

ACROSS
THE AISLE

P CHIDAMBARAM

Another journey begins today. The journey will never end. At five-year intervals, there is a rest stop, and the journey will resume. The differences among the party-contenders for the right to govern India. These differences are the hallmark of a multi-party democracy, especially a vibrant democracy in a plural and diverse society. A party may refuse to accept the diversity and yet win a national election, but that does not mean the diversity is not real

To be or not to be inclusive

ON MAY 17, 2019, while addressing a rally at Khargone, Madhya Pradesh, Mr Narendra Modi said, "From Kashmir the whole nation is saying 'Ab ki baar, 300 paar, phir ek baar, Modi Sarkar.'" He got his psephology right, but geography wrong. The final tally proved that his electoral marksmanship deserved a perfect 10.

So, congratulations are in order to Mr Modi, the BJP, the millions of workers of the party and the allies. As he begins his second term of office, I wish the Prime Minister success in steering the government and in the service of the people.

The exit polls were published two days later on May 19 and at least two of them were spot on: 300 for the BJP, 350 for the allies and about 50 for the Congress. These two polls restored some faith in statistical sampling and election forecasts!

THE RIVAL VISIONS

Another journey begins today. The journey will never end. At five-year intervals, there is a rest stop, and the journey will resume. There are — and will be — differences among the party-contenders for the right to govern India. These differences are the hallmark of a multi-party democracy, especially a vibrant democracy in a plural and diverse society. A party may refuse to accept the diversity and yet win a national election, but that does not mean the di-

versity is not real.

The BJP has a vision of India: one nation, one history, one culture, one heritage, one civil code, one national language, and many other aspects of 'oneness'. The Congress has a different vision: one country, many interpretations of history, many sub-histories, many cultures, plural civil codes, many languages, and many other aspects of diversity, in which one seeks unity. The regional parties have their own vision: while the vision may differ from state to state, there is a common thread running through their political statements: that the history, language and culture of the people of the state are entitled to the highest respect and, especially, the language of the state has to be nurtured and given primacy.

SALIENCE OF LANGUAGE

Language, in particular, is an emotive issue. The culture, the literature, the arts, and every other aspect of the life of the people revolves around the language. This is true not only of the Tamil people but also of those who speak Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Odia, Bengali and, I suppose, every other ancient language. The salience of language in politics, especially political communication, cannot be disregarded.

I know the Tamil people reasonably well. Language is at the centre of their civilisation and culture. Tamil is the identity of the Tamil-speaking person, the

Tamizhan. The three great composers in Carnatic music were born in Tamil Nadu but wrote their verses in Sanskrit and Telugu. The Tamil Isai (Music) movement was born in order to assert the primacy and pride of Tamil. *Archanas* in temples were performed in Sanskrit and are still the language of choice of most temple *archakas* and worshippers; the Tamil *archana* was mandated by government as an alternative and the policy was accepted by everyone. Hinduism, as we know it today, was *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism* and that is how they are recorded in Tamil history and religious literature. In fact, Tamil classics were vehicles of religion as much as they were examples of fine literature. Besides, Christian and Muslim scholars and authors contributed in great measure to enriching the Tamil language.

What I have said about the Tamils and Tamil language is equally true of the people and the languages of Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. Just ask your friends. Let me come back to the competing visions of different political parties. The results of Election 2019 cannot be regarded as a decisive choice of one vision over the others. Even more true, religion can never trump language or culture.

SECULAR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The idea of a secular state was not born in India. It is one of the hallmarks of a modern democracy and republic, the

best exemplars of which are the countries of Europe. No one can say that the people of European countries are irreligious, but they are determined to be secular in their politics and systems of government. Secular indeed meant, originally, 'not connected with religious or spiritual matters'. In course of time, especially in Europe, it meant separation of the State and the Church. In the modern day, particularly in plural and diverse societies, secular means eschewing extreme positions and being inclusionary. The thrust of my argument is India — and the Indian government and all other institutions of governance — must always remain inclusive.

Did the BJP fight the just-concluded elections on the plank of inclusiveness? I doubt it. According to news reports, among the BJP's 302 MPs there will not be anyone from the Muslim community. There are others who feel excluded such as Dalits, tribals, Christians, tenant-farmers and agricultural workers. There are some sections that are *actually* excluded from the developmental process because of caste, poverty, illiteracy, old age, minuscule numbers or remoteness. There is, therefore, a need for the Prime Minister to reiterate his original slogan 'Sabka saath, Sabka vikas'.

I am afraid the BJP fought the election on an exclusionary agenda. I hope the process of governance will be inclusionary.

