and facilitated coalitions with other opposition parties.

Rahul Gandhi addressed a series of public gatherings, including 12 large-scale rallies, hundreds of street-corner meetings, and thirteen press conferences over the course of this first yatra. The Yatra covered more than 4,000 km, including 75 districts across 71 Lok Sabha constituencies spread across 12 states and two UTs. This massive outreach campaign served a key role in building the electoral prospects of the INC in the 2024 general elections, where they contested 56 seats and secured 23 wins, a remarkable improvement from the 15 seats won out of 65 contested in 2019. The INC's allies contested 14 seats and secured six victories, compared to just two out of four contested seats in the 2019 election. The Congress's decision to abstain from contesting the Srinagar (Jammu & Kashmir) and Baghpat (Uttar Pradesh) constituencies in 2024 also impacted the comparative results.

The INC went on to conduct the second phase of its outreach, titled 'Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra', from January to March 2024. The Yatra covered 82 constituencies and 6,713 km, mostly by bus, from Imphal in Manipur to Mumbai in Maharashtra, enhancing visibility and accessibility. In the places where yatra passed, out of the 49 contested constituencies, Congress secured 17 victories, an increase from the six seats that Congress won out of the 71 seats that it contested in 2019. The party's allies in the INDIA bloc contested 33 seats and won 18, a remarkable rise compared to their performance in the 2019 election, when they secured no victories out of the 10 contested seats. When we consider the broader electoral outcomes, both yatras demonstrated the Congress party's significant electoral recovery and organizational rebuilding, as evidenced by their combined increase of 41 seats across constituencies traversed by the yatras (National Herald, 2024).

Support for minorities and underprivileged: According to a report published by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) titled "Constitutional and Legal Challenges Faced by Religious Minorities in India", Dalits and other religious minority groups in India are subjected to discrimination and persecution, with a sharp increase in hate crimes, forced conversion, and social boycotts against them since 2014 (Cheema, 2017). Human Rights Watch, after analysing the 173 campaign speeches delivered by Prime Minister Modi after 16 March 2024 when the code of conduct was in effect, expounded that he repeatedly made remarks encouraging violence, animosity, and discrimination against minorities, especially Muslims. Since the election, there have been reports that several BJP state administrations have conducted illegal activities, including demolishing Muslim residences, places of worship, and businesses without following proper procedures. BJP leaders have referred to these demolitions as "bulldozer justice". In addition, there has been ongoing violence against religious minorities; at least 28 assaults have been recorded nationwide, killing 12 Muslim men and one Christian woman (Human Rights

Watch, 2024). The Modi government has also been under fire for its deliberate inaction in Manipur over the ethnic clashes between tribes, leading to severe fatalities.

On the other hand, the Indian National Congress through its election manifesto named as 'Nyaya Patra' had called for the conduct of a nationwide Socio-Economic and Caste Census to understand the demography of castes and sub-castes and their socio-economic conditions and to take proactive action to ensure social equity. The Congress promised to enact a constitutional amendment that would increase the SC, ST, and OBC quota ceiling above 50%; Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) would have a 10% reservation in employment and educational institutions, inclusive of all castes and groups; and reiterated its obligation to fill the backlog vacancies for reserved communities within a span of one year (INC Manifesto, 2024). This assurance and accommodation offered by the INC, further emulated by regional parties such as the Rashtriya Janata Dal and Samajwadi Party, helped the Congress consolidate minority and marginalised sections of the vote bank, especially in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Commitment to safeguarding the Constitution: Since 2018, India has experienced a significant deterioration in the quality of its electoral democracy, as evidenced by its shifting political landscape. The V-Dem Institute has categorised India as an "electoral autocracy". This indicates that while the country ensures regular elections, the character of its governance has become increasingly authoritarian. It also points towards the deterioration of constitutional morality by the state itself by violating basic features like the separation of powers, safeguarding individual rights, and the rule of law, which are increasingly under threat. The 2024 election witnessed the projection of this reality by Congress and opposition parties. They highlighted a political emergency by reiterating the statement, "The Constitution is under threat". Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi, and Mallikarjun Kharge, along with Akhilesh Yadav from the Samajwadi Party, made sure to appear in political rallies only with a constitution. The ideological clarity exhibited by the INDIA alliance, led by the INC, deeply resonated with the common man, who always believed in the constitutional certainty our forefathers guaranteed. The fear of the NDA rewriting the Constitutional ethos amassed huge support for the Congress, especially from the marginalised population, who always found solace in the Constitutional protection received post-independence. This was evident from the rise in the vote share for Congress in SC-reserved constituencies from 16.7% in 2019 to 20.8% in 2024. (The Hindu 2024).

CONCLUSION

For the third time, the NDA came back to power in 2024. However, it also witnessed the INC reclaiming its age-old position as the largest secular party in the country by realigning its political narrative and winning considerable seats to officially qualify as the opposition party. For the INC, the main agenda was to prevent the BJP from acquiring an absolute majority in Parliament. They used Bharat Jodo Yatra and the Caste Census issue and highlighted the threats to the Constitution to accomplish their goal. This was made possible by securing the votes of minorities and the marginalised by reiterating issues that affect them most,

such as social welfare, national unity, and economic stability. The 2024 election analysis also casts light on the significance of secular, liberal, and accommodative stances in the Indian political environment to counter polarisation and hate. The strategies adopted by the INC passed the litmus test and showcased a stable path to counter Hindutva as we navigate through the complex socio-cultural web of Indian society.

The INC's political comeback should be read as a guarantee for the existence of social cohesion, fraternity, and political maturity of Indian society that demands a secular force to drive them through the turbulence posed by the threat to our Constitution. This proves that real social issues can alter the political landscape and remove religious identities from the core of political narratives if presented with a genuine vision of the future. The 2024 elections were a game changer, reviving the foundational ethos of the INC, such as secularism and inclusiveness, whose existence was in question in the last decade owing to the rise of Hindutva politics.

The major inference derived from this study indicates the loss of shine for the Hindutva narrative. Even though BJP remained the single largest party after the 2024 elections, it fell short of a clean sweep as expected, reflecting support for the Congress party's campaign, pivoted on economic concerns, job creation, societal polarisation, and the need for a Caste Census. The minorities and the marginalised in the country, who deem the Constitution as their saviour, have rallied behind the Congress, taking up the narrative of 'the Constitution under threat'. The 2024 election set the stage for shifting the focus of narratives from Hindutva to secularism by displaying popular belief in the INDIA coalition which blends different political ideologies and cultural diversities. In short, the 2024 election was a huge comeback for the INC as a political party and the inclusive politics it stands for.

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