



For a rediscovery of India

As Prime Minister Modi returns to power, he must swear by the Indian civilisational ethos

The definitive nature of the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in the 17th general election marks an unmistakable inflection point in the journey of the Republic. If the 16th general election in 2014 catapulted the BJP as the primary pole of Indian politics, relegating the Congress to a distant second, 2019 establishes it as the overarching hegemon. For good reasons, this result is being viewed as an endorsement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's persona, and his imprint on this victory is distinctive. But it will be a folly to ignore the underlying structural reasons that made this victory possible, and its sweep so deep and wide. It takes strong personalities to popularise an idea, but it is those ideas that outlive personalities that define the course of a people or a nation. The outcome, hence, must be understood as an electoral endorsement of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, the creed that guided the BJP and its forebears for nearly a century since Vinayak Damodar Savarkar wrote the treatise by the same title. Mr. Modi, who counts Savarkar as a critical influence, has been the catalyst and the alchemist of the transformation in the way India imagines itself. In recess, if not in irreversible decline, is the idea of India that had grown from the freedom movement, and had prevailed for most part of the history of the Republic. Championed by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, it sought inspiration from the millennium-old civilisation, the Vedas and the Upanishads, but also strived to build India into a modern society with a scientific temper and liberal values. The idea outlived Nehru, but it had begun to fade soon after his passing. Nehru and his mentor, Mahatma Gandhi, were the prime targets of derision for the proponents of Hindutva in the early years. With the 2019 result, Hindutva has pushed Nehruvian secularism to the margins of Indian politics. The Congress, now led by Nehru's great-grandson Rahul Gandhi, did better than in 2014, but not enough to even be recognised as the official Opposition in the Lok Sabha.

The 2019 verdict has also dismantled social justice politics in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, two States that together send 120 members to the Lok Sabha. The rise of Hindutva since the 1980s had a parallel — a new wave of backward caste mobilisation in parts of northern and western India, which questioned the Nehruvian elite's grip on power. While parties based on social justice politics or regional pride weakened the Congress, they also viewed the BJP with scepticism despite their occasional association with it. Through deft coalition-building, the BJP used many non-Congress outfits to further its own growth and gobbled them up in several States, such as Gujarat. In U.P. and Bihar, social justice parties with deep-rooted support among the Hindu backward castes, in alliance with the considerable Muslim population in these States, became the biggest roadblock to the Hindutva project. In 2014, the BJP upended that dynamic and swept both States; on Thursday it proved that the phenomenon is enduring. The Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar and the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Rashtriya Lok Dal in U.P., usurped by their leaders as personal and family fiefdoms and sunk in corruption charges, collapsed. But outfits such as Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party in Bihar and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, guilty of the same sins, have flourished in their alliance with the BJP. The 2019 outcome must thus be seen as one powered by the hyper-nationalist agenda that was the mainstay of Mr. Modi's five-year term in government, though corruption and nepotism of the BJP's opponents could have been supplementary factors. The welfare schemes of the Modi government did play a role, but these or the promise of economic development were not the real differentiators. The Pulwama terrorist strike and India's response to it dovetailed into the BJP's campaign. And, the victory of a terror accused in Bhopal constituency who hailed the assassin of Gandhi as a patriot stood out as a striking reiteration of Hindutva.

Southern States, barring Karnataka, remained unimpressed by Hindutva, but the BJP made impressive inroads in West Bengal and Odisha, proving its potency even in areas where linguistic, political and cultural factors have historically been unfavourable to it. Tamil Nadu, where Dravidian politics had entrenched itself as a counter to homogenising pressures decades ago, stonewalled the BJP yet again as did Kerala. But the BJP's gains in Telangana, modest as they are, might be an indicator that the south may not remain impervious to it forever. For the present, the victories of the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha, which won a fifth term, and the YSR Congress Party in Andhra Pradesh are indicative that linguistic and cultural identities still continue to hold sway in these States. Punjab was also an outlier, as the Sikh-majority State leaned towards the Congress.

