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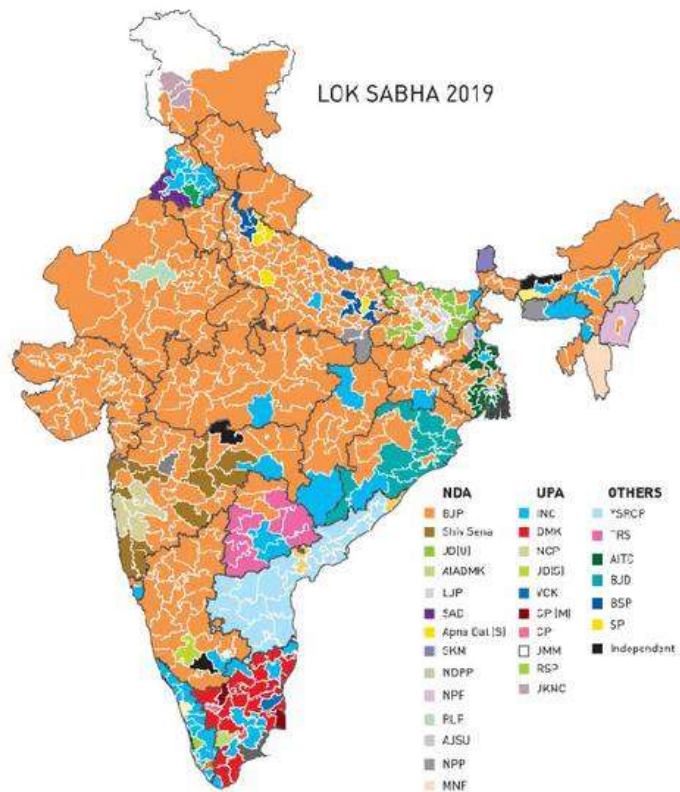
Politics and Public Policy

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The South Wall of India



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Infographics: V. Srinivasan/Frontline

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has pulverised the opposition in North and West India and made significant inroads into fresh electoral territory of the East in West Bengal and Odisha. But South India remains a mountain that the ruling party at the centre still has to climb. Lakshmana Venkat Kuchi, senior journalist, writes on why the three Southern States - Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala - voted to keep the BJP away.

With a brand-new attempt to sneak in Hindi, within a few days of stupendous victory with a majority in Lok Sabha on its own, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the centre openly declared its intentions to target the South and in particular, Tamil Nadu, that has proven to be its most impregnable fortress.

The BJP-led NDA government's move on Hindi sparked off fierce reaction from almost entire South India, forcing it to beat the retreat, for the present.

This is only a trailer of what to expect in the near and distant future as the Modi-Shah election winning machinery begins to roll out its southward plan.

After successfully breaching West Bengal (18 seats) and Odisha (9 seats) in the 2019 general elections, the BJP will be embarking on its expansion in South India, beginning with strengthening Karnataka and building upon its recent breakthrough in Telangana, where it won four seats. But it has some distance to go and work hard to become the opposition party in the State, especially after Congress abdicated its position by surrendering to the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) President K. Chandrashekhara Rao. KCR, as he is popularly referred to by his well-wishers has poached many of the Congress 19 MLAs in the State. On Thursday, June 6, twelve Congress MLAs requested the Assembly speaker to merge CLP with the TRS. After the speaker accepted the merger and recognised the group of 12 MLAs as part of the TRS, the Congress is left with a mere six MLAs. One of the 19 Congress MLAs, N. Uttam Kumar Reddy, won a Lok Sabha seat and has quit the assembly.

In both the Telugu-speaking States of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, the BJP's task is easier than in the two no-go areas of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, as the May 2019 general election results showed. In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the BJP failed to open its account. So also, in Andhra Pradesh, but there, the BJP more or less supported the Yuva Jana Shramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) of Y. Jaganmohan Reddy in its bid to rout its former ally, Telugu Desam Party supremo N. Chandrababu Naidu.

