



## Signals from States

Results for 4 Assembly elections cast a light on political strategies and voter behaviour

The results of four State Assembly elections conducted alongside the Lok Sabha polls hold important political signals. Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh elected new Assemblies along with their Lok Sabha members. In Odisha, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik has won a fifth consecutive term, leading his Biju Janata Dal to a sweeping victory, while in Sikkim, Pawan Kumar Chamling, the longest serving CM in India, will be bowing out after his Sikkim Democratic Front lost to the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha. Mr. Chamling became CM in 1994. The BJP won the Assembly election in Arunachal Pradesh – though this serves as a reminder of the curious ways in which the party has expanded its footprint in the Northeast. The Assembly election in 2014 was won by the Congress and Pema Khandu, the current Chief Minister, was a Congress MLA then. He became CM in 2016, shifted to the People's Party of Arunachal as its leader, and then moved to the BJP, where he still remains. The BJP's acquisitive approach to politics in general has been effective in the Northeast. Now, the SKM in Sikkim might ally with the party. The spectacular victory of the YSR Congress Party in Andhra Pradesh, in turn, is a reminder of the Congress's persistent mishandling of the State since the abrupt death in an accident of Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, the party's then CM, better known as YSR, in 2009.

YSR had helped the Congress win more than three dozen Lok Sabha members from the undivided State in 2004 and 2009, the single biggest contingent for the party from any State and which powered the UPA-1 and UPA-2 in Parliament. Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, YSR's son, sought the top post in the State after his father's death, but the Congress high command, which has a high tolerance for demands of offsprings of party leaders, raised the bar in this instance. Mr. Reddy launched his regional outfit, the YSRCP, cleaned out the Congress, which was reeling under the adverse after-effects of the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh, and has now won decisively across regions of the State nine years later. In Odisha, Mr. Patnaik's victory in the Assembly was overwhelming but the BJP, which has won eight of the 21 Lok Sabha seats from the State, is sitting in the wings, having displaced the Congress as the principal Opposition party. The results in Odisha are also indicative of a new political trend whereby voters differentiate between the State and national elections. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh, States that chose the Congress over the BJP in Assembly elections only months ago, swung right back to the saffron party in the Lok Sabha polls. In Odisha, even with both elections being held simultaneously, this demarcation is stark, though the BJD still got more seats than the BJP. In Mr. Reddy's case, he swept the Lok Sabha polls too, indicating that a hard-working regional leader with effective political messaging can resist top-down hyper-nationalism.

## Full circle

How the kilogram has come to be defined, once again, in terms of universal constants

As of May 20, the kilogram joined a bunch of other units – second, metre, ampere, kelvin, mole and candela – that will no longer be compared with physical objects as standards of reference. The change comes after nearly 130 years: in 1889 a platinum-iridium cylinder was used to define how much mass one kilogram represented. Now, a more abstract definition of the kilogram has been adopted in terms of fundamental constants, namely, the Planck's constant  $h$ , and the metre and second which already have been defined in terms of universal constants such as the speed of light. With this redefinition, the range of universality of the measurement has been extended in an unprecedented way. Earlier, if a mass had to be verified to match with a standard kilogram, it would be placed on one of the pans of a common balance, while the prototype would have to be placed in the other pan – and mass would be measured against mass. Now, by using a Kibble balance, which balances mass against electromagnetic force, to measure the mass of an unknown piece, the very methodology of verification has been altered. The constants involved are known precisely and are universal numbers. Hence, whether the mass is measured on earth or, say, on the moon, it can be determined with precision.

This is the culmination of a series of historical changes, which are also described by Richard S. Davis et al in their 2016 article in the journal *Metrologia*. Originally the definition of mass was in terms of what was then thought of as a universal physical constant. In 1791, 1 kg was defined as the mass of one litre of distilled water at its melting point. Thus, the density of water was the physical constant on which this definition hinged. In 1799, the kilogram came to be defined using a cylinder of platinum – the first time an artefact was used for this purpose. But it was also defined as equivalent to the mass of one litre of distilled water at atmospheric pressure and at about 4 degrees Celsius, the temperature at which water has the maximum density. This was done away with in 1889 when the community adopted the International Prototype of the Kilogram – a cylinder made of an alloy that's 90% platinum and 10% iridium. The reference to the 'physical constant', i.e. mass of one litre of water, was abandoned. Now, as a culmination of this historical process, we come back full circle and find that the kilogram is defined again in terms of a fundamental physical constant – the Planck's constant. Planck's constant is a robust number to match. Not until the art of travelling at relativistic speeds, close to the speed of light, is mastered, will we have to redefine these abstract definitions. Until then, it looks like metrologists are on a stable berth.

