

The 2024 Lok Sabha Election Results in India: Implications of the Mandate

Debashis Chakraborty

Abstract

During a democratic election process, the electorate is most likely to vote for political parties that are capable of fulfilling their aspirations in an efficient manner. India witnessed the General Election in 2024, where the ruling political outfit, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), came back to power, along with its coalition partners. As the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) begins its third term, there is a need to analyze the reasons why the group was able counter the anti-incumbency waves. From a political economic perspective, the current analysis looks into the major external and internal drivers that might have shaped the Indian voter's perception on the ruling alliance. While on the domestic front factors like the trajectory of economic growth and inflation management performance of the government might have provided the NDA with positive dividends in the electronic voting machines (EVMs), the recognition on brighter image of the nation at the global stage could also have acted in their favour. Based on the discussions, certain conclusions on the future course are drawn.

The 2024 Election: Results and Undercurrents

India, the largest democracy of the world, witnessed the general election in the country during 2024. While a large number of political parties, including many small and regional ones, participated in the election, the major battle was between two national parties and their alliances. On one end of the electoral spectrum, there was Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which held the power since 2014. A number of political parties were supporting BJP, either directly or through tacit collusion. These parties collectively formed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). On the other end, there was Congress, a party which has been out of power since 2014. Congress also received varying degrees of support from a number of political parties, who were under the umbrella of Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA).

It has been observed that the rational electorate generally votes for improving their own welfare as well as the same for others (Aldin et al., 2007). However, whether the electorate *en masse* will go for the incumbent party or for the opposition, often depends on the way in which the current government handles the question of economic prosperity (Bochsler and Hänni, 2019). In 2024, elections in other parts of the world witnessed a defeat of the ruling parties, on the question of economic policies, among other considerations. For instance, the change of colours in South Korea, United States, United Kingdom and several other countries can be noted. As the BJP-led alliance completed 10 years in the office, despite its positive performance across different fields, a certain degree of anti-incumbency sentiments was anticipated. The coming back of NDA to power in this context is indeed noteworthy.

The political parties usually differ in their positions (spatial theory) or emphasis (salience theory) on the contemporary issues. One major driver of the success of a party in an election can be the careful crafting of the political manifesto, which bears both direct and indirect effects. On the one hand, the relatively well-off segment of the electorate can read through the promises, form their opinion and decide accordingly. On the other hand, the segment with relatively less access to resources may learn about the perspectives from the word of mouth from the acquaintances, conventional or social media and cast their votes in that light. It has been argued that political parties prefer to fight on their chosen turf and “disproportionally emphasise issues they ‘own’” (Dolezal et al., 2014). Interestingly, it has been observed that on one hand the BJP and Congress manifestoes somewhat differed in terms of economic, social and cultural policies as well as freedom and ease of living perspectives. On the other hand, they were on similar pages on economic growth, economic justice, market orientation, welfare considerations and defence strategies (Phadnis and Priyadarshi, 2024). Hence, the manifestoes to some extent helped the voters to form an impression on the orientation of the parties on key issues and cast their votes accordingly. Moreover, the voter’s perception on a political party can be based on both their actual actions or their ability to get coverage in the media on the contemporary issues (Walgrave and Soontjens, 2019). In addition to the conventional campaigns, the major parties invested significant time and energy in social media platforms with application of AI tools, which helped them to formulate favourable opinions across different issues (Singh, 2024).

The literature further notes that the electorate feel comfortable to vote for candidates with whom they can associate with, which generates a