South India, barring Karnataka, stopped the Modi-Shah juggernaut by voting in a diametrically opposite manner to what the North that gave the BJP its biggest ever electoral victory with 303 seats. With its allies, the NDA tally stood at a massive 353. Clearly, the BJP repeated the Black Swan moment that many expected not to occur again, and definitely not so in quick succession.

A weakened Congress, with its organisation in tatters, was no match to the BJP electoral machine. Moreover, the opposition failed to fight as a united

force as it promised to. Several contributing factors added to the overall BJP victory across a vast swathe of North and West like Pulwama, paranoia about Muslims from across the border, a new upper caste consolidation in Uttar Pradesh that felt threatened with the idea of a Mayawati as the PM, in East and North East, the foreigners' issue all combined to give the BJP its second successive victory in general elections.

But all these same factors did not have the same impact in South India, where voters rejected the BJP and its allies, save for Karnataka.

Out of the 130 seats on offer, the BJP alliance could win only 30 thanks to the collapse of the Janata Dal (S) – Congress alliance that fell apart due to internal differences that led to a dysfunctional Karnataka government. In Karnataka, the BJP swept aside the coalition winning 25 of the 28 seats. The vote in Karnataka was as much against the infighting of the coalition partners also it was a positive vote for Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Moreover, In Karnataka, the BJP has had penetrated many years ago and has a strong cadre base in addition to the Sangh parivar and affiliated organisations working for it. In the assembly elections held last year, the BJP nearly came to power on its own, falling just eight MLAs short of the magic figure.

GENERAL ELECTIONS 2019

RESULTS

Seats 542

Won

Aam Aadmi Party	1
AJSU Party	1
AIADMK	1
AIMIM	2
Trinamool Congress	22
AI United Democratic Front	1
Apna Dal (Soneylal)	2
Bahujan Samaj Party	10
Bharatiya Janata Party	303
Biju Janata Dal	12
Communist Party of India	2
Communist Party of India (M)	3
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	23
Indian National Congress	52
Indian Union Muslim League	3
J&K National Conference	3
Janata Dal (Secular)	1

Janata Dal (United)	16
Jharkhand Mukti Morcha	1
Kerala Congress (M)	1
Lok Jan Shakti Party	6
Mizo National Front	1
Naga Peoples Front	1
National People's Party	1
Nationalist Congress Party	5
Nat. Demo. Progressive Party	1
Rashtriya Loktantrik Party	1
Revolutionary Socialist Party	1
Samajwadi Party	5
Shiromani Akali Dal	2
Shivsena	18
Sikkim Krantikari Morcha	1
Telangana Rashtra Samithi	9
Telugu Desam	3
Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi	1
YSR Congress Party	22
Independent	4

Total 542

Source: Election Commission

ETV GRAPHICS

North-South divide

But voters in the rest of South India – one Union Territory, Puducherry and four States, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana – did not buy the BJP campaign of *phir ek baar, Modi Sarkar* (one more term for Modi Govt.)

The question that begs itself to be answered here is why the South voted differently.

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term and long-term politics in the region. Especially, when viewed in the backdrop of the lament of Chief Ministers of South Indian

States and their serious concerns over far lesser returns on revenues they generate and add to the national kitty – an argument that did not find favour with either the centre or the States that are supposedly allotted more funds than they should have, on the basis of their contributions to the national exchequer.

Chief Ministers of Southern States of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Puducherry came out against the change in norms of devolution of finances from the 15th Finance Commission. These CMs had alleged that new terms of reference for the finance commission, directing it to use 2011 census figures in the formula to calculate how tax revenues were to be divided between the States, would be detrimental to the interests of the States that controlled population growth over the decades. The 14th Finance Commission used the 1971 census to determine tax revenue sharing. The South Indian States demanded that the FC use 1971 census figures only. These concerns were dismissed as baseless by the centre.