# No easy solutions for the Congress

Its defeat now is far more consequential than it was in 2014; and it does not have the luxury of time

ZOYA HASAN

When the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Narendra Modi stormed to power in 2014, the Congress was reduced to 44 seats in the Lok Sabha. In 2019, the Congress has suffered another colossal defeat. It won 52 seats, still not enough to claim the post of the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha. This dismal result shows that the revival of the once-dominant powerhouse isn't happening any time soon.

Mr. Modi's re-election with an even larger majority sanctifies the structural shift to the right and the BJP's overarching dominance of the political system – that's why the Congress's spectacular defeat in this election is far more consequential than it was in 2014. The Modi landslide in 2019 is not based on any pretence of development, but on the basis of Hindutva consolidation and majoritarian triumphalism. The divide-and-rule strategy has succeeded in securing an unprecedented electoral endorsement for Hindu nationalism as large numbers voted for the BJP as the party that best represents, protects and propagates Hindu interests and rejected the pluralistic vision of India.

### About Rahul Gandhi

Congress president Rahul Gandhi put up a spirited fight but it was not good enough to slow down the Modi juggernaut. The Congress campaign was well-crafted and well-supported by a progressive manifesto promising jobs and a minimum income, but it just didn't appeal to voters. Many strategic and tactical reasons will be given for the Congress's failure; yet, we must begin by noting that the odds were heavily stacked in the BJP's favour: the government's use of instruments of state power, its money power and the media's

building of the Modi cult.

The 2019 outcome was powered by a hyper-nationalist agenda and Mr. Modi's strong advocacy of it. This election was all about the political persona of Mr. Modi and what he symbolised: a strongman standing against a divided Opposition. Mr. Gandhi is a genial and affable figure, but that seems to put him at a disadvantage when pitted against Mr. Modi's muscular leadership in 'new India'. The Congress made a strategic mistake when it decided to focus its attack entirely on Mr. Modi. Many voters had said that although they felt that the BJP had not delivered on its promises, they would vote for him because they believe a strong decisive leadership can solve India's numerous problems.

Mr. Gandhi appeared to see the danger of personalising the campaign, but even then he persisted in repeating the slogan 'chowkidar chor hai' to dent Mr. Modi's image as a scrupulously honest leader, rather than remake his message. In almost every speech he would begin and conclude with the Rafale issue. But it didn't excite anyone except possibly the committed Congress voters attending his rallies.

The real gains for the Congress would have come from disappointment in the Modi government's economic performance and policies, but the BJP shrewdly sidestepped its governance record by diverting to a three-point campaign of nationalism (national security, Pakistan and terrorism), Hindutva (Hindus everywhere, minorities nowhere) and anti-corruption (blasting the Congress's record, ignoring its own). Mr. Modi did not run on his track record but on teaching Pakistan a lesson. He has been re-elected on this plank. The economic downturn and shrinking employment opportunities didn't matter in this election.

After the Pulwama terrorist at-



tack and India's response with the Balakot airstrikes, the BJP mixed nationalism with a muscular nationalism, which completely derailed the Opposition as Mr. Modi used this narrative to project himself as the strong leader of a 'maza-boot sarkar (solid government)'. The Congress couldn't counter this narrative. It tried to change the subject by returning the focus to people's issues. The Nyuntam Aay Yojana (NYAY) income guarantee proposal was part of this attempt, but it came too late and the party didn't carry it to the people. Consequently, NYAY did not become a talking point in the campaign; it did not even figure prominently in Mr. Gandhi's speeches.

Throughout the election campaign, Mr. Modi relentlessly attacked the Congress; in fact, he reserved his munitions for the Congress and generally spared other Opposition parties. In response to this ceaseless attack, amplified by the mainstream media, the Congress leadership came off looking timorous and defensive. The Congress did not counter him. It did not list the achievements of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) or previous Congress governments.

Mr. Gandhi said the right things but often did not connect with the voters, perhaps because he did not address them in an idiom or vocabulary that resonated. The failure of Mr. Gandhi and his sister

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, whose last-minute induction in the campaign made no impact, is obvious. Apart from the leadership crisis, two other issues are important. These pertain to the Congress's ideology and organisation.

