



The Indian EXPRESS

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RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

Staggering dominance

Narendra Modi won because India identifies with him.
What that means is something we will figure out



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THERE ARE TIMES in the life of a democracy when the heady winds of popular power turn into their opposite: The deification and personification of one man. Democracy displays a will to simplicity when the answer to every question, the remedy for anxiety becomes one man, and one man alone. The only authentic analysis of this election is two words: Narendra Modi. Everything else is irrelevant. Modi convinced the voters that he could write India's destiny. And they were glad to outsource their destiny to him. Anybody who doubted that this was going to be the outcome, including this columnist, should eat humble pie.

All our normal categories of political analysis and statistical jugglery come to naught when they are faced with Narendra Modi. This is because, he more than any politician in modern history, has grasped three things. First, he is the purest distillation of the idea of politics. For him political reality is not given, it is created; while other parties twiddle thumbs trying to get sociological arithmetic right, he goes about the task of producing a total identification with his persona. And he deploys undefeatable energy to do so. Second, he has fully grasped the potential of a dangerous idea in democracy: That even evil that has a whiff of a larger cause about it has the power to move more than civility that is tainted with pettiness. And third, and most importantly, he has crafted a way of being everywhere: He managed to colonise our imaginations, our fantasies, hopes and fears, to the point where even resistance to him seemed to be entirely in his thrall. There has been any other figure in the annals of democratic politics who makes you think about him almost every second of your existence? He can literally make himself the object of attention every second of public discourse. Many leaders win because the public does not see an alternative. Modi won because he made an alternative unthinkable.

It is difficult to argue with the claim that the opposition did not, in any way merit victory. In these times, civility is a rare commodity and the Congress can be granted that. It is also easy to blame control of institutions, me-

dia and money for the BJP's electoral firepower. Some of that is true, but to attribute the BJP's victory to that would be to deny political reality. Even in a moment of grave national crisis, the Opposition's inability to come together was above all, evidence of their pettiness and myopia. Even when the Congress knew that the battering ram Modi was using against the Congress was that Congress was dynastic and corrupt, Congress could not change the face of its leadership. Modi relentlessly campaigned that all of India's other parties — from SP and BSP, to the Congress — are corrupt family enterprises. He was the scimitar, slashing away at the old order, which was still holding India back.

Modi deserves his victory. But this is also a moment of dread for Indian democracy. Let us be clear. This is the greatest concentration of power in modern Indian history. Never has a force emerged, not even the Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, where a leader had such unchallenged power in the party, a party organisation this energised, complete control over capital, and a vast set of civil society organisations that are poised for dominance in every institution in every corner of the country. India's fate is now truly in his hands. This victory puts an imprimatur on the idea that India has given up on the central tenets of its politics. In both its institutional and aesthetic form, this is a victory for electoral Caesarism pure and simple, where the power of every institution, from business to religious institutions, will revolve around one man. In ideological terms, it is a victory for majoritarianism, a desire to openly marginalise minorities and assert the cultural hegemony of Hindutva. In sociological terms, this is yet another blow to those who peddle illusions about the power of caste and regional politics. Those identities are breaking down, and ripe for appropriation for the larger project of Hindutva. It is probably also the case that despite the cult of toxic masculinity that characterises BJP's ideological discourse, Modi upended the politics of gender in new and creative ways. There are now no barriers to the Hindutva project that we take for granted that emanate from social structure.

This is a victory for the politics of unreality. The Modi government has several successes to its credit. It certainly managed to create a sense that some of its schemes touched the lives of more people than ever before. But let us be clear: Modi has not won because of his economic success; he has won despite his economic failures. The economy is tottering at a growth rate feels that is closer to four or four-and-a-half per cent. That this election was almost entirely bereft of a serious economic narrative of hope does not portend well. To be fair, the Opposition did not have any eye-catching ideas either. Indian elites are now compensating for a faltering India story, a make believe world where our explanation of our failures is the fragmentation of power. If only we gave one man more power, he would do wonders: Nationalism became a refuge for us, because participating in it seems to vicariously lift us, even though it does not do anything to secure India's future. This is also, finally, a victory of the politics of fear and hate. In 2014, Modi struck a hopeful chord; perhaps it was easier as an outsider. But this campaign was a relentlessly negative one, full of mendacity and hate. This is not a poison that is easy to roll back.

