



Facing the debacle

Congress's stocktaking must be deeper than an off-the-cuff take on Rahul Gandhi

In light of the Congress's dismal defeat in the 17th general election, Congress president Rahul Gandhi's offer to resign from his party post at the Congress Working Committee on Saturday was on expected lines. What came as a surprise is the indication that he was seemingly unmoved by the CWC resolution that urged him to continue as president and restructure the party. Either way, whether Mr. Gandhi finally insists on quitting or allows himself to be persuaded otherwise, the party cannot look away from a dilemma that has shadowed it for long: the double-edged sword of the dynasty. Devoid of a coherent ideology or organisational structure, especially over the past two decades, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty has remained the party's cementing glue. The family is projected as the party's emotional currency with the public and the Gandhi surname is invoked to hark back to the formative years of modern India. However, now in 2019, facing its toughest crisis, the Congress must address the question unflinchingly, and in depth, if it is to refresh itself as a political force. The decline of the Congress is symptomatic of the fading appeal of the old ways of conducting politics and of the disenchantment with opaque and unaccountable power-wielding by political dynasties. Also, as with the Left and Mandal parties, the Congress has collectively failed to upgrade its message, modes of outreach and organisational structures. But the Congress's success in nimbly facing up to the rout is vital if India is to have a coherent political opposition that keeps the government of the day democratically accountable.

Of course, Congress leaders argue that the party would disintegrate if Mr. Gandhi were to quit. Mr. Gandhi, who had once likened power to poison, must take full responsibility for his party's debacle. However, figuring out the form that this account-taking must assume is what makes it a difficult moment for him and the Congress. Whether Mr. Gandhi sticks to his resolve to quit or not, the party will have to go through a process of revitalisation that deals with the hollowing out of its intra-party democracy. Any organisational reform that does not decentralise decision-making and fix accountability at all levels is bound to fail. It must involve a frank assessment of the Congress's risk of failing to cohere if Mr. Gandhi were to abruptly leave his post as party president. True, the Congress may well be able to sustain itself without a dynast. But unless the new leadership emerges through a truly democratic exercise, and is truly independent of the dynasty, any half-hearted restructuring will only lead to the enfeeblement of the party. A dynasty-free Congress will surely invigorate the Indian polity, but a Congress-free polity could well prove dangerous for Indian democracy.

Fire and laissez-faire

Fix accountability for Surat tragedy, and update the fire safety protocol countrywide

The deadly fire in a Surat coaching centre that resulted in the death of 22 young people highlights the gap between India's dreamy visions of smart cities and the cruel reality of urban chaos and lawlessness. Images of students leaping from the blazing building in a bid to escape will remain imprinted on the public consciousness; many more teenagers were hopelessly overpowered by the flames within the premises, while a lucky few escaped with their lives. These young Indians are the latest victims of a culture of laissez-faire urbanisation that city governments have bred and which the courts allow to be pursued without severe penalties. India's abysmal record on fire safety is reflected in the death of 17,700 people countrywide in fires in both public and residential buildings during 2015, according to the latest available data from the National Crime Records Bureau. Periodically, high-profile cases such as the Uphaar cinema blaze in Delhi that killed 59 people in 1997, and the Kumbakonam school fire in Tamil Nadu in 2004 in which 94 children perished shock the nation, but even these are not strong enough to persuade governments to make fire safety the priority it should be. Neither has prolonged, aggressive litigation by the affected families in the Uphaar case made a difference, because the criminal culpability of the administrative machinery and officials who sanctioned unsafe buildings, often in return for bribes, remains largely unaddressed.

The Surat fire cannot be called an accident, since there are reports of notices having been served to the builder on the risks, but not pursued by the Fire Department. Civic officials have displayed unforgivable indifference, since two deaths occurred in another coaching centre in the city late last year. That tragedy should have led to a comprehensive review of public buildings. The present inquiry into the disaster should go into any deviations from the sanctioned plan for the commercial building housing the coaching centre, and the role of urban planning officials in allowing it to come up. Ultimately, litigation on fire disasters goes to the courts, and it is essential for the judiciary to send out the message that there will be no tolerance to corruption and evasion in the enforcement of building rules and fire safety. Beyond suspending a few officials and filing cases against the building owners, there is a need to make an example of sanctioning and enforcement authorities. The unwavering message must be that Indians demand accountability. Mandating compulsory insurance for all public buildings against fire risk and public liability can bring about a change to the way architects and builders approach the question of safety, since the insurer would require a reduction of risk and compliance with building plans. At least, that would be a start to rewriting India's shameful record on fire safety.

