

INDIA ELECTION

THE MODI TSUNAMI: PATEL VS.

Jayantha Dhanapala assesses the likely implications – including for Sri Lanka – of Narendra

At a time when faith in genuine people-based democracy is waning globally, an electoral exercise of gigantic proportions concluded recently in the world's largest democracy – India.

A record 66.8 percent voted over nine phases, and the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) – with 63-year-old Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as its prime ministerial candidate – won an overwhelming majority to rule by itself.

With its coalition allies in the National Democratic Alliance – many of them representing regional interests – it fell just short of a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha.

For the record, Sri Lanka – which has a much higher literacy rate – achieved a voter turnout of 74.5 percent at the 2010 presidential election and 61.3 percent in the parliamentary elections.

The 'Modi wave,' presaged by opinion and exit polls, has turned out to be a Modi tsunami, reducing the venerable Congress Party of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi to a state where it may not even qualify to take the post of Leader of the Opposition.

ANALOGIES The only analogy that emerges – apart from 1956 and 1977, for us, Sri Lankans – is the 1977 Indian election, when the Indira Gandhi-led Congress was soundly rejected because of her draconian Emergency



Rule, bringing in the first non-Congress Party government of post independent India – the Janata Party.

That victory had been inspired by a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi – Jayaprakash Narayan (popularly referred to as 'JP') –

who called for a 'Total Revolution.' After the election, a newspaper cartoon famously featured a peasant seated under a tree in rural India, asking JP: 'Was it total enough?' The Janata Party-led Government had Morarji Desai as its Prime

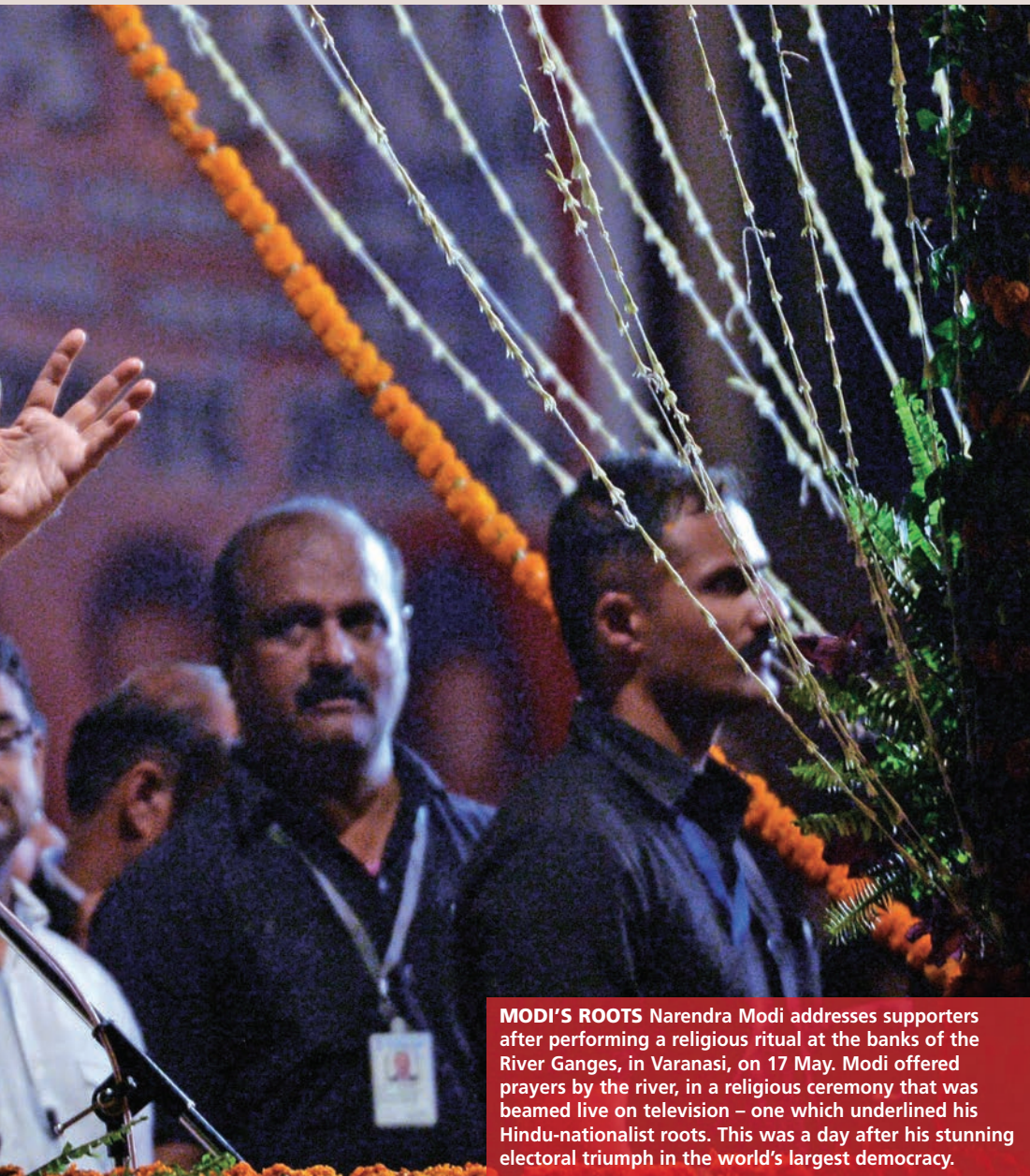
Minister and Atal Bihari Vajpayee as Foreign Minister, but fell prey to internal bickering which paved the way for the return of Indira Gandhi.

