



Policies & Perspectives



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Rahul Gandhi, Lost in Political Wonderland?

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The realm of intelligence — not to be confused with intellectualism — is limitless. But those who possess or claim to possess intelligence do so in limited quantities. The key to success, therefore, lies in the optimum use of the precious faculty (in the right place and at the right time). While this is true in the application of every area of human endeavour, the relevance takes the form of public display most potently in politics, because politics is about policymaking and implementation, and equally importantly in influencing public discourse in general. Judicious use can lead to rewards and mishandling results in disasters.

The general image of politicians in India is not very flattering. And yet there is intelligence out there. Intellectualism, however, is scarce. Only a handful of politicians that made it to the top can be considered as intellectuals. Independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was one such personality. He was a grassroots politician, author and thinker, all rolled into one. The other intellectual of that time was S Radhakrishnan, a philosopher of eminence and the country's President. Decades later came along PV Narasimha Rao — Prime Minister, author and multi-linguist, he had a deep understanding of Indian spiritualism and civilisational culture. But Rao, unlike Nehru and like Radhakrishnan, was not a grassroots leader, nor did he have Nehru's dazzle — according to one uncharitable remark by a Congressman, Rao's charisma was akin to that of a dead fish. The poet-Prime Minister AB Vajpayee was certainly charismatic throughout his active political life, but even he would have laughed at being called an intellect. He was politically street-smart in a nuanced way, blending the rough edges of political intelligence with a soft, personal touch.

VP Singh too was a poet, and a painter. He had political intelligence of the Indira Gandhi kind. An intelligence that is put to ruthless use when an occasion comes one's way — either from the outside or within the party. Like Indira Gandhi capitalised on the mess within the Janata Party and bounced back to power in 1980 or vertically split the Congress by sidelining the so-called Syndicate in her early days in office, VP Singh seized upon the dwindling credibility of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the wake of multiple defence scandals, to take the spotlight. Neither Indira Gandhi nor he was an intellectual but both possessed a good deal of political intelligence. A less crafty leader with paucity of intelligence would have been less able to convert a challenge into an opportunity in the manner VP Singh did. He was certainly an opportunist — but to give the devil his due, he brought both Rajiv Gandhi's Mr Clean image and the latter's Government's massive three-fourth majority in the Lok Sabha crashing down. That he failed to rise to the occasion later on, is a different story to be told another day.



There have been instances of astute leaders who could not leave a lasting footprint in the sands of Indian politics because of circumstances beyond their control, and they were intelligent too. Chandra Shekhar is a good example. Opportunistic in some ways, ideological in others, and pragmatic in most ways, he could have been more than a footnote that he has become. But it's a tribute to his intelligence that he is still discussed with seriousness although he lasted only a few months as Prime Minister. Chandra Shekhar was not a privileged politician and he didn't get anything on a platter. Inside the Congress and outside, he fought his way up through a mix of rebellion and compromise. What about those who get authority as a matter of family 'right', without even needing to demand? If that is anachronistic to democracy, worse happens when the recipient of the windfall fails despite having the privileged head-start. It sinks his image, it sinks the fortunes of the party he leads, and it sinks the hopes of the crowd that has gathered around him. Nothing in politics is irreversible, of course, and so the prospect of a turnaround is always there. But a lack of political understanding in the leader makes the reversal difficult.

The clash of political intelligence between the Government of the day and the Opposition is really a confrontation between the chief leaders of the two formations. In the present context, thus, it's between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Congress vice president (and soon to be president) Rahul Gandhi. The question being most often asked is not whether Modi has demonstrated political acumen — that he has is evident — but whether the Nehru-Gandhi scion has learned to be politically savvy. His remarks at various events during a recent visit to the United States have fetched him publicity, no doubt, but do they reflect a mature political mind? Have they been absorbed by the Indian audience as being credible? Is this how Rahul Gandhi thinks the road to Congress's recovery lies? Answers to these can be varied and contradictory. But since the Congress leader is not working in a vacuum and has made Prime Minister Modi his prime target, it would not harm if a short comparative study is done of their political careers. In itself, the exercise can offer answers to many questions of the day, and settle at least for now the issue of political intelligence. After all, both Rahul Gandhi and Modi began their active political careers in the early 2000s, the first in an expected manner and the second quite unexpectedly.

The BJP chose Modi to head the Government in Gujarat in October 2001 when he was not even an MLA and was somewhat distant from the State's politics. The party faced a crisis then, with Chief Minister Keshubhai Patel's regime having accumulated a great deal of public ill-will for poor governance. Few expected Modi, with no administrative experience, to turn things around. The start was not propitious. The Godhra train burning incident and the subsequent communal riots in the State claiming the lives of hundreds of people took place barely four months after he took office.