All this is not to take away from Modi's political achievement. As a purely political phenomenon, he has scripted another glorious victory. But the magnitude of his political achievement is made even greater by understanding how staggering his dominance is. What kind of an alchemy is it where a leader produces not just a sense that he is better than the other, but a sense of deep identification? His political achievement becomes even more creditable because it is not built on a secure foundation of economic achievement or national security. People were looking for an excuse to vote for him despite his failures, and nationalism gave them the fig leaf. But to give Modi credit: He won because India identifies with him. What that says about India is something we will figure out over the next five years.

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A REMARKABLE VICTORY,
A GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

A victory of this magnitude speaks of an appeal that has breached vote banks and also drawn into its fold the aspirational and the poor

THE NARENDRA MODI led-BJP's winning of a second term comes with a mandate so large that it could end the political argument. It must start a new conversation. One that begins with the acknowledgement of what PM Modi and his party have achieved. First and foremost: A second unprecedented majority, the second larger than the first. Verdict 2019 deals a fell blow not just to the political common sense that India's parliamentary election had become the sum of 29 contests, but also, that anti-incumbency had settled down as the country's political reflex. The numbers will be parsed carefully in days to come. But it is already clear that this was a national election, fought across the country around the political persona of the man who had led the NDA government for five years, and the electorate has overwhelmingly affirmed his rule.

In the process, Modi has taken the BJP to newer places and groups. The party that was seen as a Brahmin-Bania outfit, primarily of the Hindi heartland, and most attractive to the upper classes, has now carved significant spaces for itself in the east, most spectacularly, in West Bengal, and also in the south, in Telangana and Karnataka. It has also vaulted over the faultlines of caste and class. A victory of this magnitude speaks of an appeal that has breached the caste vote banks of its political opponents and also drawn into its fold the aspirational and the poor.

Under Modi, the BJP shows an appetite for power not diminished by being in power. And an ability to constantly remake its message, add layers to the party's appeal. In the beginning, was the call for Hindu consolidation, by a party that pledges to protect and propagate Hindu interests, through the proposed amendments to the Citizenship Bill, or even more strikingly, and troublingly, by the candidature of Sadhvi Pragya Thakur, accused in a terror case, out on bail. But that was not all.

After the terror attack in Pulwama, and India's response to it in Balakot, the BJP, and the Modi campaign, turned "national security" into a prime talking point. Hindutva was mixed with a muscular nationalism that used the strikes in Pakistan to spell out a new security doctrine: If hit, India would retaliate, and would say so too. To this mix, was added the message that the Modi regime was burnishing India's stature abroad. And delivering a vast array of schemes to the poor at home, in their homes.

Indeed, the Modi message was underscored by the fact that in times of an economic downturn, and rampant unemployment in a country of the young, the government found imaginative and relatively efficient ways of lending a helping hand to the poor. Be it the Ujjwala yojana, or the assistance with building toilets and Swachh Bharat, be it the opening of Jan Dhan accounts for all or the Rs 2,000 sent into them under PM-Kisan — the state reached out to those who bore the brunt of an economic slowdown made worse by, ironically enough, another government policy, demonetisation.

AS IT drove its multiple messages home, the Modi-BJP was helped, most of all, by its Opposition. It would be no exaggeration to say that the Congress-led Opposition created the enabling environment for the Modi landslide.

The Congress and the Mahagathbandhans sought to counter the multi-hued, leave-nothing-to-chance Modi campaign with just an anti-Modi slogan plus a bare caste arithmetic. Rahul Gandhi's "Chowkidar chor hai" chant could not drown out his party's silence on crucial issues or its BJP-lite responses in others.

For five years, the Congress seemed either spooked by the BJP or bewildered about the way forward, on subjects ranging from secularism and the rights of minorities to economic policy. Just before elections, the Congress did finally try to outline its positions, differentiate itself from the BJP, in its manifesto. But it was too late, and the Congress itself seemed content to throw up talking points in the capital's drawing rooms — it did nothing to carry its document to the people.

