



Policies & Perspectives



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Insistence versus Expectation in Politics of Today

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Just as the new world order George Bush had proclaimed in a burst of hope and happiness was a chimera, the new Indian political order that critics of the Modi Government wish to see in place is a delusion. For one, a new political order has already come into place, and the one the Congress party and like-minded organisations want to install, is an old and discredited one. At best, it can be repackaged to look fresh, but even that attempt is underway in a rather sloppy and amateurish manner. As the 2019 Lok Sabha election draws near, that political order is gasping for breath. It's being replaced in State after State and is facing oblivion, if not complete decimation for good.

And yet, instead of directing their energy into crafting a new order that catches the people's attention and designing a narrative which sound like an 'alternative', rivals of the incumbent ruling party are wasting precious time in seeking to re-impose a stale system already disapproved and discarded by the electorate. Since voters are unwilling to give the old a chance, the leaders of the opposition have resorted to another route: Demanding that the Government and the BJP perform along the guidelines they consider as credible for governance. The irony that their model of governance which had so miserably failed, is being rejected in electoral battles, appears lost on them.

At least George Bush's new world order was a dream having the right elements — nations would work in tandem to promote rightful conduct and outcomes; they would unite to fight the scourge of terrorism, poverty and climate change; they would respect one another's national interests and sensitivities and sovereignty. It was a tall order and failed because many countries, the United States of America included, refused to walk the talk. The West's over-zealous interventions in other nations' affairs in the garb of maintaining world order, and the non-West's obstinacy in seeking to cut the US to size — even if it meant harm to self-interest — complicated matters. Everybody is for a new order but few are willing to make the necessary sacrifices. The United Nations, the self-appointed preserver of world order, is being questioned increasingly for its failure to do so.

By contrast, the political order which the Congress-led opposition wants to reinstate — or be reinstated by others including the BJP — is full of hubris. Even the Greeks, who used the term 'hubris' in their literature of tragedy to depict arrogance against or disrespect to Gods, would be appalled by the scale it reached during Congress rules, especially during the 10 years preceding 2014, after which it was voted out of power. True, there are more complimentary instances in the party's history and it would be unfair to only hold the 2004-14 decade as being symbolic of its performance. The early part of Jawaharlal Nehru's prime ministership as well as Indira Gandhi's firm handling of the 1971 war and the consequent creation of Bangladesh, are certain positives. However, public perceptions are shaped not by distant history (with 65 per cent of the population under the age of 35 years, both



Indira Gandhi and Nehru are distant history) but by recent history of which they have an experiential understanding.

So much has been written about how the Congress lost the plot and what it must do to regain vitality, that even a corpse would be shaken into activity by its impact. Yet the party, if its recent reaction to electoral drubbings is any indicator, refuses to acknowledge that its brand of political order has been rejected. It needs not a new coat of paint but an entirely new structure that connects with the people. More accurately, the Congress has to adopt a new attitude; the old one is sickening. It's not just the Congress but also the supposedly secular ones in the opposition benches that are similarly afflicted by the new political order which came into being from May 2014 and is a work in progress still — though the contours are clear and the brick and mortar are in place.

In many ways, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's arrival has been more reformative than the first BJP-led Government at the Centre which was led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee. While the Vajpayee regime did overhaul a good many aspects of governance associated with Congress tenures and gave a new direction and pace to international diplomacy, economy and infrastructure, Vajpayee himself was seen as a newly starched version of the Nehruvian thought, packaged in a Right-wing wrapper. This may have had to do with the fact that Vajpayee's early political career was shaped during Nehru's time and influenced (if not enamoured) by his ideological positions. Nehru himself had taken a liking to the young Vajpayee and had prophesied that the latter would one day have a huge impact on national politics. In later years, many Congress leaders would remark that Vajpayee was a Congressman who never was. Modi came with no such baggage. He wasn't in thrall of the Nehruvian concept, and hadn't, for instance, been brainwashed through years of listening to South Block mandarins on their dated take of international diplomacy — with nostalgia for a dead bipolar world order clouding their analyses of present-day realities. Domestically too, Modi pushed ahead with small but telling decisions that set governance in an entirely new direction — he has belied both hope and apprehension that he would unleash cataclysmic shifts. Appeasement was out and inclusivity was in, even if seemed politically incorrect. The culture of a high command controlled by a dynasty was replaced by a set of leaders who had risen in the party not on the strength of a privileged background but sheer hard work. The use of technology to enhance transparency and swift decision-making became the new norm.

As the Modi Government nears three years in power, it can look back with a sense of satisfaction at the slew of programmes it initiated, and which in varying measures has touched upon the common man's life. From Swatch Bharat Abhiyan to Beti Bachao Beti Padhao to 'Make in India' to 'Digital India' to Jan Dhan accounts to Ujjwala to comprehensive crop insurance to the massive spread of Aadhaar to the complete revamp of MGNREGA to the mental healthcare Bill — they have all contributed to giving a positive spin to the Modi regime's image. The list is incomplete, of course, without a mention of the 'demonetisation' decision, easily the most disruptive one in terms of scale and impact (both economically and politically), the Government has taken. Poll results have demonstrated the people's acceptance of the honesty of intent at least, even if the outcomes have not been to the fullest potential.



