



TSUNAMI 2014: THE ELECTION THAT SHOOK INDIAN POLITICS.

Political Science

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KEYWORDS

Narendra Modi has scripted one of the most gloriously spectacular political triumphs in the history of independent India. There is no other way to describe this 2014 General Election and the magnitude of the achievement. For the first time since Independence, a non-Congress party has got a majority on its own. By enlarging its footprint, it has become a genuinely national party and transformed India's political landscape, perhaps forever*1.

The Congress has been brought to the verge of extinction. Every known rule of Indian politics has been transformed. Caste-based political parties have been sidelined at a national level*2. A party has been able to create a broad-based support, across social classes, across rural and urban areas, across different castes. A chief minister from a small state has become a national figure. And perhaps most importantly, this election has belied the cliché that all politics is local.

This election was fought on national themes. The voters have not been swayed by narrow horizons. They have voted what they thought was in the national interest. The idea of India is not an intellectual abstraction. It is created and enacted by millions of voters thinking about the future of India as a whole, joining in a national discourse and delivering their verdict. This is a community of fate charting its future together.

But Modi is a political phenomenon without precedent. In the annals of democratic politics, there are few stories to match his. He is a politician who embodies the quintessence of politics: converting adversity into opportunity. That single characteristic, more than any other, sums up his appeal. It stood out in distinction to a political culture where a ruling dispensation lost no opportunity to miss an opportunity, where privilege masqueraded as victimhood, and care for the poor as a paternalistic excuse to keep them poor*3.

On 26 December 2012, Narendra Modi was sworn in as the Chief Minister of Gujarat for the fourth time to extend his record tenure in office. "Mass Murderer" or "Development Man"? It depends on which side of the spectrum he is viewed from, because Narendra Modi is one of those politicians whose name prompts extremes of hate-filled anger or outright adulation*4. Despite polarizing Gujarat and India in more ways than one, Modi brilliantly does what it takes to survive in a democracy: win elections. Written by veteran journalist and writer, Nilanjan after several in-depth interviews, meticulous research and extensive travel through Gujarat, this book reveals hitherto unknown aspects of Narendra Modi's psyche: as a six-year-old boy selling tea to help out his father and distributing badges and raising slogans at the behest of a local political leader; abandoning his family and wife in search of his definition of truth; initiation into the RSS as a fledgling who ran errands for his seniors; his idea of Gujarati pride and Indianness; and finally, his meteoric rise which gave him a distinct identity post the 2002 Godhra riots. Narendra Modi: The Man, The Times is a definitive biography of a man who may have challenged the basic principles of a sovereign secular nation but emerged at its destination as an undisputed and larger-than-life leader.

The Modi-centric BJP 2014 election campaign : Strategies - new techniques and old tactics.

The 2014 election campaign of the BJP was unprecedented not only because, for the first time, a Chief Minister was the prime ministerial candidate of one of the national parties in the fray and tried to promote his state achievements in terms of development across the nation, but also because the party relied on the personality of its leader more than

any other party since the Congress under Indira Gandhi. Narendra Modi broke with the BJP's collegial tradition in several ways. He marginalized party veterans, short-circuited the BJP apparatus to use a parallel support structure, and resorted to new techniques of communication that saturated the public space. However, these innovations were superimposed on older themes which had sometimes not been used by the BJP itself before, but by others - like caste politics or corruption. Modi's BJP also fell back on some alliances with other parties, the old RSS network, and revisited Hindutva politics to such an extent that 'development' was definitely not the only theme of the Modi campaign*5.

A Leading western Newspaper went so far as to argue in its editorial that the electoral verdict of 2014 "May well down in history as the day when Britishers left India". It was observed Narendra Modi's victory in the elections mark the end of a long era in which Britain ruled the subcontinent. India under Congress party in many ways a continuation of British Raj by other means*6.

The editorial spoke of the voices of the people asserting itself, a people who had a vote often lacked a voice. It was seen as an endorsement of that voice, he was a "new kind of leader from lower castes", not a natural English speaker without any truck with old power structure and elites"*7.

In a discourse suffused with all that cannot be done, he came to be an embodiment of all that can be done under adversity. He rose from a humble background, and in some ways, understood the possibilities democracy affords for mobility more than its princely custodians. He was an outsider, demonized by the intelligentsia, with a Central government arrayed against him. But he has broken through and will now produce the biggest churning that India's power structure has seen since Independence.

He has tenaciously fought every charge. He has overcome the opposition of his own party establishment. But he has done what his opponents failed to do. He continued to think politically, sensing the national mood, mounting a formidable political machine, by sheer dint of will crisscrossing the country, connecting with crowds from West Bengal to Kerala, and demonstrating an old truth: politics is about creativity, will, organization, imagination, aspiration. Those who think of it purely in structural terms are bound to remain victims of that structure.

Modi became the voice of change. We can talk about the way parts of his campaign fished in social polarization in places like UP. But for the most part, he presented himself as something new: to walk into Bihar and talk about transcending caste politics, to utter the sentence no secularist in India has had the courage to utter, that poverty has no religion, to dream of reviving India's growth prospects, to talk about jobs, to tap into the restlessness for doing things. He became an embodiment for a desire for change*8.

Congress prepared the ground for him: it mismanaged the economy, acted as a rotten plutocracy, and its top leadership engaged in one of the most spectacular acts of political hara kiri we have seen. The AAP, though its electoral performance was meagre, managed to expose the rottenness of this ancient regime.

Most non-BJP alternatives discredited themselves thoroughly, both

intellectually and politically. Non-BJP secular forces have, for years, tied themselves into knots of intellectual dis-ingenuousness and institutional hypocrisy. They hitched their stars to the Congress that, instead of making institutions more credible, robust and fair, consistently used its power to undermine them.

In its actual behavior, it could not claim the moral high ground on any issue. When disenchantment with the Congress set in, the protest vote had nowhere else to go but to the only available alternative. We have seen, since 2004, something like a stability surge in many elections: once disenchantment sets in, the vote gravitates towards the other viable alternative.

The Congress and its minions had been running the self-defeating line that this election was just about money and propaganda. This line is self-defeating because it expresses open contempt for voters. This has been a big failing of non-BJP forces. Anyone who talked about new narratives was always pulled back into the muck of social arithmetic. Talking about governance and development was being elitist, there were some authentic social forces lurking underneath that represented the true spirit of Indian politics. They thus ceded this space entirely to the BJP. Irony of ironies: the BJP was left holding the candle of development and progress.

The same dis-ingenuousness marked the debate on leadership. Any mention of leadership was condemned as a yearning for authoritarianism. The blunt fact is that the election was made semi-presidential because we did not have a prime minister the last few years. It was intellectually otiose to think that leadership does not matter. The more parties ran away from projecting leadership or addressing issues of stability, the more they yielded the field to Modi*9.

This was an election about leadership, and Modi grew in stature at every step. He has an uncanny machine to project his power. But he also has an unprecedented capacity to connect. And what the attacks on him did was reinforce the one attribute of leadership: his capacity to stand his ground and not be swayed by every wind. Ironically, the person accused of being a media creation came across as the man capable of standing his own ground.

There will be other occasions to discuss what this means for the future of Indian democracy. The fact that the BJP does not have a single Muslim Lok Sabha MP will be an issue they will have to address proactively, not presumptuously wave away. The decimation of the opposition is a structural worry. There is little doubt that India's future now depends on what Modi decides to do with his mandate. He has an unprecedented opportunity to take India to new heights. Will this be a new dawn, a false dawn, or just another day? Only time will tell. But this is Modi's moment. It will be churlish to describe it as anything else.

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