



Policies & Perspectives



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Of Political Heroes and Hero-worship

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It is not often that the result of a national election is predicted with certainty two years in advance and the opposition parties throw in the towel too, even before the contest begins. It happened for the Congress during Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership in 1957 and in 1962 and Indira Gandhi's leadership in 1980. In the first instance, there was no opposition worth the name and Nehru's Congress had a cakewalk. It won 371 of the 494 Lok Sabha seats in 1957, with a vote share of nearly 48 per cent. The scale of an opposition's absence is evident from the fact that the runner-up, which was the Communist Party of India, secured just 27 seats. Years before the election happened, it was clear that the Congress would register a convincing second win after its 1952 electoral triumph. The outcome of the 1962 poll was also known, and the Nehru-led Congress scored a hat-trick. In Indira Gandhi's case, the failed Janata Party experiment had made it obvious that the Congress leader was on a quick comeback trail after losing power in 1977 in the wake of the Emergency. Indeed, in less than a year of assuming power, the Janata Party Government and Prime Minister Morarji Desai had paved the way for her return — which she did in grand fashion in 1980.

One can add to the above instances a third example: That of VP Singh. After a series of illegal pay-off scandals hit the Rajiv Gandhi Government in the later second half of the 1980s, seriously tarnishing Rajiv Gandhi's 'Mr. Clean' image that led to his senior Minister VP Singh emerging as the fulcrum of opposition within the Congress and the Government and seizing the national imagination, it became evident that the Congress led by Rajiv Gandhi was set to lose power. In all of these three cases, the circumstances were extraordinary — either there was no opposition or the ruling party or the Government had committed monumental follies. In Nehru's time, there was no pan-India party to challenge the Congress's hegemony, nor were there strong regional formations to stop its march in the States. The opposition was relatively more robust during Indira Gandhi's tenure but she had employed ruthless political skills to counter them — neutralising the Syndicate's influence from within her party was one such case. But her 1980 comeback was not the result of a weak opposition; it was ironically due to a clueless and disoriented ruling party and its Government. VP Singh crafted his (short-lived) success by cleverly distancing himself from a regime which got mired in the Bofors scandal.

This brings us to the present, which is similar to the situations listed earlier insofar as an advance acceptance of electoral outcome and the popularity of a leader are concerned but dissimilar in other ways. The Lok Sabha election is due only in May 2019, and yet nearly two years before, everyone is confidently talking of the return of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to power for a second successive term, propelled by Narendra Modi's charisma.



There is general acceptance — enthusiastic or grudging, depending on where it emanates from — that Modi is too powerful to be challenged effectively by the current crop of opposition leaders. A few days ago, Janata Dal (United) leader and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar remarked, “Nobody (in the opposition) has the capacity to challenge Narendra Modi.” It can be argued that such praise is only to be expected of a leader who has returned to the NDA fold and now heads a Government in the State in collaboration with the BJP. But there is admiration from certain opposition leaders too. Five months ago, senior Congress leader and former Cabinet Minister in the Congress-led UPA Government, P Chidambaram, had said that Prime Minister Modi was in the pole position. He posted the following on his official Twitter account: “The victories in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand have re-confirmed that Mr Narendra Modi is the most dominant political leader.” Chidambaram is no Modi-supporter, and thus his compliment surprised those in the opposition. This was more so because he also seemed to — with having to be explicit — rule out his own party leader Rahul Gandhi’s capacity to take on the Prime Minister. There will be others in the opposition who share similar views but have kept those to themselves.

What then are the dissimilarities between the situations of the kind that existed during Nehru and Indira Gandhi’s time and now? In both the earlier cases, the Congress’s two tall leaders faced opposition that either did not truly exist or was consumed by a desire to self-destruct. The popular narrative today is that the Modi juggernaut is unstoppable because there is no opposition. This is not true. The Congress is a pan-India party which, despite electoral reverses, remains a force across the country. There are also regional parties which are dominant in their respective States — they are often stronger than the national ones. In West Bengal, it’s the Trinamool Congress; in Odisha it’s the Biju Janata Dal; in Tamil Nadu we have the DMK and the AIADMK; in Telangana there’s the Telangana Rashtra Samithi; in Uttar Pradesh, the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party are strong; Delhi is ruled by the Aam Aadmi Party; and in Bihar there’s Lalu Prasad’s Rashtriya Janata Dal. Since the 2014 Lok Sabha triumph, the BJP has had to battle formidable opponents before it emerged victorious. It can be argued at best that the main opposition party, the Congress, has been ineffective. But it has the organisation and leaders of stature who can revive the party; nothing stops it from doing so. If the counter is that dynasty politics is the cause of the Congress’s decline, it is for the party to fix the problem. After all, the dynasty issue did not come in the way of the party ruling the country for the greater part of the tenure post-independence. While reams of paper can be exhausted analysing the evils of dynasty politics, the fact is that weak leadership and not dynasty per se, is the culprit for the Congress’s decline. The fact that Indira Gandhi was a beneficiary of family name was subsumed by her strong leadership. Therefore, if Congress vice president Rahul Gandhi is faced with the criticism of basking under the dynasty’s glory, it’s because he has failed to provide leadership which his party needs when faced with an opponent of Modi’s political acumen.