The making of the 2019 verdict

Voters want someone who will protect them from insecurities flowing from the new economy and globalisation



NEERA CHANDHOKE

A great deal has been already said and written on the spectacular victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), or rather Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the 2019 general election, why he won, and why the Congress lost so badly. Still the results occasion surprise. Mr. Modi headed the government during a period of major job losses, a serious agrarian crisis, marginalisation of the minorities, and polarisation of society. And yet he was re-elected to power. What is the secret of his appeal to voters across class and caste?

A worldwide trend

Over the past five years we see a worldwide trend – for example in the U.S., Russia, Turkey, the Philippines, Hungary, Poland, and Brazil – of a shift to a mode of politics known as authoritarian populism. Populist leaders are not anti-democratic, they are elected often with huge mandates. Once they are elected, authoritarian populists disdain institutions and processes that act as brakes on the exercise of power – civil society, a free media, separation of powers, and a judiciary. They are impatient with the intricate and laborious processes of democratic governance. They prefer to concentrate power in their corporeal person.

Two, authoritarian leaders garner power by attacking existing elites as corrupt. They themselves might be a part of this elite – recollect a wealthy Donald Trump or a

Narendra Modi who had held power for more than 12 continuous years in Gujarat before he became Prime Minister. Three, authoritarian populist leaders prefer to speak directly to an inchoate and slippery entity called 'the people' than through reported speeches and questioning in Parliament or press conferences. Four, populist leaders dismiss groups, such as immigrants and minorities, as non-people. Five, authoritarian populists eschew the niceties of public debate, which is expected to be civil and heedful of the sensibilities of other participants. They have contempt for politically correct language. They provoke and insult. They delight in breaking every taboo.

Because they speak as they will and how they will, authoritarian populists are disorienting. Opposition leaders found it impossible to keep pace with Mr. Modi's rapidly changing rhetoric. Despite the many errors that he committed when campaigning, the Opposition simply could not respond adequately, or in time. He shifted from "chowkidar" to Balakot, and non-BJP leaders had just no time to ask an important question, how on earth did the Pulwama attack happen? Mr. Modi raised his arms, all fire and brimstone, and practically threatened the use of nuclear weapons. Everyone kept quiet. The quintessential authoritarian populist rides rough shod over consistency or decorum. He presents himself as a strong leader, breaks conventions and makes his own rules.

Why do electorates in democracies opt for rule by a strong man? Perhaps they look for someone who will protect them against the continuing insecurities that liberalisation and globalisation have brought in their wake. In India



G. RAMAKRISHNA

both processes were formally launched in 1991. The process that was initiated in the late 1980s was marked by the rollback of the welfare state by Ronald Reagan in the U.S., and Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. For them an unfettered market was the answer to all problems. The mythology of the market was once again reasserted, its injustices were forgotten.

Checking the market

Karl Polanyi had in *The Great Transformation* (1944) told us that the market is based on exploitative social relations, it dislocates people and leads to misery. The counter-movement to suffering caused by the market was the rise of working-class struggles. These movements managed to re-embed the market in the state. Someone had to be in charge of the market, someone had to be responsible for the deprivations wreaked by this institution. The market could not be left alone, it would destroy social and economic life.

Postcolonial elites tried to control market processes that had been monopolised by imperial powers. But in the 1990s the market acquired dominance and legitimacy. This time there was no working class to counter the ideology and the practices of this system. It had been decimated. In In-

dia, contract labour was introduced in the organised working class. This generated tremendous insecurity. Public enterprises were privatised and workers were thrown onto the street. Here they joined the ranks of the unorganised working class whose lives are blighted by anxiety. Where is the next mess of porridge going to come from? India transited to the service sector, but in the lower levels of these enterprises, young people are not promised security of jobs, they can be sacked at the drop of a hat. On balance, the working people live in unstable conditions.

There is no doubt that the deregulation of the economy benefited sections of people who managed to make the transition to new modes of technology and new ways of working. But in the process, inequality between classes deepened to an alarming extent. Among those who had been left out, it generated both aspirations for better lifestyles and resentment at the glittering life styles of the affluent. Insecurity, combined with aspirations and resentment, engendered the politics of desire and social envy.

It was a mixture of these combustible sentiments that were articulated by new forms of music, such as rap. This mix was also tapped by authoritarian populist leaders. They drew upon rage against elites, and they initiated a backlash against inherited privileges. Above all, we saw that populist leaders drew upon resentment to build up xenophobic nationalism. And we witnessed with some sadness the retreat of progressive politics.

