

## The Indian EXPRESS

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

## WEIGHT OF WORDS

PM strikes the right notes. His party needs to hear there will be no impunity for those who make the wrong noise

**I**N HIS speech in Central Hall in Parliament on Saturday, the first after being elected leader of the BJP-led NDA, Prime Minister Narendra Modi struck a heartening note of magnanimity. Among other things, he said the new government would make efforts to earn the trust of minorities, and of those who disagree (with the BJP-NDA). He urged the newly elected MPs to puncture the "myth" or illusion of fear among the country's minorities: "The way the poor have been cheated, the minorities have been deceived the same way...". He spoke of owning even those who express strong opposition to the BJP, "jo hamara ghor virodh karte hain, woh bhi hamare hain". These are statements of inclusive intent. But it will take more for them to reassure.

PM Modi's words will need to be heeded by his own partymen and Sangh Parivar footsoldiers, who will need to acknowledge both what the PM said and didn't say: Minority fears and insecurities are real, they are no illusion or myth. Admittedly, they are a grave, throbbing left-over from the deceptions and abdications of earlier governments that called themselves secular. But, in the last five years, they have been made up of, and stoked by, a majoritarianism unleashed and emboldened by the NDA victory of 2014. This "us versus them" strain, deepened by the top BJP leadership's silences and complicities, was also mirrored in its 2019 campaign: Be it party president Amit Shah calling (the mostly Muslim) Bangladeshi immigrants "termites", or PM Modi himself referring to Rahul Gandhi's decision to contest from Wayanad in Kerala as an escape to a minority (as opposed to a majority dominated) constituency, or the BJP's choice, endorsed by its top two leaders, of Sadhvi Pragya Thakur as the candidate from Bhopal. It may well be that campaigning is different from governing in the second term. It could be that the overwhelming mandate of 2019 — ironically, facilitated by this kind of rhetoric — makes room for generosity and inclusiveness of the kind that could be heard in the PM's first speech to his MPs. But it will need constant mindfulness from the top BJP leadership.

It will have to own the responsibility to curb the party's worst instincts vis a vis minorities and those who disagree with it. The next time a BJP MP or MLA resorts to hate speech, or justifies mob violence, the next time the party uses its mandate as a weapon to disrespect the political opponent or subdue the autonomous institution, they will need to be told that there are penalties to pay. Going ahead, at the very least, there must be no impunity for flouting the PM's words on the Saturday after he won a famous mandate.

## LEFT ADRIFT

The communists once wielded influence out of proportion with their numbers. Now, they are in retreat on both fronts

**T**HE communist parties have plumbed the nadir in the general elections, with just five seats in the Lok Sabha — four in Tamil Nadu, one in Kerala and absolutely none in West Bengal and Tripura, their former strongholds in the east. Apart from the numbers, the influence that they had wielded in national affairs and policymaking has also dwindled to nothing. Once upon a time, they could claim to provide the moral armature of Manmohan Singh's government, highlighting welfare and deploying the work of academics loyal to the cause for leverage in steering policy. That was before they let their anti-Americanism get the better of their political sense and withdrew support to the government over the Indo-US nuclear deal, a decision they were unable to explain to the electorate. That misadventure alone would have sapped the energy of the cadre in less committed parties, but it was not the first. In 1996, to the dismay of the troops, the Politburo had prevented Jyoti Basu from becoming prime minister of the United Front government. And in 2008, Somnath Chatterjee was expelled by the CPM for being more loyal to Parliament than to his party.

Ever since, the left has been almost shouldered off the electoral field and had retreated to the groves of academe. It ventured out of that safe haven this year to do combat in Begusarai, and lost one of the most closely watched contests. This would only embolden the BJP to proceed with its declared project to clear universities of left influence. Of course, success in this initiative would also deprive it of a pet peeve, that it had been excluded from academia and the writing of history by left-wing intellectuals. But that would be a small price to pay, now that it has demonstrated its electoral prowess beyond doubt.

The left movement has lost relevance because it is overtaken and outclassed. Its politics is based on the notion of class, whose contours have changed over time. Historically, it was also hamstrung by its decision to interpret caste through the lens of class. It doesn't really matter any more, because Hindu pride may have, in many ways, trumped caste, too, in this election. The eclipse of the left may be a historical necessity, but which party is capable of filling the moral vacuum it will leave behind — its commitment to welfare, and to the centrality of the poorest? That question lingers on.

