



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



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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.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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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. SIVASUBRAMANIAN,
Chennai

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The psychology of a tectonic electoral shift

Opposition parties failed to dent the thick and rich social base that the BJP has acquired

SAJIAN KUMAR

As the BJP surpasses its 2014 tally by a huge margin, indicating a wave the extent of which wasn't visible on the ground, one needs to revisit old assumptions to understand the 2019 election.

First, contrary to expectations, elections no longer seem to be the outcome of a complex interplay of socio-economic and cultural factors. It appears that the electoral realm has acquired a great deal of autonomy. This has methodological implications, wherein caste- and community-centric analyses to predict the outcome are proving to be inadequate. Else, what explains the drubbing of the 'mahagathbandhan', which had a core support base in U.P. and Bihar that was roughly 40% of the total population?

Similarly, the electoral articulations of a majority of voters seem to be moving away from the thick linkages that public policies used to have with political behaviour in the past. While it was possible in 1971 for a truncated Congress to

come back with a thumping majority on account of socialist and professedly pro-poor policies, 2019 offers a complete decoupling of the two. Not only has the BJP made an emphatic comeback in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh – States where it lost power last December – it has also made impressive gains in West Bengal while retaining its lead in Assam, a State where the party faced intense backlash on account of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016.

Three factors

Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to ask what accounts for the BJP's stupendous victory as the kind of wave witnessed in 2014 wasn't visible this time on the ground. Three factors gathered from my field studies may help in understanding new features that informed the nature of this election.

One, the election was more about perception without any

tangible basis for the same. A majority of respondents in U.P., Bihar and parts of Rajasthan, where I did my fieldwork during the elections, vouching for the Modi factor were nearly clueless when asked to substantiate their inclination towards Mr. Modi with a public policy that had benefited them. Rather, it was the abstract perception that India's reputation had catapulted it to a much higher pedestal in the international arena under Prime Minister Modi. Upon further probing, the respondents would cite the money getting credited in farmers' accounts and the Balakot strike in the same breath. Similarly, in U.P., while the majority of farmers were unanimous in expressing their anguish over the mayhem created by stray cattle in the last two years since the BJP government in the State banned cattle trade, the translation of the same into the electoral arena was mediated through the prism of caste and community. While for

Yadav, Jatav and Muslim peasants, stray cattle seemed to be a prime issue, for the rest it wasn't a hurdle in their appreciation of Mr. Modi, highlighting the inadequacy of employing a 'rational choice' theory in the Indian context. Rather it denotes a shift in the electoral narrative wherein the choices of the people towards a particular dispensation are a priori, while arbitrarily offering a set of issues without any subjective tangibility is a post-facto attempt at rationalisation. This was visible in the wake of demonetisation and GST, and now over joblessness and stray cattle in U.P.

Limitation of regional parties

Two, the kind of mandate the BJP got in States like U.P., Bihar and Maharashtra where there was a formidable Opposition alliance points to the intense limitation of regional parties to dent the thick, rich social base that the BJP has acquired since 2014. One must take into account that these re-

gional parties – namely, the SP, the BSP and the RLD in U.P.; the RJD in Bihar; and the NCP in Maharashtra – are looking at public policies primarily from the vantage point of assertive and dominant intermediary castes like Yadavs, Jats, Marathas and the politically vocal Jatavs.

The limitation of this kind of alliance between regional parties and with the Congress led to a sort of counter-consolidation of the weaker castes who resent the dominance of intermediary castes when these regional parties acquire power. In this sense, the BJP emerged as the default beneficiary of a counter-consolidation among the weaker OBCs and a section of Dalits when dominant intermediary castes became vocal against the BJP in the public arena. Elections today cannot be won when dominant caste-centric regional parties, which prevailed over two decades in their respective States without accommodating weaker subalterns,

emerge as the prime anchor of change, as their articulation is seen as an attempt to bring back the old single caste-centric template. Unfortunately, the Opposition didn't do enough to quell that fear among fellow subalterns by giving them more representation. What explains the fact that one-fourth of the RJD-led UPA candidates in Bihar were Yadavs, when the NDA was fielding candidates from a diversified subaltern base?

