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Slow to get off the blocks

In Manipur and Goa, the Congress lost out as it seemed lethargic and disoriented

L If the just-concluded polls were indicative of poor planning on the part of the Congress, the aftermath was worse. Even with the largest number of seats in Manipur and Goa, the party has managed to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. The delay in getting off the starting blocks in Goa is astounding given the circumstances. After squabbling among themselves, the Congress held a secret ballot to choose a leader and then sent the name onto the high command to decide on it. Meanwhile, the BJP, displaying some deft footwork, cobbled together the numbers and staked claim to form the government, a ready candidate for chief minister in the form of Manohar Parrikar in place. Similarly, in Manipur, despite the largest number of seats, the party was not quick enough to bring smaller parties into its fold and make a legitimate claim to form the government. Now, it is correct that constitutionally the governor is bound to call the largest party to form the government. But given the delay, the BJP was able to show that it had numbers on its side. The Congress, which has gone to the courts, got the reply that if it had the numbers it should have shown this in time. It did not and so the Supreme Court does not seem too sympathetic. The SC has told the Congress in the Goa case that it should have brought affidavits of support, which it did not.

The Congress seems to have lost its political touch completely. Once masters at outwitting opponents in the numbers game, today it seems like a rabbit caught in the headlights as a nimble BJP runs rings around it. The tussle is now on in the apex court, but whatever the outcome of the floor test in Goa, it shows up the Congress as unable to compete effectively in either quick reaction or political strategising. Yet, the BJP and all other political parties in India learnt the tricks of the trade from the grand old party. The party also did not seem to understand that power flows to the victor. It must examine why, despite its numbers, the smaller parties and independents did not gravitate towards it. When quick decisions are needed, the fallback on the high command simply doesn't work.

The Congress must see this defeat in Uttar Pradesh and its political failures in other states as a signal that it must rethink its brand of politics. It has so far been reactive when being proactive would have saved it some embarrassment. The writing on the wall is bold and clear: The Congress needs to reinvent itself drastically, now.

An impending storm

Jobless growth can lead to social unrest like the Jat and Patel agitations. India must invest in education and skills

W ith the assembly elections over, one of the big issues which will hog public attention in the coming days is the Jat agitation. Before leaving Delhi after their protests on March 1, the Jats promised to come back on March 20 and convert the city into "Jat land". Whether they will manage to do that or not only time will tell but the reasons for their disgruntlement — lack of jobs — will stay. The lack of adequate job opportunities was also the key reason behind the recent agitations of the Marathas and the Patels. This link between such social unrest and high unemployment rates was brought up by former plan panel member Arun Maira during a recent meeting. He said that India needs to create jobs or else there will be social unrest. According to the former member of the Planning Commission, India produces the least number of jobs per unit of growth.

In fact, this is not the case only in India. According to the International Labour Organisation, the global unemployment rate is expected to rise modestly from 5.7 to 5.8% in 2017 representing an increase of 3.4 million in the number of jobless people. The number of unemployed persons globally in 2017 is forecast to stand at just over 201 million — with an additional rise of 2.7 million expected in 2018 — as the pace of labour force growth outstrips job creation, according to the ILO's World Employment and Social Outlook — Trends 2017.

The lack of jobs is not just one challenge for India: Increasing automation will also take away many existing jobs. The policy prescription (job creation) is straightforward but, as India is increasingly finding out, not easy, especially because the level of literacy and skilling is poor. Every year, 10-12 million young people join the labour force, and five million people leave agriculture to join the non-agriculture sectors. Thus, there exists a total demand of 17-20 million new jobs per annum. In such a scenario, social security in the form of unemployment benefits could be one way of ensuring social stability, while continuing to invest heavily in education and skilling.

deepcut

RAJESH MAHAPATRA



From acche din to a 'new India'

Narendra Modi knows that to return to power in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, he needs a new narrative that shifts the goalposts

T he Bharatiya Janata Party's spectacular victory in Uttar Pradesh makes Prime Minister Narendra Modi appear unstoppable in his quest for a second term in 2019. The BJP's winning streak through the state and local body polls held since Modi stormed to power in the national election of 2014 demonstrates how the party's well-oiled election machine has gone from strength to strength. It draws its strength from the formidable triad of a popular leader in Modi, the state apparatus and an expansive network of volunteers from the BJP's ideological fountainhead, the RSS.

In contrast, the opposition is in disarray and continues to disintegrate. The failure of the Congress party to seize the opportunity in Goa and Manipur, where it emerged as the single-largest party but fell just short of a majority, reinforced once more how India's grand old party is just that — "grand" and old. It no longer has the appetite or the ability to go for power. As one commentator put it, the Congress has been reduced to a flock of headless chickens.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is the imminent danger of a split in Akhilesh Yadav's Samajwadi Party, the dismal showing by Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Admi Party in Punjab and Goa, the huge setback to Naveen Patnaik's Biju Janata Dal in the recently held panchayat elections, the festering power tussle in Tamil Nadu and the growing unease in relations between Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar and his ally Lalu Prasad. All of these dim the prospects of a strong realignment of regional parties to take on the BJP in 2019. As Omar Abdullah rightly conceded, "at this rate, we (the opposition) might as well forget 2019 and start planning/hoping for 2024."