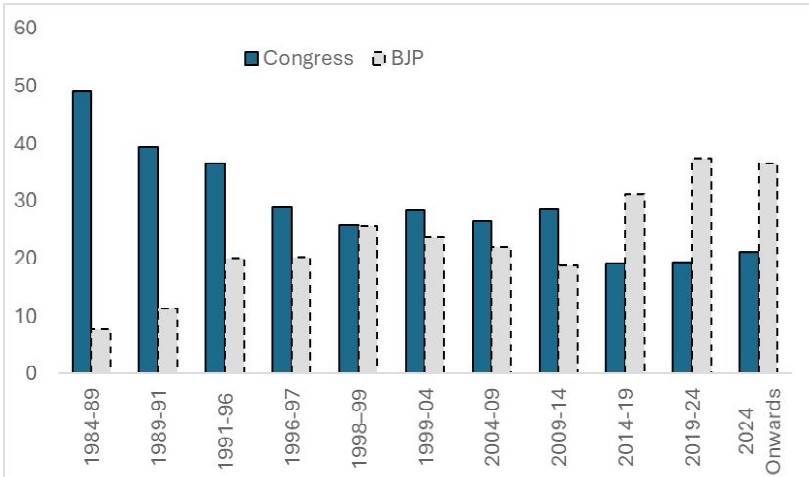
sense of proximity. However, an acknowledgement of superior leadership skills in such candidates is preferred for ensuring good governance and brighter future (Aichholzer and Willmann 2020). It has been observed that BJP, under the leadership of the Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi, consolidated its base strongly during the last ten years through various economic, social and nationalistic initiatives that was conveyed appropriately and resonated well with a major section of the electorate (e.g., 'Mann ki baat'). On the other hand, despite recent attempts to recover the lost ground, the Congress, under the leadership of Mr. Rahul Gandhi, has not been able to match its past glory yet (Jaldi, 2024). It has been observed that a significantly higher proportion of the electorate considered Mr. Modi as a more resolute leader as compared to Mr. Gandhi, based on domestic considerations as well as India's growing prominence in global forums during the past decade (Huang et al., 2023).

One other defining feature of the 2024 election was the fielding of celebrity politicians (CPs) by several political parties, including the two major national parties as well. CPs are personalities who have already gained popularity in other spheres (e.g., sports, cultural activities), and use their fame and social identity to join politics. Given their past achievements, as the CPs attracts people's attention, their social media posts and interventions can create a direct communication with their electorate. Interestingly, while the CPs from entertainment industry background sided with the ruling and opposition parties almost uniformly, 'sportspersons, who often enjoy a nationalist appeal by virtue of representing the country, tend to have a much more partisan relationship with the incumbent party' (Mothilal *et al.* 2022). This inherent preference pattern offered BJP and its allies an edge over the competing parties.

The success of the leader party of the NDA alliance (i.e., BJP) in 2024 has first been compared with its counterpart in the opposition (i.e., Congress) by comparing their vote shares in general elections since 1984 (Figure 1). In the 1984 election, Congress reached the peak of its electoral success, in the aftermath the tragic death of the then Prime Minister Ms. Indira Gandhi. Since then, BJP has significantly gained ground by skilfully responding to the contemporary issues and furthering its nationalist agenda. While from 1998 onwards the gaps between the two parties narrowed, after 2014 BJP has consistently dominated over Congress both at the national and state level elections. It is observed that in the 2024 election BJP has lost ground slightly and Congress has gained to some extent in terms of vote share, but the gap between the two parties remain quite significant. This perspective clearly gets

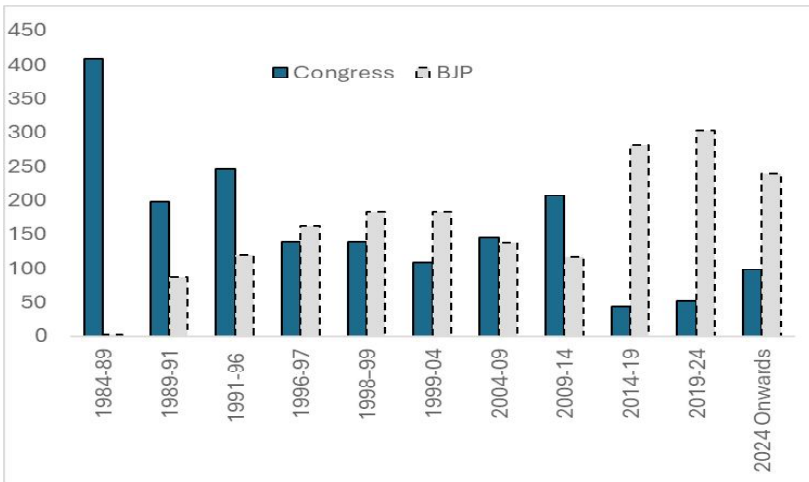
reflected from the number of seats won by the two parties in the national parliament since 1984, as reported in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Vote Shares of the Two major parties from 1984 onwards (%)



