

The BJP's Election Manifesto

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The cover pages of the [BJP's Election Manifesto 2014](#) may have several faces from the past and present on it, but there is little doubt about whose imprint is the most significant. Some brave representatives of the party had already declared that they did not even need a manifesto, since they already had a "Modifest" going for them! Even the Preface signed by Murli Manohar Joshi notes "the determination of the party under the charismatic leadership of Shri Narendra Modi," in yet another expression of the unabashed personality cult that has been actively fed by the mainstream media.

So the feeling in at least some of the people in the BJP may have been, why go in for specific promises in a manifesto when you have a leader who will supposedly deliver everything? Indeed, such promises could even prove to be problematic for the party and its current candidate for Prime Minister. After all, they would require specifying at least some of the precise steps through which all the wonderful outcomes of growth, development, etc, are to be obtained, as well as revealing other measures required by the hard core of the party and its support base in the RSS.

The controversial delay of the manifesto's release (after the first phase of polling had already started, in what may be an unprecedented move in Indian electoral politics) is widely perceived to have reflected internal dissensions and debate. This is in turn expressed in somewhat contradictory statements, most of all within the segments of the manifesto relating to economic policies.

Of course, the schizophrenia is evident in some of the non-economic promises of this manifesto as well. But this may not be actual internal confusion so much as the need or desire to conceal the real purpose from a public that may react to its overt expression or from allies who may respond negatively.

So the staple warhorse of BJP manifestos over the decades - the call for a [Uniform Civil Code](#) - is no longer stated in its own terms, but in apparently gender-sensitive terms "BJP believes that there cannot be gender equality till such time India adopts a Uniform Civil Code, which protects the rights of all women." Similarly some of the more controversial provisions are stuck in at the very end, possibly in the hope that general and uncommitted readers may tire of reading the document until the end. These include the promise to facilitate the construction of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya; the warning on the Sethu Samudram Channel project; and the emphasis on the "protection and promotion of the cow and its progeny" through "a necessary legal framework" in view of their "contribution to agriculture, socio-economic and cultural life of our country".

But otherwise, the document does indicate the effort of the party to present itself as a more modern, cleaned-up version of the party that has had a tradition of thriving on majoritarian and divisive politics. This is apparent especially in terms of its attempt to include and incorporate everyone possible. So, for the BJP government, apparently both rural and urban areas are to be high priority. And all sections of people are to be empowered: the poor, old and new middle classes, entrepreneurs, rural dwellers, urban residents, SCs, STs, OBCs, minorities, other weaker sections, women, children,

senior citizens, the "specially abled", the youth, sports persons, farmers, small-scale business owners, and so on.

Did anyone get left out in this breathless attempt at inclusion? And how is all this widespread empowerment to be achieved? The generally woolly and indistinct nature of the promises and plans is exemplified in declarations such as these, that the BJP will "remove bottlenecks and missing links in all sectors, activities and services; focus on proper planning and execution for right outcomes; strive for scale and speed with futuristic vision; and build institutions for today and tomorrow."

So far so vague, but it would be wrong to say there are no specifics in the BJP's manifesto. Many of these details, however, are also in the form of feel-good statements about encouraging decentralisation and people's participation, building infrastructure and providing basic amenities, etc., which presumably all parties would also like to do. In economic terms, there are more specific promises, but many of these are potentially problematic and actually provide clear pointers about the likely direction of future economic policy if indeed a BJP-led government does manage to come to power.

Consider, for example, the issue of investment in infrastructure, basic amenities and social services - a spectacular failure of the Indian development project over both NDA and UPA regimes. In recent years the UPA tried to ensure these through Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) which have mostly failed to deliver the promised investment or been have mostly failed to deliver the promised investment and created huge problems of moral hazard. So what does the BJP propose to do instead? More PPP! "Public Private Partnership would be encouraged to tap into private sector resources as well as expertise." In addition, "We will further evolve the Public Private Partnership (PPP) model into a People-Public-Private Partnership (PPPP) model."

In general, the economic manifesto for India goes along with the known preference of the Modi government in Gujarat for an economic strategy heavily biased in favour of the large corporate sector, which provides explicit and implicit fiscal and other subsidies to such large business; relies on continuing very low wages and significant numbers of working poor; does not bother with improving working conditions including safety of workers or social security; and has little regard for environmental concerns. This pro-business model that is the basic feature of economic growth in Gujarat has considerable resonance in the BJP manifesto. Consider some of these promises, taken from different parts of the manifesto:

- "Re-visit the policy framework for investments both foreign and domestic to make them more conducive.
- undertake banking reforms to enhance ease and access, as well as accountability
- provide a non adversarial and conducive tax environment
- rationalize and simplify the tax regime
- The FIPBs (Foreign Investment Promotion Board) functioning shall be made more efficient and investor friendly.

- We will ensure that a conducive, enabling environment is created making 'doing business' in India easy.
- We will focus on cutting the red tape, simplifying the procedures and removing the bottlenecks.
- Our attempt will be to move towards a single-window system of clearances both at the centre and also at the State level through a Hub-spoke model.
- We will put in place a mechanism that will ensure that the Central and state governments work in close coordination and synergy while giving clearances to mega projects."

If the last promise caused the antennae to rise of environmentalists and those concerned with issues of displacement and ecological problems generated by unregulated private activity, they were absolutely right because the BJP's manifesto also promises that "decision-making on environment clearances will be made transparent as well as time-bound." They will also "frame the environment laws in a manner that provides no scope for confusion and will lead to speedy clearance of proposals without delay." (Emphasis added). Note that there is no explicit promise that this speedy clearance will ensure that the interests of nature, the environment and all stakeholders will be adequately protected.

In general, the BJP's heart bleeds for private business, as is evident from the promise that "Over-regulation needs to be addressed to stop the harassment of the businessmen and traders." The privatisation of knowledge is also not a concern for the BJP but apparently a process greatly to be encouraged, even though it is known to inhibit industrialisation economic diversification and has many problems for public health and other areas: "We will embark on the path of IPRs and Patents in a big way."

The most transparent reflection of private investor and employer bias is in the discussion on labour laws. "For the organised labour, we propose to encourage industry owners and labour to embrace the concept of 'Industry Family'..., in which industry owners and labourers bond as a family. This in turn involves bringing "together all stakeholders to review our Labour laws which are outdated, complicated and even contradictory."

So workers are not necessarily to be ensured of their rights - instead they have to succumb to some template of paternalistic familial relations in which employers can decide on their conditions without being circumscribed by minimum laws respecting wages, working conditions, security of contract and so on. This is indeed a promise to "flexibilise" further what is already one of the most flexible labour markets in the world, and to allow social patterns of discrimination to continue to segment workers to avoid ensuring their human rights.

This manifesto suggests that the most dangerous aspects of the BJP's vision for India are not only those that threaten the country's secular fabric, but also those that envisage the enforcement of an aggressively pro-big business agenda in which the

rights of citizens can be effectively trampled on in the push for corporate-driven growth.

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