### Ideology-lite

During the past five years, secularism has been pushed to the margins of Indian politics, and the Congress did not strongly defend secular nationalism. The party remained inexplicably silent on subjects ranging from secularism to the rights of minorities, to name just two of the most important ones. Mr. Gandhi chose to embark on a series of visits to Hindu temples but his party didn't care to make a distinction between Hinduism and Hindutva, which is a political ideology and a political project. The Congress could not harvest electoral dividends from this competitive wooing of the Hindu vote because people chose the more strident option.

Besides, and critically, the Congress lacks an organisation; it failed to rebuild its organisation during UPA rule (2004-14) and it failed to push this process during its years in opposition (2014-19). The BJP, in contrast, has a well-oiled political machine at its disposal. It is also closely connected to a network of Hindu religious organisations that spring into action in every election and provide vast numbers of volunteers for campaigning and booth management. The nationwide branches of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its affiliated organisations clearly helped the BJP to build a second Modi wave.

Complicating the Congress's hopes of returning to its old strength is that its decline has coincided with the rise of smaller regional parties, most of which are breakaways from the Congress. These parties are fighting intense-

ly for a larger share of the political pie. The Congress has drawn a zero in its erstwhile bastion of undivided Andhra Pradesh, where it won a sizeable proportion of seats in 2009. As Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy gets ready to take over as the next Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, the Congress leadership must be ruing its decision to deny him the CM's post a decade ago, leading to a bitter estrangement.

The Congress has lost Maharashtra, done poorly in Karnataka, West Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh – which means it lacks the geographical base of a pan-India party. The BJP has decisively reversed the trend of the 2018 Assembly elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where it had lost to the Congress, and has now surged ahead in these crucial States. Punjab and Kerala are the only two big States which continue to lean towards the Congress.

### Ability to retain supporters

The Congress now lacks a distinct social base, and its ability to retain its supporters is dwindling. To regain its influence, it needs to decentralise and build broad-based social coalitions at the State level. The party's decline is not irreversible. But in the long road ahead, it has to figure out what it actually stands for, and what it will take to stand up to Mr. Modi's BJP. The real key to rejuvenation lies in mass contact, a distinctive and far swifter campaign on an egalitarian platform and the leadership's ability to communicate this to the people – rather than depending on the eternal verities (and varieties) of dynastic leadership.

The Congress does not have the luxury of time; it must start today.

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# The NDA has its task cut out

It must improve conditions of supply and facilitate the move away from agricultural jobs to raise farmer incomes

ASHIMA GOYAL

Indian voters have shown remarkable maturity and thoughtfulness in delivering a stable government at the Centre. They realise the necessity of a stable government, and so often vote differently in national and State elections. Forecasts of political and economic instability made in 2014, when the macro economy was vulnerable, proved incorrect. Similar forecasts were made this year, based on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance's losses in the Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan Assembly elections. The pundits should bow to the greater wisdom of the people – in this election, the BJP has swept the same States.

The Congress underestimated the voters' continuing need for good governance. The Congress did not choose dynamic Chief Ministers when it had the option. It also underestimated the voters' need for a positive narrative. Talking of slow job growth and farmer distress did not work. The Nyuntam Aay Yojana scheme (the Congress's proposed social welfare programme) was not acceptable as a substitute for jobs.

On the other hand, the BJP promised to improve ease of living,

beyond just the ease of doing business, and strengthen the self-respect and ability of the average citizen to do more, which is exactly the right approach for an aspirational India.

### Bringing life to poll promises

There was fear of competitive populism in the event of a weak government being elected at the Centre. Now the BJP will hopefully focus, as promised in its manifesto, on infrastructure, housing, technology, health, education, water, the environment, and facilitate the move away from agricultural jobs to raise farmer incomes. Only 23% of rural income now comes from farming, and there is a major ongoing shift to add value in agriculture. Apart from this, administrative reforms should be the focus. There are police and judicial reforms on the anvil. Well-targeted direct benefit transfers will efficiently deliver relief to the really distressed at low cost.

And what about the economy? The slow growth of jobs was largely due to strict monetary and credit policies that started in 2011. International monetary theories were not adapted as required in the Indian context. The inherited non-performing assets (NPA) burden dragged on. Since major loans



had gone to private business, a bankruptcy regime had to be put in place, to prevent the entire burden of resolution from falling on tax payers.

But today, with some clean-up, inflation is below the target set by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). There is still stress in the non-banking financial companies (NBFC) sector. The government must move fast to nip this in the bud and support growth.