Source: Constructed by author from Gol (undated) data

Figure 2: Lok Sabha Seats held by the Two major parties from 1984 onwards



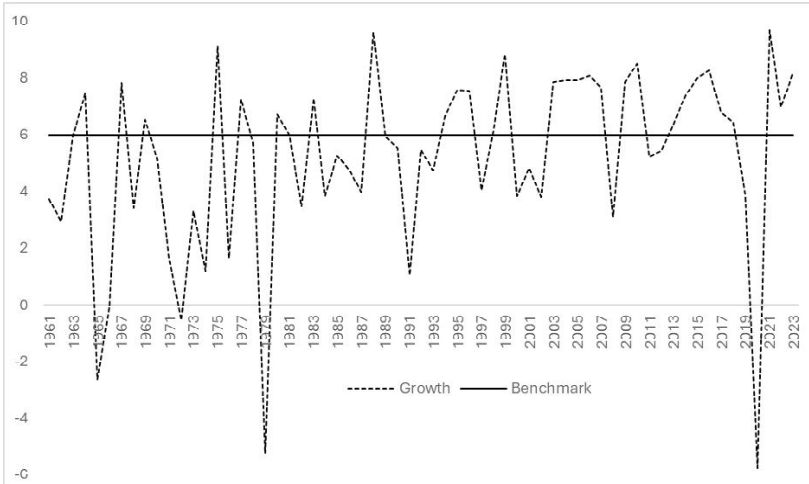
Source: Constructed by author from Gol (undated) data

The discussion so far indicates that in the 2024 election BJP has performed reasonably well, despite potentially facing anti-incumbency sentiments to some extent, for being in power for a decade. The moot question is whether this electoral result can be interpreted as a sign of maturity for Indian democracy. If the perception on economic growth in India is indeed backed by real evidence, then the comeback of the NDA government, albeit with lower number of seats for BJP, is an appropriate reflection of this contention. Given this background, this paper first analyzes the potential internal drivers and then delves into the external ones. Based on observations, in light of the emerging challenges and opportunities, the conclusions for the future are drawn.

Internal Drivers

The GDP growth scenario in India is first noted with the help of Figure 3. In order to capture the steadiness of the growth regime in the country with respect to a benchmark, a horizontal line depicting 6 percent growth rate (an indicator of sustainable growth) has been incorporated in the figure. It is observed that during the post-2014 NDA regime, the growth rates have consistently stayed above 6 percent, barring the global recession period, caused by the outbreak of Covid-19. This economic growth has been a result of several policy interventions during the 10-year rule of NDA. First, a wide array of initiatives was floated to enhance farmer income and agri-infrastructure on one hand and to reduce food price uncertainties on the other. Some of the pertinent interventions on this segment include: Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN), Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY), Agriculture Infrastructure Fund (AIF) and so on (GoI, 2024a). Second, the introduction the 'Make-in-India' initiative launched in 2014 significantly facilitated production in domestic manufacturing segments. This sector received further support after the launch of the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan' in 2020, when a holistic development was planned across the entire value chain. The recent introduction of the 'Production-linked Incentive' (PLI) has further cemented the industrial base in the country and played a key role in attracting foreign investments with technology from abroad. These interventions collectively provided Indian players a crucial support against the cheap Chinese imports, which were often being dumped with predatory intent (Chaudhuri, 2015).

Figure 3: Movements in GDP Growth Rate (%)



Source: Constructed by author from World Bank (undated a) data

Third, the trade policy liberalization on services front has helped the country to consolidate its position on sectoral exports (particularly IT-enabled services) on one hand and produce better-quality manufacturing goods through the ‘servicification’ phenomenon on the other (Pant and Chakraborty, 2024). Fourth, the launch of initiatives like ‘Start-up India’ (2016) greatly helped budding entrepreneurs in the country, by offering them a seed capital. Fifth, the schemes like Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) (2015) facilitated skill formation and employability of people from low-income households. Sixth, the inflation management over the past five years has been efficiently undertaken, as a result of which the economic stress on the underprivileged sections did not lead to severe disruptions. Seven, given the steps undertaken to boost confidence in the capital market, the Sensex value has increased considerably over the last decade and secured financial gains for a wider set of population. Finally, as a cumulative effect of these policies and other similar interventions, the poverty scenario considerably improved in the country. For instance, the projected headcount ratio in the country during 2022-23, even in the aftermath of the disruptions in economic activity caused by Covid-19, came down to 11.28 percent, vis-à-vis the corresponding figure of 29.17 percent during 2013-14 (Figure 4).