Regional parties in the Opposition, with the exception of the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the YSR Congress in Andhra Pradesh, also confront a moment of reckoning. The RJD in Bihar, and partners in the much touted UP Gathbandhan, SP and BSP, need to ask themselves why it was so easy for the BJP to flatten regional diversities and sweep aside state specificities. It could do so because these parties have either shrunk into family fiefs, or let themselves be tarred by corruption or tainted by a distorted version of secularism that alienates the majority without meaningfully coming to the aid of the minority. Or they have narrowed their appeal to address their core support groups alone.

BUT with great power comes great responsibility, as Modi himself underlined in his victory speech. More so, when the victory comes after a campaign marked by majoritarian triumphalism and a rhetoric that often sought to divide to rule. From fielding a terror-accused who will now be the new MP from Bhopal to categorising the electorate as majority or minority, many anxieties were stoked, institutions were tested. Now, the election won, and handsomely, PM Modi and the party that he and his lieutenant Amit Shah have remade in their own mould, must acknowledge the need to reach out to those who worry about the shrinking of the Opposition. How they respond in their historic second term will matter to all those who have stakes in the quality — and future — of this great democracy.

AGENDA No 1

State of the economy was not a defining issue in the election.
But Modi government can use its mandate to prioritise it

FOR ANY RULING party, the state of a \$2.7 trillion economy, in one of the fastest growing nations in the world, which is staring at a slowdown with a collateral impact on revenues, growth and jobs, would have been the main issue it is judged by in a national election. That the NDA government led by Narendra Modi has managed to buck that trend flies in the face of conventional theories on the linkage between economics and politics. A resounding win, encouraging as it is from the point of view of the financial markets and political stability, may, however, recede from the mind of the voters as soon as the new government takes over. It must be warned that India's fiscal health is worrying and must be addressed urgently.

With the combined deficit of the Centre and states now over 8 per cent, coupled with a widening current account deficit, a slump in exports and private investment, and the threat posed by the fresh tariff war unleashed by Donald Trump, the challenges are enormous. They are amplified by the state of the global economy and the limited leeway for a fiscal stimulus in India. All these point to the urgent need to put in place a good economic management team and to hit the ground running. The Modi-led NDA government's economic agenda in its second term should be dominated by policy measures to boost private investment, a progressively cleaner GST regime with just two rates, a quick one-shot recapitalisation of PSU banks to ensure greater flow of credit and governance changes, tightening of the provisions in the new insolvency law to make sure that timelines are met, flexibility on labour laws to enhance competitiveness, privatisation of bleeding state-owned firms in competitive sectors and addressing of the crisis in the farm sector.

The Modi government has the comfort of numbers on its side again. But falling short on economic management this time around will resonate with both domestic and global investors. The economic costs or fallout will be severe.

GATHBANDHAN VS GATHBANDHAN

The social coalition crafted by the BJP trumped the BSP-SP-RLD caste alliance



BADRI NARAYAN

IT IS CLEAR THAT the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance is headed for a mammoth victory. The BJP is likely to win at least 55 of the 80 seats in UP. This is in contrast to the reading of political analysts, who had expected the gathbandhan of the SP and BSP to pose a severe challenge to the BJP. The SP-BSP gathbandhan, backed by the Scheduled Castes and other backwards, was deemed an unassailable social coalition. What then explains the success of the BJP in UP?

First, the BJP, which has its core vote among the upper castes, who are numerically substantial in UP, went for a strategic micro-management of castes and crafted a new social equation. This too was a gathbandhan of non-Yadav, numerically substantial OBC communities such as Kurmi, Maurya, etc. and most backward castes including Nishads, Bind, Kasera, Kumhar, Thathera, Tamboli. The party also reached out to non-Jatav Dalit castes such as Musahars, Nat, Kanjar, and Kuchbadihya. The BJP built this social coalition by organising caste conferences of various most backward and non-Jatav Dalit castes while also ensuring that the benefits of schemes like Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Aawas Yojana and Mudra reached them. In this way, it crafted a larger social coalition than the gathbandhan of the SP, BSP and Rashtriya Lok Dal. Feedback from the RSS helped the party to build and manage this coalition. Dalit and MBC caste heroes were reinterpreted by the BJP-RSS leadership as Hindutva warriors to attract their respective communities into the Hindu fold.

