

ESSAYS

Indian Elections and Narendra Modi: Hear That Hollow In The Drumbeat?

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The Modi hype is relentless. But some of our institutions of democracy are still fragile for us to risk a firebrand leader.

The drumbeats are all around us, proclaiming the triumphal arrival of Narendra Modi as our next prime minister. They are already reaching deafening proportions among urban middle classes, NRIs and the corporate sector-owned media. For the last few months, a rising crescendo of clamour about a 'Modi wave' has, through clever PR and slick advertisements along with his gruff eloquence and prodigious energy, indeed created in a self-reinforcing way a wave about the 'unstoppability' of a supreme leader. The myths building around him are now almost impenetrable. Yet a close scrutiny of them is worthwhile even if he is to become the next PM.

Modi has made governance the major plank of his platform, and through constant repetition, his excellent record in this respect is now taken as a given fact in many quarters. There is no doubt that much that is wrong in Indian politics has to do with governance issues at all levels. Modi has pointed to his record of strong and quick decisions in his state of Gujarat and its superb performance in economic growth, which he now promises to replicate for the rest of India.

Governance has both political and economic dimensions, let us discuss both. The 2002 massacres in Gujarat that happened under Modi's watch suggest a disastrous governance failure. Even if his personal complicity is not legally established (partly because of destroyed evidence), there is no question that horrendous things happened under his watch in an administration he firmly controlled (he was not just a backseat passenger in the car when, sadly, a "puppy got run over"). Some of his close associates have either been indicted or are currently under investigation. The then prime minister of his own party, Atal Behari Vajpayee, rebuked Modi at the time for deviating from his 'rajdharma' (the Sanskrit word for good governance).

His supporters say that Muslims are better-off in Gujarat than in poorer states like Bihar. This is like white Afrikaners in the Apartheid regime saying that Blacks were economically better-off in South Africa than in Nigeria. Robbed of their dignity and security, Muslims who used to live across different parts of Ahmedabad are now huddled in squalid ghettos on the fringes of the city.

Modi's well-funded and efficient campaign machine has successfully deflected public attention away from all this to his Gujarat model of economic governance. Occasionally his mask slips, and he talks about the rise in 'meat exports' under Congress rule from the slaughterhouses mainly run by you know who, or about a 'conspiracy' to kill rhinos in Assam in order to give space for Bangladeshis to settle in, about his political opponents being 'Pakistani agents', and so on. But, in general, he keeps to the theme of economy and strong India, while delegating the job of hate and fear-mongering to his minions, particularly in the all-important states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The BJP politicians

implicated in the Muzaffarnagar riots have been given tickets in this election and Amit Shah has reportedly called for “revenge” against “those who have been ill-treating our mothers and sisters”.

If he does become PM, will Modi be able to ram through his economic agenda in the face of structural problems?

In economic governance, there is no doubt that he has done some good things for the Gujarat economy. His electricity reform, for instance, has been exemplary. He, of course, exaggerates Gujarat’s relative economic performance under him, but what is more surprising is how easily this is accepted by even his non-admirers. Studies show—see, for example, the piece by Maitreesh Ghatak and Sanchari Roy in a recent issue of this magazine (A Look in the Mirror, Mar 31)—that a few other states have done even better compared to the national average in the first decade of this century relative to the 1990s, in both economic growth (for example, Maharashtra) and poverty reduction (for example, Tamil Nadu). Thirty years back, Gujarat was No. 2 among Indian states in industrial development, and under Modi it has remained No. 2. Even in industrial growth, much of it in recent years has been in the petroleum refineries sector, which is highly capital-intensive and creates very few jobs for common people. In the delivery of basic social services (health, nutrition, education, etc.), the performance of many other states (for example, Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh) has been substantially better. Taking growth and social welfare together, the best development performance in the last decade or so has been in Tamil Nadu. So even though at public platforms Modi likes to thump his 56-inch chest as ‘Vikas purush’ (Mr Development), some of it is really hype.

