

**The Ramifications of Managing a Political Brand: A Perspective on 2014  
General Election**

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**Abstract**

The general election of 2014 to elect the fifteenth lok sabha would go down in the history as one of most difficult phases for the Grand Old Party of India. It suffered the ignominy of its worst ever show in the election winning only a paltry 44 seats out of 543-seat strong parliament. More than that, it would be remember for the stellar show put up by BJP for being the first party in the history of Indian politics to come in power on its own by securing a mandate riding on its 282 seats.

The election was also witness, for apparently the first time in the history of Indian elections, the significance of a political brand, as used, to their benefit or loss, by various political parties. None so more significant than the brand on which BJP rode, brand Modi. At the same time Congress suffered heavily due to the failure of brand Gandhi abysmally.

This research paper would focus upon the reasons which led to the failure of Mr Rahul Gandhi as a brand for Indian National Congress. It would highlight those aspects of his persona which were simply not in sync with being projected as the poster-boy of the party as well as its alliance, namely United Progressive Alliance.

Also, the paper would be centered on the various parameters which go into the making of a successful political brand and how parties can encash the same during an election.

**Introduction**

The various developments which surrounded the general election of 2014 to elect the sixteenth lok sabha were truly unique in more ways than one. First, it threw a stable single-party government for the first time in the last three decades, the last being the general election of 1984 which gave clear mandate to Congress. It went to win 404 seats, the highest in its history.

However, the same was possible due to the emotional upsurge which resulted due to the assassination of the-then prime minister Late Indira Gandhi. People casted their votes in sympathy. BJP was marginalized to such an extent that it was reduced an unbelievable 2 seats. This is in stark contrast to the victory of BJP in the 2014 general election as the mandate was won by the party on the plank of development-oriented politics as Mr Modi shunned caste, religion, region-based politics; a trait which was embraced by the top brass of the party and emulated by even the ground-level workers.

No one, and that includes even the most ardent believer in the values and philosophy of the saffron party, would have believed that BJP would come to power on its own, and that too with a sweeping majority which defied all the predictions and calculations. So much so that the role of coalition partners was reduced to its

zilch in the past two decades of coalition politics. This aspect was very much reflected during the allocation of ministries. In the past, due to the compulsions of coalition politics, many deserving candidates were left out and the undeserving were sworn-in as ministers just to appease and placate the coalition politics. However, it changed significantly in the aftermath of the mandate.

There were such hours of crises in the Indian political history that the-then prime minister Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, ironically from BJP, lost the trust vote at the floor of the house by just 2 votes and here was Mr Modi who didn't need support even of his allies, leave alone others, to form a stable government at the center riding on the Modi-wave. The development plank which be built so carefully during the campaign paid huge dividends.

However, this research paper is not about what Mr Modi did right or how much his image impacted the results positively for his party. Rather, it is about the blunders committed, gaffes, hara-kiri and the failure of Mr Rahul Gandhi as a political brand which failed his party, its cause, his supporters and was just not good enough to live up to the expectations of the Indian electorate.

### **Brand Rahul Gandhi: Chimera or Reality?**

This brings us to the central idea of this research paper, namely, the abject failure of brand Rahul Gandhi during the election. No one was sure that he was of any match to the seasoned politician that Mr Modi was. But the rout which Congress suffered during the election was beyond the wildest imaginations of even the staunchest critics of the party.

So what went wrong? Where did brand Gandhi failed, if there was any, and that too so miserably? It is questions like these which would be explored and the authors would try to explain the reasons behind the same. The circumstances leading to such a fiasco for the party would be highlighted and dealt with. The authors would also make a point to elaborate on the factors which are essential for a leader to become a strong political brand for her/his party and what value s/he can add to the overall image of the party.

Whenever the name Rahul Gandhi is mentioned, one cannot help but notice the powerful surname. But as they say, every good thing comes with a price! It holds true for a fine political lineage as well. People expect you to follow the footsteps of your illustrious ancestors, matching their popularity, following their demeanours verbatim. If the person is not prepared for the same, s/he could suffer from an inferiority complex which is bound to raise its ugly head in the wake of heightened expectations followed by non-deliverance.