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FIFTH COLUMN



TAVLEEN SINGH

No revival of that old order

THE 2014 general election marked the beginning of the end of India's ruling elite. The election whose results came last week marked the end. As someone born and bred in this group of privileged Indians, I speak as an insider. So believe me when I tell you that we controlled everything. Politics, government, business, foreign policy, the police, the military and the media. All this was possible because we were to some degree all courtiers in the court of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty since the British left. We knew that their 'socialism' and 'secularism' were as fake as their 'idea of India'.

We knew long ago that this was an idea of India in which it was only Indians who spoke English well who could hope to do well. English is not a language in India. It is a definition of class. After the Raj ended, it was only Indians who spoke English well who went up in life. It was they who rose high in the ranks of the police and the military. In the Lok Sabha, as the roots of democracy deepened, appeared long ago people who spoke Indian languages well and English badly. They were tolerated in a sneery sort of way. Then someone came up with the brilliant idea of ensuring that Parliament became a private club by making the democratic process dynastic.

It took this election campaign for ordinary Indians to notice what was going on. They noticed because Modi told voters that they were choosing between a 'kaamdaar' and a 'naamdaar'. A working man and a prince. It did not help that the 'naamdaar' then mocked Modi and made fun of everything about him. Modi's 'hugplomacy', 'Gabbar Singh Tax', demonetisation, Modi's demonetisation, he said, was done to steal their money and give it to his rich friends. The country's *Chowkidar*, he said too many times, was a 'chor'. He forgot that he was demeaning not just a political opponent but the Prime Minister of India. Ordinary voters were appalled that the heir to India's most powerful political dynasty should talk this way. He sounded arrogant, entitled and insulting and reminded them that there were too many political heirs in Indian politics. If many have been voted out across India in this election, it is no accident.

When the results came last week, my fellow members of what the Prime Minister calls the Khan Market gang were devastated. They had seen this election as their last chance to oust the *chai-wallah*. They were certain that the campaign to paint Modi as a Hindutva monster had succeeded. They had hoped that the campaign to defile him as a totalitarian leader with no respect for democratic institutions had succeeded. They had hoped that the campaign to show him up as someone who wrecked the economy had succeeded. They had hoped that their campaign to reinvent Rahul Gandhi as a decent, worthy heir to the Dynasty had succeeded. Notice that in the English language media he and his sister made headlines and cover stories throughout the campaign.

The past five years have been difficult for India's ruling elite. High officials, famous writers, editors of English newspapers, celebrated TV anchors, heirs of political dynasties, leftists and liberals have found their importance diminish by the day. They have been replaced by people they once dismissed as 'vernacs', the word they use derisively for Indians who speak only in the vernacular. If 'liberal' journalists are astoundingly illiberal in their assessments of Modi it is because they have suffered badly since there was regime change in 2014. Where they once had privileged access to the men and women who rule India, they are now relegated to unseen TV channels while Hindi journalists get all the interviews and all the glory.

It might seem to you a small change. It is not. It is a sign that India's traditional ruling elite is being swept slowly but surely into the dustbin of history along with the Dynasty they have supported through bad times and good. Not even when Indira Gandhi made herself into a Dictator and used the Emergency as a cover to hand the Congress party to her son did they protest. Not even when she insisted that judges of the Supreme Court swear oaths of loyalty to her did they protest. That was the only time, since India gained Independence, that the institutions of democracy were crushed and maimed, but the traditional ruling elite said nothing.

If they have spent the past five years targeting Modi, often wrongly, for what they perceive as attempts to crush democracy, it is possibly because they know how easily this can be done. The truth is that the traditional ruling elite believes in an idea of India in which there are privileges and not rights. This was always a bad idea. Now it is dead.

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INSIDE TRACK



COOMI KAPOOR

NEW-LOOK CABINET

Some familiar faces in the Modi Cabinet might be missing in his second innings. The average age is likely to be 10 years younger. Several protégés of senior ministers have over the last year switched loyalties to Amit Shah, 54, as he is seen as the man who matters. Incidentally, the only three Cabinet ministers on the dais when Narendra Modi was felicitated at the BJP Office were Rajnath Singh, J P Nadda and Thawarchand Gehlot.