File photo: Pinarayi Vijayan, Kerala CM; N. Chandrababu Naidu, Andhra Pradesh CM; M.K. Stalin, DMK President; Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi, Congress President at the unveiling of statue of former Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi at the DMK party headquarters in Chennai on December 16, 2018. Photo: Bijoy Ghosh

Terming it a needless controversy, the then Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley said allegations were being made that the terms of reference of the Finance Commission was loaded against any particular region of the country. The share in central taxes is allocated to the States based on recommendations made by the Commissions to help them meet fiscal deficiency in providing a minimum standard of services to their people.

But the South Indian State CMs were far from convinced.

There is seemingly is a North-South divide discernible in various aspects of life – languages, food, culture, economics, and politics – from times immemorial. As it has been so historically, even when we go back in history to the times of the empires ruled by the different Indian monarchical dynasties.

If we look at the Indian landscape after the fall of the Mauryan empire to the times when large parts of the current day north India was under Kushan empire, the South had its own set of rulers. What we now know as the Andhra region, was ruled by the Satavahanas dynasty and by Cholas in Tamil Nadu region. Large parts of areas surrounding present-day Kerala were under the regime of Cheran kingdoms,

indicating as to how the different regions were under different monarchical control with different governance models in place.

Even when large tracts of Indian sub-continent were subject to Mughal invasions, several parts of current day Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala remained untouched by the destruction heaped by the marauding invaders. And

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hence, the animosity existing in northern India based on religion does not get traction in this part of the country.

The collapse of the Kushan empire that included areas in Afghanistan and current day Pakistan led to the emergence of various little kingdoms and fiefdoms. Even during this period, parts of the southern peninsula were ruled by dynasties, at war with one another, that the British took advantage of and conquered one by one and established their rule across the landmass that comprises current day modern nation-state of India.

The different regions of India, forgot their differences and divide on a host of issues and got together to overthrow a common enemy – the British. The mission was accomplished and India was born as a sovereign democratic republic. Unity in diversity has been the biggest strength of the country but traditional

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differences in different aspects of life continue – whether in culture, cuisine music, social parameters like education, health, and various development indicators. South India has over the years has become a manufacturing hub and education, the two key drivers of economic activity. Along with Maharashtra and Gujarat, South as a region progressed faster as compared to the North.

Electoral outcomes too reflect North-South divide

It was in Tamil Nadu that Congress, a national party, was ejected out of power in 1967 and ever since then, Congress has not been able to make any significant headway. It has been forced to play second fiddle to either of the two Dravidian majors, whether in State assembly or Lok Sabha elections.



DMK president M.K. Stalin speaking at Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's swearing in ceremony at IGMC Stadium in Vijayawada on May 30, 2019. Photo: Ch.Vijaya Bhaskar/The Hindu

If we take the period of emergency and polls immediately after that, Janata Party – a coalition of different non-Congress parties that came together just to oppose and defeat Indira Gandhi led Congress – swept North India and came to power, but South India stood by Indira Gandhi. In Andhra Pradesh, the Congress won all the 42 seats, barring one of Janata Party leader N. Sanjiva Reddy who went onto becoming the Speaker and then the President of the country. The excesses of the emergency regime – demolitions, forcible sterilizations, and censorship – touched more human lives directly in North as compared to South India and hence in terms of electoral impact, it heaped lesser damage to the Congress and Indira Gandhi.

If we take the example of more recent times, in 2004, it was the Congress numbers in Andhra Pradesh (29) and Tamil Nadu, along with its alliance partner DMK (39) plus one Puducherry seat that enabled it to become the largest single party with 145 seats and lead the formation of a UPA government at the centre. In the subsequent elections too, the powerful performance of the party in South ensured that it got re-

elected, something even few of the Congress ministers were doubting at that time. In AP Congress won 33 seats and in Tamil Nadu, the tally of Cong-DMK was 26.