To urge the BJP to uphold secular ideals or to protect the integrity of existing institutions may amount to demanding an abandonment of its very core beliefs. Gaining the trust of all citizens will be a necessary prerequisite for Mr. Modi to drive India's continuing journey to become a global leader. It is only reasonable that the government and the Prime Minister be asked to live up to the promise they continuously make — 'sabka saath, sabka vikas (with all, development for all)'. These tenets must be felt in the daily lives of the marginalised sections of the population, and Mr. Modi must add a third tenet to make his mantra meaningful: *sabka vishwas* (the trust of all). The Hindu hopes that Mr. Modi's second term will be more inclusive than the first, which was marred by arrogant pride and hateful prejudice. We extend our congratulations and wishes to him and his party.

The 2019 vote: an intoxicating verdict

It has produced coherence in our governing arrangements; yet it is cause for democratic unease and concern

HARISH KHARE

A general election is essentially meant to enable the citizens to decide whether or not to renew, if at all, the incumbent ruler's lien and on what terms. This involves a kind of judgment about the ruler's record, his accomplishments and failures, his flaws and foibles, strengths and weaknesses; in the same instance, the voter also gets to judge the ruler's democratic rivals, their claims to provide us with a more agreeable regime that would secure a better future for the realm. To its credit, in 2019 the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) put in place a shrewd and sophisticated strategy that ensured that the voters only saw it as a vote for or against Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The voters have spoken, clearly and firmly. We have an unambiguous verdict. Also, a frightening verdict.

Primacy to the leader

It becomes an ominous verdict because the choice before the voters was never as stark as in 2019. Mr. Modi offered himself at the head of a 'majboot sarkar' (a decisive and robust governing arrangement that will deliver). Not since 1980, when the Congress sought votes in Indira Gandhi's name, had a political party given primacy to an individual leader and his presumed transformational leadership, over and above any other calculus.

Unlike 2014, there was no coyness on the BJP's part in 2019. On offer was Narendra Modi, garished and adorned with overstated accomplishments and qualities; throughout the campaign, he remained unflinching in his malicious rudeness, and never once felt embarrassed at the inflated self-promotion. The country was told that he was a leader, omnipotent and omnipresent, wise and clever, strategist and tactician, a

humble, honest, hard-working commoner, an uncompromising nationalist, a Hindu to the core, who would defend Mother India against enemies, external and internal. It was a complete marketing package. And it is frightening that the BJP strategy has paid off so handsomely.

It is important to reflect that behind the slogan of a 'majboot sarkar' were clearly delineated outlines of the prime ministerial authority. That office now stands redefined as a presidential arrangement. To the extent that the Prime Minister's job is a political leadership role, Mr. Modi stands tall — and alone — at the apex. He need not share space or glory with any of his colleagues, in government or party. He will be able to commandeer the unquestioned allegiance and unreserved respect of the National Democratic Alliance parliamentarians — each one of them sought votes in Mr. Modi's name. This is a heady moment and cannot possibly augur well for the health of our constitutional system.

Because at its core our constitutional democracy is nothing but an elaborate arrangement for how power will be shared and authority exercised in this vast land among regions, States, communities, and citizens. This finely chiselled equilibrium stands threatened because of the nature of the 2019 verdict.

Frightening takeaway

More than the danger of an obvious constitutional imbalance, what should be frightening is that this ancient nation of ours, with more than two thousand years of civilisational rectitude and resilience behind it, and with seven decades of democratic robustness, can be made to feel so insecure and so vulnerable as to embrace, joyfully and wilfully, an



REUTERS

authoritarian prophet.

The prophet, of course, got a lucky break when the *jehadis* made their move in Pulwama. It was an unholy but definite intervention in our democratic process. And, then, we struck at Balakot (that, too, on a cloudy night). The ensuing stand-off with Pakistan was brilliantly worked into a consummate election narrative; nationalism was exquisitely milked for party purposes.