Second, vote-katuas (vote-cutters) like the Congress and Pragatishil Samajwadi Party of Shivpal Singh Yadav worked against the SP-BSP-RLD gathbandhan. The Congress's tactic was to field candidates who could work as vote-katuas against the BJP in many seats. The tactic misfired. Many Congress candidates were leaders from the SP and BSP, who were denied tickets by their own party. They cut into the gathbandhan's votes, which in benefited the BJP.

Third, the SP and BSP cadres didn't get sufficient time to build a rapport on the ground. In our field trips, we could sense the rivalry among cadres, which was not overt, in many constituencies. The interests of the Jatavs and Yadavs work at cross purposes at the grass roots. This conflict works at multiple levels — between the landholding Yadavs and landless Dalits, the socially dominant Yadavs and newly assertive Jatavs. It also affected the transfer of votes between the parties.

Fourth, an aspirational class of voters which identified with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The economic reforms initiated by the Congress under the prime ministership of P V Narasimha Rao have unleashed aspirations across age-group, gender and caste. This section of aspiring classes relates to the politics of BJP and is attracted towards its neo-right agendas. Issues such as national security, the call for a strong prime minister, cornering Pakistan and other such slogans motivated them to support the BJP. They backed the BJP in 2014, and their loyalty to the

BJP was evident in 2019 also. Fifth, the Modi government, through policies and programmes, mobilised various marginal communities horizontally to counter the BSP and SP, which mobilised castes vertically. The reservation for economically backward sections among the upper castes helped to dilute the dissatisfaction among the upper castes, especially the Brahmins, who perceive UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath as favouring specific castes. It also diluted the upper caste anger against the BJP's ambivalence on the SC-ST Act, which had played a significant role in the party's defeat in the elections to assemblies in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. The reservation for economically backward classes helped the party to assuage the upper castes in northern India, particularly in UP.

The impressive success of the BJP and the failure of gathbandhan in UP may have far reaching consequences for Indian politics. Political parties may have to redefine the politics of social justice in north India. The relationship between caste and politics may have to be revisited. The OBCs and SCs are not homogeneous communities. Their inherent heterogeneity is brought to the fore by competitive democracy. Political parties such as the BJP are quick to respond to the emergence of these heterogeneties and craft social equations accordingly.

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MAY 24, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
O P TYAGI'S "FREEDOM of Religion Bill" could become "a potent means of harassing honest persons exercising no more than their fundamental right in regard to the profession, practice and propagation of their religion". These are the words in which the Minorities Commission has condemned the Bill. The Commission has been in touch with the law ministry on the the controversial bill. Last week, it met to finalise its report which has now been sent to the Centre. Tyagi's bill, it says, is badly drafted and should not be accepted.

DRUGS PRICE CONTROL
THE DRUGS PRICE Control Order, 1979,

which was officially heralded as an important measure to bring down drug prices, is yet to be enforced. The drugs and pharmaceuticals industry is virtually set on a confrontation course with the government over the latter's bid to curb prices of essential medicines. Barring half a dozen units, drug manufacturers including most multinationals and others in the foreign sector, have not cared to submit to the Ministry of Petroleum and Chemicals their price lists as is required under the order, even though the time limit has expired. Notified on March 31, 1979, the order made it obligatory on the part of manufacturers to furnish price lists by April 30.

AIR AUTONOMY
THE MEMBERS OF the Verghese committee, appointed to review the question of autonomy for All India Radio and Doordarshan, have criticised the Prasar Bharati Bill which, they say, seeks to give more power to the executive. B G Verghese, chairman of the committee, and its members Umashankar Joshi, A G Noorani, Chanchal Sarkar, P L Deshpande and Nayantara Sehgal have issued a joint statement. They say: "Instead of the 'genuine autonomy' for broadcasting that the country was promised, the Prasar Bharati Bill offers something emasculated and confined, with the executive continuing as the dominant influence".