Even in 2014 general elections, it was Tamil Nadu that stopped the Modi wave at the State's borders, with the AIADMK under Jayalalithaa winning 37 out of 39 seats. Once again, in 2019, it is South India barring Karnataka that stood up to the Modi wave.

The reasons are not far to seek. The issues that fetched the BJP huge dividends in terms of votes and seats in North and West India failed to find resonance in relatively more developed and progressive

South India – except in Karnataka where Modi magic seemed to have worked. The ground in Karnataka was prepared from previous

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elections when the BJP successfully expanded its base and vote in successive elections formed a government on its own and became its gateway to South India way back in 2008.

But since the government it provided was a lackluster one and no different from others that preceded it, the BJP lost ground in 2013 and even today finds itself out of power, thanks to a post-poll coalition of the JD (S) and Congress. Despite winning 104 seats in the 224-member house, the BJP finds itself on the opposition benches as the Congress with 80 and Janata Dal (S) with 37 got together and formed the government. The magic number is 112 and the BJP fell short by just 8 members. Today, the BJP is trying to get few Congress and or JD (S) MLAs to resign, to bring down the magic number, topple the government and install its own.

Fewer takers for Hindutva in South India

In Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, the BJP failed to open its account.

The reasons for the poor showing of the BJP in the South, despite an increase in its number of seats and vote share, are not far to seek. By and large, the issues that resonate in the North, like Ram temple, cow protection, or even muscular nationalism as reflected by the Balakot airstrikes into Pakistani territory to avenge Pulwama terror strike in which 45 soldiers died, did not find favour in the South.

There are fewer takers for the BJP's Hindutva agenda and Modi centric campaign in South India as the results show.



Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy, with Siddaramaiah, chairman of the coordination committee of the Janata Dal (Secular) – Congress coalition government, and Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) president Dinesh Gundu Rao, at a meeting held in Kumara Krupa Guesthouse, in Bengaluru on May 28, 2019.

Though in parts of Karnataka, notably the coastal areas and urban centres the BJP's campaign worked but in large parts of the State, voters expressed their displeasure at the functioning of the State government and the infighting of the two coalition partners and punished it by giving 25 seats to the BJP. On the ground, the coalition failed to work completely and the infighting of the coalition partners costing both dearly. In a State where the Congress and the JD (S) have been traditional rivals, it was too much to expect the cadres to work in sync with one another, especially at a time when Congress and JD (S) leaders were having a go at each other. If former Chief Minister Siddaramaiah wanted to defeat the Deve Gowda family, the sentiments were reciprocated by the coalition partner. Seat sharing between the coalition partners too left much to be desired as JD (S) sought and got tickets in areas where the Congress had a stronger base. Clearly, the vote transfers did not take place as the cadres were at loggerheads.

In Telangana, the only other southern State that gave the BJP reasons to cheer, ironically it was the impression that Chief Minister and TRS chief,

K. Chandrashekhara Rao, were seen as the B-team of the BJP. All his attempts to float a Federal Front appeared to have been guided by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi with whom the CM shared a good rapport. Perhaps, KCR had foreseen such an eventuality and had advanced assembly elections by six months and swept the December polls to return with a brute majority. And he has mopped up more Congress MLAs by engineering defections. But this all-powerful CM, who could do no wrong, appeared to entertain national ambitions in the hope of the electorate throwing up a hung parliament but found out that the ground was shifting from under his feet. His own daughter Kavitha lost in Karimnagar constituency. But more important, from the South India voting story, Telangana gave the BJP four seats, up from a single seat in 2014. What is even more significant is that even the Congress, pulverized in the assembly elections, managed to win three Lok Sabha seats.

TN, Kerala & Andhra reject BJP totally



File photo: Even before the elections, Tamil Nadu saw protests against the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. In one such protest on April 12, 2018, hundreds of black balloons were released into the city's skies when the Prime Minister made an official visit to Chennai. Photo: K. Pichumani

If there is anyone State that witnessed an anti-Modi wave, it was Tamil Nadu, where AICC President Rahul Gandhi appeared more popular than Prime Minister Modi.

