

Opinion

SUNDAY, JANUARY 6, 2019

I AM WRITING from Delhi, one of the world's most polluted cities. It is still winter. The spring that I mentioned last week is still many weeks away.

Notwithstanding its loss in all five states that held elections recently, the BJP's leadership is still combative, contemptuous of Parliament and disdainful of institutions. In an interview to ANI on January 1, 2019, Prime Minister Modi said, "No one gave the BJP any chance in Telangana and Mizoram. In Chhattisgarh, a clear mandate was given — the BJP lost. But in two states (Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh) there was a hung Assembly."

Decisive verdict

A hung Assembly means that no party is in a position to form the government. In three states, there were only two real contestants. After the results, the party that had absolutely no chance to form the government was the BJP; the party with a chance was the Congress — and it did form the government in the three states with practically no hurdles on its path. I would call that a decisive verdict, not a hung Assembly.

In Chhattisgarh, the BJP lost 34 seats (from 49 to 15), in Madhya Pradesh 56 seats (from 165 to 109) and in Rajasthan 90 seats (from 163 to 73). That was a decisive rejection of the BJP.

Mr Narendra Modi's analysis of the election results has few takers. For example, the RSS's internal view is that it was a big defeat; hence the RSS is cranking up the engine of Hindutva and demanding an ordinance to build a Ram temple at Ayodhya, notwithstanding the appeals pending in the Supreme Court.

The Modi interview was dubbed by the media — and seen by the people — as an end-of-the-tenure report card. It was significant in two respects: for what the prime minister said and for what he did not say.

Mentions and omissions

Let's begin with the subjects on which the Prime Minister spoke: demonetisation, GST, surgical strike, lynching, Dr Urjit Patel's resignation, Sabarimala, triple talaq Bill, Rafale, farm loan waiver and the mahagathabandhan (alliance of opposition parties). True to his character he gave nothing away, he admitted no mistake, he maintained that his government had done everything right, and "Modi is just a manifestation of public love and blessings".

I am wary of persons who do not admit their mistakes. Demonetisation was a monumental error, the GST was deeply flawed and was made worse because of faulty implementation, the surgical strike was not unique nor did it put an end to infiltration or militancy, the triple talaq Bill is an overkill and biased, the Rafale deal short-changed both the Air Force and Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd and, thanks to wrong policies, the farm loan waiver has become an imperative. The people seem to agree with this analysis but the Prime Minister has taken a contrary view.

Now, let's list the subjects on which the Prime Minister did not speak: mounting unemployment, farmers'

ACROSS THE AISLE

P Chidambaram



It is 'Fail' on the report card



In an interview on January 1, Prime Minister Modi said that no one gave the BJP any chance in Telangana and Mizoram

distress and suicides, women's security, vigilante groups, growing impunity, Jammu & Kashmir, economy, closure of MSMEs, stalled projects, insolvent companies, likely failure to achieve Budget targets of revenue and fiscal deficit, and departure of distinguished economists from the government.

I got the impression that the Prime Minister was like a person driving a car looking only at the rear-view mirror. He spoke about the past and not a word about the future. He is not able to look forward, and he has nothing to offer to the people that will lift their spirits or lift the economy. The report card has 'Fail' written on every page.

Desperate measures?

Nothing seems to have changed in the new year. On January 2, there was an acrimonious debate on the Rafale deal in the Lok Sabha, the Prime Minister

was absent, the Defence Minister was a spectator, and Finance Minister Arun Jaitley (the man with all the reasons) answered none of the key questions (see my column She wanted reasons, here are 10, *The Indian Express*, October 7, 2018).

There are 10 weeks before the dawn of spring. What can be expected before the notification of the elections? I can only speculate.

The narrative that is playing out among the people is that there is change in the offing. It is clear that the government has to do something if it wants to alter the narrative.

As I write this essay on Friday, the buzz is that among the measures under contemplation are interest-free crop loans and a cash transfer to small and medium farmers. Even if the government directs public sector banks to provide the money for crop loans, how will

it find the money for cash transfers?