Private investment growth has stagnated since 2011. There was a brief recovery of animal spirits after the last election, but high real interest rates and the asset quality review made bank lending to firms negative and squeezed out the revival. Something similar should not happen this time. Policymak-

ers may believe that private investment will revive now and foreign money will pour in. But the latest data show a fall in private investment as real interest rates have risen and liquidity remains tight. There are also external shocks from the global slowdown and trade wars.

### A wider tax base

Although the RBI is now keeping short-term liquidity in surplus, banks scarred by a long battle with NPAs are just parking them with the RBI instead of increasing lending. If the share of durable liquidity is increased, it will encourage banks to lend and also bring down market rates. Despite RBI permissions, banks are not lending to NBFCs, since they are afraid of having to make provisions. A full recapitalisation of banks, possible now with bankruptcy and governance reforms in place, will increase their confidence.

The RBI does not want to open a special liquidity window to NBFCs because of credit risk. It believes weaker NBFCs should be allowed to exit. But NBFCs were financing consumption growth and real estate, which are slowing, creating systemic risk, against which the RBI has to act. Even stronger NBFCs, in the current environ-

ment, are choosing to sit on a fat liquidity cushion rather than lend. If an RBI liquidity window is made available against collateral with high rates, it may not be used much, but fear of liquidity shortage would disappear, allowing NBFC lending to revive. This is required also because fiscal space, though it is there, is limited. Demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax (GST) have increased the tax base, reducing rampant tax evasion. Despite simplifications and tax cuts, the tax base is expected to raise more revenue post-elections. Unspent government cash balances will be spent as the spending slowdown is reversed. Money from completed schemes can be reallocated.

Humility should come with strength. After an exceptionally bitter election season, the NDA will hopefully follow a constructive and inclusive agenda and encourage moderate progressive stances. Institutions are the backbone of any economy and must be strengthened. The people know the government took difficult decisions to clean up the system, and chose to give it a second chance. It is time to meet their expectations.

Ashima Goyal is on the Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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

### The 2019 mandate

The larger-than-life Narendra Modi, carefully projected and presented to the electorate, was also made possible by the willing contributions of government institutions and machinery. With the economics and logistics well taken care of, the Hindu nationalistic agenda (with Pulwama and Balakot) made for a perfect elixir that the huge population was willing to drink. That the failures of demonetisation and GST, the unprecedented unemployment rate, agrarian distress and other grave issues made no change in the perspective of the voter can be attributed to Mr. Modi's narrative focussed only on two major issues: Hindu nationalism and national security. The fragmented Opposition only aided the BJP victory. The brazen nomination of

the candidate from Bhopal and her victory gives credence to the view that the BJP is treading the path of Hindutva quite unabashedly. It is odd that inclusive development did not matter for large sections of the electorate which is rejoicing in the victory. I only hope that Modi 2.0 will have a different perspective (Editorial, "For a rediscovery of India", May 24). Most importantly, it is time the Opposition pondered over its shortcomings and faces the electorate with a concrete and plausible alternative five years from now.

G.B. SIVANANDAM,  
Coimbatore

■ As far as the failure of the Congress and the rest of the Opposition is concerned, it was known that in the absence of a healthy understanding among themselves, they would lose.

Each party was ambitious, failed to be accommodative and take quick decisions for proper seat-adjustments.

This exposed them as incapable and at sixes and sevens. Narendra Modi and his party should follow constitutional goals and ensure peace and prosperity.

B.M. BALIGA,  
Bengaluru

■ The election result marks an inflection point in the history of independent India. It was with great fanfare and hope that India had set forth on its own constitutional journey, clearly separating the state from any religion, but decades later, we have willingly blurred those boundaries with our mandate. Mr. Modi will be steering India at a crucial time in its developmental trajectory, when the world situation itself is in a state of great flux. The Indian voice since Independence – of soft

power, non-violence and standing up for a just and equitable world order – is more relevant today than ever before. This is what earned us the goodwill of the international community. One hopes that these values are not eroded amid the charged emotions holding sway now. The absence of a credible and robust Opposition is a matter of great concern. The issues that figured during campaigning do not die with the results of 2019. These are bound to resurface sooner rather than later. I hope that India survives the next five years without any major social dysfunctions.

ROSEN BRAR,  
Patiala, Punjab

■ The massive victory was definitely built on polarisation, though the non-existence of a viable political alternative was of great help. There is an element of truth in calling

the pole leader of the BJP as a divider. Hopefully, this remains a temporary poll strategy. The new government should regain the trust of the minorities. Otherwise it will definitely lead to the decay of this wonderful civilisation of ours which thrives on tolerance and which takes pride in inclusiveness, which is so crucial for the progress of such a diverse country.