Firaq's caution

Fuzzy class positions and insecurities, desire for a better life and so-

cial esteem, the politics of frustration and social envy have been harnessed to a project of xenophobic nationalism. In this mood of nationalism anyone who is not like us becomes the enemy who has appropriated land and resources. Even if a majority of Indians are not directly involved in hate crimes against minorities, they do not sympathise with the victims of these crimes against humanity. And the few who carry out candlelight processions to protest against any intolerance are labeled in perverse ways. Our own people became strangers in their own land. The poet Firaq Gorakhpuri had famously written: *Sar Zamine-e-Hind par aqwam-e-alam ke Firaq/Kafle baste rahe/Hindustan banta gaya* (India was created as a plural society by successive waves of migration). Today people whose ancestors settled in this land, whose labour was mixed with the land to create wealth, and who became a part of the earth when they died are characterised as foreigners.

Mr. Modi's strongman image is reassuring to people wracked by both anxiety and aspirations. It is the same case in other parts of the world. Researchers tell us that today the working class votes for right-wing populists. Matters are not very different in India. Once we had a social democratic state, now we have an authoritarian populist leader who might protect his people, but who has no patience with the tedious processes of parliamentary democracy. Thomas Hobbes had written in the 17th century that all people want self-preservation. They are willing to give up their rights to a Leviathan in exchange for security. We continue to vote for Leviathans.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Electoral outcomes don't alter the purpose of journalism

Journalists should regain their sense of pride to pose probing questions and to speak truth to power



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

This newspaper's editorial, "For a rediscovery of India" (May 24, 2019), was not only about Narendra Modi's return to power but also about the fundamentals of journalism. The editorial pointed out the most important retreat we are witnessing in the body polity: "In recess, if not in irreversible decline, is the idea of India that had grown from the freedom movement, and had prevailed for most part of the history of the Republic."

There is a disturbing retreat in the information and media sphere too. For instance, the World Press Freedom Index for 2019 compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has documented "how hatred of journalists has degenerated into violence, contributing to an increase in fear". It points to a steady decline in the number of

countries regarded as safe, where journalists can work in complete security, even as authoritarian regimes continue to tighten their grip on the media. The Index also downgrades India by two ranks – from 138 to 140 – because "critics of Hindu nationalism were branded as 'anti-Indian' in online harassment campaigns and six journalists were murdered in 2018".

Some of the basics

On the question of governance, the editorial was unequivocal in expecting the Prime Minister to walk the talk of "sabka saath, sabka vikas (with all, development for all)". It hoped that "Mr. Modi's second term will be more inclusive than the first, which was marred by arrogant pride and hateful prejudice". Before attempting to address the crucial question of what we, as citizens, expect from the media in general, and *The Hindu* in particular during Mr. Modi's second term, I would like to list out some of the fundamentals of journalism. Media scholars identify two major functions for the news media: the credible-informational and the critical-analytical-investi-



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gative. And there is an often conflicting demand between what is in public interest and what the public is interested in. Hence, it is important for not only journalists but also citizens to know the purpose of journalism.

For years, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, the authors of the defining textbook, *The Elements of Journalism*, have been exploring the purpose of journalism. For them, the purpose is not defined by technology, nor by journalists or the techniques they employ. The principles and purpose of journalism are defined by something more basic: the function news plays in the lives of people. They write: "News is that part of communication that keeps us informed of the changing events, issues, and characters in the world

outside... The purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to make the best possible decisions about their lives, their communities, their societies, and their governments."

The political climate is not hostile to the idea of the credible-informational function of the news media. But, there is a chilling intimidating environment when it comes to the second function – of being critical-analytical-investigative. From SLAPPs, (Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation), to draconian criminal defamation laws and denial of crucial access, multiple devices are deployed to blunt efforts to hold those in power accountable. Let us not forget that India has the ignominy of figuring in the Global Impunity Index, which is computed by the Committee to Protect Journalists every year, over the last decade.

What would be welcome

As Prime Minister during his first term, Mr. Modi may have developed a direct communication channel with the people through his social media handles and his

periodic broadcast, "Mann Ki Baat", and this is obviously yielding political dividends. But, as the head of the largest democracy in the world, there is a need to constantly interact with the larger news media and not some select players alone. An open press conference in which unscripted questions are encouraged would be a welcome departure. There is a need to reverse tendencies to undermine the salient features of the Right to Information Act. Pulitzer-Prize winning historian Ron Chernow summarised, in one sentence, the prevailing media environment during a White House Correspondents Association dinner last month: "We now have to fight hard for basic truths that we once took for granted."

