

For a rediscovery of India

As Prime Minister Modi returns to power, he must swear by the Indian civilisational ethos

The definitive nature of the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in the 17th general election marks an unmistakable inflection point in the journey of the Republic. If the 16th general election in 2014 catapulted the BJP as the primary pole of Indian politics, relegating the Congress to a distant second, 2019 establishes it as the overarching hegemon. For good reasons, this result is being viewed as an endorsement of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's persona, and his imprint on this victory is distinctive. But it will be a folly to ignore the underlying structural reasons that made this victory possible, and its sweep so deep and wide. It takes strong personalities to popularise an idea, but it is those ideas that outlive personalities that define the course of a people or a nation. The outcome, hence, must be understood as an electoral endorsement of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism, the creed that guided the BJP and its forebears for nearly a century since Vinayak Damodar Savarkar wrote the treatise by the same title. Mr. Modi, who counts Savarkar as a critical influence, has been the catalyst and the alchemist of the transformation in the way India imagines itself. 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. Championed by the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, it sought inspiration from the millennia-old civilisation, the Vedas and the Upanishads, but also strived to build India into a modern society with a scientific temper and liberal values. The idea outlived Nehru, but it had begun to fade soon after his passing. Nehru and his mentor, Mahatma Gandhi, were the prime targets of derision for the proponents of Hindutva in the early years. With the 2019 result, Hindutva has pushed Nehruvian secularism to the margins of Indian politics. The Congress, now led by Nehru's great-grandson Rahul Gandhi, did better than in 2014, but not enough to even be recognised as the official Opposition in the Lok Sabha.

The 2019 verdict has also dismantled social justice politics in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, two States that together send 120 members to the Lok Sabha. The rise of Hindutva since the 1980s had a parallel – a new wave of backward caste mobilisation in parts of northern and western India, which questioned the Nehruvian elite's grip on power. While parties based on social justice politics or regional pride weakened the Congress, they also viewed the BJP with scepticism despite their occasional association with it. Through deft coalition-building, the BJP used many non-Congress outfits to further its own growth and gobbled them up in several States, such as Gujarat. In U.P. and Bihar, social justice parties with deep-rooted support among the Hindu backward castes, in alliance with the considerable Muslim population in these States, became the biggest roadblock to the Hindutva project. In 2014, the BJP upended that dynamic and swept both States; on Thursday it proved that the phenomenon is enduring. The Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar and the Samjawadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Rashtriya Lok Dal in U.P., usurped by their leaders as personal and family fiefdoms and sunk in corruption charges, collapsed. But outfits such as Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party in Bihar and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, guilty of the same sins, have flourished in their alliance with the BJP. The 2019 outcome must thus be seen as one powered by the hyper-nationalist agenda that was the mainstay of Mr. Modi's five-year term in government, though corruption and nepotism of the BJP's opponents could have been supplementary factors. The welfare schemes of the Modi government did play a role, but these or the promise of economic development were not the real differentiators. The Pulwama terrorist strike and India's response to it dovetailed into the BJP's campaign. And, the victory of a terror accused in Bhopal constituency who hailed the assassin of Gandhi as a patriot stood out as a striking reiteration of Hindutva.

Southern States, barring Karnataka, remained unimpressed by Hindutva, but the BJP made impressive inroads in West Bengal and Odisha, proving its potency even in areas where linguistic, political and cultural factors have historically been unfavourable to it. Tamil Nadu, where Dravidian politics had entrenched itself as a counter to homogenising pressures decades ago, stonewalled the BJP yet again as did Kerala. But the BJP's gains in Telangana, modest as they are, might be an indicator that the south may not remain impervious to it forever. For the present, the victories of the Biju Janata Dal in Odisha, which won a fifth term, and the YSR Congress Party in Andhra Pradesh are indicative that linguistic and cultural identities still continue to hold sway in these States. Punjab was also an outlier, as the Sikh-majority State leaned towards the Congress.

To urge the BJP to uphold secular ideals or to protect the integrity of existing institutions may amount to demanding an abandonment of its very core beliefs. Gaining the trust of all citizens will be a necessary prerequisite for Mr. Modi to drive India's continuing journey to become a global leader. It is only reasonable that the government and the Prime Minister be asked to live up to the promise they continuously make – '*sabka saath, sabka vikas* (with all, development for all)'. These tenets must be felt in the daily lives of the marginalised sections of the population, and Mr. Modi must add a third tenet to make his mantra meaningful: *sabka vishwas* (the trust of all). *The Hindu* hopes that Mr. Modi's second term will be more inclusive than the first, which was marred by arrogant pride and hateful prejudice. We extend our congratulations and wishes to him and his party.