MANIFESTO MISTAKE

Congresspersons privately blame P Chidambaram and Navjot Singh Sidhu for damaging the party's image. Chidambaram as chairperson of the manifesto committee, along with Rahul Gandhi's young, apolitical brains trust, insisted on inserting a clause in the party manifesto calling for amendment to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). While human rights activists applauded the move, it hardly made political sense in the wake of Pulwama and Narendra Modi's campaign whipping up nationalist fervour. Voters frequently mentioned the manifesto as a black mark against the Congress. Similarly, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh was infuriated with his minister Sidhu for giving a bear hug to Pakistani army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa when he visited Lahore for Imran Khan's swearing-in ceremony. The BJP made capital out of the photograph. Many are too timid to blame Rahul for surrounding himself with inexperienced youngsters who have an NGO mindset rather than an understanding of electoral politics.

FAMILY FIRST

Did the Congress fritter away an opportunity in Priyanka Gandhi Vadra's debut in national politics this year? What was hoped to be the party's *Brahmastra* was introduced belatedly and somewhat casually in the middle of the campaign, and Priyanka was unable to make much impact. Her charm and strong personality attracted crowds and media attention, but did not garner votes. Unlike Rahul, Priyanka writes her speeches herself and has an intuitive understanding of what issues to take up with different audiences. But since she did not want to overshadow her brother, she played a secondary role.

OUT OF MY MIND



MEGHNAD DESAI

IT HAS been a surprising, transformative result. On May 23, 2019, Nehru-Gandhi Yuga ended and Modi Yuga began. The precise timing will have to be adjusted ex post. The changeover is not in doubt. This is the first time since Indira Gandhi's win in 1971 that an incumbent has renewed a single-party majority. The BJP vote share exceeded 50% in a dozen states. The Congress party, reduced to 44

HISTORY HEADLINE

The significance of Modi-2



NEERJA CHOWDHURY

NARENDRA MODI'S 2019 win is a watershed moment in the contemporary history of India. The sheer scale of the victory has been breathtaking. It is not as if there have not been spectacular victories in the past. In the first election after Independence in 1952, the Congress party had got 364 of 489 seats and 45% of the popular vote (the same as the NDA has notched up this time). In 1971, Indira Gandhi won a landslide after her clarion call for 'Garibi Hatao'.

The 1977 verdict had also stunned the country when the invincible Indira — and her equally powerful son Sanjay Gandhi — were defeated in their fiefdoms in UP and the Congress wiped out all over North India because she had abridged fundamental freedoms through the imposition of the Emergency. The biggest mandate however came in 1984, when after his mother's assassination, Rajiv Gandhi won a whopping 415 seats, not even clocked by his grandfather Jawaharlal Nehru.

But the significance of 2019 lies not just in the scale of the victory. The BJP had got a majority on its own also in 2014. It lies in the BJP coming to occupy the space in the country's politics which belonged to the Congress in its heyday. The pendulum has swung the other way. The Nehruvian vision which, for instance, included making minorities secure in an inclusive India, even by giving primacy to their concerns, has given way to a majoritarian rule, emphasising Hindu identity and consolidating it as a political force. This will have its own implications for the country's governance as well as social relations. The BJP leadership has already announced that it would abrogate Article 370, which confers special status on Jammu and Kashmir. The *mandir* in Ayodhya remains on its agenda, and it may opt for its construction at an appropriate moment, using the legislative route if the Court does not give a favourable verdict.

Poll 2019 has further powered the already strong leadership of Narendra Modi. In 2013, a year before Modi became PM, a BJP leader had remarked during a private conversation, "Narendra Modi will model himself not on any of the figures in the RSS pantheon but on Indira Gandhi." As with Indira, the party is today dependent on him, not he on it, and he is able to connect



Indira Gandhi at a press conference at Vigyan Bhavan, New Delhi, 1971. Modi, a BJP leader said, wants to model himself not on any RSS idol, but her. Archive

with people directly above its head.

And like Indira Gandhi, he has managed to acquire a pro-poor image, with the deprived sections seeing him as their messiah — in the process taking the Congress's plank away from it. The strong leader image was also reinforced after Balakot, where he was seen to hit back at Pakistan. Indira Gandhi was called "Durga" after the creation of Bangladesh, having taken on Pakistan.

Given the blank cheque that the country has given him, Modi-2 enjoys unparalleled powers today. This comes when the Opposition is weaker than ever before. And possibly more demoralised. The Congress, which even today could be the only countervailing national force to a resurgent BJP, and provide the necessary checks, is not able to stem its decline.

In 1984, when the BJP was reduced to two Lok Sabha MPs, it had an Atal Bihari Vajpayee and an L K Advani at its helm. It had a Chandra Shekhar, who undertook a *padayatra* from the South to the North to mobilise public opinion and unite the Opposition. It had a V P Singh inside the Congress calling Rajiv Gandhi to account on the Bofors gun deal, despite the massive mandate he had won in 1984. This led to the ouster of Rajiv Gandhi as PM in the 1989 elections, throwing up a national coalition supported by the BJP and the Left parties.