VENKATA RAMANA N.K.,  
Narsapur, W. Godavari, Andhra Pradesh

■ The BJP won the political battle hands down but has still to fight the economic battle. The brute majority it has won will leave the Opposition nonplussed. The theme of 2019 was only nationalism. However nationalism alone cannot extricate people from poverty, unemployment and agrarian distress, to name a few issues.

For Mr. Modi, it is a case of uneasy lies the head that

wears a crown. Interestingly, the election was on the Modi aura and is likely to lull many into complacency hoping that the Modi magic shall save them again. So why deliver? This is not good for democracy.

DEEPAK SINGHAL,  
Noida

■ The shocking defeat of the Indian National Congress has put a huge question mark on the very future of the grand old party at the national level. Both the national and State leadership of the party need to be replaced. Tough decisions need to be taken, fresh young blood infused and a comprehensive plan formulated to lead the party to gradual recovery. Cliched terms such as 'self introspection' will no longer work, else it will be the same disastrous story in 2024.

A. MOHAN,  
Chennai

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# It's time to take stock of the electoral process

The general election saw serious questions being posed to the Election Commission. The 17th Lok Sabha must deliberate on them

S.Y. QURAISHI

The biggest election in the world has finally come to a successful end for which the three Election Commissioners and their 12 million staff deserve appreciation. Unfortunately, what deserved to be remembered as a subject of national pride became mired in several controversies. At the top of the list was the unprecedented attack on the Election Commission (EC) which was accused of being soft on the top leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for repeated violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC).

## A long election

Questions were also raised about the prolonged election of seven phases. The EC has always main-

tained that the most pressing concern is voter security. All political parties demand that Central armed police forces be deployed, but due to their limited availability they have to be rotated, which necessitates multi-phase elections. If the numbers of these forces were adequate, the EC could conduct elections in one day. After all, the MCC is difficult to operationalise in the age of social media in staggered elections. This is a trade-off the EC is fully aware of. The cost-benefit analysis of multi-phase versus short phase elections in the face of new challenges can be done afresh.

The highlight of 2019 was the highest ever voter turnout in a general election so far (67.11%), even though there was a lower turnout than usual in many constituencies, possibly because of oppressive weather, and varied turnouts across phases. This proves that the EC's voter education programme (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) is effective.

## The three 'M's

In this election, the role of money power was alarming. It is becoming more and more expensive to contest elections and the problem of black money is alive. Even before the first phase had started, it was

evident that Indian democracy is overwhelmed by the overarching role of money, media and mafia.

The EC seized crores worth of money, liquor and drugs. As on May 24, money, drugs/narcotics, liquor, precious metals and freebies worth an estimated ₹3,475.76 crore were seized. The figure in 2014 was ₹1,200 crore. According to EC data, Tamil Nadu (₹952 crore), Gujarat (₹553.76 crore), Delhi (₹430.39 crore), Punjab (₹286.41 crore) and Andhra Pradesh (₹232.02 crore) were the top five States/Union Territories that accounted for the total seizures. A cause for worry is that drugs/narcotics formed a large part of the seizures, with Gujarat topping the list (almost ₹524.35 crore).

## Code violations and counting

Personally, what was most painful was witnessing the EC repeatedly coming under the scanner due to its delayed and often perfunctory actions on violations of the MCC. Once lauded for its conduct of free and fair elections in the world's largest democracy which have been held with precision and integrity, this time it was criticised both nationally and internationally.

The check on the Prime Minister's helicopter in Odisha on April 16 should have been used by the EC

to demonstrate its commitment to equality of all before the law. But it chose a different course.

The EC was also questioned for its stand on the sample size for Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) verification. Its line was that tallying VVPAT paper slips with

**✶ The ascendant role of money power, fake news, communal polarisation and hate rhetoric pose a serious challenge to the very foundations of our electoral system**

the EVM count one per Assembly constituency was based on scientific methodology and endorsed by the Indian Statistical Institute. But the Opposition parties went to the Supreme Court which advised the EC to raise the mandatory random counting to five VVPATs per Assembly segment laying emphasis on "better voter confidence and credibility of electoral process". The court believed that the move would ensure the "greatest degree of accuracy and satisfaction". Rather than being on the defensive, the EC should have discussed this issue with political parties, with an open mind.

As the election progressed, the

Opposition made two more demands: The five machines must be counted in the beginning and in case of even one mismatch, all machines in the Assembly segment must be counted. The EC examined these proposals only to reject them as being unfeasible.

