

Saffron slide

2004

VOTE SHARE **22.2%** SEATS WON **138**

BJP-led coalition takes severe drubbing, as its 'India Shining' wilts in front of Congress' *aam admi* plank.

2009

VOTE SHARE **18.8%** SEATS WON **116**

Slide continues, bickering follows poll debacle

1999 VOTE SHARE **23.8%** SEATS WON **182**

Elections are held after a key coalition partner pulls out, Vajpayee returns to rule for a full term

The curve line is based on BJP's vote share

Source: Election Commission of India

1998

VOTE SHARE **25.6%**

SEATS WON **182**

Best show. BJP forms a coalition government with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Prime Minister.

MAIN PLAYERS



L.K. Advani

Approaching 82, he holds the key to smooth succession after party chief Rajnath Singh's term ends. But he is still undecided on stepping down as Leader of Opposition.



Rajnath Singh

BJP chief since January 2006, Singh (58) wants an alternative post ensured before stepping down. After a turbulent tenure, he finds his luck running out.



Sushma Swaraj

As Advani's deputy in Lok Sabha, Swaraj (57) looks forward to becoming Leader of Opposition, as she knows she cannot get the top party job.



Arun Jaitley

Jaitley (56) will have to bide his time as Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha. His favourite one-liner: "if you do nothing, you won't be criticised for anything."



Murli Manohar Joshi

Not too pleased that the RSS wants new faces, Joshi (75) who served as party chief in 1990-92, wants to prove himself again as Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha.



Venkaiah Naidu

Naidu (59) hopes to be a consensus candidate for the top job. He was party chief in 2002-04, but was forced out as Advani took control after the 2004 poll debacle.

AFTER THE defeat in three state polls, BJP is more disillusioned than ever about its future and, of course, its leaders. But why is no one coming forward to stop the slide?

sunday special

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NEW DELHI: The photograph is eerie — a small aircraft illuminated by car headlights on a dark tarmac.

The place is Maoist-dominated Dumka, about 300 km north of Jharkhand capital Ranchi. The date was October 19, three days before poll results from Maharashtra, Haryana and Arunachal came in.

The passenger was Bharatiya Janata Party chief Rajnath Singh, who allegedly forced the pilot to take off from an unlit airstrip. The photograph amused Singh's friends and foes alike.

A senior BJP leader chuckled: "Was Rajnath trying to do what he has already done to the party — taking off in the darkness to crash land nowhere?" The assembly poll results in the three states on October 22 showed nothing has apparently improved six months after the parliamentary elections.

Political commentator Jyotirmay Sharma, who teaches politics at the University of Hyderabad, said the BJP did well earlier because of the momentum of the Ram temple stir. "Like all movements, it petered out after sometime. Today, the



Mohan Bhagwat

RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat (59) believes changing top leadership is not the answer. And he's not willing to be seen as controlling the party.

voter is making stark choices. What has the BJP to offer?"

But why no one is willing to or even thinking of trying to stop the slide? And why has the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which by now did at least three autopsies on the BJP, not come out yet with a solution?

Sharma said, "It is like trying to graft mango on an orange tree. The party is wearing the ideological clothes of the RSS, which does not want to get directly involved in politics and does not have an appeal anymore."

On top of it, there are speculations over L.K. Advani's role. Is he only interested in the timing of his exit and have a say in the choice of the next BJP chief? Or will Advani merely endorse who ever the RSS chooses in exchange?

But the first thing that crossed some BJP leaders' mind was that after the Maharashtra

results, it would now be difficult for the RSS to place its blue-eyed boy, Nitin Gadkari, as Rajnath's successor.

"You can't install a man who failed in Maharashtra to run the BJP nationally," remarked a party leader.

Also, it has become clear that the BJP failed to read the mood of the people and avoid splits in Opposition votes both in the parliamentary and assembly polls. "I don't even think we have yet figured out how to combat a younger Congress under a hard working Rahul Gandhi," said a young BJP leader.

Between the Lok Sabha polls in 2004 and 2009, the party's vote share went down 3.4 percentage points to touch 18 per cent. It lost substantial ground in urban areas, failed to win a single seat in Mumbai and Delhi and helplessly watched its base eroding away in Lucknow, Bhopal, Indore, Panaji, Chandigarh, Raipur and Pune.

Some analysts believe that the way forward is to split and come clear on issues like Hindu Rashtra, conversions, economic liberalisation and Pakistan. "No party has survived without splitting after internal differences on ideology," Sharma said.

But voices within the BJP calling for moderation and junking aggressive Hindutva are more muted than ever before. For, no one dares to antagonise the RSS now.