Complacency of Congress

Finally, besides the Modi factor and the well-oiled organisational machinery, one factor that contributed to the decimation of the Congress was its complacency after registering victories in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in the Assembly polls last December, leaving the ground vacant for the BJP.

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It's now a do-or-die situation for the Congress

Unless the party reinvents itself by setting aside its obsession with dynasty politics and returning to its ideological roots, its days are numbered

MOHAMMED AYOOB

The Congress party that led the freedom movement under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi and steered the state-making process under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru is on its last legs. The decline had started in the 1970s when Indira Gandhi imposed the Emergency, but was temporarily reversed with unexpected victories in 2004 and 2009. The 2014 election clearly signalled that the Congress had become largely irrelevant to the future of India's polity. This election has confirmed it. The reasons for this decline are the deep-rooted culture of sycophancy within the party and the lack of an ideological backbone.

Culture of sycophancy

The culture of sycophancy has been evident in the upper echelons of the party for decades. It was famously embodied in the slogan "India is Indira, Indira is India", coined by Dev Kant Ba-

rooah, the president of the party during the Emergency. It was visible in the way Sanjay Gandhi acted as an extra-constitutional authority during the Emergency though he held no official position. The choice of Rajiv Gandhi, a political novice, as Prime Minister after the death of his mother in 1984 confirmed the fact that the sycophantic culture had become so deep-rooted within the Congress that it was impossible for its leaders to even consider appointing a person who did not belong to the Gandhi family as Prime Minister. Rahul Gandhi was made president of the party in 2017 despite his lack of political experience and clear demonstrations of political ineptitude and projected as the prime ministerial alternative to Narendra Modi. Further, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra was appointed general secretary of the party in 2019 in the vain hope that her likeness to her

grandmother would attract votes.

The fact that UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi did not see the writing on the wall after the 2014 debacle and relinquish the leadership of the party was less a reflection of their political naiveté than their desire to control the party at all cost for their benefit. Their refusal to step down also flew in the face of the time-honoured tradition in established parliamentary democracies, such as Britain and Australia, that leaders of parties who lose elections immediately relinquish their position. Now that the 2019 election has ratified the 2014 verdict, with Rahul Gandhi losing his Amethi seat, it is time that all members of the Gandhi family resign from their party positions for the greater good of the party.

'Soft' Hindutva

The second factor is the party's decision to move away radically

from its ideological moorings. Once again, this process had begun with Indira Gandhi, who unabashedly used the "Hindu card" to return to power in 1980. Rajiv Gandhi engaged in dual appeasement. First, in the Shah Bano case he got Parliament to pass legislation overriding the Supreme Court judgment in favour of a Muslim woman divorced by her husband who refused to pay her maintenance. He did so to appease the most obscurantist elements in the Muslim community. When criticised for this action and in order to balance it, he opened the gates of the Babri Masjid to allow Hindu religious rites to be performed in its premises in order to appease extremist Hindu sentiments.

In a final act of surrender to the most reactionary forces in Hindu society, the Congress government at the Centre remained a mute spectator when the Babri Masjid

was razed to the ground in 1992 by a mob in the presence of leading BJP figures.

More recently, the primary lesson that the Congress learnt from the 2014 defeat was that Hindutva sells and that if you cannot beat the Hindu nationalists, you should join them. Rahul Gandhi attempted to project himself as a *janeudhari* Brahmin and visited unmet temples in the countdown to State and national elections in the past two years. Terms such as 'secularism', 'minorities' and 'lynching' disappeared totally from the Congress rhetoric in the run-up to the 2019 elections. This seemed to be a part of a deliberate strategy to project the image that the Congress was not a party of "Muslim appeasers", but a party of faithful Hindus similar to the BJP. The Congress made a concerted effort to project an image of 'soft' Hindutva against the BJP's 'hard' Hindutva. It seems

that Rahul Gandhi and his advisers did not realise that the Indian electorate was not so naïve as to support the Congress's pale imitation of the BJP's genuine article. All the Congress ended up doing was to further legitimise the Hindutva discourse propagated by the Sangh Parivar by helping to conflate Hindu nationalism with Indian nationalism.