THE IDEAS PAGE

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“The prime minister (Theresa May) has lacked the vision and judgment to define Britain’s future relations with Europe, let alone convince MPs and the public to trust her.” — THE GUARDIAN

A victory foretold

Election results invite questions for liberals. Worldwide, they lack their rivals’ discipline and close ranks too late



CHRISTOPHE JAFFRELOT

THE 2019 GENERAL election has been won by Narendra Modi, like the last one. But the context this time is different. In 2014, it seemed that the Modi wave was founded primarily on the promise of development. Five years later, Prime Minister Modi did not even mention vikas in his campaign, simply because his government failed on that front, at least when it comes to job creation. So, what are the reasons for the massive support he has received?

The growing acceptability of Hindu nationalism needs to be factored in first because this ideology has been the main motivation of the BJP’s traditional voters. This core group has expanded and it clearly approves of the communalisation that has taken place in the past five years — an unprecedented phase of Indian history, marked by recurrent campaigns against “love jihad”, for “ghar wapsi” and cow protection (including cases of lynching innocent Muslims). These hardcore supporters of the BJP have endorsed the mainstreaming of Hindutva’s fringe, including Pragna Singh Thakur, whose election to Parliament will remain the most defining aspect of this election.

But only a fraction of the BJP voters are likely to say they support Modi because of Hindutva. What about the others? Many do not support the BJP’s brand of Hindutva — even though, they have no problems with Hindu majoritarianism as such — but prefer to give other explanations for their voting preference. Indeed, Modi offered them another good reason to vote for him this time — national security. The Pakistan-centred turn that the election campaign took after Pulwama enabled the PM to project himself as the country’s protector. Modi argued that the situation demanded a strong leader and a coalition government run by his opponents would inevitably be a weak one. Some voters took this “strong leader” rhetoric at face value. Among them, many felt that the Opposition did not offer a viable alternative because Rahul Gandhi is not sufficiently experienced.

This reading of the elections, that is supported by the findings of the Lokniti-CSDS exit poll, suggests three conclusions.

First, India has taken another step towards re-inventing itself as a de facto “ethnic democracy” — a term coined by the Israeli political scientist, Sammy Smooha, to describe the regime in his country, a de jure Jewish state. India continues to be a secular state on paper but in practice, the minorities are becoming second-class citizens, as the under-representation of Muslims in the Lok Sabha shows.

Second, India has also taken another step towards becoming an illiberal democracy. This trend, evidenced during the election campaign, has been reinforced by the loss of credibility of the Election Commission and the media. It flows from the populist idiom of Indian politics: When one person embodies the nation, and projects himself as its saviour

against all kinds of threats, any questioning of his authority is deemed illegitimate. There’s been hardly any press conference, hardly any assessment of policies — not to speak of the debates between the main contenders, one of the exciting features of elections in a democracy. The PM has, instead, benefited from a disproportionate access to prime time on electronic media. All this reflects the growing convergence of India with other illiberal ethnic and nationalist-populist democracies, such as Israel, Brazil, Hungary and Turkey — even the US, to an extent. In all these countries one person has projected himself as the nation’s — the majority community’s — saviour against external and internal threats and polarised the society. In such a regime, political adversaries are transformed into enemies — of the people and the nation — in the name of security. Most illiberal democracies are, therefore, also security states: Their populist leaders harp on threats to divert attention from their limitations on the governance front.

Third, in Indian politics, policies do not matter as much as before. This time, the campaign was not about jobs, the farm crisis or the environment, but about emotions — fear, anger and mangoes, a cocktail that is part of populist recipes across the world. The Congress manifesto did talk of some of these issues, but they were not discussed during the campaign.

Some Indian citizens have also voted for Modi because they did not believe that the Opposition offered a viable alternative. In fact, the same people who have supported his opponents at the state-level in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, barely six months ago, have voted for Modi this time. Why has the Opposition failed to make a dent in the Modi mania?