The top court's repeated interventions (as many as six) also have long-term implications given that Article 329 of the Constitution bars courts from interfering in electoral matters after the election process has been set in motion. But the court had to intervene repeatedly for course correction. The Supreme Court expressed displeasure over the EC's stand on April 15 when it submitted that it was "toothless" and "powerless" to act on hate speeches. When the court set the EC a deadline of May 6 to act on this, the EC took strong and unprecedented action against some political leaders, debaring them from campaigning for up to three days by invoking Article 324. This was laudable, but when it came to acting on complaints against the Prime Minister and the BJP president, it reacted differently, giving the two leaders 'clean chits', and casting a shadow on its own reputation for fearless independence.

Much later, it was shown that at

least one Election Commissioner had dissented in five out of 11 EC decisions concerning violations of the MCC. In the absence of unanimity, decisions can be taken by a majority vote, and his dissent did not change the result. But dissent is good news for a constitutional body as it is a healthy sign of objective deliberation and democratic functioning. His demand for his dissenting note to be made public was worthy of positive consideration.

## Course correction

The ascendant role of money power, paid and fake news, communal polarisation and hate rhetoric pose a serious challenge to the very foundations of our electoral system. As soon as the dust settles, India must introspect over these issues and find answers. A democracy is only as credible as the strength of the institutions fundamental to its legitimacy. I have hope that the 17th Lok Sabha will take it upon itself to reform the electoral process and enable the world's largest democracy to become the world's greatest.

S.Y. Quraishi is a former Chief Election Commissioner of India and the author of 'An Undocumented Wonder - The Making of the Great Indian Election'



# What the thumping mandate for Modi means

Leftism and liberalism feel like nostalgia at this moment

SHIV VISVANATHAN

The first thing one notices about the Lok Sabha election, in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has secured a phenomenal victory, is that elections are no longer a game of chance. Majoritarian politics has robbed elections of a sense of contestation. The Election Commission as an institution has been emasculated. The plurality of politics that kept India alive has been lost to the univocality of choice, all focused around one man, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It is almost as if India held a presidential election, while pretending to be overtly parliamentary. One man's presence justified the power of propaganda, but also vitiated the plural sense of India. The whole election was held on one question: do we vote 'yes' or 'no' for Mr. Modi?

This created a reductive politics where a simplistic idea of the nation state and its security destroyed the sheer diversity of issues that locality and region raised.

## Identifying with Modi

Mr. Modi's victory is a result of three triangular forces. The first is the creation of a majoritarian society. The second is the 'Hinduisation' of this society. The third is that this majority is committed to middle-class aspirations.

A vote for Mr. Modi is a message that needs to be interpreted. It is a vote that says he speaks to the aspirations of the common man; he speaks the language of mobility, expectation; he represents the middle-class dream of success. On the other hand, the Congress, which was mouthing the language of socialism and secularism, has literally become a voice in the wilderness.

Small town India feels there is a Modi in all of them. They feel Mr. Modi is them, he is accessible. There is no distance between him and the masses. Mr. Modi, by projecting himself to be like them, allows the hitherto alienated small town to feel a part of power politics. Mr. Modi's success is a vindication of his small-town gambit. As *chaiwala* and *chowkidar* he played to the sentimentalism of middle-urban India. This election is an act of

symbolic empowerment, where a sense of familiarity and identification with a leader literally became a sense of empowerment. Small-town India's sense of aspiration, and its resentment against another leader and family, has propelled Mr. Modi to power once again. His campaign was an act of genius.

In terms of numbers, Mr. Modi has outperformed himself. This proves that BJP president Amit Shah is India's best psephologist; that BJP is today the biggest party in the country. As an organisation and an imagination, the BJP has become the colossus it dreamt of.

## Lost in a new India

Other parties caught in an outdated ideology did not understand this. In its campaign, the Congress talked of the Nyuntam Aay Yojana as a leftover of socialism. The liberals and the Marxists have now discovered their ultimate irrelevance. They hang around like Rip Van Winkles who do not recognise the society outside. An outdated language and an outdated politics have confirmed their irrelevance to this new, aspirational India. In fact, the only things that seem to work are demagoguery and populism, not programmes or ideologies. Mr. Modi and Mr. Shah are welcomed like street heroes with a sense of realpolitik, while Congress presi-

dent Rahul Gandhi seems to be an outdated exercise in table manners. The Assembly results in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh deceived the Congress to believe that it is a party that is relevant again, but it now seems to be a

**✶ By projecting himself to be like small-town Indians, Prime Minister Narendra Modi allows the alienated to feel a part of power politics**

party that makes little sense. Only the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the YSR Congress Party were able to retain their hold in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, respectively. Each is equally adept at the populism game.