Thus, sweeping victories may not always augur enduring stability. The conspicuous

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NEHRU LEGACIES

Modi's landslide election victory in India



MODI'S ROOTS Narendra Modi addresses supporters after performing a religious ritual at the banks of the River Ganges, in Varanasi, on 17 May. Modi offered prayers by the river, in a religious ceremony that was beamed live on television – one which underlined his Hindu-nationalist roots. This was a day after his stunning electoral triumph in the world's largest democracy.

difference now is the dominant personality of Modi, and the fact that the BJP does not have to rely on coalition partners to survive.

Emphasis on corruption, inflation and modernisation through technology and infrastructure improvement appealed to the business sector and youth.

NEW REALMS “India has won,” declared Modi, signalling the end of the regionalisation of Indian politics. Neither Jayalithaa’s solid bloc of 37 Tamil Nadu seats, nor Mamata Banerjee’s 34 seats of Trinamool Congress, in West Bengal, will sway the balance of power. Specifically, Tamil Nadu’s

influence on the Centre’s Sri Lanka policy will be limited. Modi, vowing to work for all of India, would be unwise not to keep both these ladies in a cooperative mode.

Among the winners were Modi himself, in the two constituencies he contested: Vadodara, in Gujarat; and the sacred city of Varanasi, in Uttar

Pradesh, where he beat Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Aadmi Party. He had to give up one of them. The choice between his home state constituency (where he has been Chief Minister for 13 successful years) and Varanasi, by the holy Ganges (the heart of the ‘saffron’ appeal) must have been a difficult one.

Among the leadership of the BJP, Arun Jaitley lost in Amritsar. But he may be elected to the Rajya Sabha (Upper House). The veteran L. K. Advani – who finally acquiesced in the ascendancy of Modi as the BJP candidate for the premiership – won his seat in Gandhinagar.

Former BJP External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, who had quit the party over his seat allocation, lost at the elections. The controversial former Chief of Army Staff Gen. Vijay Kumar Singh won, making his debut in electoral politics as a BJP candidate. Two members of the Gandhi clan in the BJP – Sanjay Gandhi’s widow Maneka, and his son Varun, both won their seats.

In the Congress leadership, Sonia and Rahul Gandhi won with reduced majorities, and have taken responsibility for the heavy defeat of the party. The demand by some Congress youth for the replacement of Rahul by his sister Priyanka

is a symptom of the deep lack of confidence in the current leadership, tempered by a reluctance to break entirely with dynastic politics.

