



Preserve the Idea of India

The sensational sweep and scale of the Bharatiya Janata Party's electoral victory was unquestionably the direct result of the strong upsurge in the popularity of its prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi. The Gujarat Chief Minister was clearly the star campaigner and the massive "Modi wave" that has caught the imagination of large sections of India's voters has given the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance an unprecedented and historic mandate. With the BJP winning a majority on its own, a remarkable paradigm shift has taken place in the trajectory of India's parliamentary politics. Breaking the trend of the last few decades in which no party was able to pull off a runaway victory of this kind, the BJP will come to power, free from the pressures of coalition politics, giving it unfettered space and scope to govern. This election marked the entry of 100 million new voters, young Indians impatient for change and extremely aspirational in their focus. The voter turnout — 66.38 per cent — was the highest ever in India's post-Independence electoral history, beating the record of 1984 when 64.01 per cent of Indians voted in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination.

This landmark election has also seen the incumbent United Progressive Alliance crash to an ignominious defeat with the Congress party, already on a downward spiral in several elections, now humiliatingly reduced to a double-digit figure in Parliament, its worst electoral tally since Independence. An indefensibly uninspiring campaign led by Rahul Gandhi failed to rally a young and impatient electorate. The BJP's landslide victory, almost entirely attributable to the sweeping effect of the Modi wave across India, reflects the intensity of the desire for more effective governance. The rising public anger as a result of the UPA's policy paralysis, stalled economic growth and worst of all, the series of corruption scandals, created a hunger for change especially among young Indians who see Mr. Modi as a leader symbolising

their expectations of fast economic growth unshackled from red tape and corruption. It is indeed an ironic twist of history that the Gujarat Chief Minister whose governing record is shadowed by the disquieting facts that have not really gone away — relating to his moral and political responsibility for the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 — has adroitly become the beneficiary of the increasing eagerness for a higher growth trajectory. It is also discomfiting that the election campaign that Mr. Modi conducted in the Hindi heartland States, especially Uttar Pradesh, drew heavily upon Hindu cultural nationalism, invoking as he did Hindu sacred geography in Varanasi and using Hindu cultural idioms, not really imagery suitable to the public space in democratic India.

Mr. Modi emphatically asserts that his agenda is all about governance and economic change. We welcome his assertion and wish him well in his efforts in this regard. But the reality remains that there is a huge trust deficit with the minorities, especially the Muslim community, which must be addressed. He is still regarded as a deeply polarising figure not really reaching out to minorities unlike many of his senior colleagues in the BJP or even the RSS who have made some political attempts to bridge the divide. In order to close the credibility gap that persists as regards his acceptability to govern all Indians, Mr. Modi must ensure that the idea of India as a pluralist and inclusive landscape in which all citizens have equality before the law as constitutionally decreed, is upheld consistently and transparently, while he is in office as Prime Minister. He tweeted exuberantly upon hearing the election results that "India has won!" Indeed the task ahead is to ensure that all Indians share that sense of belonging and participation in the national governing agenda. With these cautionary notes, we offer our congratulations to Narendra Modi, India's next Prime Minister, and wish him all success, for his own sake and India's too.