

Democracy on the march: dissecting India's 16th general elections



India, the largest democracy in the world, has achieved an enviable distinction in conducting free and fair elections regularly and making the transfer of political power a routine and smooth affair. Some may dismiss this as a mere demonstration of the success of procedural democracy, hiding its failure to achieve substantive democracy. True, Indian democracy falters on many counts – poverty, education, healthcare, employment and governance. But it is a little unfair to demonise this democratic deficit, taking into account India's gigantic size, population, poverty and enormous diversity in terms of language, region, religion and culture. Incidentally, no democratic country does epitomise perfection and India is no exception, particularly considering its unique features; rather, India's sanctimonious adherence to procedures needs to be seen as its solemn quest in the direction of perfection.

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IN THIS CONTEXT, the recently conducted sixteenth general elections has not just been a mere mechanical transfer of power from the Manmohan Singh-led Congress to the Narendra Modi-led Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, but it has also been a site of engaging debates over the idea of democracy and its working – covering a range of issues like political leadership, secularism, development, entitlement and governance. No doubt, there was Modi magic all the way, but the magic was played out not in a world of fantasy or hallucination, but very much in the competitive arena of democracy.

The Congress party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), being in power for two-consecutive terms (2004-2014), was facing a strong anti-incumbency before going to the polls. UPA's 2004 victory over the Vajpayee-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) was surprising. Soon after the results were out, the BJP and its ideological mentor the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) threatened agitation if Sonia Gandhi was installed as the Prime Minister, opposing her Italian origins. Sonia decided to opt out of the race, but played a master stroke by nominating a distinguished economist Manmohan Singh, who belonged to the minority Sikh community and was instrumental in the liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s. She, however, remained the anchor of the coalition government as the Congress President and the UPA Chairperson, thereby setting the agenda of governance. The combination worked perfectly. Though critics raised fingers at a 'dual power centre', the electorate did not bother as the economy was doing well keeping the middle class happy, and progressive entitlement policies induced the marginalised in rural and urban areas. The second emphatic win for the Congress-led UPA in 2009 was a testimony to its credible performance and governance.

In the middle of the second stint, things started falling apart all of a sudden. The UPA II government developed so many snags at the same time – poor economy, high inflation,

mega scandals, mal-governance and policy paralysis. The crisis deepened when the Prime Minister's integrity came into question; the impression spread that he was shielding his corrupt cabinet colleagues under coalition compulsion. Surprisingly, the Prime Minister, despite his personal honesty, appeared vulnerable as he never tried to clear the air of suspicion. Manmohan Singh's silence was construed as a spineless surrender of his authority before Sonia Gandhi. The 'dual power centre', which earlier had cut no ice, became a major issue; later, even a memoir by Manmohan's former staff, disclosed Sonia's routine access to government details in violation of confidentiality. The gentleman Prime Minister looked helpless and gradually started to lose control, not only over the cabinet members belonging to coalition partners, but also over his own party colleagues. The scams and irregularities came under severe public scrutiny – adverse comments by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) to regular scathing attacks by a vibrant media. Thus, the Congress became demoralised and Sonia's grand plan of launching her son as the next Prime Minister went awry. Anticipating defeat, a shaky Congress could not muster the courage to declare Rahul as the Prime Ministerial candidate and the cadre became disheartened.

On the other hand, the BJP, after two consecutive defeats, was facing serious factionalism and a leadership crisis. However, BJP Chief Ministers of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh were in firm control. More importantly, the RSS, as a no non-sense mentor, continuously worked on the party to keep it in proper shape for the next round. The moment Congress started dithering, the savvy RSS sensed a big political opportunity. Sensibly, it first went to settle the leadership issue as Congress was defensive and non-committal on Rahul. The first claimant was veteran L.K. Advani, the anchor of the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement, who made it possible for the BJP to come to power in Delhi. In the RSS calculation, he was

no longer an asset since his failure to win in 2009; moreover, his old age would not inspire the young voters who were going to play a decisive role in this election.

