

The Modi Cult Is Far From Finished

Jawhar Sircar

Narendra Modi is surely passing through his worst patch ever as prime minister, but then, there is no reason to view this seven years' 'itch' of the people as the beginning of his end. The sudden fury against his regime's disastrous handling of COVID-19 was sparked off in the national capital and other urban pockets of power by shocking visuals of endless funeral pyres and by horror stories of 'people we know' gasping to death for want of oxygen. What was so utterly preposterous was that COVID-19 did not give any consideration to status, connections and other visible capabilities of the urban elite to beat all raps.

Surprisingly, even the local, domesticated media could not resist the temptation to portray the truth — much to the dismay of its ringmasters — while the international media shattered India's image and Modi's standing in a matter of days. The prime minister's so-tiring 109 foreign trips to 60 countries and his mandatory bearhugs proved quite ineffectual — as did the upfront declared cost of Rs 518 crore spent on them. While the much-ignored badlands of the Gangetic belt dumped corpses into the holy river, or buried them thin under its sands, explosive anger cut through different sections across the well-cultivated political divide.

Yet, in January this year, *India Today's* Mood of the Nation survey [revealed](#) that 74% of the respondents rated Modi's performance as 'good' or 'outstanding', a small dip from his 78% rating in August 2020. The report "reiterated the phenomenal popularity rating for a leader now in his seventh year in power." This was, of course, when India was on a hubris-induced high, imagining that it had conquered COVID-19 under the "great leader's guidance". Things changed considerably when the second wave struck, ripping off Modi's Potemkinian-painted cardboard cutouts that camouflaged reality.

His latest popularity index, as calculated by the much-quoted US data intelligence company Morning Consult, shows a fall to the lowest point ever. People who 'approved' Modi fell from 82% exactly one year ago to 63% now, while those who specifically disapproved his policies rose from a mere 16% to 30%. But these surveys still affirm that he is way above the 31.1% of popular vote with which he swept to power in 2014 and also far higher than 37.4% he cornered in the 2019 polls — whichever be the method of extrapolation one may seek to use.

While watching the infallible leader being roasted may have provided a dash of delicious schadenfreude — it does precious little to challenge his fiercely entrenched, flush-funded and ruthlessly professional electoral machine. Toughened politicians who have got away with murder (figuratively, till now) are used to the temporary tantrums of some voters. In any case, the peeling off appears to be restricted to the outer layers of the support base and were mostly add-ons to Modi's fan club from 2014 or thereafter.

The Hindu Rashtra is, however, determined to not allow such aberrations to feed fantasies like the replacement of Modi. A senior well-read editor has, in fact, warned the leader against conspirators in his inner circle and others who have let him down and thus need to be purged forthwith. The regime's propaganda wing has taken up even more belligerent positions and its artillery is bombarding the media, both mainstream and social, after just a small daze-induced pause. Trolls are also back in action clumsily bludgeoning their enemies in the filthiest of language, while the opportunist majority in media are clicking their heels in salute to the powers that be, and to the deadly chaebols that now back them quite openly.

Frankly, the only refreshing breeze comes from the corridors of courts, once some powerful entrenched judges who were enthralled by the regime retired. But then, seven years in power is also a long time for the regime to foist many judges of choice to critically important courts that determine the fate of this beleaguered democracy. This is so clear from certain shocking decisions of a few high courts, but then, we are also blessed with some really outstanding judges everywhere.

The Supreme Court's flexing of its muscles and its remarkable boldness in compelling a chronically misleading and inept government to declare free immunisation of all adults will go into the annals of India's history with great favour. The other welcome development is that the regime has been trounced in three of the four major states where assembly elections were held. But, then, the results in Tamil Nadu and Assam were fairly predictable, while Kerala's was a morale-booster — but then, the contest was never with the Bharatiya Janata Party. It was only in West Bengal that the verdict against Modi was astoundingly clear and really invigorated demoralised secular democratic forces all over the country.

Unshakable support

The angst against Modi may or may not, however, last beyond the second wave of COVID-19 that, mercifully, appears to be waning. It is quite misleading to read too much in the RSS supremo's recent criticism of Modi's handling, as all he did was to push a few cadmium bars into the atomic reactor to absorb some of the extra combustion building up within. The talk of bringing in Nitin Gadkari as the 'good Sanghi' is now a favourite pastime of the marginalised Lutyens class and a section of slighted Maharashtrians. Let us not ignore the fact that Modi has the support of the biggest corporates — some of whom have prospered beyond their imagination, during his regime.

Relations between the BJP's Wehrmacht and big capital, especially from Gujarat, are much too deep to be ignored by the RSS and the BJP, especially after Modi has raised the bar of election costs. Post-Modi elections are too incredibly expensive to depend on small-time shopkeepers anymore. The Centre for Media Studies (CMS) estimated that the 'visible' expenditure on the 2019 Lok Sabha elections was an incredible Rs 60,000 crore. It was, shockingly, the costliest election in the world and its spending was more than double of the 2014 polls.



BJP workers celebrate the NDA's lead in the Bihar assembly elections in Varanasi, November 10, 2020. Photo: PTI

CMS calibrated the BJP's outlay was close to Rs 27,000 crore, i.e. 45% of all and this worked out to investing Rs 89 crore for each of its 303 victorious candidates.

In contrast, the latest declaration of the Election Commission, based on figures of its opaque-most electoral bond scheme, is that in 2019, the BJP received just Rs 750 crore in donations from companies and individuals. This is still more than five times what the Congress garnered, which was Rs 139 crore. One reason why Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress was so badly battered in Bengal in the 2019 polls could be that it could manage to get some miserable Rs 8 crore in all.