So, what could possibly stop Modi from returning to power in 2019? The answer perhaps lies in the way we look at the

mandate. Take the case of Uttar Pradesh. About 40% of the voters chose the BJP over the others. They were overwhelmingly Hindus, mostly upper caste and non-Yadav OBCs. There have been suggestions that the BJP succeeded in consolidating their support, because it excluded the Muslims from its political equations in the state and raised the pitch for communal polarisation. I disagree. The campaign around Hindutva definitely helped, but it was not the most important determinant of the outcome. Most Hindus voted for the BJP because they still see in Modi a leader who can help them realise their aspirations, even though his government's policies have yet to bring tangible gains. He is still seen as a leader "who is trying to do something, while others are merely protesting." That narrative is reinforced again and again by Modi himself, via 24x7 news channels, social media and every mass-contact platform available with the government. So far, it seems to have worked, making the Gujarat strongman appear invincible and helping BJP steadily expand its national footprint.

But Modi knows the imponderables that will come in his way, between now and 2019. His party is now in power in 15 states that account for nearly 60% of the nation's population. By the time national elections are held in 2019, it might have added a couple more states to its kitty. The wins in Uttar Pra-

IN ABOUT A YEAR, THE BJP WILL BE IN A POSITION TO MUSTER ENOUGH SUPPORT IN THE RAJYA SABHA TO PUSH THROUGH ANY LEGISLATION. MODI AND HIS PARTY CAN DO PRETTY MUCH WHAT THEY WANT



Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his thanksgiving address to party workers on Sunday, a day after the verdict, at the BJP headquarters, March 12

BURHAAN KINU/HT PHOTO

adesh and Uttarakhand have taken the BJP closer to making its nominee the country's next president, in the elections scheduled for this July. In about a year, it will be in a position to muster enough support in the Rajya Sabha to push through any legislation. In other words, Modi and the BJP can do pretty much what they want to do. For not being able to do what they ought to do, they will have none to blame.

Modi knows his government's policies have so far failed to reverse the trend of jobless growth. Education and skill levels fall far short of what the country's youth need to be gainfully employed. The push for a digital India has improved productivity in some areas and added to transparency in government services, but as a policy it has been labour-displacing and the economic gains are not widely shared. In the aftermath of demonetisation, there is heightened distress in rural areas, where farm incomes were already getting squeezed and indebtedness had been on the rise. In the cities, the middle class is getting restless over the rising costs of living, stagnating wages and increasing layoffs. The global economic environment remains not so benign to provide any external growth stimuli. Nor does the government have enough money in its kitty to pump-prime the economy.

Modi knows he has yet to come good on his promise of acche din. And he knows, to return to power in 2019, he needs a new narrative that shifts the goalposts and is strong enough to overshadow the promise of acche din. That is why, in his thanksgiving address to party workers on Sunday, a day after the verdict, he made another pledge — building a "new India" by 2022. It remains to be seen if the electorate repes its faith again in yet another ephemeral promise from the prime minister

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newsmaker

OMAR ABDULLAH Former chief minister, Jammu and Kashmir

IN A NUTSHELL THERE IS NO LEADER TODAY WITH A PAN INDIA ACCEPTABILITY WHO CAN TAKE ON MODI AND THE BJP IN 2019... AT THIS RATE WE MIGHT AS WELL FORGET 2019 AND START PLANNING/HOPING FOR 2024. PUNJAB, GOA AND MANIPUR WOULD CERTAINLY SUGGEST THAT THE BJP ISN'T UNBEATABLE BUT STRATEGY NEEDS TO SHIFT FROM CRITICISM TO POSITIVE ALTERNATE.

Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMDE



THINK IT OVER »

BE AT WAR WITH YOUR VICES, AT PEACE WITH YOUR NEIGHBOURS, AND LET EVERY NEW YEAR FIND YOU A BETTER MAN.
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

The BJP faces several minefields in Manipur

If the party does not settle Naga interests in the state, it will run the risk of jettisoning the peace process

Sudeep Chakravarti

Manipur deserves better, but the best of a bad lot is all it could end up with after the elections to its assembly. There is also the Naga peace deal: The state has extensive Naga homelands that will have to be factored into any settlement.

Okram Ibobi Singh's desperate gambit to win Manipur for the fourth consecutive time for the Congress — and for himself as chief minister — hasn't paid off yet. In the absence of allies, the 28 seats the Congress won has fallen short of the 31 required for majority in the 60-member house. A spectacular late campaign surge by the BJP brought it a count of 21, from zero previously. The support of four allies and finessing of an independent MLA has taken the grouping to a majority — but only just.