In Tamil Nadu, the BJP not only failed to retain the lone seat it had won in 2014, but it also seems to have pulled down its alliance partner, AIADMK, that had swept the State in the previous elections.

As in Kerala, so in Tamil Nadu the fact that Congress president Rahul Gandhi was projected as the Prime Minister candidate helped set up a direct battle

between two gladiators, unlike in North India and elsewhere where Congress could not openly declare a PM candidate, unsure as it was of numbers it was likely to get.

In Tamil Nadu, the BJP not only failed to retain the lone seat it had won in 2014, but it also seems to have pulled down its alliance partner, AIADMK that had swept the State in the previous elections, winning all but two of the 39 seats. The AIADMK paid for its alliance with the party that found no favour among people. The reason for such negative sentiments against the BJP is a strong perception that it was a north Indian Hindi party and the Modi government was seen as anti-Tamil Nadu in its responses to the issues of the

State. People did not forget the fact that farmers from Cauvery belt spent months in Delhi protesting, but the Prime

The DMK and its chief M.K. Stalin created a rainbow coalition, which countered the BJP's Hindutva ideology and prevented it from striking deeper roots in the State.

Minister did not even meet them for five minutes. Whether it was Cauvery, NEET – common medical entrance examination, or controversial highway projects across fertile agricultural lands in the western belt, the people of the State were at the receiving end. They were only waiting for the elections to teach a lesson to the BJP and to AIADMK for cozying up with the ruling party at the centre. Moreover, the DMK and its chief M.K. Stalin managed to create a rainbow coalition of Dravidian forces, centre and left of centre parties, Dalit party, and Tamil nationalists. This coalition countered the BJP's Hindutva ideology effectively, preventing it from striking deeper roots electorally in the State.

In neighbouring Kerala, even the BJP candidate in Union Minister K.J. Alphons lost his deposit in Ernakulam. The Congress won 19 of the total 20 seats, leaving just the one for the LDF constituent, CPM.



Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan at the valedictory function of the 1000-days celebrations of the LDF Government in Thiruvananthapuram on Wednesday, February 27, 2019. Due to a throat infection, the CM did not deliver the inaugural address. Photo: S.Gopakumar/The Hindu.

All the seemingly polarizing Hindutva campaign surrounding the Sabarimala issue failed to convince the highly literate State to vote for the BJP, though its vote share

In Andhra Pradesh, the BJP ended up with a 0.96 per cent vote share that was lesser than what NOTA polled at 1.49 per cent.

increased to 12.9 percent now. Women sure did come out on streets against the Supreme Court verdict on temple entry, but when it came to voting they trusted

the Congress. The devout women and men, angry with the SC verdict, were totally cut up with the LDF government for the stringency with which it tried to implement the apex court verdict. The BJP thought it could milk the issue for votes. For sure, the BJP vote share did increase in Kerala, but not enough for it to win seats for Lok Sabha. In the next assembly elections, the BJP would be a more serious player in the bipolar polity in the State.

In Andhra Pradesh, the two national parties, were not even in the fray, so to speak, as the two regional chiefs – Telugu Desam Party supremo N. Chandrababu Naidu

and challenger YSRCP head Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy fought it out, both for assembly and Lok Sabha polls. Riding on strong anti-incumbency, Jaganmohan Reddy swept to power with a massive majority, decimating the ruling TDP. He won 22 out of the 25 parliamentary seats as well. In Andhra Pradesh, the BJP ended up with a 0.96 per cent vote share that was lesser than what NOTA polled at 1.49 per cent. The BJP clearly paid for its earlier alliance with TDP in Andhra Pradesh as it just could not grow on its own. One definite reason for the BJP debacle in Andhra Pradesh is the fact that Modi government failed to honour the promise of Special Package to Andhra Pradesh that was made by the then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh at the time of the division of the State and creation of Telangana. It was the promise of the Union government that in continuity ought to have been honoured is the sentiment that the BJP could not effectively counter on the ground.