Certainly Modi did have more funds and support in the media, including the social media where an army of paid trolls demolished Rahul Gandhi’s reputation in much the same manner that Donald Trump’s supporters attacked Hillary Clinton a few years ago. But the Opposition was unable to project a viable alternative. To win against Modi, it needed to rally around a leader who could be projected as the PM-in-waiting. Many state-level leaders, including Mayawati, Akhilesh Yadav, Arvind Kejriwal, Mamata Banerjee and Prakash Ambedkar, did say that the BJP was posing a threat to democracy. But they did not go in for electoral adjustments with the Congress. They perhaps believe that they can live with a BJP government in New Delhi. Many such parties have been BJP allies in the past. So why not again? Also, many of them have not adjusted to the “new normal” — the majoritarian era. Some even dream of a tabular rasa on which they could build an ideal state. They even ask the Congress to commit suicide, forgetting that forming a party from scratch is no easy task — the AAP is a good example.

Liberals face similar problems elsewhere — they lack the discipline of their rivals and before they realise that they should close ranks, the populists change the rules of the game for good — or for the period during which the strongman is in command.

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C R Sasikumar

The leader is the truth

This election result is a positive mandate in favour of Narendra Modi



RAM MADHAV

“THE DATA SUGGESTS that the ill may have been particularly susceptible to Mr Trump’s message. According to our model, if diabetes were just 7 per cent less prevalent in Michigan, Mr Trump would have gained 0.3 fewer percentage points there, enough to swing the state back to the Democrats. Similarly, if an additional 8 per cent people in Pennsylvania engaged in regular physical activity, and heavy drinking in Wisconsin were 5 per cent lower, Mrs Clinton would be set to enter the White House.”

This was not a stand-up comedian, but a highly reputed magazine from London analysing Donald Trump’s victory in 2016. Many such “expert analyses” are awaited after May 23. They blamed EVMs first, the Election Commission next, the pollsters after that, and finally, they will end up blaming the voters.

This is a completely positive mandate in favour of Narendra Modi. The sheer magnitude of the victory amazes even the seasoned political pundits. Modi has simply conquered the heart of India. Conventional political wisdom suggests that ruling parties can’t create waves. It is usually the opposition that creates a wave. But PM Modi is a known convention-breaker. He has created a strong wave in his favour.

We often refer to war terminology in a lot of non-war activities these days. “Cyber warriors”, “media wars”, “electoral battles”, “green warriors” etc are descriptions that are too casually deployed to describe the activity of a given group. In that sense, elections too became like a war. They are fought with no less intensity and fervour. This was the case with the current election too.

Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general of the 17th century, in his book *On War* described war as “the continuation of politics by other means”. His treatise became famous as “Clausewitzian doctrine”. According to Clausewitz, three basic factors determine the outcome of war: The administrative element (overall strategic planning and logistics); the military element (resources and men) and

the emotional element (campaign theme and tactics).

The overall strategic planning of the BJP’s campaign, led by Amit Shah, has been miles ahead of the Opposition. The party had put in enormous efforts in areas where additional dividends were expected, like West Bengal, Odisha and the Northeast. The results in these states prove that those efforts paid off. On the other hand, the Opposition’s campaign was lacklustre and bombastic.

The BJP had mobilised all its organisational resources very well. The organisational structure that team BJP put in place right up to the polling station level has played an important role in this election. The Opposition lacked in that respect too. The senior and seasoned leadership of the Congress party was less visible while the campaign was left on the shoulders of inexperienced young leaders.

Finally, the Opposition had no answer to PM Modi’s strong emotional pitch. Modi effectively intermixed his personality, his developmental programmes of the last five years and the ideology in action to generate a strong emotional sentiment among the masses in his support. Those accusing Modi of using “nationalism” for electoral ends must remember that nationalism is not just an election issue, but forms the very identity of the BJP. Modi has many achievements in the past five years to showcase, reaffirming his nationalist credentials. That is what Modi and the BJP did during the campaign. In fact, this mandate is a proud reaffirmation of the people’s commitment to nationalism. It is, in a way, an answer to all those critics, both domestic and international, who called Modi a divisive figure. It is the most expansive and inclusive mandate in support of the nationalist idea of India.

