

# It's time to take stock of the electoral process

The general election saw serious questions being posed to the Election Commission. The 17th Lok Sabha must deliberate on them

S.Y. QURAISHI

The biggest election in the world has finally come to a successful end for which the three Election Commissioners and their 12 million staff deserve appreciation. Unfortunately, what deserved to be remembered as a subject of national pride became mired in several controversies. At the top of the list was the unprecedented attack on the Election Commission (EC) which was accused of being soft on the top leadership of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for repeated violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC).

## A long election

Questions were also raised about the prolonged election of seven phases. The EC has always main-

tained that the most pressing concern is voter security. All political parties demand that Central armed police forces be deployed, but due to their limited availability they have to be rotated, which necessitates multi-phase elections. If the numbers of these forces were adequate, the EC could conduct elections in one day. After all, the MCC is difficult to operationalise in the age of social media in staggered elections. This is a trade-off the EC is fully aware of. The cost-benefit analysis of multi-phase versus short phase elections in the face of new challenges can be done afresh.

The highlight of 2019 was the highest ever voter turnout in a general election so far (67.11%), even though there was a lower turnout than usual in many constituencies, possibly because of oppressive weather, and varied turnouts across phases. This proves that the EC's voter education programme (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation) is effective.

## The three 'M's

In this election, the role of money power was alarming. It is becoming more and more expensive to contest elections and the problem of black money is alive. Even before the first phase had started, it was

evident that Indian democracy is overwhelmed by the overarching role of money, media and mafia.

The EC seized crores worth of money, liquor and drugs. As on May 24, money, drugs/narcotics, liquor, precious metals and freebies worth an estimated ₹3,475.76 crore were seized. The figure in 2014 was ₹1,200 crore. According to EC data, Tamil Nadu (₹952 crore), Gujarat (₹553.76 crore), Delhi (₹430.39 crore), Punjab (₹286.41 crore) and Andhra Pradesh (₹232.02 crore) were the top five States/Union Territories that accounted for the total seizures. A cause for worry is that drugs/narcotics formed a large part of the seizures, with Gujarat topping the list (almost ₹524.35 crore).

## Code violations and counting

Personally, what was most painful was witnessing the EC repeatedly coming under the scanner due to its delayed and often perfunctory actions on violations of the MCC. Once lauded for its conduct of free and fair elections in the world's largest democracy which have been held with precision and integrity, this time it was criticised both nationally and internationally.

The check on the Prime Minister's helicopter in Odisha on April 16 should have been used by the EC

to demonstrate its commitment to equality of all before the law. But it chose a different course.

The EC was also questioned for its stand on the sample size for Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) verification. Its line was that tallying VVPAT paper slips with

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the EVM count one per Assembly constituency was based on scientific methodology and endorsed by the Indian Statistical Institute. But the Opposition parties went to the Supreme Court which advised the EC to raise the mandatory random counting to five VVPATs per Assembly segment laying emphasis on "better voter confidence and credibility of electoral process". The court believed that the move would ensure the "greatest degree of accuracy and satisfaction". Rather than being on the defensive, the EC should have discussed this issue with political parties, with an open mind.

As the election progressed, the

Opposition made two more demands: The five machines must be counted in the beginning and in case of even one mismatch, all machines in the Assembly segment must be counted. The EC examined these proposals only to reject them as being unfeasible.

The top court's repeated interventions (as many as six) also have long-term implications given that Article 329 of the Constitution bars courts from interfering in electoral matters after the election process has been set in motion. But the court had to intervene repeatedly for course correction. The Supreme Court expressed displeasure over the EC's stand on April 15 when it submitted that it was "toothless" and "powerless" to act on hate speeches. When the court set the EC a deadline of May 6 to act on this, the EC took strong and unprecedented action against some political leaders, debaring them from campaigning for up to three days by invoking Article 324. This was laudable, but when it came to acting on complaints against the Prime Minister and the BJP president, it reacted differently, giving the two leaders 'clean chits', and casting a shadow on its own reputation for fearless independence.

