

Indian elections, the BJP, the Congress Party and the “Development myths”

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The BJP and the Congress unleash their campaign blitzkriegs highlighting the “Gujarat model” of development and “Bharat Nirman” respectively, triggering a debate on what constitutes development.

DEVELOPMENT has become the buzzword in the campaign for the 2014 general election. The two mainstream parties, the ruling Congress and the principal opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), have contributed majorly to this so-called development discourse with the massively funded propaganda blitz of each. The Congress’ campaign, driven by the “Bharat Nirman” slogan, argues that the country has witnessed unprecedented progress and socio-economic empowerment during the last 10 years when the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the party, was in power at the Centre. The BJP and the larger Sangh Parivar, led by the party’s ideological and organisational fountainhead, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), seek to present its prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi as the symbol of development and the “Gujarat model” advanced under his leadership as a sort of panacea for India’s problems. Several non-Congress, non-BJP parties, including the Left parties, the Janata Dal (United) and the Samajwadi Party (S.P.), have added their mite to this discourse with the professed objective of “exposing the hollowness” of the BJP and the Congress campaigns by projecting their own development initiatives. Thus, the Left is focussing on the Kerala and West Bengal models of development and the JD(U) is highlighting the “Bihar model”. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), the new entrant into national politics, has also sought to put across its own ideas on the theme by arguing that resources can be released in a big way by fighting corruption.

The BJP and the Congress had planned and started executing their “development discourse” campaigns over the past 15 months, and, as expected, their political blitzkriegs reached a crescendo with the announcement of the Lok Sabha election schedule on March 5. Informal estimates are that both the parties are spending close to Rs.500 crore to advance their campaigns. The international communications consultancy APCO Worldwide has been assisting Modi in this effort since 2007. The BJP has roped in additional institutional resources, which include Soho Square, a subsidiary of the international advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather (O&M), and TAG, a subsidiary of McCann Workgroup. The Congress campaign is also driven by international advertisement agencies such as Dentsu India and J. Walter Thomson. The advertisement campaigns driven by these agencies cover different platforms ranging from traditional media to social media.

Both thematically and structurally, the campaign drive of the two national parties has striking similarities to the “India Shining” campaign launched by the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in 2004. The NDA had sought to showcase the development gains of the A.B. Vajpayee government by spending over Rs.150 crore in publicity exercises. The India Shining campaign did capture much space in the media but the common man was not impressed. The BJP and the NDA suffered a shocking defeat at the hands of the Congress and some minor secular parties in the 2004 elections. This time round, the two parties are competing with each other to publicise their own

adaptations of the India Shining slogan.

The non-Congress, non-BJP parties do not have the kind of huge budgets needed to advance their part of the development discourse. Obviously, the impact these parties have created in media spaces is comparably lower than what has been achieved by the two big parties. Thus, certain achievements of the Bihar model that came up in official, government documents as recently as the second week of March have not received the kind of attention or traction they merit, presumably because of the lack of support from big-time social and media influencer companies.

The achievements of the Bihar model were reflected in Economic Survey 2012-13, which pointed out that the State had recorded high rates of growth during the Eleventh Five Year Plan. The survey stated that Bihar's economy grew at an annual rate of 11.95 per cent in the Eleventh Plan period, a significant increase from 5.67 per cent recorded in the Tenth Plan period. "The rate of growth is not only high compared to the previous Plan period but one of the highest among all the Indian States," the survey stated. Although the survey noted that this impressive growth was not reflected proportionately in poverty reduction, it certainly raised questions about the BJP's propaganda projecting Gujarat as the State with the highest growth rate in the country. Yet, neither the survey nor the questions its findings raised about the claims on Gujarat have enjoyed the kind of circulation and approbation the Gujarat model has received across the country and abroad. Similarly, the several initiatives taken by the Nitish Kumar-led JD(U) government in Bihar, including measures to empower the most backward communities and the weaker sections of society through enhanced representation in the local bodies and panchayati raj institutions, have not got much publicity.

The inability of the smaller parties to showcase and promote their development achievements or development models is reflected in the historical experience of the Left parties, too. The Left has been in power in West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala for many years since 1957. Its record in respect of implementing land reforms is unmatched in the country. The reforms have helped improve the living conditions of a large number of the people in these States. Kerala's significant achievements in improving the material conditions of living, reflected in the indicators of social development, some of which are on a par with many developed countries, have given rise to the internationally accepted term "Kerala model of development". Yet, at no point of time did the features of the Kerala model generate the kind of massive political traction that is being witnessed now in the case of the Gujarat model. Clearly, the well-funded propaganda machinery with its reach and efficacy is an important concomitant of the development discourse in the 2014 campaign.