History is full of such examples from all fields. Mr Abhishek Bachchan found it difficult to come out of the shadow of the towering persona of his father, the superstar of the millennium Mr Amitabh Bachchan. Howsoever hard he tried, people always wanted him to be a splitting image of his father, a fantasy which bordered on irrationality. But then, that is the price one has to pay if he shares his surname with the most distinguished names in a field and is related to her/him in one way or the other. When Mr Rohan Gavaskar debuted for team India, people expected him to play the anchor role for the team, from the word go, on similar lines as his illustrious father Mr Sunil Gavaskar. However he came a cropper. He was no match to the talent of his father and to rub salt to the matter, he had to carry the weight of unrealistic expectations on his shoulders.

When one talks about brand Rahul, however the problem was much deeper. There was a clear lack of positioning in his case. Voters were not sure what he signified or

what the brand stood for. To make the situation worse, the two regimes of UPA, specifically UPA-II lost its relevance long before the general election of 2014 was held.

A brand is good if it excites its potential customers. It holds true for politicians as well. Unlike brand Modi, there was no enthusiasm surrounding brand Rahul. Voters took their own guesses about it, much to its own peril. The mystery surrounding what brand Rahul was did the Congress in. Whenever brand Rahul did make its presence felt by speaking on various issues, it was mocked and derided for its unrealistic take, far from reality, on issues. The interview with Mr Arnab Goswami which was telecasted live on a popular English News channel and was dubbed by many as ‘interview of the decade’ was full of such instances where his answers were simply not good enough to rise to the occasion and even those who thought that being youth on his side, he could connect with the young of the country, were forced to rethink their views on him. He became the center of mockery, specifically on various online platforms where people made various spoofs, memes, trolls and other creatives over this disastrous public outing of the brand Rahul. The purpose with which the exercise was done fell flat on its face and did irreparable damage to the party from which it never really recovered.

Despite having the resources and the incumbent government on his side, brand Rahul was never promoted on the lines of brand Modi. The presidential-style campaigning, as practiced by Mr Modi centered around one individual. That was not the case with Mr Gandhi.

The oratory skills were another area in which he was found sorely lacking. Whenever Mr Modi spoke, people turned up to listen to him owing to the charismatic persona of his and the talismanic presence which he had. People believed in him, on his words due to the conviction power which he had. With Mr Gandhi it was just the opposite. In fact, during an election rally in Delhi, once Ms Sheila Dixit has spoken and she said that it was Mr Gandhi’s turn to speak, people started leaving the venue. Embarrassed and mortified, she had to appeal to the assembled people to stay back and listen to Mr Gandhi.

He was invited to speak, on numerous occasions, to conclaves by business heads, most famously the one organized by CII (Confederation of Indian Industries) amidst high hopes that he would promise major reforms and propose business-friendly progressive policies. However, the audience was left high and dry as what he spoke was mere rhetoric rather than a clear plan or agenda for development. Contrasting was the case of Mr Modi. He had a vision, a plan for every section of the society and was prepared in his own way wherever he went as he had answers for every one of them. Though his detractors thought otherwise, the mandate proved Mr Modi felt the pulse of the nation and was ‘in-sync’ with most of them.

Mr Modi addressed 430-plus rallies across the length and breadth of the nation, surpassing all the records which ever were there for political campaigning. The BJP and NDA candidates wanted Mr Modi to campaign from them at all the seat at which the party or coalition contested. Such enthusiasm among the Congress or UPA candidates was simply missing, not without a reason.

Next in line, if one talks about the achievements of Mr Rahul Gandhi, there were hardly any. This would not have been a major issue if he was pitted against a novice. However, he was contesting against a veteran, a seasoned politician who had a solid performance record to fall back upon. The longest-serving chief minister in Indian politics, with four back-to-back mandates and 14 years of uninterrupted governance in one of the most developed states in the country. These are some

seriously impressive stats which even the sharpest critics of Mr Modi found hard to ignore or wish away.