The Indian corporate sector is tirelessly promoting this glittering image of Modi. The reasons have much to do with the reputation he has of giving generous business subsidies—capital subsidies and corporate tax concessions given by his government amount to several times the subsidies for food and agriculture—and the way he ‘decisively’ rides roughshod over business hindrances like clearances on environment and land acquisition. Modi is eloquent against the Congress government’s programmes of ‘dole’ for the poor, but his reformist friends among economists ignore that his corporate welfare payments suggest that he is business-friendly, but not necessarily market-friendly. Many critics who refer to Modi’s crony capitalism point to the disproportionately sharp rise over recent weeks in the stock prices (unwarranted by the fundamentals) of particular business groups close to him.

Along with the hype, there is also a bit of naivety in the public enthusiasm for him. It is not clear that if he takes over the leadership in Delhi, he’ll be able to ram through his economic programmes in the face of the formidable structural (political, bureaucratic, institutional) problems that face any reform-minded government in India. The country as a whole is far too complex and poor compared to Gujarat, which has been business-friendly and advanced in both governance and physical infrastructure (like roads, ports, etc.) over many decades now. On top of this, Modi’s rather high-handed autocratic personal style (which is resented by many even within his own party) does not augur well for the intricate negotiations with diverse groups, state leaders and coalition partners he will necessarily have to work with at the all-India level. His polarising personality is not conducive to the tasks of compromise and consensus-building a leader inevitably faces in a highly fragmented polity like India’s.

Another common position popular among some Indian journalists is that Indian democracy will ultimately ‘tame’ Modi, the checks and balances in our system will smooth his rough edges over time. First of all, our democratic institutions are not all that strong. Our elections are vigorous, but other essential parts of a democracy, like some basic human rights and certain regular procedures of accountability are fragile, even after all these years. One should not welcome further pressures on these institutions and procedures just for trying out a firebrand leader; in any case the hankering for a strong leader that our middle classes display, while it may be understandable after a decade of

ineffective, inarticulate and jaded Congress leadership, is not exactly healthy. Middle classes in south Europe and South America have often gone through such phases of hankering, with disastrous consequences. Our democracy is also decidedly weak at the local level (districts and below) in most parts of India, and most political parties have no inner-party democracy, with major decisions mainly taken from above. In such a situation, a leader given to propensities for aggregation and concentration of power is potentially harmful to democratic processes. After the chaotic '90s Russian hankering for a strong leader has given them, through landslide elections, Vladimir Putin, who has turned Russia into a cesspool of oligarchic corruption and human rights abuse.

Of course, Modi has cultivated an image of a fighter against corruption, and this is welcomed by people tired of one scam after another during the Congress regime (revealed ironically with the help of one of that regime's landmark legislations, the Right to Information Act). But at the same time nothing has stopped him from trying to reabsorb into the party some of the leaders in Karnataka associated with the egregious cases of corruption in real estate and mining. It is also well-known that some of the NDA chief ministers were complicit in the decisions around the coal scam. A couple of years back, the CAG had complained about serious financial mismanagement in the Gujarat public sector. Also, the crony capitalism that Modi indulges in is a form of corruption under the broad definition of corruption as abuse of public office, which need not always be illegal.

Above all, with a history of inter-community relations as fraught as in India and the discovery by Modi and his party over the years that, if necessary, mobilising fear and hatred among the majority community can pay good electoral dividends, it is not always clear how merely the periodic electoral check of democracy can tame a leader who is equally adept at playing the development and the communal cards. Facing roadblocks on his way, he can turn either way, the explosive consequences of which in our fractured society, where violence is often just below the surface, he may not be able to control. One, of course, hopes this will not happen, but Modi's history and background do not comfort us.

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P.S.

* Outlook. MAGAZINE | APR 28, 2014:
<http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?290353>

* This does not appear in print.