Much later, it was shown that at

least one Election Commissioner had dissented in five out of 11 EC decisions concerning violations of the MCC. In the absence of unanimity, decisions can be taken by a majority vote, and his dissent did not change the result. But dissent is good news for a constitutional body as it is a healthy sign of objective deliberation and democratic functioning. His demand for his dissenting note to be made public was worthy of positive consideration.

## Course correction

The ascendant role of money power, paid and fake news, communal polarisation and hate rhetoric pose a serious challenge to the very foundations of our electoral system. As soon as the dust settles, India must introspect over these issues and find answers. A democracy is only as credible as the strength of the institutions fundamental to its legitimacy. I have hope that the 17th Lok Sabha will take it upon itself to reform the electoral process and enable the world's largest democracy to become the world's greatest.

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# What the thumping mandate for Modi means

Leftism and liberalism feel like nostalgia at this moment

SHIV VISVANATHAN

The first thing one notices about the Lok Sabha election, in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has secured a phenomenal victory, is that elections are no longer a game of chance. Majoritarian politics has robbed elections of a sense of contestation. The Election Commission as an institution has been emasculated. The plurality of politics that kept India alive has been lost to the univocality of choice, all focused around one man, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. It is almost as if India held a presidential election, while pretending to be overtly parliamentary. One man's presence justified the power of propaganda, but also vitiated the plural sense of India. The whole election was held on one question: do we vote 'yes' or 'no' for Mr. Modi?

This created a reductive politics where a simplistic idea of the nation state and its security destroyed the sheer diversity of issues that locality and region raised.

## Identifying with Modi

Mr. Modi's victory is a result of three triangular forces. The first is the creation of a majoritarian society. The second is the 'Hinduisation' of this society. The third is that this majority is committed to middle-class aspirations.

A vote for Mr. Modi is a message that needs to be interpreted. It is a vote that says he speaks to the aspirations of the common man; he speaks the language of mobility, expectation; he represents the middle-class dream of success. On the other hand, the Congress, which was mouthing the language of socialism and secularism, has literally become a voice in the wilderness.

Small town India feels there is a Modi in all of them. They feel Mr. Modi is them, he is accessible. There is no distance between him and the masses. Mr. Modi, by projecting himself to be like them, allows the hitherto alienated small town to feel a part of power politics. Mr. Modi's success is a vindication of his small-town gambit. As *chaiwala* and *chowkidar* he played to the sentimentalism of middle-urban India. This election is an act of

symbolic empowerment, where a sense of familiarity and identification with a leader literally became a sense of empowerment. Small-town India's sense of aspiration, and its resentment against another leader and family, has propelled Mr. Modi to power once again. His campaign was an act of genius.

In terms of numbers, Mr. Modi has outperformed himself. This proves that BJP president Amit Shah is India's best psephologist; that BJP is today the biggest party in the country. As an organisation and an imagination, the BJP has become the colossus it dreamt of.

## Lost in a new India

Other parties caught in an outdated ideology did not understand this. In its campaign, the Congress talked of the Nyuntam Aay Yojana as a leftover of socialism. The liberals and the Marxists have now discovered their ultimate irrelevance. They hang around like Rip Van Winkles who do not recognise the society outside. An outdated language and an outdated politics have confirmed their irrelevance to this new, aspirational India. In fact, the only things that seem to work are demagoguery and populism, not programmes or ideologies. Mr. Modi and Mr. Shah are welcomed like street heroes with a sense of realpolitik, while Congress presi-

dent Rahul Gandhi seems to be an outdated exercise in table manners. The Assembly results in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh deceived the Congress to believe that it is a party that is relevant again, but it now seems to be a

**✶ By projecting himself to be like small-town Indians, Prime Minister Narendra Modi allows the alienated to feel a part of power politics**

party that makes little sense. Only the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and the YSR Congress Party were able to retain their hold in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, respectively. Each is equally adept at the populism game.

## Simplification of democracy

This election showed us that politics is not about values, ideology and ethics. It is a display of instrumentalism that merely says, in this life of alienation, Mr. Modi works, and works for us. India is not saying there is no alternative; it is saying, we want no alternative. Alternatives create controversy and disorder, but a univocal choice for Mr. Modi shows that democracy has simplified itself. In this age of uncertainty, it has gone for the rudimentary. There is a laziness to pol-

itics we need to grasp. What is clear-cut is India's refusal to look at the complexity of politics. When you have a Charles Lamb, why do you need a Shakespeare? Instead, democracy is reduced to a fixed choice questionnaire.