As it stands, with the inevitable exercise of having to prove majority in the assembly the elections in Manipur are done, but hardly dusted. With a slim majority, the BJP combine will be vulnerable to jettisoning by fair-weather allies. Defection is high art in Manipur.

A peculiarity of this electoral outcome is that, for the first time in years, there will be a substantial Opposition irrespective of what combine governs. If the BJP is able to consolidate its hold, it will have the Congress at its heels.

Ironically, this will be to find fault in the BJP's delivery of its election promises — what Manipur sorely needs and what Singh was unable to provide. Singh has for three terms over 15 years presided over a slide in ethnic relations, collapse of urban and rural infrastructure, runaway corruption, and horrific human rights violations. The BJP will need to quickly find a way to end a crippling economic blockade imposed by the United Naga Council (UNC), the apex body of Naga tribes in Manipur; provide massive development; a sense of security over land and lives; and an equitable settlement of the Naga peace deal, to which the blockade is linked. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his senior BJP colleagues have publicly placed their names to it all.

As to the Naga issue, in August 2015 the Government of India signed a so-called framework of agreement with the largest Naga rebel groups, the National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah). In Nagaland's rigid tribal structure, it has become increasingly clear that, in post-conflict



Nongthombam Biren Singh (centre) is greeted after being elected the BJP's legislature party leader, Imphal, March 13

Nagaland there's no future for the NSCN (I-M) — especially for its key leaders and numerous cadre who are Tangkhul Naga from the northern Ukhrul district of Manipur. This possibility has refuelled long-time fears among the non-Naga Meitei majority that a Naga peace deal will involve ceding of contiguous Naga homelands in Manipur's territory. This is a violently emotive issue.

This is reinforced by an open secret in these parts: The UNC is a strategic vehicle for the NSCN (I-M). The blockade that has choked Manipur since early November (and provided Singh a political lifeline to play to Meitei interests — the Congress would otherwise have been decimated) has been at the instance of the UNC. The BJP-led central government and now, the BJP in Manipur have much to lose in the non-Naga parts of Manipur — where the Meitei reside as also the ethnic majority, and the Kuki and Zomi tribes — if it is seen to pander to Naga interests.

The UNC began to push hard about three years ago to delink from the administrative control of Imphal, accusing Singh's government of pursuing policies of administration and development that favour the Meiteis. The NSCN (I-M) piggybacked on this demand.

The BJP will now have to step delicately, even though Singh may have made its job of untangling Manipur's ethnic mess a little

easier. In his bid to regain support among non-Nagas, on December 9 Singh announced the formation of seven new districts adding to the existing nine. Of these, four were earlier part of the Naga-majority districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong and Chandel. In effect, it cauterised non-Naga areas.

Theoretically this may help the BJP balance the peace process with the NSCN (I-M) as well as live up to the electoral promise that Manipur's "territorial integrity" won't be disturbed. It can now offer administrative autonomy to Naga homelands in Manipur within the geographical construct of Manipur.

But it will require great finessing. If the BJP is seen to give in to Naga interests without offering a massive development and administrative boost to Manipur — perhaps even dilute the ambit of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act as a sweetener, or reach out to Meitei rebel groups with offers of peace and reconciliation — Manipur will explode. And, if the BJP does not settle Naga interests in Manipur, it will run the risk of jettisoning the Naga peace process. As the BJP will very quickly discover, in Manipur political ballast is a brutal business.

Sudeep Chakravarti is author of Highway 39: Journeys through a Fractured Land, a book set in Manipur and Nagaland

The views expressed are personal

innervoice

Faith will surely make us feel that our hopes are alive

PP Wangchuk

Faith is an instrument of power that can unleash many great things in life. That is why we are told to have faith and be determined to win.

It is faith in your potential that can work wonders. I was reading, the other day, Preeti Shenoy's Life is What You Make It. The main character, Ankit, for whom, initially, the whole world was at her feet because of her physical beauty, later gets into depression. Her doctor, full of faith not only in his own ability to treat Ankit but also in her power to get back to normalcy, does wonders. Ankit comes out of her depression all because her doctor and she had full conviction that if they believed in something, it will happen.

American writer Emmanuel Teney says, "As your faith is strengthened, you will find there is no longer the need to have a sense of control, and that things will follow as they will, and that you will flow with them, to your great delight and benefit." Faith sustains hope, and when hope is sustained, you are a gainer, leading ultimately to big achievements that will make others proud of you. No need to say that nothing can be achieved without hope and faith.

Faith works like a lamp that brightens up life and gives vision at night. It inspires you and guides you when you see nothing but darkness all around. And that enables us to defeat all the odds we have to face in the long journey of life.

Therefore, we must convince ourselves that faith will surely make us feel that our hopes are very much alive and within reach.

(Inner Voice comprises contributions from our readers. The views expressed are personal)

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