## Simplification of democracy

This election showed us that politics is not about values, ideology and ethics. It is a display of instrumentalism that merely says, in this life of alienation, Mr. Modi works, and works for us. India is not saying there is no alternative; it is saying, we want no alternative. Alternatives create controversy and disorder, but a univocal choice for Mr. Modi shows that democracy has simplified itself. In this age of uncertainty, it has gone for the rudimentary. There is a laziness to pol-

itics we need to grasp. What is clear-cut is India's refusal to look at the complexity of politics. When you have a Charles Lamb, why do you need a Shakespeare? Instead, democracy is reduced to a fixed choice questionnaire.

We need to understand the new construction of politics which pushes ideology to the margins, which thinks individual aspiration has a poetry that collective justice does not. Mr. Modi grasps this. The ubiquitousness of Mr. Modi and his accessibility at the level of ideas create a symbolic sense of a new imagined community. When Pragna Singh Thakur wins after her statement on Nathuram Godse during the 150th year of Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary, one senses change in the Indian imagination. It is as if Gandhi as an imagination is over.

## Voting for a myth

It is a symbolic politics of a new India that is tired of being called backward, Third World. It is an India which loves the aphrodisiac of the nation state and is convinced that Mr. Modi is a problem-solver. Mr. Modi realised that more than material guarantees, contemporary India needed symbolic plumbing, a rush of confidence, an inflation of masculinity, and a set of simplistic formulas which magically promise

a new flat land where Indians can compete on equal terms. The vote for Mr. Modi is a vote for a new myth, and one must realise that social psychologists and psephologists are not used to myth-making. It is this symbolic politics which became the idea of India that our country voted for. Political analysts read the elections like a complex chess game when it had been whittled down to Chinese checkers. The simpler the move, the more devastating the success. Mr. Modi won because he understands the rules of the game.

It is a lesson his opponents with their illusions of politics might find difficult to grasp. Mr. Modi has outfoxed the Opposition. He was in tune with the aspirations and anxieties of the people. He understood that mass psychology went beyond party definitions and old categories. He sensed that if the entire nation is fed the right history, it could tectonically shift to the right. Leftism and liberalism feel like nostalgia at this moment. The sadness or the celebration begins now. The Opposition has to rethink, reinvent and regroup. A new battle for the idea of India begins today.

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# The leader who is bigger than his party

The BJP played little role in its own gigantic victory and stood by watching with stars in its eyes as PM Narendra Modi single-handedly pulverised the Opposition

VIDYA SUBRAHMANIAM

Election 2019 has smashed the assumption that India is a party-based parliamentary democracy. Yes, India is still notionally a multi-party system, and there indeed are pockets, especially in the south, where regional parties have held on to their suzerainty. But this hold is precarious and slipping by the minute.

## An indefatigable leadership

The biggest blow to the party system has ironically been dealt by the biggest beneficiary of Thursday's stunning verdict: the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The party confounded admirers and critics alike by amassing a majority that surpassed its haul of 282 of 543 Lok Sabha seats in 2014. Yet, the BJP played little role in its own gigantic victory and stood by watching with stars in its eyes as Prime Minister Narendra Modi single-handedly pulverised the Opposition in large

parts of the country. It is true that India's most powerful Prime Minister since Indira Gandhi was expertly aided at every stage of the election campaign, and in the meticulous planning that preceded it, by BJP president Amit Shah. But without Mr. Modi, there could be and would be no Mr. Shah. It was Mr. Modi's unflagging, ever-present visage, beamed into homes day and night by an adoring TV media, that spun a seductive web into which awestruck citizens walked.

Mr. Shah had announced soon after the BJP's 2014 victory that the Congress's days were numbered. The slogan 'Congress-mukt (Congress-free) Bharat' seemed outlandish initially, but the BJP, now under an indefatigable leadership that embodied the belief that the ends justified the means, purposefully expanded its footprint, capturing previously out-of-bound territories such as the Northeast through enticements and mass defections. The Congress did show its existence from time to time by registering victories here and there.