We need to understand the new construction of politics which pushes ideology to the margins, which thinks individual aspiration has a poetry that collective justice does not. Mr. Modi grasps this. The ubiquitousness of Mr. Modi and his accessibility at the level of ideas create a symbolic sense of a new imagined community. When Pragna Singh Thakur wins after her statement on Nathuram Godse during the 150th year of Mahatma Gandhi's birth anniversary, one senses change in the Indian imagination. It is as if Gandhi as an imagination is over.

## Voting for a myth

It is a symbolic politics of a new India that is tired of being called backward, Third World. It is an India which loves the aphrodisiac of the nation state and is convinced that Mr. Modi is a problem-solver. Mr. Modi realised that more than material guarantees, contemporary India needed symbolic plumbing, a rush of confidence, an inflation of masculinity, and a set of simplistic formulas which magically promise

a new flat land where Indians can compete on equal terms. The vote for Mr. Modi is a vote for a new myth, and one must realise that social psychologists and psephologists are not used to myth-making. It is this symbolic politics which became the idea of India that our country voted for. Political analysts read the elections like a complex chess game when it had been whittled down to Chinese checkers. The simpler the move, the more devastating the success. Mr. Modi won because he understands the rules of the game.

It is a lesson his opponents with their illusions of politics might find difficult to grasp. Mr. Modi has outfoxed the Opposition. He was in tune with the aspirations and anxieties of the people. He understood that mass psychology went beyond party definitions and old categories. He sensed that if the entire nation is fed the right history, it could tectonically shift to the right. Leftism and liberalism feel like nostalgia at this moment. The sadness or the celebration begins now. The Opposition has to rethink, reinvent and regroup. A new battle for the idea of India begins today.

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# The leader who is bigger than his party

The BJP played little role in its own gigantic victory and stood by watching with stars in its eyes as PM Narendra Modi single-handedly pulverised the Opposition

VIDYA SUBRAHMANIAM

Election 2019 has smashed the assumption that India is a party-based parliamentary democracy. Yes, India is still notionally a multi-party system, and there indeed are pockets, especially in the south, where regional parties have held on to their suzerainty. But this hold is precarious and slipping by the minute.

## An indefatigable leadership

The biggest blow to the party system has ironically been dealt by the biggest beneficiary of Thursday's stunning verdict: the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The party confounded admirers and critics alike by amassing a majority that surpassed its haul of 282 of 543 Lok Sabha seats in 2014. Yet, the BJP played little role in its own gigantic victory and stood by watching with stars in its eyes as Prime Minister Narendra Modi single-handedly pulverised the Opposition in large

parts of the country. It is true that India's most powerful Prime Minister since Indira Gandhi was expertly aided at every stage of the election campaign, and in the meticulous planning that preceded it, by BJP president Amit Shah. But without Mr. Modi, there could be and would be no Mr. Shah. It was Mr. Modi's unflagging, ever-present visage, beamed into homes day and night by an adoring TV media, that spun a seductive web into which awestruck citizens walked.

Mr. Shah had announced soon after the BJP's 2014 victory that the Congress's days were numbered. The slogan 'Congress-mukt (Congress-free) Bharat' seemed outlandish initially, but the BJP, now under an indefatigable leadership that embodied the belief that the ends justified the means, purposefully expanded its footprint, capturing previously out-of-bound territories such as the Northeast through enticements and mass defections. The Congress did show its existence from time to time by registering victories here and there.

But 2019 has proved that the experiment will not be long in coming. Notionally the Congress has improved on its pathetic 2014 tally of 44 Lok Sabha seats, but the defeat of party president Rahul Gandhi in Amethi is a warning of bigger catastrophes ahead. There was no reason for Mr. Gandhi to lose: He was contesting from the bastion of the Nehru-Gandhi clan and in his recently enhanced capacity as par-

ty chief he was a potential Prime Minister. Under normal circumstances, this fact alone would have appealed to Amethi's voters to the exclusion of other attractions.

