

# The beginning of the end

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History will look back at the 2024 elections to the 18th Lok Sabha as an exciting landmark - somewhat like 1967 or 1977 or even 2014. There is no doubt that it marks the beginning of the end of the Modi era, though one cannot predict how badly he may react to the writing on the wall or how viciously he may tighten his stranglehold over a battered democracy. It is a major blow to Narendra Modi's ego and his hold over his flock that he has fallen 32 seats short of the absolute majority figure of 272 seats, when he was bragging non-stop of exceeding by far his earlier high of 303. The voters of India have told him quite clearly that he is neither indispensable nor invincible - and a section of the stifled Sangh Parivar may now openly agree. The Indian people have demonstrated that his lofty claim of some non-biological or divine origin and that he was chosen by God, like some prophet or messiah, cuts no ice.

His acute discomfiture notwithstanding, Modi has already indicated that he would be forming the third National Democratic Alliance government in India. For this, the desired number among his 51 electoral allies need to agree to help and they can surely play hard to get or drive preposterous bargains. All is fair in politics and business negotiations. Even those allies who join him cannot also be taken for granted or run roughshod over, as the veritable duo of Modi and Shah is so used to. Any coalition is fragile and its survival depends on a magnanimous leader factoring in minority opinions and vexatious demands. Two long-lasting coalition leaders, Jyoti Basu and Atal Bihari Vajpayee, were genetically accommodative and cut their own party or organisation to size to make way for recalcitrant minor partners. Such a trait is again not very characteristic of Gujarat duo's style of functioning and thus, their 'coalition government' would be interesting to watch. They have already brought down nine state governments in the last five years, with a combination of guile, threats by enforcement agencies and inducements of a just-can't-say-no type. A hugely successful and highly charged INDI Alliance is now within its rights to emulate this, and look for slips and opportunities. Anything is now possible and we are back to 1989-91 or 1996-99, when every party played Rubik's cube with numbers.



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Now, while psephologists thrash out finer details of percentages of votes gained or lost, and the reasons thereof, let us look at the big picture. The first is that the Modi magic has taken a beating. From 2012, even before he was 'anointed' as BJP's PM candidate, Modi took politics to unprecedented levels of professionalism and corporatisation, obviously with assured mega funds required to finance both. His image building and messaging through 'analogue' mass meetings and his adroit use of the digital media that mesmerised a nation are case studies of manufactured charisma, with little content to back, except pumped in falsehoods and visceral hatred for hapless minorities. This election proves that 'demagicalisation' of this image has begun, even in his huge pocket borough of the north - the Hindi-Hindutva belt.

Incidentally, while Modi is not from the 'Hindi belt', but from an adjunct region, Gujarat, he latched on to this largest linguistic and cultural heartland that accounts for approximately 45 per cent of the seats to the Lok Sabha. He mastered Hindi - the only language that he knows, beside Gujarati - and planted himself at the epicentre of the Hindi-Hindu heartland, Varanasi. His focussed attention was on Ayodhya and he gained the most from the destruction of Babri Masjid, without endangering his life at the spot when it was a veritable volcano. He also took full credit for the Supreme Court decision on the disputed plot, built Ram Mandir (or a part of it) there in record time and consecrated it, all by himself - sharing not an ounce of glory with anyone else. Yet, his party lost the Lok Sabha seat of Ayodhya and his own lead in Varanasi fell down dramatically from 4.8 lakhs that he had in 2019 to 1.5 lakhs today. Some say

Ram Lalla and Kashi's Vishwanath sided with the jobless millions and millions of families struggling to survive. Even though BJP gained elsewhere, it lost 63 seats on the whole and most of this was in the core Hindi-Hindutva territory. In Uttar Pradesh, bulldozer and encounter 'Baba' is still reeling from the shock of losing 29 seats, and gnashing at the Samajwadi Party and the Congress that are way ahead, with 43 seats. It has lost half its seats in Haryana and suffers the ignominy of parting with 10 seats in Rajasthan. Of the major Hindi states, it did best in Madhya Pradesh where it swept all 29 seats and took all 9 in the two hill states of Uttarakhand and Himachal. It won 12 seats in Bihar, thanks to its crafty ally, Nitish Kumar, whose JD(U) also got 12 - but, as compared to 2019, the two parties lost 9 seats. It lost just 1 of 11 in Chhattisgarh and 3 in Jharkhand, but on the whole, though BJP's allies did better.

Outside this belt, the BJP conceded just one seat in Gujarat, but it received a rude shock in Maharashtra where it lost 14 and its ally, the original Shiv Sena lost 6. The Congress gained 12 new seats, to tot up 13, Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena managed 9 profited by 8, while Sharad Pawar's NCP gained 5, to end up with 8. On the whole, INDI parties ended up with 31 of the 48, while the ruling NDA could get just 17. This is a major lesson that voters have taught defectors and party-splitters and opportunists.

In Bengal, Mamata Banerjee fought relentlessly against Modi's Chakravayuh, that consisted of maliciously starving the state of rural funding, battering non-stop several anti-incumbency charges, daily depredations of the ED and CBI, an indulgent High Court that revelled in castigating the TMC government,

a vitriolic partisan governor; a sold-out godi media, and the non-stop anti Muslim/Bangladeshi poison injected by the Sangh Parivar's media Medusa. She scored a massive 29 seats out of 42, snatching 6 from the BJP and 1 from the Congress. Uncompromising opposition to Modi paid rich dividends.

Outgoing Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik who had habitually cozier up to the BJP, realised much too late that the partner was actually a Black Widow spider - that feasts on its own mate. Modi decimated Biju Janata Dal by winning 20 of the 21 seats (1 was retained by Congress). Telengana's K Chandrashekar Rao, who had bailed out Modi in the Rajya Sabha, also discovered this fact and has been decimated, while Modi romped home with 8 seats, but so has the Congress. Andhra's Jagan Mohan Reddy learnt Modi's tactics too late also, only after he lost 18 seats (retaining just 4), 13 of which went to his arch-rival, the TDP, and 3 to TDP's main patron, the BJP.

Far from 'storming the south', the Congress snatched 8 seats of its 9 from the BJP in Karnataka and the INDI Alliance did very well in Kerala with 19 of the 20 seats - conceding only 1 to the BJP for the first time, thanks to the Left's let-down strategy. Tamil Nadu did not give BJP any seat despite its screaming oath that it would batter the INDI Alliance that just shrugged it off.

The BJP's gains in Assam are too little to matter and most of the northeastern states have thrown out the party or elected its own local parties. It was thrown out decisively out of Punjab, though it could manage 2 from Jammu while the Kashmir valley elected their own regional units.

The short point is that Modi's uncontested hold over resources will surely take a hit and his unabashed enrichment of cronies would be under the scanner. The myth of the Gujarat duo's unmatched organisational skills has gone for a six and an emboldened INDI team is gearing up for very close fielding, so that not a slip goes past. Even the servile-most bureaucrat will now be careful, for he's not sure who may soon become his boss or may start enquiries into excesses. The Modi-Shah duo is so habituated to obedience or retribution, swagger and threats, mysterious encounters and the grossest misuse of official agencies to hound dissenters that it may find the changed atmosphere much too difficult to navigate.

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