The strong leader was recast as a defender of the realm; violence and aggression against the real and presumed enemies at home and abroad were promised and romanticised. Now, the leader with his 'danda' stands consecrated with an electoral mandate. That cannot be a very comfortable prospect to all those who cherish the sanctity of democratic space and republican values.

Even more uncomfortable should be the idea that a manufactured ultra-nationalist hype can be made to sweep aside entrenched regional sentiments and identities. With the possible exception of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the resistance from the regional forces and leaders to this Hindi-Hindu-fied nationalism turned out to be so disappointingly feeble. Even West Bengal, that last bastion of democratic resistance, has flirted with a Hindu-fied politics. Regional lead-

ers such as Mamata Banerjee, Naveen Patnaik, Chandrababu Naidu, Sharad Pawar and others would find themselves in the unhappy situation of having to take their cue from a Modi-led Centre.

The 2019 verdict is a triumph of unalloyed Hindutva. This was the culmination of careful crafting these last five years of a Hindu persona on Prime Minister Modi; till the very last day of the campaign we were witness to the very elaborate and very public rites of a pilgrim's trek to Kedarnath. We know that as Prime Minister, Mr. Modi has never allowed himself to make any concession to the non-Hindus' sensitivities, and he shall now see no reason to do things differently.

Message to minorities

The 2019 verdict has a chilling message. The minorities' votes do not count, and therefore, they can be done out of their space under our collective sun. The Muslims have been told, once more, to remain stranded in their own islands of resentments and grievances. There can be only one implication: the minorities would have to reconcile themselves to a majoritarian polity, and to rely on the fair-mindedness embedded in our constitutional arrangement to live a life of safety and dignity.

The minorities may not be the only ones cowering in their corner. The 2019 verdict has also endorsed a *danda* sarkar; the citizen must yield to the demands of the state, especially its national security requirements. It also means that the armed forces would get a place of pride in the national scheme of things and would demand a voice in allocation of collective resources. Practised jingoism, against enemies at home and abroad, will produce further distortions in the nature of civilian control over the armed forces.

Mr. Modi has carved out a splen-

did mandate for himself. It was a one-man campaign. And he may feel he is entitled to unlimited power. This could also mean that the rigorous requirements of a polity based on the rule of law would be made to give way to a prime ministerial overlordship. This is an inevitable consequence of the strong leader syndrome, who feels he alone is in communion with the inner aspirations and hopes of a billion-strong India.

Case for democratic vigilance

The 2019 election has yielded an intoxicating result, with potentially deleterious effects for our constitutional polity. It would be tempting for the Modi crowd to try to jettison the so-called Nehruvian consensus with renewed vigour; but it would be a very different proposition to see the 2019 result as a licence to enfeeble the existing constitutional institutions of constraint and accountability. India has not voted for an experiment in 'democratic' Stalinism.

What is most frightening about 2019 is the collapse, once again, of the Congress as a pan-India party. The Congress did put up a spirited fight and yet it failed to slow down the Modi juggernaut. Its spectacular underachievement means a depletion of Opposition ranks and voices in the Lok Sabha. This can only be an unhappy augury. At a moment when India should be celebrating its democratic vigour and vibrancy, it also ought to gear itself up to safeguarding our republican virtues and constitutional values. The 2019 vote has produced coherence and stability in our governing arrangements, yet energetic democratic vigilance will be needed in defence of the Republic.

Harish Khare is a senior journalist; till recently he was editor-in-chief of *The Tribune*

History repeats itself for the TDP

But it is not clear how Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy will negotiate with the BJP

AJAY GUDAVARTHY

Telugu Desam Party (TDP) chief N. Chandrababu Naidu, when Chief Minister of the erstwhile unified Andhra Pradesh, was typified as being ahead of his time, and futuristic. He was the first to refer to himself not as a Chief Minister, but a CEO. He was the first to make thinking of converting Indian cities to resemble a Shanghai or a Singapore no pipe dream, and also administer through teleconferencing.

