

Assembly Elections 2018

## What explains Modi's waning magic and the rise of Rahul Gandhi? Darwin may hold a clue

Unfortunately for Modi, this one-time 'part-time politician' called Rahul Gandhi, the proverbial Pappu, was willing to dare.

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It helps to have a perspective to understand events of significance. The alternative is to play consumerist to the voluminous media spouting of platitudes and prejudices.

Consider this. While the counting of votes for five states was in progress on Tuesday, the media focus was all on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whereas the man at the centre of the scenario was Congress president Rahul Gandhi. There were only two references to him all day, as against the nearly 30 references to Modi before afternoon. Only after Gandhi's press appearance did this trend change, grudgingly. There is much you can learn from this, provided you have your perspective right. Agents of misinformation, as also merchants of mis-governance, thrive for want of proper cognitive and interpretative perspective on our part.

The angle of vision we may use legitimately is that of development or progress. In 2014, Modi rode to power on the promise of a heaven of development. By implication, we were promised that we would be led out of the dark age of communal politics, with its drivers of hate and distraction from real-life problems. We sighed in relief. We did so because we were naïve and lacked common sense. Only the most gullible will believe that

development can be delivered to a people without any change in their outlook and personal empowerment. The proof that someone is really interested in development is that he does all he can to remove the hindrances to development.

In this respect also, we were misled. We were told the only hindrance was the Congress. Creating a Congress-mukt Bharat (Congress-free India) was, we were told, a developmental imperative. Millions of Indians, herded together in many a faceless, riling, roiling crowd, responded hysterically to this call. Modi rode to power, accompanied by an army of monstrous hyper-expectations.



The erosion of the BJP's base in the Hindi heartland should worry the BJP, which has nothing else to bank on. (Credit: PTI)

## Unkept promises

The outlandish promises were made, if Union minister Nitin Gadkari is to be believed, on the assumption that the Bharatiya Janata Party would not come to power and would, hence, not have to deliver on those promises. According to him, those promises were not to be taken seriously. Such explanations may sound clever, but they do not help. Instead, like demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax, they hurt their inventors.

Ensconced in power, Modi realised the impossibility of being a servant both to the people and to our insatiable corporate giants at the same time. The BJP's electoral machine can be run only with corporate largesse of astronomical proportions. Modi's seat in power can be secured only with the votes of the common man, whose interests have to be compromised to keep the corporate giants in good humour. It is a dilemma the gravity of which Modi could not have been unaware of, given his stint as chief minister of Gujarat.

In our country, as in most countries, development indices and numbers are calculated with instruments indexed to the organised sector, especially the corporates. The plight of workers in the unorganised sector – who comprise 93% of India's workforce and generate 45% of national wealth – is not reckoned in the calculations and projections. There is no data available on this sector. When gross domestic product (the value of all goods and services produced in a country in a year) is said to be rising or falling, it does not include how these people – nearly 500 million of them – fare. They are irrelevant to our growth story. If data pertaining to them is factored in, calculations will go berserk and boasts will stop.

## Merchant of illusions

Let us return to the elections in five states, particularly in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. Their over-arching feature is the emergence of Rahul Gandhi as a genuine leader and serious contender to Modi's myth of personal invincibility. The erosion of the BJP's base in the Hindi heartland is striking and should worry the BJP, which has nothing else to bank on. Why has this happened so quickly?

I do not know if Modi can be described as a merchant of death, as former Congress president Sonia Gandhi did in the wake of the 2002 Gujarat genocide. I would not hesitate to describe him as a hypnotic merchant of illusions. He is the most effective salesman in this category in our history. Whether it is a laudable thing or not is for individuals to judge. One thing is certain, it has taken the country nowhere. All the promises made remain not only undelivered but even unaddressed. They do not need to be listed; the list is long and familiar.

To understand why the Modi magic has waned so soon, we need to understand the logic of his ascendancy. He unfurled a carefully calibrated strategy, which could be put as follows.