While the mainstream of Indian business is still quite shattered, from shocks delivered both before and after COVID-19, those who prosper from privatisation, favourable policies, large infrastructure projects and rich mining tracts will surely continue to finance a leader who has done so much. It also explains why the BJP need not dirty its hand with petty 'receipts' like many other parties. This centralised funding has also made it is eminently possible to clip the powers of its own ministers, regional leaders and local satraps and decimate any possible rival to Modi.

When one hears only "Modi, Modi" across the landscape, it is time to admit that he matters as much in the party's economics as he does in its politics. Misgivings if any in the RSS's headquarters or those nursed by old-timers would all have to gulped — with liquids of their choice. And left-liberals would do well to also realise that Modi is simply too entrenched and too powerful to be wished away with tweets, memes and self-congratulatory articles.

Political populism + guruvadi tradition

We may as well confess that Modi has actually merged political populism with the old Indian *guruvadi* tradition rather dextrously. Unlike Abrahamic religions that appoint local pastors, rabbis or *maulanas* to hold the flock together and to comfort any troubled believer, Indic religions do not usually provide for them. Hindu ritual practitioners and temple purohits have their duties precisely cut out for them, and counselling is not in their charter. This craving is left to 'gurus' to handle and the successful ones hold immense powers over their followers.

The guru is god on Earth — even when he is a corporate magnate like Baba Ramdev or is quite scandalous like Asaram Babu or Gurmeet Ram Rahim Singh. The latter's net worth is some Rs 1,500 crore and in 2017, when he was arrested for rape, 41 lives were lost in the riots that followed. Over 500 people had to be arrested but several lakhs still swear that he is an unadulterated god. We would do well to realise that Modi assiduously cultivated millions of *bhakt*s and has created a large class of blind followers which no other prime minister ever had.

Though Christian Evangelists did try to appropriate Trump and Erdogan works through a besotted Muslim Ulema, none had the benefit of a deep-rooted, millennia-old socio-religious tradition waiting to be exploited. They are a product of the adroit grafting of traditional *guruvad* with modern mass politics, that was possible to such unique levels only in India. We can elaborate on this on a later occasion. Liberals had, indeed, read the series of electoral signals in the run-up to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections quite erroneously and had started nursing false hopes of defeating Modi. They may recall the stunning shock they received when mind-boggling numbers rose to demonstrate their guru-bhakti at the hustings. It would, thus, take many more blunders like COVID-19 mismanagement to break the magical spell over die-hard bhakt, and millions of Indians would never abandon their unshakable and genetically-prompted faith in the infallible guru.

No national leader to challenge Modi

Popular frustration may surely be reflected intermittently in some forthcoming bypolls, but that does not ensure radical change. None in the opposition can hold a candle to Modi, in his mesmerising oratory skills or in electoral strategies. There is, sadly, no national-level opposition leader, not one, to challenge him. Several non-BJP regional leaders have sworn their allegiance to him and the few chief ministers who are opposed to him are quite content to lord it within their own fiefdoms.

Good examples are Captain Amarinder, Pinarayi Vijayan and Uddhav Thackeray. Maybe, an aggressive street-fighter like Mamata may decide to challenge Modi on the national stage, despite limitations of language, elocution and resources. Which is why she is kept pinned down to her state by a series of pre-planned attacks and has to fight endless battles to survive even after her massive popular mandate.

The next round in India will be fought in an Uttar Pradesh that has been brutalised by Yogi Adityanath. Its elections are in February, but no serious unified opposition to the BJP is noticeable, but one can keep hoping. Internal dissensions within the BJP are said to be surfacing and the Samajwadi Party's performance in this year's panchayat polls is commendable. If one believes in Harold Wilson's earthy wisdom that "one week is a lot of time in politics", well, 34 weeks is then quite an ocean to cross. Besides, agitating farmers are still on the boil and one never knows what's next. The citizenship law is still a burning fuse.

These insurmountable difficulties notwithstanding, when people united and are determined to safeguard their values, they can move mountains. We just need to recap the manner in which Mamata Banerjee and Bengal challenged the tsunami of money and Central police power and shattered the cast-in-stone national media narrative — financed by the ruthless duo. Never before did a historic 48% of the electorate coalesce, in a notoriously argumentative and quarrelsome state, to throw Modi out. If we include the anti-BJP votes that the Left and Congress garnered, it means a whopping 56% of Bengal united to keep the BJP out.

It is a very recent lesson worth remembering and it can help us transcend the gloom brought in by other irrefutable facts. If we look back further at history we will see that Indira Gandhi was also in a similar invincible position in 1977 — when the people of India decided to teach her a lesson. Opposition parties had united, unlike now, but not very effectively and since the Emergency was still in force, Indira played skittles with them.

One remembers every frustrating day during those months, as a participant-observer who was caught between diametrically opposing pulls — that of a former student activist till July of 1975 and of an IAS officer coopted into the establishment thereafter. As a junior magistrate in Burdwan and an assistant returning officer, one saw it all at close quarters. All hopes for the restoration of democracy vanished when we saw how pitifully disorientated was the rag-tag band of opposition politicians who were simply no match for the machinery they confronted. Indira's party was far better organised, so well-equipped, lavishly funded and, above all, ruthless.

This is then that history and the people of India stepped in — to roll the dice. But, can we really demand or pray for an encore?

Jawhar Sircar is a former culture secretary, Government of India. He tweets at @jawharsircar.