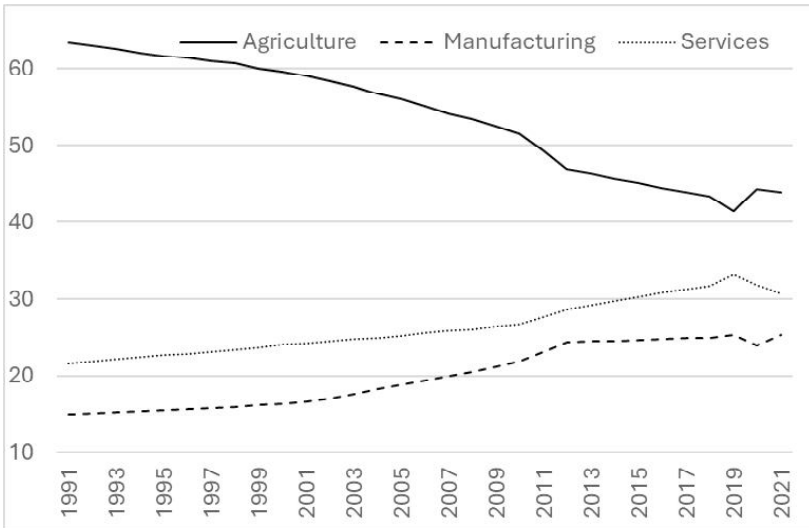
Figure 4: Poverty Scenario in India over last two decades



Source: Quoted from Chand and Suri (2024)

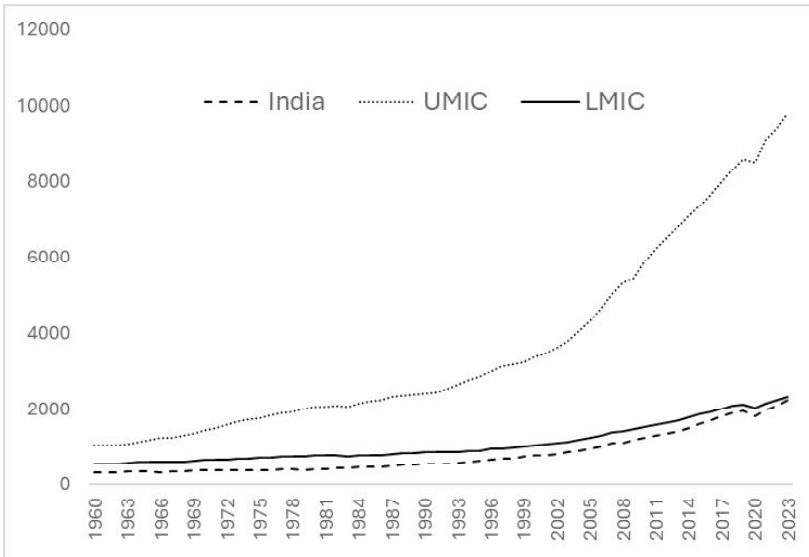
While the interventions described so far explain the economic growth witnessed over the last decade, certain challenges still persist. The first and foremost challenge is the jobless growth phenomenon witnessed in the economy, i.e., relative growth of the service sector, whose employment elasticity is not very high. On the other hand, despite the growth witnessed in the manufacturing sector, the employment growth therein remained at a relatively low level. This phenomenon can be explained by the relative growth of sub-segments in the hi-tech industries, which are by definition not employment intensive. On the other hand, the labour-intensive industries, given the gradual tariff reforms, got exposed to steep competition from low-cost economies like China, which compromises their employment creation capabilities. Agriculture by far is the highest contributor to the employment pool (Figure 5). However, the government initiatives for systemic reforms in agriculture have met strong protests from a major section of the farmers, and the challenge in coming days would be to sell the reform agenda to this reluctant segment of the electorate (Singh, 2022).