The fiscal deficit at the end of November 2018 was 115% of the target. Yet, a desperate government may announce the 'reliefs', borrow the money, indulge in creative accounting, and hope to reverse the political tide. Failing these measures, the government could promulgate an ordinance to facilitate the construction of a Ram temple on the disputed site. That will be an act of contempt of the Supreme Court, besides being highly provocative and divisive.

Usually, anything that a government does in the 10 weeks before elections is viewed by the people with suspicion and scepticism. It will not be easy to erase the word 'Fail' on the report card.



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OUT OF MY MIND

MEGHNAD DESAI

A new game

The new year started with a bang. A talking Prime Minister taking questions, giving long answers and holding forth for 90 minutes! Those who complained that he does not talk to the media had to find new grounds for criticism: Only one interviewer. Questions no doubt cleared in advance. Too much about Me, My and I.

But then if you ask a Prime Minister about matters of State, he can hardly use third person singular. If Modi had said, "That was not me. That was my Cabinet colleague", howls of protest would have resulted. The central issue of the interview was the Prime Minister as he is of the forthcoming election. Indeed there has been no other issue occupying the Opposition. So the manner in which Modi responded could hardly be a surprise. By giving interview to ANI, he also ensured that all the channels carried it simultaneously and each carried on analysis for the rest of the evening. A press conference would not have been carried that extensively. If nothing else, the Prime Minister understands how to get TRPs.

There were surprises. He did unequivocally denounce lynchings. He showed real passion speaking about his worries in the morning after the surgical strikes. But above all, the surprise was that the interview happened at all. It may presage a different approach by the Prime Minister to politics in the next few months. Thus, he knows that he will have to be accommodating to his NDA allies. He cannot do the emollient act but he can be patient, as he is being with the Shiv Sena. This may mean approaches to new allies such as

the TRS. It may mean more press encounters. It will mean wrong-footing the Opposition, which has made Modi the sole issue.

A little-noticed signal was issued by the NCP last week. With support from NCP corporators, the BJP won the posts of mayor and deputy mayor in the closely contested Ahmednagar municipal elections. Sharad Pawar has lost neither his guile nor his ability to play power politics. Here again is the great uncertainty as to which side some parties will end up with between the two alliances. By making Modi the issue rather than policy or ideology, the Congress has freed its possible allies from any guilt if they join the NDA. If the issue is personal, who cares one way or another? The sole consideration of small parties led by the Big Beasts will be: What is in it for my party and me? Sharad Pawar is not finished yet.

The interview was also quite categorical about the Temple. The Parivar was told in no uncertain terms that the government will not move until after the Supreme Court verdict. In a not-so-subtle way the Prime Minister told the Congress not to delay the proceedings of the Court. Here is the perfect alibi. If the Supreme Court cannot declare its verdict till after the election date has been announced, the ground is ready for Modi to blame the Congress for thwarting the desires of millions of Hindus. Rahul Gandhi will no doubt counter by promising the Temple if the Congress is voted in power, but then who will the public believe in that issue? Get real. You think you know your Modi. You ain't seen nothing yet.



A file photo of voters at a village near Ajmer, Rajasthan

PTI

Be Ole smiles

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer should land the job of Manchester United manager permanently, given his positive impact on the team

RINGSIDE VIEW

Shamik Chakrabarty

IT WAS GREAT to see Sir Alex Ferguson smiling again, as Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's Manchester United hammered Bournemouth 4-1 at Old Trafford last Sunday. A couple of weeks back, the legendary former boss was seen expressing his disgust at Anfield, when Liverpool toyed with their archrivals. Towards the end of the match, United's executive vice-president Ed Woodward was spotted covering his mouth in a private chat with Sir Bobby Charlton in the directors' box. The writing was on the wall. Jurgen Klopp—never mind that he is the Liverpool manager—owes a vote of thanks from all United fans, football lovers to be precise, to deliver the hammer blow to Jose Mourinho. Not only United, the English football would be better off without his morbid philosophy towards football and his dark narcissism.

