

UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC SIDE OF INC AND BJP'S ELECTION MANIFESTOS

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In the run-up to the 18th Lok Sabha elections, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) released their *Nyay Patra* and *Sankalp Patra* on 5 and 14 April 2024, respectively.¹ The two manifestos have extensively highlighted the past and future policies of both the parties. Their policy prescriptions and the approaches to achieve them differ, based on the capabilities as well as the calculations that the two parties have done during their respective tenures in government. As the titles of the manifestos suggest, the BJP would further accentuate its existing policy planks on domestic issues, if it wins elections again as the party touts the ‘achievements’ in the 10-year-long rule under Prime Minister Modi since 2014. The INC is pledging reformative policies because of the ‘damage’ it claims the BJP has done to India's social, economic and political fabric.

In its manifesto, the INC presents itself as the protector and follower of India’s Constitution and federalism. The party promises to implement different Constitutional provisions for different societal segments - including women, youth, farmers, and minorities; strengthening fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution; and taking robust steps to solidify Union-State relations. For its part, the BJP does not affirm any such adherence to the Constitution, which has prompted experts to view this as further evidence of the party's intent to modify the Indian Constitution if it comes to

¹ “Manifesto,” Indian National Congress,” <https://manifesto.inc.in/en/introduction/>, “manigesto,” Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), <https://www.bjp.org/bjp-manifesto-2024>.

the power again. Congress's language is ambitious when it talks about launching welfare schemes including reservations for farmers, youth, women, and minorities; while the BJP employs emotional phrases and connects them to policies such as pledges to arrange visits to religious sites for the old generation.

The INC and several other experts have highlighted that the BJP has been spreading misinformation about its 'economic performance' that is not corroborated by the reality on the ground. Noting these discrepancies, INC keeps the focus of its manifesto on "Hath Badlega Halat," expressing dismay with BJP's decade-long rule. On the other side, BJP has sought to drum up "Modi Ki Guarantee," which indeed became a buzzword across India.

The brazen promotion of the leaders by the parties in the two manifestos has its benefits as well as downsides. Rahul Gandhi is not a party president, nor a member of any committee; but his picture pasted alongside party president Malickarjun Kharge explains why factions outside and inside the party had called for change in the party structure. The INC has focussed on 25 promises with five sections of society -- including the Youth, Farmers, Women, Workers, and Minorities. On the other hand, the BJP starts with what it claims it has achieved in terms of socio-economic development and political objectives and outlines its future policies with regard to women, youth, farmers, and underprivileged segments.

The youth between 18-19 years of age in India comprise around 49 million while women voters are 49.7 percent of the population, for which both INC and BJP have announced attractive schemes to woo their votes.

Major policy pledges of INC contained in its manifesto include:

- Strengthening pluralism
- Reservation of 50 percent seats for the OBCs, SC, and ST along with their quotas in the education and job sector
- Maintaining of Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizen Act 2007 for senior citizens
- Right To Apprenticeship Act, jobs and scholarships for youth
- Ensuring the autonomy of educational institutions
- Mahalakshmi scheme to provide INR 1 lakh to every poor family's oldest woman, immediately implementing the 106th Amendment of the Constitution regarding 1/3 women

representation in the Lok Sabha, half central government jobs for women, and 'same work, same wages scheme'

- Legal guarantee to Minimum Support Price (MSP) for farmers amidst recent protests on the issue against BJP, and farmer-centric crop insurance
- Aquaculture to be recognized as crucial for India alongside agriculture to promote fishermen's community
- Ensuring Constitutional fundamental rights for all
- Independent and strong judiciary and media
- Strengthening India's federal structure through cooperative Centre-State relations, and developing India's Northeastern States.

On the other side, the BJP starts with the statistics about 'development' in its decade-long rule which appear exaggerated and mainly for point-scoring. The major policies of the BJP pledged in the manifesto are:

- Free ration to more than 80 crore poor under PM Gharib Kalyan Anna Yoajana, health, and clean water for poor households
- Empowering women through providing job opportunities, sponsoring educational and sports opportunities, toilets for women, and reservations in the Lok Sabha
- Transparent exams, developing startup ecosystem, and expanding participation of youth in nation-building
- Providing healthcare and government services at doorsteps for senior citizens, and facilities to arrange sacred pilgrimages for them
- Strengthening PM Fasal Bima Yojana, increasing MSP, and supporting farmers to enhance production capacity and expand the agricultural sector through technological implementation
- Social security for the workers
- Simplifying laws and compliances for small traders and protecting them through technological initiatives

- Empowering OBCs, SCs, and STs through representation in government, education scholarships, and investing INR 24,000 crore to improve their socioeconomic stature

While BJP has based its *Sankalp Patra* on existing policies to give a sense of the government's resolution to improve the socio-economic conditions of Indian society, INC's *Nyay Patra* has promised a lot in a sense of reforming most of the policies that BJP has introduced. When experts have criticized the BJP for presenting wrong facts and figures about socio-economic development and for Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which will be daunting for Indian so-called secularism, they also take into account the lack of calculation by INC while announcing multiple welfare schemes under its women and youth empowerment sections. Currently, India's fiscal deficit stands at around 5.1 percent which will further increase if INC implements its promised schemes without realizing how to generate further revenues.

Both INC and BJP have put forth manifestos, articulating their policy preferences, but both parties know that the majority of the population does not read the whole document and both seem to want to capitalize on this act of omission on the people's part. The BJP has focussed more on pictorial depiction of Modi as a man who cares about people and who knows what people want. On the other side, INC has made a significant number of promises but with little explanation on how to achieve those objectives.

Both the BJP and INC covered most of the domestic issues in their manifestos and faithfully echoed these themes in their electoral pitches at the beginning. However, as the election is entering its fifth phase, electoral pitch of the BJP has changed significantly. In its manifesto, the party had eschewed talking about Muslims and Pakistan; but as it senses less voter turnout in its favor than it had initially expected, Modi and the other party leaders have once again resorted to full-blown anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan rhetoric. The unabashed polarising and divisive pitch of the Indian Prime Minister is being noted worldwide, while it is engendering fear and intimidation among the Muslims inside India. Although INC has pledged reformativ schemes, fulfilling these promises if INDIA is able to form government, would be a formidable challenge as there is not much indication as to how the resources for these schemes would be utilized.

Both parties aim to attract voters with their expansive visions and lucrative promises, yet they also count on the electorate's limited engagement with the detailed contents of their respective manifestos. As the election heads towards conclusion, voters are faced with a crucial decision that will shape India's socio-political landscape, weighing the continuity offered by the BJP as compared to the reformativ agenda proposed by the INC.