The goal: manipulation of the people to one's advantage. How to do this? By raising expectations – the more astronomical, the better. How can this be done? By projecting problems and pretending to have magical solutions for them. The masses are helpless in respect of solutions. They look for those who can invent new and effective solutions. This is their vulnerability. If you can silence and harden your conscience, you can take mega advantage of it and go home, laughing all the way.

But not for long, and thereby hangs the tale. The larger the promises made and expectations raised, the more bitter and severe the backlash. But that reaction will not come about by itself. Nothing happens by itself in public life and in the political area. As Stalin famously said, history needs a gentle nudge from you. Unfortunately, for Modi, there is this one-time “part-time politician” called Rahul Gandhi, the proverbial Pappu that Modi and Co revelled in ridiculing, like elementary school children tormenting a street puppy, who was willing to dare.

The scores of TV commentators and expert psephologists who boomed on various channels throughout Tuesday could see everything else but this. They kept saying, times without number, “This is a vote against Modi and not in favour of the Congress” (refusing to take Gandhi's name, mind you). Sure. But why? That, they did not tell you.





Rahul Gandhi is all that Narendra Modi is not. (Credit: @INCIndia / Twitter)

## Myth of invincibility

The point is that Modi is coming unstuck progressively. He is running out of ideas. He has survived longer than anyone else could have by manufacturing clever verbal tricks, tropes and alliterations. You can create an anthology out of them. It will sell like hot dosas. But like dosas, they are perishable and their shelf life is short. There is no substitute for solving the problems that people face.

For example, Modi insisted that people with disabilities should not be called “vikalang”. They should, instead, be called “divyang” – people with limbs dear to the gods. It sounded so good. But that did not mean the plight of persons with disabilities improved, or was meant to improve, even a bit. The new label was so soulful, so satisfying. It was good enough to be a permanent palliative. So, go home and sleep with it. Thank you.

A myth of Modi’s invincibility was scripted, with a drooling-obliging media in tow. Little did it occur to millions that it was based, in part, on promises sans delivery. For the most part, it was sustained by Congress-bashing and Rahul-ridiculing. Modi continued to speak as though he was still in the Opposition – the belligerent opposition to the Opposition who happens to be, incidentally, the prime minister. This could go on for as long as there was none from the Opposition to call his bluff.

Rahul Gandhi emerged as that voice. From the beginning, he positioned himself in stark contrast to Modi. He was all that Modi was not. Not afraid to be ridiculed in a virile and macho world championed by Modi, he was content to be self-effacing, unassertive in speaking and doing, willing to listen and to learn, daring to be compassionate and attentive to the lost and the least, for which he was most ridiculed. But all the while, he remained, like his mother Sonia Gandhi, a steady and steadfast learner. His arangettam, his debut, came with the no-confidence motion against the Modi government in July. He erupted into reckoning. There has been no

looking back since. Gandhi today convinces everyone as one who has discovered his true vocation and is ready and willing to follow it passionately and purposefully.

## Evolve or die out

Where does Charles Darwin come in? Well, according to Darwin, creatures that fail to evolve solutions to the problems that life poses to them die out. Life does not grant too much margin for fooling around. We are living, as the writer Alvin Toffler would tell us, in an era of “future shock”. Tomorrow is already upon us, today. Speed is the most significant aspect of modern life. Speed also implies accelerating obsolescence. As George Bernard Shaw said in his speech while accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature: Ptolemy’s universe lasted 1,400 years. The Newtonian universe lasted 300 years. Einstein’s universe? “It is now 30 years,” he quipped, with Einstein himself in the audience. (That was in 1930). “I don’t know how many years more it will last.”

The idea that the BJP will rule India “for the next 50 years” – typical of BJP president Amit Shah’s hubris – is contrary to the logic of history. Such pretensions are swept away from the face of the earth and waters of change will roll over and erase them like gibberish written in sand. As the psalmist says, for a moment you will see. You will look for it but will not find its place.