Narendra Modi, the other claimant, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, being elected for third consecutive time, had huge mass appeal. Controversial for his role in the 2000 Gujarat riots, Modi had been subject to endless scrutiny and censure by civil society groups and media, both in India and abroad, despite the fact that the Court had never found him guilty. Without becoming entangled in this controversy, Modi had shrewdly deflected national attention towards the 'Gujarat Model of Development', which particularly appealed to the aspiring youth. Moreover, his strong leadership and winning spree had already made him the darling of the party cadre. Hence, the RSS sided with Modi and the BJP declared him the Prime Ministerial candidate.

A positive, confident and aggressive Modi went to the electorate with his mesmerizing oratory. Modi's speeches were well-crafted melodrama that kept the audience spellbound. While exposing Congress on delivery and governance, he was simultaneously entertaining the crowd with jibes at Sonia, Rahul and Manmohan Singh. Against the backdrop of Congress' failure, he was offering an alternative: 'Gujarat Model of Development' and good governance. Modi was consciously projecting himself as the icon of development – and not of Hindutva – by rousing slogans such as *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas* [Together with All, Development for All]. Rahul Gandhi, in contrast, was no match for Modi's oratory and aggression; his speeches failed to inspire the youth as he was simply recounting the achievements of the government in the past; the youth was waiting for concrete opportunities for their futures, which he failed to offer.

Modi's campaign was unique in tone and tenor; the text changed with the shifting context. Initially, he called for a *Congress mukt Bharat* [Congress free India] and attacked the Gandhis. Next, he smartly switched over to good governance with a corresponding media campaign *achche din aane wale hain* [happy days are about to come], which became a big hit. His YouTube Campaign promised to end inflation, poverty and unemployment, guaranteed education for children, prosperity to farmers, women's security, transparency, welfare for all, dignity for the poor and respect for the nation. In the final stages, Modi's campaign focused on *Aab ki bar, Modi Sarkaar* [This Time, Modi Government].

Elections have always been spectacles in India, but Modi's campaign left all previous spectacles far behind, in terms of scale and grandeur. As the star campaigner and master communicator Modi travelled 300,000 km, including 410 hours of air-travel, addressed 437 public meetings in 25 states, addressed 2000 '3D rallies', 2 grand Road Shows in Varanasi and Vadodara, and 4000 innovative and interactive *chai pe charcha* [chat over tea] through video conferencing. Media – print, electronic, social – played an unprecedented role, never seen before; the BJP reportedly spent 5 billion rupees, very much close to Obama's election expenses.

Behind this glitter, there was another campaign being quietly undertaken by the RSS; this mammoth organisation mobilised its affiliates and a large number of committed cadres to reach out to each supporter and sympathiser; it also campaigned for high voter turn-out and brought voters to the polling booths. Out of a colossal 814 million electorate, 551 million exercised their franchise to elect 543 members of the Lower House of the Indian Parliament. This was the highest ever turn-out (66.3%) indicating popular yearning and aspirations. The RSS played a crucial role as it knew that high turn-out would go in BJP's favour.

The marathon exercise took place in 9 phases, extending for 36 days, whereby 1.8 million Electronic Voting Machines were used and millions of polling officials worked round the clock under the supervision and control of the Election Commission, perhaps the most trusted public institution in India with a glorious track record. A total number of 8251 candidates belonging to 1687 political parties (6 National, 54 State and 1627 Unrecognised) and independents contested; as 1650 parties failed to secure a seat, an introspection of the workings of the present multi-party democratic system is called for.

The outcome of this spectacle was a spectacular victory for the Narendra Modi-led BJP which captured 282 seats on its own. After three decades, a single party with an absolute majority is back in Parliament, thus signifying the return of 'national' and retreat of 'regional'; states like Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Odisha have been the exception, however. For Congress, it has been the worst debacle; with just 44 seats in its kitty it was not even eligible to lead the opposition. Modi has blunted the old identity politics based on caste, community and region to some extent, offering a new vision and new politics; although, during the campaign he did invoke his own backward caste identity at selective places and faintly remembered Hindutva on rare occasions. Thus, the decisive mandate he received is largely for development and governance. Expectations are very high and tasks are really tough! Can Modi deliver?

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