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The Great Indian Election Mystery



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Every Indian General Election is “The Greatest Show on Earth” and “The Largest Ever Democratic Exercise”. Like most clichés, these descriptions are not without foundation. As I write this, Indian voters (909,917,469 are eligible) have just completed the fifth of seven phases of voting which are spread over thirty nine days. Nearly four million electronic voting machines will record votes for candidates from the 2,294 registered parties. Perhaps the most exciting statistics are about the voters themselves: nineteen million of them are eligible to vote for the first time in this General Election. And voter participation looks like it may beat the record of 67.9% set three decades ago, an increase widely attributed to increased participation by women voters. So democracy is alive and well in India. There is of course debate about the quality of that democracy, notably between elections, but not much about its quantity.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is a remarkable politician by any measure. He was among the first of the current wave of “populist/nationalist” leaders to emerge around the world. India’s development path, catalysed by the reforms of the early nineties, had already started down a path towards even greater inequality than previously witnessed in its post-Independence history and the “Modi Wave” was driven by the electorate’s fury over the corruption and “crony capitalism” which came to define the second term (2009-14) of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance, an alliance of left and centre-left parties so successfully formed a decade earlier. The ordinary voter was left with the conviction that a politico/industrial complex was benefiting from two decades of increased growth which had failed to alleviate any of their hardships.

Modi was also perfectly placed to benefit from three trends:

- India’s political process had matured to the extent that local/regional/caste factors no longer drowned out the identity of the potential Prime Minister; enough voters wanted to see Mr Modi as PM to make a critical difference;
- India’s demographics meant that many of the young voters had little historical affinity for the Congress and felt the attraction of the “tech-savvy” “moderniser” Modi;

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- The evolution of communications technology and social media meant that Modi's remarkable communication skills penetrated deep into the electoral consciousness; while his performances at the huge election rallies characteristic of Indian hustings were unrivalled by his opponents.

It has to be acknowledged that all three of these remain beneficial for Mr Modi. He remains head and shoulders above any other Prime Ministerial candidate, he still holds great appeal for the young voter and this election will if anything be more influenced by communications technology and social media than any before it (it has been dubbed the "WhatsApp" election). Also in Mr Modi's favour is the resonance of his Bhartiya Janata Party's (BJP) nationalist and, more controversially, Hindu majoritarian message. This advantage was significantly bolstered by the Indo-Pakistani skirmish following a terrible terrorist attack in Kashmir just as the election campaign got under way, which gave Modi a perfect opportunity to present himself as the only fit defender of India's national security.

Expert commentators on Indian politics often focus, with justification, at the local factors which go into the success and failure of candidates: regional and religious loyalties, caste equations, political trade-offs. None of these should be taken lightly, and Mr Modi, while presenting a personality-driven campaign at the national level, rides the best-funded and arguably most effective political machine in India's history. The BJP, working through the local cadres from their own ranks and from those of their political allies and social supporters from the Hindu nationalist movement, are a one party Premier League in terms of political manoeuvring.

So why isn't this election a "cake-walk" for Mr Modi's National Democratic Alliance (NDA)? Although political commentators consider them favourites, few are predicting a repeat of the unexpected absolute majority the BJP enjoyed last time (often ignored fact: the BJP's 31.0% of votes was the lowest share for a party to form a majority government in India since independence, while the [NDA's](#) combined vote share was 38.5%). There is something to be said for a BJP constrained by coalition politics from some of their excesses. There is plenty of middle class/intellectual concern about Modi's undermining of India's institutions (the Central Bank, the Judiciary, the Central Bureau of Investigation, the Media and even the Constitution.....does this have a Trumpian whiff to it?) and his failure to rein in his Hindu nationalist cohorts who are a threat to India's unique traditions of diversity and tolerance.

More of a threat to Mr Modi has been his patchy record in delivering on his populist promises of "good days ahead" – indeed his controversial demonetisation of the vast majority of India's currency caused immense hardship for many low down the pyramid. Indian voters are not naïve – they are used to a slow pace of development, but the last time the BJP lost power, against most expectations, in 2004 it was attributed by many to a reaction against their "India Shining" propaganda, when the ordinary voter tired of being told the country was doing so well when he/she had so little to show for it: a 21st century version of "you've never had it so good". Mr Modi is a plausible candidate for a post-hubris tumble. This is particularly true in the vast rural expanses of central India where farmers have suffered for the failure not only of rains and crops but also of Government support systems. It is no surprise that the centre-piece of both the main election manifestos is a massive welfare plan to support the poor.

Modi's supporters would point to important reforms brought in over the last five years: a national system of indirect taxation to replace an obstructive state-by-state structure; real progress on

infrastructure, notably roads and ports; electrification of all India's villages (though this disguises realities about scale and consistency of supply); the opening of millions of bank accounts for the poor enabling payment of subsidies directly to them rather than relying on the leaky bureaucracy. But the truth is that, if Mr Modi does win a second term, it will be less to do with his track record and more to do with what he promises. His image as a leader who gets things done has been frayed – his time as Prime Minister has shown how much more difficult that is at the national than at the state level where he built his reputation as Chief Minister of Gujarat – but his work rate, his energy and his oratory have been sufficient still to make him look like the man most likely to make a difference in a country where change is slow and fitful. We shall see on 23 May if that image has been sufficient to tip democratic balance.

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