## FREEZE FRAME

## E P UNNY



ASHUTOSH VARSHNEY

## Transfiguring India

Are we on the path to a Hindu Rashtra? Much will depend on how the electoral verdict is read by the victor

EVERY ELECTION outcome has two aspects: The statistical and the interpretative. Once the results are out, the purely statistical side has few mysteries to offer, unless we enter the complicated terrain of statistical inference. Basically, data show who won and who lost, revealing also the scale of victories and defeats. The interpretative side, however, is another matter. It is, among other things, about meanings. What does the victory signify? Here we enter an analytically — and politically — embattled domain.

So what does Narendra Modi's huge election victory mean? My formulation of the question should indicate that I am ascribing the victory primarily to Modi, not to the BJP. The situation is quite akin to the US, if not identical. Nearly all observers say that the Republican party is no longer what it used to be. It is Donald Trump's party today. It would not be a stretch to make an analogical claim about the BJP. Although Trump is a maverick who was never part of the Republican party organization and rose to the top within a few months of primary campaigns and Modi worked assiduously at the lower rungs of the party before capturing its summit, the BJP is undoubtedly Modi's party today, with Amit Shah as an intensely loyal deputy. The Vajpayee-Advani-Joshi era no longer exists. Vajpayee gave interviews to newspapers, saying that he was not in agreement with Lal Krishna Advani on the Ayodhya movement and therefore did not support it. No leading political figure of BJP today has demonstrated the courage to articulate disagreements with Modi. Those who did so were not political heavyweights and never received the support of the RSS. They were just ignored by the party. When Modi says he is a chowkidar (watchman), all party members also call themselves chowkidars. The subservience is unmistakable.

One could suggest that the election verdict was about the electorate's comparative assessment of Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi as leaders, and people chose Modi over Rahul. The fact that the election became semi-presidential lends some weight to this argument. A lot of commentary has presented Rahul as a hapless combination of sincerity and ineptitude. With considerable decency, he repeatedly spoke of love as a way to

counter hatred. But this Gandhian line easily coexisted with his unremitting anti-Modi slogan, *chowkidar chor hai* (the watchman is a thief). It is also clear that the slogan was not working. Yet he persisted, diluting the other aspects of his campaign, such as unemployment and agrarian distress.

It is also said that Rahul Gandhi's idea of NYAY came too late — and in much too cluttered a form. The masses simply could not comprehend what it was all about. While this is true, another argument is worthy of consideration. NYAY might have been ethically compelling, but it was politically unwise. India is increasingly becoming a middle-class society and the focus on the bottom 20 per cent, which is what NYAY was about, was irrelevant to the vastly larger middle classes, carrying many more votes than the absolute poor. In the end, he did not get the vote of the poor and also lost much of the middle class vote. The ethical desirability and political rationality were directly in clash.

But was this election primarily about economic issues? Modi chose to relegate them to a peripheral status. Instead, he concentrated on national security and nationalism — relentlessly, unerringly, vociferously. And if that is so, shouldn't national security and nationalism be viewed as the principal determinants of the election outcome?

One should here note that while most election results are shaped by multiple factors, what an election means is something quite distinct. Even if we can't prove with data what turned the election, the question of how the meaning of the election would be interpreted — and used — is inevitably a political issue. Politicians don't wait for analysts to settle the relative significance of various factors. They go ahead and use the victory in a way suitable to them. They do whatever it takes to win, but once in power, the ideological project often takes over.

Here lies the great danger of this election victory. There is no doubt in my mind that for the ideologues of the BJP and RSS, including the highest rungs of leadership, not simply the so-called fringe, this election has endorsed the project of Hindu nationalism — namely, the creation of a Hindu majoritarian state and polity. How else can one interpret the victory of Pragya Thakur, a terror accused and someone who hailed Mahatma Gandhi's assassin as a hero and a patriot? How else can one understand Amit Shah's claim that Muslim migrants from Bangladesh or Myanmar were "termites" and he would throw out all immigrants except those who were Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains?

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Since the lynchings began in 2015-16, one encounters a lot of scared Muslims in India. There was a time when mainstream politics under Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi used to claim that Muslim anxieties and fears were *our* anxieties and fears. The whole nation needed to deal with them. There might have been riots, as there certainly were, especially during Indira Gandhi's reign, but from the top rungs of the polity, the claim was never that secular protections for minorities, constitutionally legitimated, were either deceitful lies or detrimental to national health and strength. Since 2014, this argument has disappeared from the corridors of power. This election gives a thunderous push to this ongoing process.