Prosperous South prefers economic issues to emotive ones

In different States of South India, strong regional forces, representing local aspirations, are well entrenched and play upon linguistic pride, sub-nationalism, and distinct culture and even their own brand of social justice and welfare governance. The voters have a clear choice from among a regional party and at the same time having representation in central government in an era of coalition governments that worked till 2014.

The regional forces and opposition-ruled governments successfully projected the BJP as the main enemy of the region by playing up perceived injustice to the South Indian States when it came to devolution of finances from the central government or even response to natural calamities.

The battle is not so much against the language, but its imposition and what this implies when viewed from livelihood and employment perspective.

Tamil Nadu people nurse a grudge that centre did not help the State enough when it was battling cyclone Gaja last year. The BJP at the national level or at the State level could not take a proper stance on Cauvery issue too.

In South Indian States the BJP is seen as a north Indian party bent upon propagating Hindi at the cost of the regional languages. The battle is not so much against the language, but its imposition and what this implies when viewed from livelihood and

employment perspective. The relatively higher developed South attracts workers from across the country and notably from States like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, that are at the near bottom of the Human Development Index and suffer from the lower level of social indicators, be it education or healthcare. If we take per capita income too, South Indian States are way ahead of those in the Hindi belt. Rightly or wrongly, there is a perception building up that these workers vote for BJP in their respective States but come out to South India for employment or livelihood as they cannot find any prospects back home.

It is because of the relative prosperity and the progressiveness of the South Indian States, the politics move away from the socio-economic problems that can be exploited by political parties say in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar or West Bengal. The different governments in different States of South India have delivered better growth, job opportunities, better infrastructure and welfare.

Consider these facts.

Average per capita income at 2011-12 prices for the five Southern States of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Telangana works to ₹1,18,070 in 2016-17. In comparison, the per capita income in Uttar Pradesh was about a third of that at ₹38,965 and in Bihar, a little over 20 per cent of the southern average, at ₹25,950.

If we take social development indicators like infant mortality rate, the South is far ahead. In Kerala, the IMR, the number of deaths of infants under the age of one per 1,000 live births, is a mere 10 compared to a high of 43 in Uttar Pradesh or 47 in Madhya Pradesh, as per data for 2016 that is available. This after, UP managed to make a drastic reduction in IMR from 83 in 2000 to 43 in 2016. But even in South, Andhra is yet to catch up as it has an IMR of 34.

Even in the sex ratio at birth, Kerala stands at a high of 967 as compared to 843 in Haryana during 2013-16 period. This explains the problem men have in finding a bride in Haryana and they go as far as Kerala to “purchase” brides.

A North-South divide can also be seen in maternal mortality rate, population growth rates, fertility rate among women, literacy, and several other indicators, a report in the Businessline dated April 22, 2019, said¹.

Few Congress leaders allude to these facts to explain that emotive issues like Ram temple or cow that symbolise Hindutva of the BJP, that resonate in the North do not find similar traction, perhaps because of the higher levels of literacy, education and economic progress.

Is Stalin cut out for a larger role in the region?

Now, what the Lok Sabha results means, in the very short run, is the very real possibility of destabilisation of the JD (S) – Congress coalition government. Moves are afoot, but it all depends on how much support does the former Chief Minister and State BJP chief B.S. Yeddyurappa gets from the central leadership. What the central leadership would be weighing is whether giving a handle to the opposition ahead of the key assembly elections in Haryana and Maharashtra due next year would be worthwhile. the BJP would like to see the back of the Kumaraswamy government as its local leaders have been impatient. But the recent local body elections in Karnataka have shown that the Congress is still very much relevant in State politics.

