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Birth of New Politics

The second coming of Narendra Modi has made many dynasts appear irrelevant

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The Modi tsunami, where for the first time after 1971 a party has come back to power with an absolute majority larger than what it had before, unveils the beginning of a 'new politics'. It is crucial for all political players to understand what this connotes, for they can ignore the takeaways only at their own peril.

First, this tsunami has overwhelmed dynastic politics. It has been accepted for too long that progenies of high profile politicians have an ordained right to succeed their parent. But, frankly, there is something abhorrent about the world's largest democracy considering this par for the course. Until now, there was no real challenge to this distortion. However, the second coming of Narendra Modi has made many dynasts appear irrelevant.

The most dramatic instance is that of the Congress party. Rahul Gandhi, who is where he is solely on the basis of whose son he is, needs to accept responsibility for his party's debacle, and, in the best traditions of democracy, offer to step down. Congress party is in urgent need of a new leadership, a new message, a new cadre, and a new operational strategy.

Tejashwi Yadav and Akhilesh Yadav need to internalise the same message. Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) did not win a single seat in Bihar, and yet Tejashwi remains the leader of the party simply because he is the anointed son of Lalu Prasad. Akhilesh may claim pre-eminence as the son of Mulayam, but lineage cannot guarantee performance. His wife, Dimple, has lost the election, as have other members of his family.

Second, the magnitude of the Modi victory has rendered hitherto caste fiefdoms largely redundant. Thus far, conventional politics tended to rely on the political arithmetic of caste or community. For instance, in UP, the Samajwadi-Bahujan Samaj Party combine was based on the assumption that Yadav, Jatav, Dalits and Muslim votes would take the alliance past the finishing line. In Bihar, for years now the Muslim-Yadav combine was considered impregnable. The Modi tsunami has swept these caste citadels aside. It is increasingly clear that in the new scenario, caste arithmetic can be finessed by political chemistry.

Third, the 'new politics' has inaugurated a new process of leadership evaluation. The voter, rising above primeval loyalties, is aggressively asking who in the political firmament is best suited to provide the leadership the nation needs. Narendra Modi may have his detractors, but his leadership qualities could just not be matched by anybody in the opposition. He combined eloquence, charisma, decisiveness, will, vision, cultural rootedness and indefatigable energy, that won over even his most trenchant critics. Henceforth, the people of India will look at someone at the helm of a party in terms of leadership qualities and not inheritance or entitlement.

Fourth, the 2019 election has shown that the people of India want a credible narrative. In the case of BJP, a clear-cut narrative was crafted. It consisted of development economics, focussing on the welfare benefits that had touched the quality of lives of people, be it through toilets, housing, electricity, direct benefit transfers, gas connections, health schemes and infrastructure projects. To this was added a muscular opposition to appeasement politics, which tapped into the Hindu backlash, starting from the Shah Bano case of 1985, that perceives ‘vote bank’ politics prevailing over an equitable respect for all religions. Nationalism was a third ingredient that, especially after the Balakot attack, resonated with the people.

The narrative was enriched by the slogan of ‘New India’. India is a young, aspirational and impatient country, with 65% of its people below the age of 35. The young are tired of the formulas of the past. Their surge of upward mobility wants to embrace the possibility of the new – new possibilities, new avenues, new vision and new opportunities – for personal advancement that go beyond the dole mongering welfarism of other parties. BJP did not spell out in minute detail what the New India will be, but the slogan and the intent to create one had an appeal by itself.

Fifth, in this era of ‘new politics’, no state bastion is immune. The concept is pan-Indian in scope and will, therefore, continuously seek expansion. This has been demonstrated by the inroads BJP has made in Odisha, the north-east, and even more dramatically in Bengal, which was considered by most political pundits as a fortress reserved for the formidable Didi. There are exceptions to this rule, such as most notably, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. But there is no guarantee that BJP will not make a dent there as well in course of time.

It must be hoped that this ‘new politics’ will function in the true spirit of ‘sabka saath, sabka vikas’. In pursuance of this goal, the legacies of Adi Shankaracharya, and of Chanakya, will be crucial. The Jagad Guru emphasised the importance of sabhya samvad, civilised discourse, where even an opponent was treated with democratic respect. Chanakya, the great strategist, welcomed opposing points of view, but was unsentimentally focussed on the importance of enlightened statecraft, and the basic premise that, ultimately, the strength of a nation lies in the social harmony prevailing within.

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No Further Policy Neglect of Water

Drought over two -fifths of land area a trigger

ET Editorials



There is a looming water crisis nationwide, and severe drought conditions across some regions. This should help the new government focus its mind on water, already an item of attention in the BJP’s manifesto. One vital reform would be to have one single ministry for water, so as not to diffuse oversight across several ministries. What’s needed is better management of water resources for agriculture, industry and households, even as we arrest falling water tables, excessive dependence on groundwater and recharge aquifers. The acute drought in Maharashtra makes water-guzzling crops like sugarcane quite

unsustainable in Marathwada and other drier areas. About 80% of water demand is for agriculture and it is vital to institute cropping patterns suited to agro-climatic conditions.

Studies suggest that water usage for major crops in India is some three-four times the global average. Greater diffusion of sprinkler systems, better seeds and stepped up resource allocation for a vastly improved irrigation canal network are in order. In tandem, we need to revamp data systems on water. We are now increasingly dependent on groundwater for irrigation purposes and even drinking water, and yet have unreliable groundwater data, based on outdated collection methodologies. Similarly, efficiency in water use is a priority, with better Centre-state and inter-state water cooperation, along with participatory groundwater management.

Irrigation reform, rejuvenation of rivers and well-planned transparency in urban water management to augment resources for sewerage and waste water treatment are essential. The associated public engineering would dovetail into the campaign to end caste-linked practices of manual scavenging. Note that the BJP manifesto has promised piped water supply for all households by 2024. Piped supply of water would encourage people to use toilets as toilets, rather than as storage spaces, as well. The starting point of comprehensive reform in water would be creation of a new National Water Commission, as suggested by the Mihir Shah committee.