Modi is a shrewd learner. He didn’t hesitate to follow Napoleon, whom historian Eric Hobsbawm described as the “secular deity”, in some of his tactics. Napoleon had mastered the art of using propaganda. He ran a government newspaper, *Le Moniteur Universel*, that regularly informed the French public about his military heroics and war successes. “What counts is what the people think as true”, Napoleon used to say. The Opposition’s lies didn’t cut any ice before the people’s belief in Modi because of his relentless and direct engagement with them through various communication platforms.

Modi led from the front. He bore the brunt of the Opposition’s attacks on himself and responded with firmness. “In the turmoil of bat-

tle, the great general maintains a psychological serenity like the needles of the compass in the storm-tossed ship”, writes Clausewitz. Consciously or otherwise, the Opposition has centred this election round Modi. And the results affirm a phenomenon that Marxist social scientist William Davies describes as “the leader becomes the truth”.

In the end, the Opposition has been left flabbergasted. They had no answer to this unconventional and intense electoral onslaught unleashed by Modi and the BJP. “*Sesham kopena purayer*” — “Rage is the only option left” — goes the ancient Indian saying. All that the nation sees from the Opposition is illogical and irrational anger and rage.

Modi-II starts on a strong wicket. Its immediate priorities are clearly laid out. Attending to the economy is, of course, one such priority. While the macroeconomic picture looks stable and promising, many important segments need support from the government. India cannot completely remain insulated from the ongoing trade war between the US and China or the geo-strategic conflict between the US and Iran. The neighbourhood also calls for attention. Developments in Sri Lanka and relations with Pakistan need the prime minister’s time and attention. Giving an impetus to the Indian Ocean strategy to secure India’s economic and strategic interests needs more focus from the government in Modi-II. The kind of mandate that Modi-II has secured makes it easy for the PM to tackle many security and strategic challenges.

This mandate is significant for another reason. It has completed the rejection and decimation of what Modi himself described as the “Khan Market cacophony” of pseudo-secular/liberal cartels that held a disproportionate sway and stranglehold over the intellectual and policy establishment of the country. Under Modi-II, the remnants of that cartel need to be discarded from the country’s academic, cultural and intellectual landscape.

Narendra Modi is seen by the people of India as not just another prime minister, but as a “transformative leader”. Nothing short of building a New India is his goal. The road to transformation is not easy but we have already taken that road. In Modi-II, the country expects the government to tread that path with a greater vigour.

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The long game

New government at the Centre should focus on land and labour reforms



AMARTYA LAHIRI

THE INDIAN VOTER has delivered a second sweeping mandate to the NDA. This is historic by itself. Congratulations are due in no small measure to the leadership team of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP President Amit Shah, who jointly spearheaded a campaign that proved irresistible to the electorate.

The size of the mandate given to the NDA as well as the fact that it signals persistence in voter preference, possibly provides the new government with the breathing space and confidence to think long term in terms of its economic policies. The first term of the Narendra Modi government was, perhaps understandably, characterised by a strong focus on political consolidation. That goal has clearly been achieved. This result will hopefully energise the government to expend some of its considerable political capital on policies that may be politically difficult in the short run but will have large long-term economic benefits.

The Indian economy is today at a crucial cusp. There are some clear positives that are tailwinds for the economy. The past 25 years have witnessed a dramatic turnaround, with growth rates above 6 per cent having become the norm. This growth revolution came on the back of a crisis-induced liberalisation of the Indian economy in the early 1990s that saw a rolling back of the industrial licensing regime along with wide-ranging trade reforms. These reforms remain in place today, which is a big plus for the economy.

A second potential tailwind is India’s demographics. India is currently adding around 10 million workers to its labour force every year. This supply of new labour should keep wage pressures in the economy under control. Moreover, it should potentially also rejuvenate the labour force with new skills, energy and dynamism. This second factor has often been described as India’s ongoing demographic dividend. It is a very important factor since such periods come infrequently, and do not last more than a couple of decades. So, it is vital that India seizes this moment.