But it is now becoming increasingly clear that South India is firmly on the radar of the BJP, as Karnataka and Telangana present it with a base to launch its assault from for its 2024 mission South India.

The politics in the southern States presents a different challenge to the BJP as they do not encourage politics played on Hindu-Muslim divide but on State-specific

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issues that play out in their own context. The biggest challenge is the present itself as an acceptable party and for that, it must present itself in a language that the people in the States understand. But clearly, this is difficult for the BJP to adopt as it goes against its core Hindi, Hindustan, Hinduism ideology. And even if the BJP manages to tone down its Hindi only approach for political work, then the same could be interpreted in a wrong manner in the Hindi heartland. So, it remains to be seen as how best the BJP will cross this language divide, from which stem other differences. So far, South India has held itself against the RSS backed political push of the BJP, but a second successive term at centre

with an increased mandate could give that much-added firepower to the BJP for its South side campaign. But the BJP's strength, in fact, can become its weakness as the regional forces in South India get more wary of the BJP and its predatory moves.

It is in this context that the stillborn Federal Front idea of Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhara Rao becomes very significant. Can DMK supremo M.K. Stalin, who has emerged as a key leader in South India after thwarting the Modi wave in Tamil Nadu like AIADMK supremo J. Jayalalithaa did in previous general elections, hold onto the political capital he has managed to earn in Tamil Nadu? And build upon it for a more enlarged role as a unifier of anti-BJP forces in neighbouring States?

In this context, the role of Congress too will be very interesting as it has become more or less a South India based regional party, barring its few seats in North and West. On Stalin's success and ability to withstand and counter the Hindutva ideology, as he has just shown in strongly opposing the latest Hindi language trial balloon, his relevance and longevity in TN and national politics will be determined. Stalin's strength in Lok Sabha presents him with a chance to articulate the South Indian voice effectively. There is a perception that the presence of 37 AIADMK MPs in Lok Sabha in the 16 Lok Sabha was a waste as they failed to make their presence felt in Parliament and also failed to articulate Tamil Nadu issues forcefully.

Telangana and Andhra new growth areas for BJP

In neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, Jaganmohan Reddy faces a real test as the TDP has been routed but not eliminated completely. But more than the TDP, it is the BJP that he has to worry about, as the national

party moves in to capture the vacuum created by the decimation of the TDP.

The BJP will be chipping away, slowly but surely, over the next five years and will enter various pockets gradually.

Already, BJP sympathisers have

unleashed a campaign on social media cautioning Jaganmohan Reddy to be cautious on his approach to issues relating to the minority community.

The fact that more time was given to Catholic priests at his swearing-in ceremony than to priests from other religious faiths has been noted. But, more importantly, his main thrust of the attack against Naidu was on his inability to get special category

status to Andhra Pradesh. Since this is entirely in the hands of the central government, his political acumen will be tested from day one. The BJP will be chipping away, slowly but surely, over the next five years and will enter various pockets gradually.

In the South, the BJP's immediate focus after Karnataka will be Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, in this order. A few constituencies could be earmarked in Tamil Nadu and Kerala for special attention instead of wasting energies by working across these two states.

These are the broad contours of the BJP's South strategy that its leadership is handing down to the next rung leadership. The BJP is believed to have set a modest target of around 60 seats from South India's 130. In 2019, the BJP won 29 seats of its own and another of its alliance partner AIADMK. It has recognised that it must shed its image as a party of Hindi heartland and adopt a more flexible language policy if it wants to make forays in fresh territories like Tamil Nadu and Kerala and to some extent Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. These four States contribute 100 seats out of which the BJP has won only four this time.

Even as the other parties are still reeling under result shock and going through motions of introspection, the BJP is up and about its South Indian campaign. Meetings of leaders on the ground with key party officials to identify issues, devise strategies and work out detailed programmes has already begun in different regions of South India.

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