Rise and ebb

Without doubt one has to credit him with having single-handedly transformed Hyderabad into a mega city with wider roads, swanky flyovers and gardens and parks. He lost elections in 2004, and was staring at a rather bleak future when the decision to bifurcate the State came as a second wind to recalibrate his political fortunes.

After the bifurcation, the people of Andhra Pradesh preferred him over Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy of the YSR Congress Party for his capability to build infrastructure and for his experience as an administrator. But history seems to

have repeated itself for Mr. Naidu because he lost the elections in the newly formed State of Andhra Pradesh, yet again, for the same reason: for focussing exclusively on building Amaravathi, the capital, and neglecting the rest of the State, and for talking of infrastructure but not welfare.

He began, unlike his counterpart in Telangana, Chief Minister K. Chandrashekar Rao, with a deficit budget. He joined the National Democratic Alliance with the promise of getting 'Special Status' to offset the budgetary deficit.

Political strategy

But the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under its president Amit Shah seemed to have had different plans of establishing its own independent footprint exploiting the popularity of Narendra Modi. They also elevated M. Venkaiah Naidu to the post of Vice-President to lay stake to the claim of 'Andhra pride' that took a beating following bifurcation. The BJP did not make much headway and did not allow Mr. Naidu to claim credit for getting additional benefits from the Centre.

With the Congress having no



BY ARRANGEMENT

presence, Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy has emerged as the only viable political alternative, and by default represents all that Mr. Naidu's model of politics eschews. By mirroring his father (the former Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy), Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy went on a padyatra in the State, spoke of agrarian distress, of the marginalised, including Dalits and religious minorities. He focussed on various welfare policies that resonated with most sections of society. In spite of allegations of corruption against him, he spoke of possible land deals in choosing the site to build Amaravathi. Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy stayed the course with the BJP in

order to avoid, as is widely believed, the excesses of investigative agencies.

It is intriguing to observe how the people of Andhra Pradesh were upset with the BJP for not granting the special status but not with Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy for staying close to them. The BJP was right, in its own cynical way, that not granting additional benefits would rub off against the local ruling party, giving it more capacity to manoeuvre things.

Case factor

Further, changing caste dynamics have made most regional parties single caste parties. Mr. Naidu's TDP too has come to represent primarily the interests of the Kammas, and is struggling to represent other castes in equal proportion. In the previous election, while the TDP enjoyed the support of the Kapus, this time around, the Jana Sena Pawan Kalyan's leadership has eroded it. In many constituencies Kapus form close to 20% of the population and that has made a huge difference to the prospects of the TDP.

Yet again, Mr. Kalyan was known to be on friendly terms

with the BJP, though he became more critical in the recent past. It may not be a surprise if he extends his support to the incumbent government. In a sense, this has been the electoral strategy of the BJP — distance and align. Parties that have maintained a distance in order to both mobilise possible discontent against the ruling party in the Centre, and also to garner the votes of minorities and other communities, have the option open to extend their support after the elections.

With the stupendous national victory of the BJP and Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy in Andhra Pradesh, the road map is clear for both parties. One has to wait and watch to see how the BJP will try to make inroads in Andhra Pradesh and whether Mr. Jagan Mohan Reddy will follow in his father's footsteps by linking his popularity to the implementation of a range of welfare policies and being able to negotiate a better deal for Andhra Pradesh. In this sense, the battle for Andhra Pradesh has just begun.

Ajay Gudavorthy is with the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

The 2019 mandate

Narendra Modi's 2019 election campaign will long be remembered as one where issues such as the slowing down of the economy, the unprecedented unemployment crisis, acute agrarian distress and rising hate crimes did not find mention even in passing. Nor did he offer any explanation for not fulfilling any of his promises made in 2014. Instead, he skillfully mesmerised voters (barring a large part of the southern States), into believing that he is still the best bet to lead the country. His skillful shifting of the entire narrative around emotive issues such as nationalism and national security and citing proof of his decisiveness (surgical strikes and Balakot) are the highlights of this. One wonders what his electoral narrative would have been had the Pulwama attack not happened. His speeches too were quite polarising. How polarised this election was became evident when a

terror-accused facing trial was given a party ticket. One hopes that the Modi-II regime will be responsive to constructive suggestions from the Opposition.