There is rumbling within the opposition ranks that Prime Minister Modi is behaving like an autocrat, that the BJP has become a one-man party, and that Modi's Ministers are rubber-stamps. This is most amusing. The Congress, which is run by a family, should be careful about throwing stones at others while it lives in a glass house. Most regional outfits are individual-driven (BJD, DMK, TMC, BSP) or family-maintained (Samajwadi Party, RJD). The issue to be discussed is not whether a party revolves around an individual. The discussion should be on two other fronts: First, whether the individual has the capacity and track record; and second, whether the party is prepared to accommodate at its high organisational levels those who do not necessarily care for dynasty as a means of self-promotion. With very few exceptions, there are no individuals in senior party leadership positions in the BJP who owe their rank to their family name. Neither Narendra Modi nor Amit Shah nor most of the Ministers in the Modi Government. By contrast, the Congress's senior leadership — or at least those that are in Rahul Gandhi's inner circle — owe their positions to family name. Such has been the culture of patronage in the party that even Manmohan Singh became Prime Minister because he was chosen by the party's first family, and not because the people had voted for him — he did not contest the Lok Sabha election.

*Now we come to the first point of discussion: The individual's credentials, and it's here that individuality becomes an important factor in national politics. There's no escaping the individual force because individuals determine the national political discourse; parties carry it forward with their organisational reach. Today, there are those who consider Narendra Modi as the greatest Prime Minister the country has had. Others hold him as the nation's most divisive Prime Minister ever. Given that at least two of the earlier 'greatest' Prime Ministers have also made it to the several 'greatest Indians' lists, it is only a matter of time before Modi's supporters push his name to that hallowed category. Meanwhile, it would be interesting to dwell on one such 'greatest Indians' list, in the creation of which noted historian (in politics and cricket) and commentator Ramachandra Guha played a role. In an article published earlier in *The Hindu* and now part of a collection of essays in the book, *India Now and in Transition*, Guha explains his dilemma and opinions on the entrants to the list. The book, edited by researcher and commentator Atul K Thakur, provides an interesting, if somewhat lop-sided, view of the changes that have been taking place in the country across the spectrum — social, political (domestic and in the area of international diplomacy) and economic. The book's claim that it is an "enquiry into possible futures, based on current happenings", is ambitious indeed, and though the editor has made an honest effort in putting together thoughts by people with credentials, the picture that has been created on the canvas lacks the roundedness of a bipartisan academic exercise.*

But we are digressing. Let us return to Guha's essay, titled, 'Indians — Great, Greater, Greatest' in the book, to understand the role of individuals in shaping a party's/ nation's destiny.



It's a given that he does not consider Modi as a great Prime Minister, let alone among the greatest Indians, but let's for the moment concentrate on his material in the article which talks of a list of 50 great Indians. He dissented with the inclusion of the names of Indira Gandhi (for the "promulgation of Emergency") and Atal Bihari Vajpayee (for his "long association with sectarian politics"). Without going into the merits of the accusation, one must ask the question: How is it that Nehru makes it to the list despite his monumental blunders on Kashmir and China policies — for which the nation continues to pay a heavy price to this date? This is not to argue that Nehru's inclusion was erroneous, but that Guha's argument for the exclusion of Indira Gandhi and Vajpayee was based on yardsticks different from those that were applied in Nehru's case. It can be argued that the very exercise of listing out 'great Indians' is an exclusivist endeavour that does not sit well in a democratic ethos. The dangers are more evident when political figures have to be listed, and when such listing is determined by their public appeal. BR Ambedkar had in a speech to the Constituent Assembly spoken about the dangers of hero worship in politics. In the November 1949 address, he said we must "observe the caution which Joh Stuart Mill has given to all who are interested in the maintenance of democracy, namely, not to 'lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or to trust him with power which enable him to subvert their institutions'." Ambedkar then went on to somewhat dramatise the impact by adding that while there was nothing wrong in being grateful to great men, there were "limits to gratefulness". He quoted an Irishman in saying that "no man can be grateful at the cost of his honour, no woman can be grateful at the cost of her chastity and no nation can be grateful at the cost of its liberty". He went on to add punch by drawing an interesting analogy in the Indian context. "This caution is far more necessary in the case of India than in the case of any other country. For in India, Bhakti or what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be a road to salvation of the soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship."

Yet, every generation needs its heroes, and, if Nehru and Indira Gandhi were that for different generations, Modi from all accounts in one for the present one. The emulation of sound qualities of a hero is not a bad idea, but as Ambedkar warned, worshipping the hero has serious consequences. In this country, leave aside politicians, there are temples dedicated to film stars. In south India particularly, hero-worship is common — even when personalities cross over to the political arena from films, they are revered as almost living symbols of good prevailing over evil. At the end, however, in politics, the hero is one who wins elections consistently for himself and his or her party. By this definition, Modi is certainly the hero of the moment. There is no need to worship him, just as there is no justification to eulogise those who oppose him on fictitious grounds. Additionally, hero-worshipping the dynasty is as bad.

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