The only way the Congress can try to rejuvenate itself is by discarding its sycophantic culture, ditching the "dynasty" for good, re-instituting inner-party democracy, and returning without reservation to its original inclusive creed as espoused by the Mahatma and Nehru. If it does not do this, it will find itself relegated to the dustbin of history.

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Regional aspirations stemmed the Hindutva tide in the deep south

The values of secularism and pluralism may truly find expression within the political mainstream in Tamil Nadu and Kerala

NARAYAN LAKSHMAN

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term in office was characterised by a tug of war between a politically centralising government in New Delhi and independent-minded State parties across the nation. Now, given that the results of the election point only one way, it is likely that his second term will witness the proliferation of hegemonic Hindutva politics in north, central and eastern India, juxtaposed with a more liberal-pluralist ethos in the south.

Changed political landscape

First, let us look at how this election has reshaped the political landscape of 'standout' States, the ones led by strong regional leaders/ parties that appeared to offer a considerable resistance to the 2014-19 "Moditva" doctrine.

One of the biggest stories of this election is how the BJP made deep inroads into West Bengal, capitalising neatly on the collapse

of the Left Front. While Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress continues to hold an edge in 21 out of 42 Lok Sabha seats, the BJP has surged ahead in 18 seats. This remarkable entry into a State that was a bastion of Left politics for more than three decades has come on the back of several factors: the deepening salience of majoritarian politics at the grassroots level driven adroitly by the RSS and the VHP; the growing use of money to lubricate the wheels of local politics towards a Hindutva narrative, including influence exerted upon temples and during religious festivals; and a purposeful economic outreach programme by these organisations that sought to bring Dalit and Adivasi communities within the Hindutva fold. This quiet saffron 'revolution' appears to have left the Trinamool playing catch-up and has been coterminous with the political decimation of the Left in

West Bengal.

In Telangana, also led by a powerful regional satrap, the BJP is on track to considerably improve its tally, from one Lok Sabha seat to possibly five, out of 17. Contrarily, the Telangana Rashtra Samithi headed by Chief Minister K. Chandrababhan Naidu is facing the prospect of a major setback given that it secured a landslide victory in last December's Assembly election. There are similarities as well as differences to the West Bengal case here. A parallel experience is that voters of the State appear to have expressed different political preferences across Assembly and Lok Sabha elections. The difference is that the BJP's victory here may have had less to do with grass-roots outreach and local politics than the sheer overwhelming popularity of the Hindutva world view and the projection of Mr. Modi as a uniquely qualified leader running a presi-

dential-style national campaign.

With West Bengal and Telangana falling into the BJP's lap, only three major States remain that are driven by strong regional aspirations, distinct ethnic and linguistic identities, and parties that are unapologetic about standing outside of the mainstream of Indian political discourse, howsoever that may be defined: Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu.

Kerala is the last hope for the Congress in the 2019 election, given that it has not won a landslide victory in any other State. In Kerala, the Congress-led United Democratic Front coalition has secured a strong lead in 19 of the 20 parliamentary constituencies.

Andhra Pradesh, which has had its share of charismatic regional leaders, looks to be a clean sweep for Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy's YSR Congress Party. However, Mr. Reddy has made political overtures towards both the BJP

and the Congress in the past, and it is unclear which way he might lean. What is clear is that for him the grant of special category status matters most and he will support the party that moves forward with that grant. It is unclear whether, if the BJP were to take this step, Mr. Reddy would remain outside its umbrella on any other grounds.

On the poorest footing

Tamil Nadu perhaps represents the one State where the BJP is on the poorest footing in terms of its politics lacking resonance with the broader populace. It faces the least prospects for making inroads through the campaigning methods it has deployed successfully elsewhere. The likely overwhelming victory of the DMK alliance will bring pause to the political expansion momentum of the BJP across most other States. The BJP's prospects are weaker

still for piggybacking on the AIADMK, a party that appears to be gradually imploding.

Even more, the DMK has, in this election, unambiguously claimed the mantle of the Dravidian movement that, at its peak, had a sharp anti-Hindu, anti-north India, anti-Hindi edge. Certainly, it has moderated to a more accommodative form today, but what the vote of the Tamil people shows is that they have chosen to step back from the headlong plunge into the saffronisation of Indian politics that so many other States seem to have signed up for.