If this interpretation of the meaning of 2019 elections is right, a transfigured India possibly awaits us. The metamorphosis is not certain but, with an enhanced majority for the BJP, it is likely. Equally probable, the pursuit of Hindu rashtra will be painful and deeply unsettling.

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KAIF SIDDIQUI

## SPOILER ALERT

Because we don't need to know what comes next



ONE OF  
800  
MILLION  
A VOICE, UNDER 35

Visiting fictional worlds with fictional characters draws people in, allowing them to forget their own worries, if only for a brief while. However, spoilers seek to ruin this attachment a person can have with make-believe worlds. They ruin the joy of watching a story unravel, the palpable excitement that comes with not knowing what comes next.

has any inkling of popular culture knows about *Avengers* and *GoT* makes it difficult to avoid conversations about them. Even those who haven't watched the movies or the series are familiar with Iron Man, Thor, Arya Stark or Tyrion Lannister. Therefore, when *Endgame* and *GoT* released — very close to each other's release dates — it started a race amongst the fans to either keep up or get their viewing experience spoiled. The internet and social media further complicate things. There is an entire category of trolls online, on social media especially, who delight in spreading popular culture spoilers. They are commonly found on Facebook and in the YouTube comments section, talking about plot twists and character deaths that were actually supposed to be a surprise for viewers.

This extreme obsession with spoilers is, in fact, a hallmark of the 21st century. It is not just the trolls, though, who hide behind the safety of their anonymity. We all have people around us — family, friends and colleagues — who derive great pleasure in intentionally spoiling movies and TV series for others. Some individuals even go to great lengths of personally messaging people with spoilers. For many, this behaviour may not be a serious transgression — it's just a movie and a TV show, but, the fact that this is commonplace, raises questions about how little we value art and entertainment. People who give out

spoilers don't see that these stories — unbelievable as they may be — can help people escape reality for a while. Visiting fictional worlds with fictional characters draws people in, allowing them to forget their own worries, if only for a brief while.

However, spoilers seek to ruin this attachment a person can have with make-believe worlds. They ruin the joy of watching a story unravel, the palpable excitement that comes with not knowing what comes next. Some say that spoilers actually enhance, or that they don't really affect the viewing experience. Some also say that knowing what's ahead helps one to analyse the story better as a whole. But, is it healthy to start off with a critical analysis even before your first viewing? The first viewing is when one should absorb the story as the creator intended it to be. Repeat viewings provide ample opportunities to dissect every minute element of a narrative. The element of surprise, which is always unique to the first viewing, must be respected. Of course, all forms of art and expression are inherently subjective and everyone feels differently about them. But, for all the books, movies and television series around us, each of which means something to someone, the least we can do is help people enjoy what they love.

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## MAY 27, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

## LN MISHRA INQUIRY

VMTARKUNDE has in a sensational report to the Bihar government said that the CBI inquiry into the murder of LN Mishra was "deliberately abandoned, indeed sabotaged, probably at the instance of Mrs Indira Gandhi" when evidence began to point to the murder having been planned by Ram Bilas Jha, a Bihar MOLC at the time and a close associate of Yashpal Kapoor. The CBI inquiry was abandoned in March 1975, barely two months after the murder. Tarakunde has recommended a fresh probe. The report has been submitted to the prime minister by the Bihar government with the request that the Centre should take appropriate action.

## US AIR CRASH

AN AMERICAN AIRLINES widebodied jet loaded with 270 holiday travellers crashed nose first and broke apart in flames yesterday just after take-off from O'Hare International Airport. Authorities said all aboard were killed in the worst air disaster in US history. The bodies of the persons on board the jet were strewn over a wide area. They planted high wooden stakes with flags on them to mark parts of bodies. Two persons, identified as Andrew Bellavia, 46, and Richard Masker, 28, were taken alive from the scene to hospital. Both were working in the area where the crash occurred. A temporary morgue was set up at an American

Airlines hangar at O'Hare. Chicago police sent six paddy wagons to help remove bodies.

## TRADERS' VIOLENCE

THE UP GOVERNMENT has decided to curb with an iron hand the tendency among certain "belligerent" sections of the trading community to take the law into its hands as reflected in the incident in Aminabad in Uttar Pradesh. The state government has taken a stern view of the incident in which a section of traders obstructed officers of the Sales Tax Department in performing their duty, gheraoed and attacked the police station, indulged in hurling bricks and also set ablaze a postal van and three government vehicles.