Figure 5: Sectoral Decomposition of Employment in India (%)



Source: Constructed by author from World Bank (undated a) data

Figure 6: Comparing India's GDP Per Capita (constant 2015 US\$)



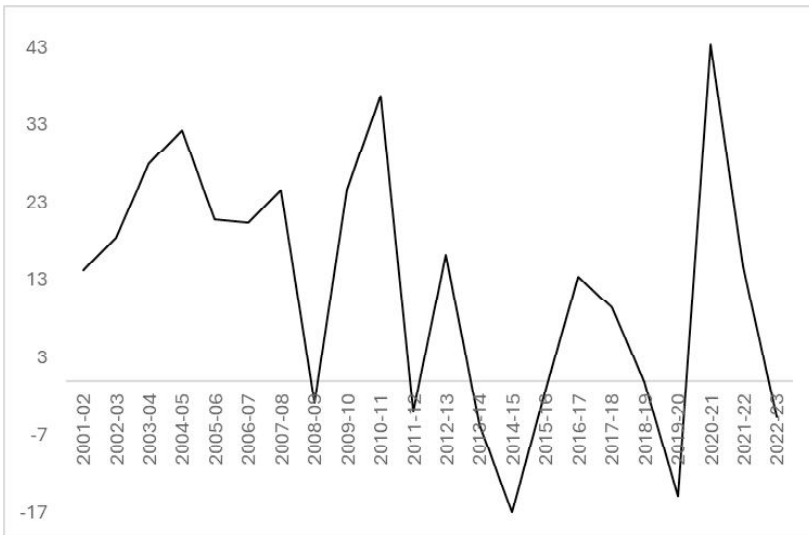
Source: Constructed by author from World Bank (undated a) data

It is evident from the discussion so far that the reform agenda initiated by the government over the last five years has not been completed yet. One outcome of this incomplete reform is the modest growth of the India's Per Capita Gross Domestic Product (PCGDP), when viewed in comparison with other developing countries. It is observed from Figure 6 that while India's PCGDP has increased over the last decade, the growth paradigm has remained comparable with the lower-middle income countries (LMIC). In contrast, the upper-middle income countries (UMIC) have witnessed a considerably higher rate of per capita income growth over this period.

While the international comparison puts India in a relatively modest income plane, the observed growth and success of the poverty alleviation programme in the context of the domestic dynamics presented the performance of the government in positive lights. As a result, BJP, the ruling party reaped rich electoral dividends, despite a reduction in the number of seats won.

External Drivers

Figure 7: India's Export Growth Rate since 2001 (%)



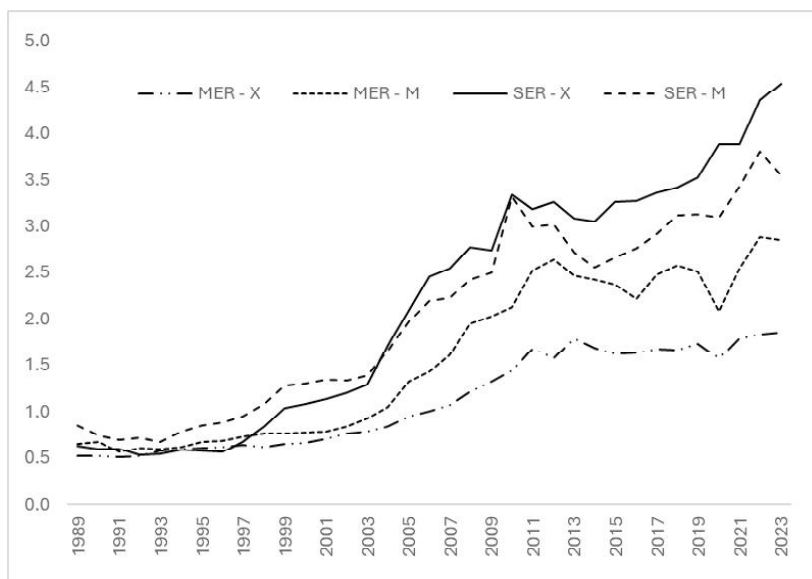
Source: Constructed by author from World Bank (undated b) data

Among the external drivers, a few major characteristics are noted here. First, the export growth rate of the country has witnessed a wide fluctuation since 2014, the time when BJP came to power (Figure 7).

The event however reflects the global currents (e.g., US-China Trade War, Covid-19 crisis, Russia-Ukraine war), rather than a weakening of Indian exports. In fact, it is considered that India played its cards quite efficiently during these crisis moments. The import of energy products from Russia, despite the sanctions from the West, which led to both rich export dividends as well as domestic price stability is a case in point. Second, the share of the country in global trade flows showed a diverging performance. While the share of the country in world merchandise exports stagnated, the corresponding figures for the service exports have increased considerably (Figure 8). While the performance in the merchandise sector remained a function of the unfinished reform agenda at home and the rising protectionism abroad, the service sector has gained from the deepening of global value chains (GVCs) in this segment.