## The choice of candidates

However, the larger story here is the marginalisation of the BJP. A joke that used to be heard in party circles was that the BJP was now BJP-mukt. The joke has come perilously close to being a reality. Indeed, on the campaign trail Mr. Modi asked voters to remember him and no one else as they went into their polling booths to cast their votes. "Remember you are voting Modi," he said. The party, the cadre and BJP candidates parroted the line. BJP candidates walked and proudly downsized themselves, insisting that it was Mr. Modi who was fighting on all seats.

Armed with this carte blanche, the Modi-Shah pair deliberately chose as candidates men and women with a record of fostering divisiveness. Among them: Ananth Kumar Hegde, Giriraj Singh, Tejasvi Surya, Sakshi Maharaj, and last but not the least, Pragna Singh Thakur. If the forte of each was to inflame passions through rabid anti-Muslim rhetoric, in the case of Ms. Thakur, a further rubicon was crossed. She is a terror accused on trial. She also spoke her mind: Nathuram Godse "was, is and will be a *desh-bhakt* (patriot)," she said, unconcerned that she was heaping insult on Mahatma Gandhi. The Prime Minister

said he would never forgive her but did not sack her, which would have established him as being truly contrite. Clearly, Ms. Thakur was chosen in the first place to make a distinction between Islamist and Hindutva terror: The first was a danger that had to be crushed with all the force possible. The second didn't exist even if Ms. Thakur was standing trial for it. Her dismissal was therefore never on the cards.

## Projection as nationalist hero

On the stump, Mr. Modi played nationalist hero to the hilt. With a benevolent Election Commission watching, he appropriated the Indian Air Force and turned the air strikes on Pakistani territory into a personal feat of daring: "*Modi wahan ghar me ghus kar ke maara* (Modi went into Pakistani houses to kill terrorists)". In the 2017 Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, he had invoked the "jawan on the border" to blunt the impact of demonetisation on ordinary folk. The Prime Minister had also invited them to view demonetisation as an effort towards collective nation-building in which each had a share. By 2019, the message was fully internalised by large sections that saw the Balakot strike as their own spectacular achievement. Travelling in Muzaffarnagar in western U.P., Iran into a group of labourers, their torn clothes attesting to their poverty, who argued that they were voting Mr. Modi because "*desh toh bach jayega* (at least the country

will be saved)".

Mr. Modi argued that the Balakot attack was an act of extraordinary courage that previous Prime Ministers had balked at - both because they lacked the steel that he had and because they wanted to protect their minority vote banks. As the campaign progressed, nationalism inevitably got posited against the Opposition's 'Muslim appease-

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ment' politics. Balakot became Ram Mandir by another name, evoking the same passion that the latter did. In some places, the majoritarian message was explicit; in a speech made in Wardha, the Prime Minister accused Rahul Gandhi of fleeing to Wayanad in Kerala to be able to contest from a constituency where "the majority was in a minority."

It would be unfair if due credit was not given to Mr. Modi for the welfare measures his government had speedily implemented on the ground, among them toilets, housing and gas connections for the poorest citizens. Their implementation was patchy - the gas refill was unaffordable, the houses were scarce - but even the half-measures were potentially a form of

empowerment. In effect, what Mr. Modi presented to the voters was a package: welfare rooted in Hindutva majoritarianism.

In the coming years, this is likely the formula that the Prime Minister will persist with. A question arises: why was the Modi wave not as visible as in 2014? Because, at least in U.P., there was a formidable Opposition in the form of the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party alliance. The combine had match-winning arithmetic and also represented the interests of the socially marginalised - Dalits and Muslims in particular.

But as the 2019 results have shown, all Opposition alliances bombed, whether in U.P., Bihar, Maharashtra or Jharkhand. The Congress played a ruinous role in U.P. by undercutting the SP-BSP in several places. Yet this was probably a small distraction in the larger picture where the BJP virtually commanded all the votes and seats.

With his sharp nationalist-Hindutva messaging and towering presence, Mr. Modi is bigger than the party. The dangers of this will presently be apparent. For the Opposition parties, the danger is more imminent - individually and collectively, they need a strong counter message as well as an intelligent, charismatic leadership that will deliver the message.

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