Nothing reflects the importance of this factor more concretely than the traction the BJP and Modi have gained by harping on the Gujarat model in multifarious fora. However, their claims of high achievement have been questioned on several parameters, from foreign direct investment (FDI) to employment generation to public health to literacy. Census 2011 ranked Gujarat 17th among the States in achieving literacy levels. Gujarat's claims on being the State with the highest FDI have also been questioned with figures that show that its ranking is not on the top rung. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) documents reveal that "Gujarat scores low in areas of nutrition, education, employment, wages, consumer price index, rural planning, health, the status of the environment and other indicators of the overall health of society" (see Frontline, March 8, 2013). On the basis of data provided by these documents, the political epithet "feku" (bluffer) was also attached to Modi. But, the BJP leadership and the party's political and advertisement associates have not given much heed to this.

This determined pursuit of the Gujarat model theme is supplemented by sustained efforts at causing communal polarisation in different parts of the country, exploiting local issues and tussles. The Union Home Ministry has noted with concern that scores of low-intensity communal conflicts erupted across the country in the past three months.

A Lucknow-based senior RSS activist told Frontline that for the past 15 years Gujarat had been the Sangh Parivar's laboratory where Hindutva polarisation was clubbed with the fabrication of a development model to reap major political gains. "We are very close to successfully advancing this combination at the national level forcefully," he pointed out.

From hindutva to 'development'

Evidently, this pursuit is well planned and has been implemented steadfastly for several decades. In the mid-and late-1980s, the Sangh Parivar had sought to carve out a domineering political space for the BJP by concentrating on the Hindutva agenda and building a pan-Hindu political identity. The Ayodhya Ram Mandir agitation was the vehicle on which this political plan was mounted. This led to the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. But the Sangh Parivar could not reap the kind of political gains it expected in the elections that followed. The larger lessons of India's electioneering slogans were thus brought home to the Sangh Parivar.

Barring the 1977 and 1984 elections, when the atrocities of government agencies and the Congress during the Emergency in 1975-77 and the assassination of Indira Gandhi respectively were the main issues, every general election since 1952 was driven by an economic agenda through slogans such as "development through Five Year Plans" and "Garibi Hatao" (eradicate poverty). This message was assimilated by the BJP with much alacrity as it found that its core Hindutva agenda was not good enough to attract the majority of Hindu voters. Also, to reach somewhere close to a striking distance of power at the Centre it had to depend on a clutch of allies who pursued varied interests through assertive politics based on caste, community and region. It was the cumulative effect of all this that led to the formulation of the "development plus Hindutva" political theme giving primacy to the development agenda.

In fact, in response to the BJP's offensive, the Congress embarked on its own massive propaganda plan showcasing development and empowerment under the UPA regime. Sources in the Congress told this correspondent that Union Ministers Anand Sharma, Kapil Sibal and Jairam Ramesh had repeatedly raised the point about the BJP and Modi getting the upper hand on the development issue and that the UPA was losing the "perception" battle with the principal opposition party as well as the new entrant, the AAP. The answer that the UPA managers found for this was a massive campaign highlighting the benefits of the UPA government's flagship programmes such as the rural employment guarantee scheme, housing projects for the poor, and empowerment of the weaker sections of society.

However, despite pumping in huge resources, the Congress campaign has not been able to create the kind of impact that the BJP and Modi's Gujarat model campaign has had. The primary reason for this, according to the Delhi-based political analyst Sheetal Singh, is the public perception that for every development initiative undertaken by the Congress and the UPA, the leadership has swindled and siphoned off resources in crores. "When such a perception gains ground, there is hardly any chance of people valuing your positive enterprises even when they are enjoying the benefits of the same," Sheetal Singh told *Frontline*.

Taking a broader view of the Bharat Nirman versus Gujarat model discourse, the Lucknow-based political analyst Sudhir Kumar Panwar pointed out that a deeper analysis would show a lack of substance and an ideological hollowness in the big tussle on the development agenda. "Between them, these two parties have led the coalitions that ruled this country for the past 16 years. When you analyse the policies of these two formations, especially their economic policies, one would see that they are identical. Broadly, both follow neoliberal economic policy parameters that are anti-farmer, anti-retail trader and anti-poor. The specific development programmes that both of them adopt could have different shades of emphasis, but in totality the developmental agenda of both the

parties are one and the same, starting with facilitation of big corporates and multinational business-industrial entities in various sectors, including agriculture, promotion of FDI and dilution of people-oriented systems such as the public distribution system. In other words, what we are witnessing now is nothing but a sham.”

Indeed, along with the development discourse, voices such as Panwar’s are also gaining ground in the electoral arena. However, it remains to be seen how much reach and impact these voices will have in the era of professional influencer companies supported with big budgets.

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