S.K. CHOUDHURY, Bengaluru

■ The entire Opposition should graciously accept the people's verdict and have an early, no-holds-barred introspection. That the Left has been left gasping is not so surprising. Mr. Modi should consider the renewed mandate for living up to his 2014 theme and slogan — of bringing 'good days' to India. The onus is on him to take the initiative to rally all Indians around a truly inclusive and secular national agenda. For the sake of the very idea of India, he must protect and uphold its secular guarantees.

C.G. KURIAKOSE, Kothamangalam, Kerala

■ The verdict is out and the soul of India has been lost. Majoritarianism, authoritarianism and hypernationalism have won.

The worry now is whether the institutions will survive the onslaught of a monolithic majoritarian ideology. This is hardly the time to celebrate.

Dr. K. VARKEY, Dindigul, Tamil Nadu

■ Authoritatively stepping into the second term, the BJP should not be needing any more slogans but a very capable cabinet under Mr. Modi. Now that the electorate has let go of its pet teddy bear of caste and creed to embrace more important tenets, the government too must reciprocate through demonstrable inclusiveness. Economic posers are intense enough to compel focus on execution and delivery. The people have handed over a heavy baton and the BJP needs to run a purposeful lap.

R. NARAYANAN, Navi Mumbai

■ The grand old party, the Indian National Congress, mistook the fragile victory it scored in the key three Hindi heartland States of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and

Chhattisgarh as a sign of its revival and an endorsement of its key electoral slogan 'Chowkidhar Chor Hai', forgetting that these victories were largely due to the anti-incumbency prevalent in these States. Even though the sentiment in large sections of the media was against the BJP, the voter thought otherwise.

RETTAVAYAL S. KRISHNASWAMY, Chennai

■ The exit polls and the final results have been a shock to wishful thinkers. The first question that must have arisen in the minds of voters when the campaign began would have been, 'if not Modi, who is the alternative?' This question was never answered and the Opposition appears to have been building castles in the air, fanned by the media. The BJP's development agenda and Mr. Modi's impeccable integrity are also reasons for the win. The dynasty in the Congress has been emphatically rejected by the electorate. However, the Grand Old Party has to

survive. It should move away from the dynasty, infuse new blood, utilise the services of veterans with a good reputation and rebuild its organisation.

S. RAJAGOPALAN, Chennai

■ The Congress president, other general secretaries and young leaders within the Congress cannot afford to sit back and relax over the next five years. They have to launch a massive reconnect movement with voters across India. Any anti-people policy by the new Modi government will have to be taken seriously and tackled intelligently. The BJP under Mr. Modi is lucky that there were issues such as Pulwama and the Nehru-Gandhi family to help it put the real issues on the back burner. If the Congress's young leaders fail once more, the party may become history.

N. NAGARAJAN, Secunderabad

■ The near rout of the secular parties is the result of their unwillingness to be

with the people in their battle for survival. The Left's plight in West Bengal is a case in point. In Kerala, the Left has been oblivious to people's struggles, especially those concerning the environment. The results should open the eyes of the Opposition.

SUKUMARAN C.V., Palakkad, Kerala

■ Ever since the announcement of the general election, there have been sections of the media that focussed on what can be called Narendra Modi or BJP bashing. While the media has the freedom to publish what it deems fit, it appears to be unfairly focussing on attacking the BJP. The mandate now is even bigger than it was in the 2014 general election, and in this there are lessons for the media. Prejudiced opinion is no match for the ground reality. I hope the media is balanced.

K. SVASUBRAMANIAN, Chennai

MORE LETTERS ONLINE: www.hindu.com/opinion/letters/