Many brand experts believed, albeit for a short while, that Mr Gandhi had the opportunity to create his version of the Nehru-Gandhi aura and build his campaign around it. He had age on his side, a big plus in a country where more than 65 percent of the population is below 35 years of age. He had the prospect to build upon the mystique the way his father Late Rajiv Gandhi after Late Indira Gandhi who herself did so after Nehru.

The choice of topics on which he spoke didn't leave many impressed. He picked issues selectively, as per his convenience. This was but natural because he was vulnerable whenever something was asked out of his comfort zone. His detractors pointed out the same on numerous occasions, much to the benefit of Mr Modi who was supremely confident and was at ease in terms of talking on a plethora of issues ranging from agriculture, to technology, to education, to foreign policy, to how to reduce the current account deficit, to defense tactics, you name it.

His track record was abysmal. Wherever he campaigned for the party in connection with state assembly elections prior to the general election, the party did poorly. This showed him in a negative light.

Though he was the president of Youth Congress, this was one segment which was most skeptical about him. Even inside the party, he never enjoyed the same level of trust, comfort and unanimity as was the case with Mr Modi. Some allege that it was due to the high-handedness of Mr Modi but the mandate proved otherwise. Grass-root politics is something which Mr Gandhi could, at best, guess whereas Mr Modi had worked his way to the top starting as a grass-root worker of his party. His experience came handy with regard to handling the issues at this level. No such provision was available for Mr Gandhi.

Another blunder, or should we say a calculated move on the part of Congress, which severely affected the prospects for brand Rahul was not declaring the prime ministerial candidate of the party as against Mr Modi. This was baffling, defied logic and was amateurish on its part. The way their media campaign was handled reeked of unprofessionalism. It was poles apart from the slickness which one could find in the media strategy of BJP which created many firsts as far as media was concerned.

Next, it was the young who rejected his views and were most alienated from his ideas, despite him being in his early 40s, and leaned towards and found resonance with a 63-year-old leader. Narendra Modi won a sweeping victory partly because he broke with convention and campaigned in presidential style. According to exit polls, it was first-time voters aged 18-22 who backed the BJP more strongly than any other demographic.

Another stinging factor which led to the total failure of brand Rahul was his inexplicable shunning of social media in the lead-up to the general election and during the nine phases of it. He was conspicuous by his absence on the social media, a platform most used by those in the age group of 18-35 years, a demographic section which had an unprecedented impact on this election. As against immensely popular facebook page and twitter account of Mr Narendra Modi, Mr Rahul Gandhi had a token presence on facebook and that too was found missing on twitter! His parody accounts on the numerous social media platforms were more famous than the actual ones.

## Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that the lok sabha election of 2014 would be remembered for two highlights more than anything else. First was the rise and rise of brand Modi on all accounts leading all the way to him becoming the fifteenth prime minister of India. Second, would be the abject failure of brand Gandhi which faltered on all fronts and ultimately proved to be of no match to the might of Mr Modi.

Mr Rahul Gandhi found it really hard to come out of the shadow of his illustrious lineage so much so that he was not sure what the party expected from him. His supporters were as disillusioned as him. They marshaled their resources around him not sure of the returns which could come out of brand Rahul and their fears were not unfounded.

The rout suffered by Congress was unprecedented in the 125-year old legacy of the party. A major cause for the same was attributed to the failure of brand Rahul to deliver during the election in the way it was expected to, or to deliver at all. He was simply no match for a veteran like Mr Modi nor was able to garner the support and win the trust of the youth, a segment with which he should have struck a chord.

All in all, this election would go down in the annals of Indian politics as the one when one brand rose to the pinnacle while the other was reduced to ashes and went into oblivion. If only Mr Rahul Gandhi would have played his cards right, the situation might not have taken a U-turn but the damage might have been much less or to be optimistic, a day of reckoning for him but majority of the voters thought otherwise and hence brand Rahul sank even before it could take off properly.

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