The country is also facing serious headwinds. The first is with regard to the demographic dividend itself. The demographics will work as a dividend if and only if the economy is successful in providing jobs that match the aspirations of these new workers. If there is a mismatch due to either not enough jobs being created or workers being dissatisfied with the quality of the jobs on offer, then the demographic dividend can rapidly turn into a curse. Nothing can be societally more destructive than hordes of young people lounging around unemployed. There are salutary examples of this from all over the world, South Africa perhaps is the most recent such example.

Job creation is a tricky business in developing countries. Most of the workers are employed in agriculture. Agricultural productivity is typically low in such countries precisely because there is excess supply of labour to this

sector. The incentive for labour to leave agriculture is usually provided by the creation of jobs in the low-skill, large-scale manufacturing sector as an economy develops.

India’s experience has been somewhat different from this typical pattern. Our services sector, especially the high-skill IT sector and its offshoots, took off before manufacturing. However, this sector doesn’t create enough high-value jobs to absorb labour at the rate of a million a month. As a result, over 90 per cent of India’s services sector employment is located in enterprises that employ three or fewer workers. These are usually family-run low productivity enterprises that add limited value to the country’s production chain.

Expecting India to continue its growth trajectory through a novel services sector-led model is a road to nowhere. There is neither enough world demand for telephone operators servicing outsourced business processes, nor is there enough supply of Indian workers with the requisite skills even if there were such a demand. Put differently, there is no escaping our manufacturing conundrum: We need our manufacturing sector to grow at scale.

Most of Indian manufacturing is currently concentrated in small-scale low productivity establishments. We need investment in low-tech, large-scale manufacturing units to pick up. Productivity is linked to scale: Firms operating at larger scale also tend to be more productive. But investing in such large units is

risky. There are constraints associated with acquiring land. Adequate infrastructure provision, including the skilling of labour, is a second constraint. While the NDA government has done excellent work in building transport infrastructure, schooling and skill-building remains a constraint.

Another problem is due to our labour laws. These are antiquated and tend to be pro-labour to such an extent that firms prefer to eschew the productivity benefits of growing to retain the safety of remaining small. This also is a major hurdle to attracting foreign investment. In this context, it is heartening to see a recent statement from the Chief Economic Advisor that the labour ministry is working on reforms to our labour laws. It is politically a minefield but highly necessary.

Lastly, withdrawing the public sector from its unproductive pursuits in multiple sectors, including banking, has to be prioritised.

The scale of India’s development challenge is immense. The country needs to play the long game and it needs to start now. There is no time to lose. Hopefully, the renewed mandate will give the Modi government the political will and space to pursue overdue land and labour reforms.

The writer is director, Centre for Advanced Financial Research and Learning, Mumbai and professor of economics at the University of British Columbia. Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

ALLAY WORRIES

THIS REFERS TO the explained article, ‘The journey of an EVM’ (IE, May 22). The article explained all the processes intricately. However, almost every day, there are reports of EVMs being transported sans security or the voting machines landing up at hotels. EVMs cannot be procured at shops, neither can they be “bought” in an illegal manner. Instead of rejecting these claims, why doesn’t the Election Commission give proofs that turn down such reports?

Yamini Kandpal, Lucknow

EVM BOGEY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Shooting the machine’ (IE, May 23). The Opposition parties’ targeting of the EVM machines is without logic. Had the EVMs been really faulty, the Congress would not have returned to power in the assembly elections a few months ago. The Opposition’s allegations are baseless.

Sanjay Chawla, Amritsar

TACKLE MILITANCY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Arunachal omen’ (IE, May 23). The shooting of 11 persons, including a sitting MLA and his security guards, is an alarming event. But the editorial has missed out on a vital detail — the steps that can be taken to eradicate militancy

LETTER OF THE WEEK AWARD

To encourage quality reader intervention, The Indian Express offers the Letter of the Week award. The letter adjudged the best for the week is published every Saturday. Letters may be e-mailed to editpage@expressindia.com or sent to The Indian Express, B-1/B, Sector 10, Noida-UP 201301.

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from the region. The AFPSA should be re-imposed in the region but only after a thorough scrutiny of the militancy-affected districts so as to not alienate the local population. Another step that can be taken is to construct laser fencing around the over 1,500-km long porous border with Myanmar to check the influx of illegal migrants and militants.

Pranay Kumar Shome, via email