He had not even begun to get a firm grip on the administration. But he managed to control the massive violence within days. He had to hit the ground running and learn through trial and error. As if this was not enough, the undoing of the legacies of the previous Government also posed a parallel challenge. Having begun that task too, it appeared that Modi was on the right track. However, he then faced another and more daunting challenge: He and his regime were accused by the opposition parties and critics of being complicit in the communal riots. It was an allegation that was to haunt him for years and was revived repeatedly by his opponents although no court found any evidence of any wrongdoing on his part. Even as he battled the accusations, Modi doggedly worked on twin goals. The first was to bring development to Gujarat and the second was to electorally strengthen the BJP's position in the State. It was natural that the shadow of communal disturbances would fall on the State Assembly election held later in 2002. The party registered an emphatic victory under Modi's leadership. Two more equally convincing wins were to follow in 2007 and 2012 as Modi shrugged off his negative Hindutva image and emerged as a development-oriented politician, giving what is now known as the Gujarat Model of development. His political graph did not dip even once since 2002; in fact, it continued to soar north all through. After the 2012 Assembly poll triumph and with the Lok Sabha election less than two years away, Modi's arrival on the national stage came to be seriously anticipated. Months before the 2014 general election, the anticipated happened — and the rest as they say is history.

On the other hand, Rahul Gandhi has risen in politics in a protected environment. He contested and easily won the Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha seat from Uttar Pradesh in 2004, and went on to retain it in 2009 and 2014 — the last time with a much reduced but still comfortable margin. His progression in the Congress's hierarchy was a bed of roses; he first became the general secretary and then vice president of the party. Although not projected officially, he was the principal opponent to Modi and the prime ministerial face of his party. Today, with Sonia Gandhi's health not permitting her to play a more active role, Rahul Gandhi is for all purposes the undisputed chief of the Congress. There is much to say about the ease with which he has proceeded and the struggles that Modi has had to endure. It has played a role in the structuring of the different responses of the two leaders. Modi's baptism was by fire in 2002 and his political intelligence evolved over the decade and more through his experiences that taught him to both understand and shape grassroots opinion. He realised the need for a new narrative in politics. Perhaps the crises he faced actually helped him to shape that fresh narrative. His becoming an election winning machine happened in Gujarat, and the party made full use of his services as a star campaigner in other States as well. Rahul Gandhi, on the other hand, never could outline the contours of his political intelligence and repeatedly floundered. Unlike Modi, he shied away from responsibilities of governance. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was left to virtually plead with him to accept a ministerial offer, but the heir apparent declined. Besides, Rahul Gandhi led the party from one electoral defeat to another in various Assembly elections.



In short, while Modi has helmed his party to unprecedented election victories while successfully battling personal allegations, Rahul Gandhi has led his organisation to historic defeats despite having a carte blanche within his party. More than three years after the Modi tsunami wiped off the opposition, the Congress shows no signs of a revival. The party is now waiting for a miracle to happen after Rahul Gandhi becomes the president — and if Priyanka Gandhi plunges into active politics as well.

Why has Rahul Gandhi's political intelligence failed him? Or does he have it in adequate measure? Why does he persist in narratives that find no credibility with the people? Perhaps he knows no better or perhaps he believes that there is still some juice left to squeeze out of the dried orange. Last month he gave an interview to Huffpost where he insisted on making the same old points: That Prime Minister Modi practised the politics of hate; that Modi's Government had sidelined the weaker sections of society, especially the Scheduled Castes and the minorities (read, the Muslims); and that the BJP's politics of exclusion could not work in a diverse country such as India. Each of these accusations has been tested electorally and the people have delivered their verdicts. Some of the remarks he made in the course of that interview are as follows: "Dalits and Muslims are being told by the ruling party that they cannot be part of India's vision"; "Hatred is the BJP's main weapon. The party is creating massive fault lines by isolating millions of our people"; "The main problem in India is over-concentration of power"; "Economic progress in a diverse and dynamic country like India can't be fulfilled through exclusion".

The politics of hate could not have delivered 280 odd seats to the BJP in the 2014 Lok Sabha election because a divided society votes in a deeply divided manner. The 2014 verdict was a consolidation and not division of votes. It's also difficult to believe that the Modi regime had marginalised the weaker sections of society. If it had, why did a significant chunk of the Scheduled Castes and the Other Backward Classes vote for the BJP in 2014 and again and again since then in various State elections? The 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly poll result needs special mention in this context. Scheduled Caste and OBC voters had the Modi Government's track record of three years to consider, and they placed their trust in the BJP. Rahul Gandhi is clearly imagining discontent where there is none. This is not to say that there are no issues of dissatisfaction; indeed there are, but these voters are quite confident that those can be tackled by the Modi-led party. The accusation of 'exclusion' is so flimsy that it doesn't stand firm even for a moment. There can be endless debate on whether the BJP or Prime Minister Modi or both are essentially 'anti-Muslim', but can there be denial of the fact that the various social welfare schemes of the Government — whether it be the distribution of cooking gas free of charge to poor rural families, or those meant to empower the girl child, or the many household electrification programmes, or the Jan Dhan scheme etc. — have neither differentiated between communities nor have they been implemented in a biased manner? The Congress vice president perhaps remembers the infamous statement of his party's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, in end-2006, in which he said that the Muslims "must have the first claim on the (nation's) resources. He had delivered this very 'inclusive' remark at a National Development Council meeting. As for 'over-concentration of power', surely that is more true of the Congress than of any other party or leader.



Nobody contends that the Modi Government's armour has no chink or that the regime has performed without taking a single wrong step. There have been problems and those need to be highlighted and addressed. As the main opposition party's leader, Rahul Gandhi must capitalise on those issues. The problem is that, unable to grasp the deeper meanings, he is lost like Alice in wonderland.

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