The penny dropped, but it took far too

long for Woodward to realise that United need a manager who knows the club inside out; it's history and culture. Mourinho was the worst managerial signing of all, appointed at the expense of the club's soul. Bereft of proper football knowledge, Woodward belatedly turned to the great men—Charlton and Ferguson—for advice. Better late than never!

Ferguson was consulted before the 20-time Premier League champions appointed Solskjaer as the caretaker manager for the season. Mike Phelan, who was Ferguson's No. 2, too, had been brought back as Solskjaer's assistant. The Norwegian super-sub scored 91 goals in 235 United appearances, the most famous of which was his 'Fergie-time' winner against Bayern Munich in the 1999 Champions League final. Notwithstanding his unsuccessful stint at Cardiff City as their boss in 2014, Solskjaer was always going to bring the smiles back to Old Trafford, a venue he calls his "home".

Happiness is contagious. Solskjaer was expected to rip apart the Mourinho non-method and bring the club back to the United way. He made an instant impact. The players started to smile again. The full-backs started to push up the pitch.



Manchester United's Jesse Lingard receives instructions from interim manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer before being substituted

REUTERS

The team started to play with width. Attacking play became slick. Even the so-called Mourinho players like Nemanja Matic and Romelu Lukaku revelled in the wind of change. The former manager had relegated United's most valuable possession—Paul Pogba—to the bench. The World Cup winner has become talismanic under Solskjaer. Both Marcus Rashford and Anthony Martial, now liberated, are

wreaking havoc on the opponents. While Mourinho killed the players' confidence—his grumbling started pre-season despite spending £391.5-million on new signings in two-and-a-half-years—the new manager helped the boys regain their mojo. "We have a fantastic squad," Solskjaer had said on his arrival. His positivity has rubbed off on the players.

Solskjaer has become the first United

manager since Sir Matt Busby to win his first four matches in charge. A victory against Reading in the FA Cup would see him match the legend. Fourteen goals have been scored in four matches under the caretaker manager. Under Mourinho this term, United had just 36 shots on target in 17 matches. More importantly, they have now closed the gap on fourth-placed Chelsea to six points in the race for a Champions League place. Not many moons ago, the gap between the fourth and the sixth had been 11 points.

Of course, it's not yet "the greatest comeback since Lazarus" and tougher challenges lie ahead, starting with the away fixture against Tottenham Hotspur next Sunday. But Solskjaer has also impressed with his tactical nous—his substitutions against Newcastle United at St James' Park. It was a tough match against a well-organised team under a shrewd tactician, Rafael Benitez. Also, it was United's third game in seven days, thanks to the very busy, festive period Premier League schedule. The players were understandably a little leggy. So, after the hour mark, Solskjaer introduced Lukaku and Alexis Sanchez. The former scored inside 38 seconds of his arrival, while the latter set up Rashford for the second.

United are a top-heavy side. They have an awesome forward line, but defence needs reinforcement. A centre-half of Jaap Stam's vintage appears an immediate requirement. Victor Linde-

lof has improved by leaps and bounds, with Solskjaer giving him the licence to build from the back and move high up the pitch. He needs a partner who can intimidate opponents.

Kalidou Koulibaly from Napoli appears a possibility, but true to the club tradition, Solskjaer has outlined his commitment to bring young players through the ranks. "As Sir Matt once said, if they are good enough, they are old enough. We are built on that tradition. We need young players coming through," he said, sitting at the Jimmy Murphy Centre at Old Trafford.

United finished the Bournemouth game with Pogba, Rashford, Jesse Lingard and Angel Gomes as their front four—all academy graduates. Gomes already got game time. His mates in the U-18 squad—James Garner, DJ Buffonge, Ro-Shaun Williams and Tahith Chong—have travelled with the first-team. The Class of 2018 will surely get their opportunities under Solskjaer.

Mauricio Pochettino has worked wonders at Spurs. He is said to be the United hierarchy's preferred choice to be the next permanent manager. But from United's point of view, it would be better if Solskjaer succeeds and lands the job permanently. The enormity of this club can gobble up even a very talented manager, if he is an 'outsider'. David Moyes should attest. Solskjaer, on the other hand, is a United man through and through, mentored by Ferguson.