With West Bengal and Telangana joining the bulk of the major States in their embrace of Hindutva, it is now only in the 'deep south' that the values of secularism and pluralism may truly find expression within the political mainstream.

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Opposition parties failed to engage the BJP ideologically

Even as it successfully stopped its downward slide in Uttar Pradesh, the BJP kept its focus on West Bengal

SMITA GUPTA

For the BJP, the challenge in this election was to compensate for possible losses in Uttar Pradesh and other Hindi heartland States by gaining new seats in West Bengal and Odisha. In U.P., the BJP won 71 seats in the 2014 Lok Sabha election; this time, it was not so short of that mark. In West Bengal, where it has been working assiduously for the last two decades, the BJP won two seats in 2014; this time, it was leading in 18. The party's minor losses in Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have been compensated for in Odisha, where the BJP was leading in nine seats.

The Congress's poor decision

The results in U.P. suggest that after its wilderness years in the 2000s, it has now returned to the sort of strength that it command-

ed between 1991 and 1998. In 1991, it won 51 seats; in 1996, 52; and in 1998, 57. In 1999, with a rift in the party, its tally came down to 29. The BJP's score sank further to 10 in 2004 and 2009.

But even though the BJP's vote percentage in U.P. has increased from 2014, its seat tally has decreased a little because of the alliance between the SP, the BSP and the RLD. The numbers also suggest that had the Congress not fought separately, at least another eight seats would have gone to the Opposition alliance. The SP would have probably won Badaun, Banda, Barabanki, and the BSP would have probably won Basti, Dhaurahra, Sant Kabir Nagar, Sitapur and Sultanpur – all of which have now increased the BJP's tally. Simultaneously, the figures also show that despite the

Congress's focus on U.P. – it brought in its star campaigner Priyanka Gandhi Vadra at the last moment – the party's vote share has not increased and, to make matters worse, party president Rahul Gandhi has lost his Amethi seat.

Indeed, even in the absence in the Opposition camp of a convincing counter-argument as well as a face to match Prime Minister Narendra Modi's strongman image, his promise of a stable government, special brand of majoritarian politics, and the BJP electoral machine, a greater degree of demonstrable Opposition unity would have further increased the Opposition's tally in U.P. It would have produced less confusion among the roughly 50% of voters who were not inclined to vote for the BJP.

U.P. also provides the prime example of the Congress's failure to provide leadership to the Opposition. Compare its reluctance to accommodate regional parties in States such as Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan last year, or in Delhi and Haryana in these Lok Sabha polls, with the BJP's sacrifice of five seats to the JD(U) in Bihar, which paid huge dividends.

Left to Right

Even as it successfully stemmed its downward slide in U.P., the BJP kept its focus on West Bengal. Taking its inspiration from its electoral success in the 2018 Assembly elections in Tripura, another State with a majority Bengali population, the BJP was leading in more than a third of the 42 seats in the State. If the ground

had been laid by the RSS and its affiliates which have been working in the State since the early 1960s, the BJP got a special boost there when it came to power at the Centre in 2014. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's blatant appeals to Muslims helped the BJP create a wedge between Hindus and Muslims by promising a National Register of Citizens that would send "infiltrators" back to Bangladesh, while retaining the "refugees". This is a State that had been ravaged by Partition, and it was easy to revive memories long suppressed by the uncompromising 34 year-long rule of the Left Front. Money power, muscle power and the message of Hindutva followed. If "Amar Nam, Tomar Nam, Vietnam, Vietnam" (My name, Your name, Vietnam Vietnam)" had

once rung through the State, now it was "Amar Nam, Tomar Nam, Jai Shri Ram (My name, Your name, Jai Shri Ram)".

Back to the drawing board

If the Congress had disappeared as an Opposition party in West Bengal, the CPI(M), which still has the remnants of an organisation, decided that it first needed to fight the Trinamool before it took on the BJP. As a result, its supporters shifted their votes to the BJP. These elections demonstrate that the Congress and the CPI(M) need to not just go back to the drawing board, but focus on the ideological battle with the BJP. Otherwise, they both look set for face extinction.

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