**POLITICAL JUGGERNAUTS**

Introduction

The Indian voter is incredibly intelligent. Just when you believe you’ve hacked into his mind and can manipulate him/her at whim, you get yorked by a googly (the inconsistent cricketing metaphor is deliberate, to prove you cannot take the Indian voter for granted).

Everybody thought that the BJP+allies would annihilate the Opposition in the Maharashtra and Haryana assemblies. Incumbents, pundits and pollsters were united in their chorus — 225+ in Maharashtra and 75+ in Haryana, an astonishing four/fifth majority in both elections.

**Deafitism is Misplaced**

The surprise bounce by the Congress+allies across the country must convince the grand old party that its post-2019 defeatism is utterly unwarranted. Its 20 percent national vote share is a ‘healthy minima’ on which it can build a strategy of political revival. I had mistakenly estimated this ‘Modi Delta’ at five+ percentage points during his first stint, thereby making a huge error about his victory in 2019. I was giving him a national vote share of 32 percent, while he ended up closer to 38 percent in May 2019. Now, with the wisdom of hindsight, and collating the differential between the past two Lok Sabha polls and 14 assembly elections (including Maharashtra and Haryana in 2014 and the week gone by), the ‘Modi Delta’ is closer to 12, perhaps even 15, percentage points.

**Foll all the Voters all the Time**

Guess who were the real political mascots of last week’s polls? No, not Devendra Fadnavis or Manohar Lal Khattar. But three relatively nondescript local politicos called Udayanraje Bhosale (ex-MP, NCP), Alpesh Thakor (ex-MLA, Gujarat Congress), Dhavalsinh Zala (ex-MLA, Gujarat Congress) and a clutch of other turncoats who jumped ship to either the BJP or Shiv Sena, hoping to ride the curry train. But a wise electorate stopped them dead in their tracks.

Udayanraje’s case study is compelling. He had swum against the Modi tsunami to win, with Sharad Pawar’s blessings, from Satara in Maharashtra in May 2019.

**Instant Political Stordom**

Finally, the Modi government must recall the folly of the Shah Commission in 1977/78, which almost single-handedly resurrected a hopelessly defeated Indira Gandhi’s political career. Right or wrong, our electorate is feudal and sentimental about strong/son-of-the-soil politicians. And if it senses that they are being hounded ‘unfairly’, or being punished ‘selectively’, their sympathy hormones begin to work overtime.

Just see what happened to Sharad Pawar after he was booked by the Enforcement Directorate days before the Marathas voted; Pawar’s political stature swelled in might. In Haryana, the dogged Hooda, who was seen fending off a concerted attack from several central ‘agencies’, acquired the halo of a ‘true Jat’, one who fearlessly takes on his tormentors.

**Modi Political Juggernaut**

What started in 2014 as a voters’ experiment with the politics of hope is now a phenomenon, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi acquiring almost a mythical image as an agent of change. As he completes three years in office, the Prime Minister and the ruling party, run with militaristic precision by his indefatigable lieutenant, BJP President Amit Shah, have emerged as the most powerful beneficiaries of the voters’ challenge to a status quo that has curtailed social mobility and promoted income inequality for decades.

The BJP is clearly the new natural party of governance, having decisively edged out the Congress in the national context. The party currently has more than 300 MPs and

The political Opposition in its entirety appears to have decided this — that each party would rather contest and lose to a smaller local adversary than challenge the one bigger, common and more ominous adversary. And win (or lose) the forthcoming Assembly elections, and more importantly, the crucial general election of 2024 together. The writing has been on the wall ever since 2019, reaffirming the urgency of the good old saying, “united we stand/win, divided we fall”.