But 2019 has proved that the experiment will not be long in coming. Notionally the Congress has improved on its pathetic 2014 tally of 44 Lok Sabha seats, but the defeat of party president Rahul Gandhi in Amethi is a warning of bigger catastrophes ahead. There was no reason for Mr. Gandhi to lose: He was contesting from the bastion of the Nehru-Gandhi clan and in his recently enhanced capacity as par-

ty chief he was a potential Prime Minister. Under normal circumstances, this fact alone would have appealed to Amethi's voters to the exclusion of other attractions.

## The choice of candidates

However, the larger story here is the marginalisation of the BJP. A joke that used to be heard in party circles was that the BJP was now BJP-mukt. The joke has come perilously close to being a reality. Indeed, on the campaign trail Mr. Modi asked voters to remember him and no one else as they went into their polling booths to cast their votes. "Remember you are voting Modi," he said. The party, the cadre and BJP candidates parroted the line. BJP candidates walked and proudly downsized themselves, insisting that it was Mr. Modi who was fighting on all seats.

Armed with this carte blanche, the Modi-Shah pair deliberately chose as candidates men and women with a record of fostering divisiveness. Among them: Ananth Kumar Hegde, Giriraj Singh, Tejasvi Surya, Sakshi Maharaj, and last but not the least, Pragna Singh Thakur. If the forte of each was to inflame passions through rabid anti-Muslim rhetoric, in the case of Ms. Thakur, a further rubicon was crossed. She is a terror accused on trial. She also spoke her mind: Nathuram Godse "was, is and will be a *desh-bhakt* (patriot)," she said, unconcerned that she was heaping insult on Mahatma Gandhi. The Prime Minister

said he would never forgive her but did not sack her, which would have established him as being truly contrite. Clearly, Ms. Thakur was chosen in the first place to make a distinction between Islamist and Hindutva terror: The first was a danger that had to be crushed with all the force possible. The second didn't exist even if Ms. Thakur was standing trial for it. Her dismissal was therefore never on the cards.

## Projection as nationalist hero

On the stump, Mr. Modi played nationalist hero to the hilt. With a benevolent Election Commission watching, he appropriated the Indian Air Force and turned the air strikes on Pakistani territory into a personal feat of daring: "*Modi wahan ghar me ghus kar ke maara* (Modi went into Pakistani houses to kill terrorists)". In the 2017 Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, he had invoked the "jawan on the border" to blunt the impact of demonetisation on ordinary folk. The Prime Minister had also invited them to view demonetisation as an effort towards collective nation-building in which each had a share. By 2019, the message was fully internalised by large sections that saw the Balakot strike as their own spectacular achievement. Travelling in Muzaffarnagar in western U.P., I ran into a group of labourers, their torn clothes attesting to their poverty, who argued that they were voting Mr. Modi because "*desh toh bach jayega* (at least the country

will be saved)".

Mr. Modi argued that the Balakot attack was an act of extraordinary courage that previous Prime Ministers had balked at - both because they lacked the steel that he had and because they wanted to protect their minority vote banks. As the campaign progressed, nationalism inevitably got posited against the Opposition's 'Muslim appease-

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ment' politics. Balakot became Ram Mandir by another name, evoking the same passion that the latter did. In some places, the majoritarian message was explicit; in a speech made in Wardha, the Prime Minister accused Rahul Gandhi of fleeing to Wayanad in Kerala to be able to contest from a constituency where "the majority was in a minority."

It would be unfair if due credit was not given to Mr. Modi for the welfare measures his government had speedily implemented on the ground, among them toilets, housing and gas connections for the poorest citizens. Their implementation was patchy - the gas refill was unaffordable, the houses were scarce - but even the half-measures were potentially a form of

empowerment. In effect, what Mr. Modi presented to the voters was a package: welfare rooted in Hindutva majoritarianism.

In the coming years, this is likely the formula that the Prime Minister will persist with. A question arises: why was the Modi wave not as visible as in 2014? Because, at least in U.P., there was a formidable Opposition in the form of the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party alliance. The combine had match-winning arithmetic and also represented the interests of the socially marginalised - Dalits and Muslims in particular.

But as the 2019 results have shown, all Opposition alliances bombed, whether in U.P., Bihar, Maharashtra or Jharkhand. The Congress played a ruinous role in U.P. by undercutting the SP-BSP in several places. Yet this was probably a small distraction in the larger picture where the BJP virtually commanded all the votes and seats.

With his sharp nationalist-Hindutva messaging and towering presence, Mr. Modi is bigger than the party. The dangers of this will presently be apparent. For the Opposition parties, the danger is more imminent - individually and collectively, they need a strong counter message as well as an intelligent, charismatic leadership that will deliver the message.

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