Mandate 2019 has challenged caste-based identity for the first time in 30 years since the Mandal Commission's report to give job reservations to the OBCs came into effect in 1990. It spawned backward class politics, changed the power balance, and threw up a crop of backward class leaders all over North India, like Mulayam Singh Yadav, Lalu Prasad, Nitish Kumar, Uma Bharti, Shivraj Singh Chouhan. In one stroke, the Modi wave has washed away caste-based alliances (for 'social justice') in UP and Bihar.

It is early days to conclude that caste will

cease to determine voter choices. Does the 2019 setback to opposition parties have more to do with the effete leadership of the Mandal children (Akhilesh Yadav, Tejashwi Yadav, even Mayawati), as compared to the street-fighting ways of their parents or mentors, Mulayam, Lalu or Kanshi Ram. Or has the Mandal story run its course with a young and a 'New India' — 50% of the population being under 25 — now aspiring for the fulfilment of their dreams through a larger identity?

Mandal and Kamandal have fed into each other in the last three decades — the regional parties, like the SP and BSP, relying on caste mobilisation and the BJP on Hindu consolidation. Election 2019 has diluted caste loyalties, but it has further reinforced religious identity. In his first post-victory statement, Narendra Modi gave new definition of caste identity. There were only two castes, he said, one of the poor and the other of those who wanted to alleviate poverty.

It is also Modi's artistry and mastery with words (for example, his words of thanks on Thursday, "Aapne is *fakir ki jholi bhar deehai*") and the way in which the BJP has used the mass media to project him, to take his visuals and words to virtually every home in the country, which makes this election different from any other in the past.

Indira Gandhi also recognised the importance of optics and her visit to inaccessible Belchihi in Bihar, which had seen violence against Dalits, atop an elephant, had figured widely in the newspapers at the time, leading to her comeback after her 1977 defeat. But she did not have the tools that electronic and social media (WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook) and the latest technology provide today to communicate with the last Indian — which is something Modi has and is savvy with.

The writer is a senior journalist

Beginning of Modi Yuga

seats in 2014, stayed in denial for five years and has paid the price. It will stay a long time in a low-level state. Even so, it should analyse why it lost so thoroughly a second time. Let me help. The BJP won not because of Balakot, nor by riding on the fear of terrorism. The vigilante attacks, *ghar wapsi*, the murder of Akhlaq were problems, but the people did not punish the BJP for those. Perhaps the Congress should ask why the impact of these events, or of the much discussed farmers' distress or joblessness, GST, demonetisation or Rafale made no dent on the electoral chances of Modi and the BJP.

The voters are not stupid. They know what their needs are and where the shoe pinches. Rural India has experienced elec-

trification, newly built toilets, freedom from outdoor defecation. They have bank accounts, Ayushman coverage if they are below poverty line. Poor farmers have Rs 6,000, seemingly trivial in eyes of Rahul Gandhi, but not the recipients.

The voters are also not naive. The conversion of Rahul Gandhi to a Hindu, not to say Brahmin, visiting temples at every photo opportunity, did not fool them. The Congress may have thought that by donning the Brahmin garb, they would win votes. This has been proved wrong. Abandoning Muslims did not help.

What is the Congress to do? It needs to examine what if anything it believes in. It has abandoned secularism and played with soft Hindutva. If it still believes in so-

cialism, it needs to specify what it means by the term. It needs to build a cadre of workers and rebuild the organisation which once spread across the length and breadth of India. Even if the presidency is reserved for the family, it needs to introduce democracy for other offices in the party. It may help other family-based parties to follow its example.

India is changing. This election has shown that caste matters much less now than in the coalition years of 1989 to 2014. This is why the gathbandhan in UP proved to be less successful than its partner parties had hoped. Entitlement is not enough. Rahul Gandhi lost Amethi and Jyotiraditya Scindia lost his family seat. Enrolling Priyanka Gandhi Vadra did not help.

Smriti Irani showed that it is hard work in your constituency which pays dividends.

Another profound change is the death of the Left. The undivided CPI was the lead opposition party in 1952. The larger Left was part of the ruling coalition in 1996-1998. Jyoti Basu was offered prime ministership but his party, the CPI(M), forbade him from accepting. The Left ruled in Kerala, West Bengal, Tripura at various times during the last 70 years. Now it has been reduced to five seats. Its intellectual influence exceeds its political presence.

It took the Jana Sangh/BJP nearly 50 years till it came to power in 1998. Now it intends to stay in power with voters' support.