So, what is it that the Congress and the rest of the opposition want of Prime Minister Modi and the BJP? Do the opposition parties have a clear option they believe is better than the one promoted by the Government and its party? They don't, and worse, they are not even internally agreeable on the ideal option. Thus, not only is there a blabber of ideas — most of them unworkable and already rejected — but that these ideas clash so strongly with one another that the end result is 'no idea'! They cannot even agree on forming a cohesive coalition to take on Modi and his party. Is it any surprise, therefore, that the people should prefer a working model to a non-existent model, however appealing it is made to sound? But the failure has not stopped the opposition parties from insisting that the Government (and the BJP) ought to follow their tips on governance. They don't expect that this will be done, but they still insist in the hope that such insistence will send the message to the electorate that the opposition hasn't lost its voice — even if it has forfeited its credibility.

It's the play of 'insistence' versus 'expectation' that makes for an interesting study. Imagine for the sake of argument that a Government begins to, at least in large measure, honour the insistence of opposition parties. The opposition, which thrives in a state of confrontation with the ruler, would have no issue in hand. It would then have to admit that while it had 'insisted', it had not 'expected' the Government to oblige. This tactic has its political advantages if used in small doses. For instance, the Modi Government consistently pushed for the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax regime on the ground that the Congress had given birth to the idea and insisted on its approval. The Government played a similar obliging trick on Aadhaar, countering the Congress's opposition to its enhanced implementation on the ground that it was merely going by the Congress's insistence that the unique identity number regime was good for the nation.

Let's consider the reverse. The opposition has every right to 'expect' the Government to perform and deliver on its promises. A Government comes into power through the people's mandate in a democratic system such as ours. The voters can insist, the losers cannot. The losers can demand — which is a notch higher than expectation. Even here, the demand has to be within the parameters of the people's expectation and insistence, and not based on theories and fantasies the electorate has rejected of the losing parties. As a tangible example, the Congress cannot demand that the BJP Government of Uttar Pradesh should roll back its decision to seal illegal slaughterhouses across the State, because the promise to shut down such units was there in the election manifesto on which the voters mandated the party to power in a big way. Similar is the argument with the anti-Romeo squad. At most, the opposition parties can 'demand' that excesses in the name of implementing the electoral promise must come to an end. At the central level, the Congress cannot insist on the Modi Government pursuing the Nehruvian model in international diplomacy or domestic affairs, because the people had voted the Modi-led BJP to power on a clear understanding that there would be a change in the political order long associated with Nehruvian thoughts.

The issue of insistence versus expectation did not directly figure in the work of political theorists across centuries, though the play of rights and obligations did. These have been defined and re-defined through the classical, modern and contemporary political theories. For the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, the rights of society and



individual had to be such that society as a whole could exist in harmony; else the 'state of nature' — chaos resembling civil war — would take over. This largely philosophical outlook was countered by another influential political theorist of the time, John Locke, who argued that political thought (or theory here) ought to be empirical in nature and tested through experiential means. He replaced Hobbes' absolutism with liberalism, and maintained that human beings were by nature reasonable and not given to civil chaos if left free. Several political thinkers since then, from Jean Jacques Rousseau to John Stuart Mill to Jeremy Bentham and others have postulated on rights and obligations in their own ways, but there has been a general understanding that rights are absolutely necessary but not unfettered; that rights are of two kinds: one where the need for action lies with the holder of the rights (such as the right to vote) and the other where the right has to be met by a third party action (such as the right to quality healthcare). Obligation is a different matter altogether. For instance, laws may obligate a person not to harm another's life, but they don't obligate that person to enhance the quality of another's life through material or other means.

While neither 'insistence' nor 'expectation' is directly mentioned in the works of political thinkers, obliquely they are there. For example, some early theorists believed that the state had the right to insist on a code of behaviour from its constituents which contributed to the larger good, while others held that man could be expected to conform to the larger good without being forced to do so; only a right environment was needed. And yet, even Rousseau, writing in the 18th century on the theory of human nature, admitted that mankind would be "undone" if it forgets that 'the fruits the earth belong to us all; and the earth itself to nobody'. He was not a votary of insistence of man's hegemonic nature. His expectation of a human being's innate goodness was absolute, even bordering on the innocent, as is evident in his praise for the Caribbean people's moderation in sexual urge despite living in a hot climate which "always seems to inflame the passions"! John Stuart Mill's theory on liberalism is well known. Widely regarded as the most influential English thinker of the 19th century, he had no expectation from but only insistence upon (though, like others, he did not use these terms) those he deemed unfit to be governed through self-will — "barbarians" and "backward states of society". For those, his solution was a despotic rule. He also highlighted the struggle between authority and liberty, calling it the "most conspicuous feature in the portions of history". For our case at hand, authority can also be seen as insistence (imposing its call on the people through various legislative and executive measures) and liberty as dissent (opponents of the Government, in the political system and in civil society). It is acknowledged that not all Government decisions may be good for the people at large, but it's also true that not all dissent is credible and or for social benefit.

Political theorists of no age, regardless of their sharp differences, have supported the cause of opposing for the sake of opposing. The Congress party and others in the opposition could benefit from a crash course in political science to understand the evolution of political theory and its practical application in today's circumstances. By the same logic, the ruling party too must keep in mind that majoritarianism (in numerical electoral terms), while having the benefits of effective and swift governance, takes no time to degenerate into an anarchy of the powerful, if it is not tempered with inclusivity and tolerance at all levels. There is need to keep the balance — just as political theory itself has sought for its various strands of philosophy, empiricism, history and science.

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