Third, due to the gradual reforms in the country, including ease of doing business reforms on one hand and relaxation of upper limits on foreign direct investments (FDI) on the other, the capital inflows in the country have increased considerably. During December 2024, the country witnessed the cumulative inflow of \$1 trillion FDI since April 2000, which is a commendable achievement (GoI, 2024b).

Figure 8: India's Share in World Trade (%)



Source: Constructed by author from World Bank (undated b) data

While the achievements on the external front have been duly noted by the electorate, certain concern areas are indeed there. First, the recent slide in the Rupee-USD exchange rate has shown the loopholes of overreliance on foreign capital inflows, which needs to be tackled in the coming days. Second, the slow progress of the WTO negotiations forced the country to opt for a number of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) in recent periods, e.g., Australia–India Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (2022), India UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (2022). While the agreements may potentially create newer opportunities, the conflicts from deep tariff cuts to partners cannot be ruled out. For instance, several sectors often call for renegotiation of tariff concessions in existing agreements (e.g., tea imports from Nepal under SAFTA). Finally, India has to some extent backtracked from its prior WTO commitments in the Information Technology Agreement (ITA) in the post-2014 period, which despite underlining its commitment for the welfare of domestic manufacturing sector on one hand, may lead to trade discords with key partner countries on the other. On the whole, the country's moves on trade-investment front has been favourably viewed by the electorate.

The performance of the government has been particularly viewed in the positive light on the foreign policy and security front. First, the decision to go for Balakot air strike after Pulwama terrorist attack underlined the government's commitments towards national security in no uncertain terms. Second, the strong response to China during the Galwan valley crisis period and beyond showed how the territorial integrity is not an area of compromise for the regime. Third, the prominence of India among the key forums (e.g., partnership in Quad, Presidency in G-20) enabled the electorate to feel pride for the nation's achievements. Fourth, the way India handled the rough weather in countries like Canada and Maldives, underlines the proficiency and capabilities developed. Fifth, the core achievements in the field of Science and Technology provided the country with a significant level of confidence, e.g., launch of Chandrayaan-2 (2019), planning of Gaganyaan. In general, the electorate has also viewed the performance of the government on these fronts favourably, which has provided them with positive returns in the electronic voting machines (EVMs).

The Road Ahead: Silver Lining?

Given the positive achievements of the government over the last decade, the electoral mandate looks quite justified. It is no wonder that BJP has been able to fight the anti-incumbency sentiments and come back to

power, though with lesser number of seats. The informed call of the electorate to bring the incumbent party back to power, based on their past performance on internal and external front, indeed underlines the maturing of Indian democracy. Viewed through a slightly different prism, the decision of the electorate not to go for a hung parliament, propagating uncertainty, is commendable.

With electoral dividends, comes non-negotiable responsibilities. The saving grace is that the government has now understood the challenges appropriately in its 10-year long cumulative memory. Policy focusses now need to tread along the path of the unfinished / semi-finished reforms agendas. First, the push for organic farming and other productivity boosting measures is the need of the hour, given the scope for earning price premiums in both domestic and global markets. The higher revenue potential may motivate the farmers to abandon some of the objections they showed earlier. Second, while India can evolve into a healthcare and pharma hub, the doubts over reputation of India-made medicines after certain mishaps needs to be removed through punitive actions against non-complying units. Third, the sustainability narrative needs greater focus, so as to promote upcoming segments like eco-tourism on one hand and generate renewable energies on the other. Fourth, for seamless export promotion, infrastructure creation and port operations need to be appropriately handled.

Nevertheless, several challenges also exist for the new government. First, the extent of negotiations with the US is going to be a major challenge, given the shifts in emphasis therein in the Trump era. For instance, the perception of the new US administration on climate change may compromise their participation in the ongoing negotiations and thus the commitment patterns in transfers towards their less development counterparts to facilitate transition to renewable energies. The possible barriers coming up to service exports in the US are another case in point. Similarly, WTO negotiations may further slow down, adding to the worries of developing countries like India. Second, after a long time, in South Asia India is surrounded by a number of governments who are not exactly friendly to its economic or political interests. The approaches of the new governments in Bangladesh or Maldives underline this perspective appropriately. Third, the government needs to decide how they can convert the huge population in the country to an advantage, rather than considering them as a burden. Revamping the education sector, particularly in recognition of the roles of artificial intelligence (AI) tools across the walks of life, is going to play a key role in this context.