Journalists should not be apologetic but instead regain their sense of pride to pose probing questions, to demand accountability, to seek answers, and to speak truth to power. Because that is not only the purpose of journalism but also the reason for journalism to survive as a discipline.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Getting off the ropes

The Congress has been decimated but there is still hope for revival (Editorial page, "No easy solutions for the Congress", May 25). The base of the grand old party has been chipped away by the BJP and regional parties over a period of time and the party has made absolutely no effort to rebuild the organisational base. The situation has become so dismal that even when it formulated an attractive welfare scheme, the party failed to communicate its significance to voters. Going forward, it needs to rebuild the party from the village level. State and district level leaders who are in touch with the people should be encouraged rather than parachuting 'Made in Delhi' leaders. The party president should tour the country extensively in the next five years and understand the problems of the common people. Further, the party should eschew its soft Hindutva strategy to counter the BJP and re-embrace secularism,

which has been its primary strength right from its origin. It may be a bit too much to expect the Congress to relinquish its dynastic leadership (Page 1, "CWC rejects Rahul's offer to quit, asks him to overhaul party", May 26). The leadership should get rid of its coterie-guided functioning and develop a regional-local leadership.

KOSARAJU CHANDRAMOULI,
Hyderabad

■ The time has come for the Congress party to regain its political legacy. The party lacks leadership. In the current political scenario, there is no leader in the Congress who can match Mr. Modi in terms of oration and presence. Moreover, the Congress's secularism has taken a beating. Unless there are new ideas and ideals, the Congress, or for that matter any other Opposition party in India, cannot even dream of dislodging the BJP.

C. S. SAMBASIVAM
Mettur dam, Tamil Nadu

■ It is evident from some of the letters that have been published ever since the

BJP's jaw-dropping victory that there is still a lot of latent support for the Congress, at least among many of us old-time readers of this daily (I am 88) who grew up with the Congress. I wonder whether Rahul Gandhi is even aware of his party's great legacy. The Congress does not belong to the Nehru-Gandhi family alone. It belongs to the rest of India too as it represents values that are still dear to us in this great country. If the Congress is to rebuild itself, it needs to stay away from 'power-point presentations'. There must be mass contact programmes in parliamentary constituencies. This is the strategy that the BJP has fine-tuned to its advantage. It also needs to have a strategy for the short, medium and long term. Finally, I feel Amethi was lost after Mr. Gandhi announced his decision to contest from Wayanad. Whatever the spin being given to the decision, the perception was that he was "running away". Priyanka Gandhi Vadra should have also contested against the Prime Minister.

Even if she had lost, it would have still sent a powerful message to the party rank and file that she is willing to pick up any gauntlet. Life is about fighting the odds, which the BJP's Smriti Irani has proven. The Congress must remember that in 2024, 10 crore new voters will be added. Can it connect with them in terms of its great legacy?

C.H. SUBRAMANIAN,
Pune

Mandate and after

The editorial, "For a rediscovery of India" (May 24), has tossed a new catchword into the BJP's camp: "sabka vishwas (the trust of all)". Despite the editorial's attempt to strike a balance between uncritical praise and fair criticism, one feels that the purported objectivity seems marred by two sweeping and unambiguous assertions. One is attributing the outcome to an "electoral endorsement of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism". I don't think many people who voted for the BJP will even remotely be aware that such an ideological world view

exists in the first place. It will be a mistake to seek and confirm the existence of an overarching pull factor that drew voters towards the ruling party. The pre- and post-poll surveys pointed to the high level of trust that large segments of society reposed in the leadership of Mr. Modi. The other troubling finding is the claim that Mr. Modi's first term was "marred by arrogant pride and hateful prejudice". This appears to be a sweeping denunciation that can be countered. Despite his popularity, no Prime Minister in independent India has been as viciously targeted by his opponents as Mr. Modi, sometimes overstepping the boundaries of decorum.

V.N. MUKUNDARAJAN,
Thiruvananthapuram

Surat fire

The fire accident at a coaching centre in Surat reminds me of a similar incident in 2004 at Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu ("Surat coaching centre owner held after fire, toll now 22", May 26). It is common practice in India to

flout safety norms in almost every field and occupation. One needs to praise Ketan Jorawadia for his quick thinking.

A. JAINULABDEEN,
Chennai

The precursor

I wonder why the captioned article, "When rage became terror" (Magazine, May 26, pp 6-9), did not find it relevant to make even a passing reference to the role played by majoritarian policies (in the name of democracy) followed by successive governments in Sri Lanka for decades. Wasn't this directly the cause of Tamil dissatisfaction which severely rocked the country and in all probability created a fertile breeding ground for those macabre and destructive thoughts to enter the minds of those whose motivations and actions the article seeks to analyse? It has profound lessons for how we in India manage our society and politics.

SUSHIL PRASAD,
Hyderabad

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