While the challenges lying ahead of the government are not easy to tackle, the saving grace is that they are now aware of the inherent strength of Indian democracy – sincere and appropriate reforms, even if it involves short run pains, will be eventually rewarded by the electorate, if they are convinced with the policy change. The NDA, drawing right lessons from their wins in the last two terms, can confidently move forward with its carefully devised agenda of ‘Viksit Bharat 2047’.

References

- [1] Aichholzer, J. & Willmann, J. (2020), ‘Desired personality traits in politicians: Similar to me but more of a leader’, *Journal of Research in Personality*, 88: 1-11.
- [2] Bochsler, D. & Hänni, M. (2019), ‘The three stages of the anti-incumbency vote: Retrospective economic voting in young and established democracies’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 58(1): 30-55.
- [3] Chand, R. & Suri, Y. (2024), ‘Multidimensional Poverty in India since 2005-06’, Discussion Paper, New Delhi: Niti Aayog and United Nations Development Programme.
- [4] Chaudhuri, S. (2015), ‘Import liberalisation and premature deindustrialisation in India’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50(43): 60-69.
- [5] Dolezal, M., Ennser-Jedenastik, L., Müller, W. C. & Winkler, A. K. (2014), ‘How parties compete for votes: A test of saliency theory’, *European Journal of Political Research*, 53: 57-76.
- [6] Edlin, A., Gelman, A. & Kaplan, N. (2007), ‘Voting as a Rational Choice’, *Rationality and Society*, 19(3): 293-314.
- [7] Government of India (undated), ‘Election Commission of India’, available at: <https://www.eci.gov.in/> (accessed January 22, 2025).
- [8] Government of India (2024a), ‘Schemes for Welfare of Farmers’, Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, February 2, available at: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=2002012#:~:text=As%20on%2031%2D12%2D2023,56.47%20Crores%20in%20agriculture%20sector> (accessed January 22, 2025).
- [9] Government of India (2024b), ‘India’s FDI Journey Hits \$1 Trillion’, Ministry of Commerce & Industries, December 12, available at: <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2083683> (accessed January 22, 2025).
- [10] Huang, C., Fagan, M. & Gubbala, S. (2023), ‘Views of India Lean Positive Across 23 Countries’, Washington DC: Pew Research Centre.

- [11] Jaldi, A. S. (2024), 'Retrospective Analysis of the 2024 Indian Elections: BJP Wins the General Elections Against the Strengthening Opposition of the INDIA Bloc', Policy Paper 10/24, Rabat: Policy Center for The New South.
- [12] Mothilal, R. K., Mishra, D., Nishal, S., Lalani, F. M. & Pal, J. (2022), 'Voting with the Stars: Analyzing Partisan Engagement between Celebrities and Politicians in India', Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, available at: <http://joyojeet.people.si.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/votingStars.pdf> (accessed January 21, 2025).
- [13] Pant, S. & Chakraborty, D. (2024), 'Can Servicification Benefit Manufacturing Exports? Empirical Results for India', *South Asia Economic Journal*, 25(2): 126–157.
- [14] Phadnis, A. & Priyadarshi, A. (2024), 'Do the Policy Proposals of the BJP and Congress Differ from Each Other? An Analysis of Election Manifestos', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 59(48): 53-63.
- [15] Singh, R. (2024), 'From memes to AI: How digital tools reshaped India's 2024 general elections', December 31, Business Standard, New Delhi.
- [16] Singh, S. (2022), 'The Farmers' Movement Against Three Agricultural Laws in India: A Study of Organisation', *Review of Agrarian Studies*, 12(1): 161-173.
- [17] Walgrave, S. & Soontjens, K. (2019), 'How voters form associative issue ownership perceptions. An analysis of specific issues', *Electoral Studies*, 59: 136-144.
- [18] World Bank (undated a), 'World Development Indicators', available at: <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators> (accessed January 21, 2025).
- [19] World Bank (undated b), 'World Integrated Trade Solution' (WITS), available at: <https://wits.worldbank.org/WITS/WITS/Restricted/Login.aspx> (accessed January 23, 2025).