DOWNSIDES One downside to this democratic exercise is the unprecedented amount of money spent on campaigning, and the fact that 34 percent of the elected MPs have criminal cases pending against them. And some 61 percent of the

AFP PHOTO/ROBERTO SCHMIDT

CURRENT AFFAIRS



voters were against the NDA exposing the deficiency of a first-past-the-post electoral system.

The list of losers on the Congress side included 13 ministers, including External Affairs Minister Salman Khurshid, Minister of Law & Justice Kapil Sibal, Home Affairs Minister Sushilkumar Shinde, and ex-Minister and friend of Sri Lanka Mani Shankar Aiyar, who was beaten into fourth place in his Tamil Nadu constituency.

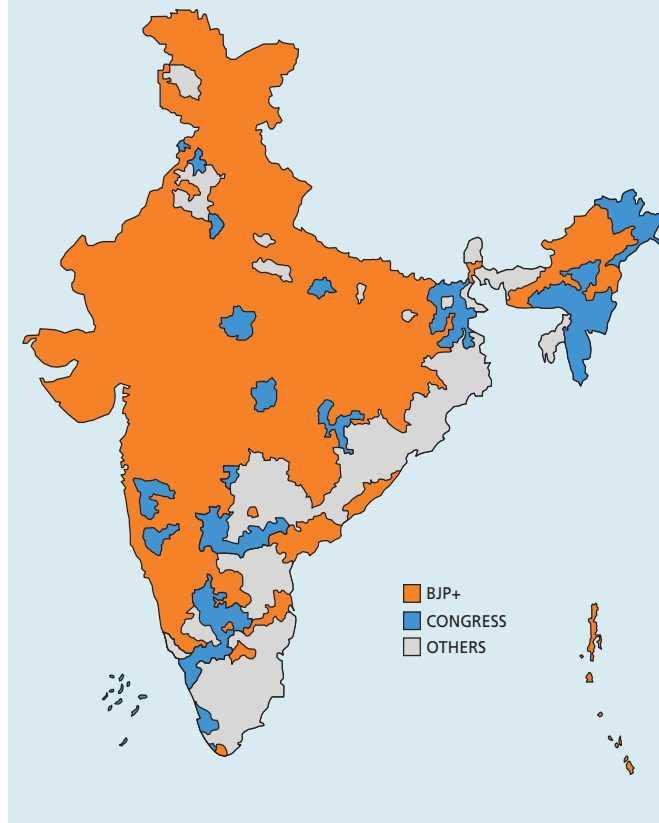
The resignation of Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh brought a sad close to 10 lacklustre years and the eclipse of his great contribution as Narasimha Rao's Finance Minister, which transformed the Indian economy. One commentator wrote, perhaps too harshly, that Singh will be the fall guy who fell down long ago and forgot to get up.

Meanwhile, the left parties were reduced to an ignominious nine seats. The new party Aam Aadmi was only able to gain four seats, despite the hype after their anti-corruption campaign, hanging on to the coat-tails of Anna Hazare. Kejriwal was seen as quixotic tilting at the windmills of the established parties, especially after he quit as the governing party in the Delhi Administration. Vaiko, and the accused in the 2G scam Andimuthu Raja too, lost in Tamil Nadu.

Several general trends can be identified in the elections results. Modi is enormously popular, and he directed an energetic campaign. His rise, breaking caste and class barriers, from being a tea vendor to Prime Minister, is a dramatic story – far more epic, in fact, than Abraham Lincoln's rise from log cabin to the White House over 150 years ago.

ROLE MODEL Of the two eminent Gujaratis in modern Indian history – Mahatma Gandhi and Vallabhbhai Patel – Modi's admiration is clearly for Patel, who was called the 'Iron Man of India' or 'Bismarck of India.' Patel's nationalism and pragmatism led to strong positions on Kashmir, the unification of India, establishing all India services like the Indian Administrative Service and other issues which inevitably

ELECTORAL MAP (INDIA MAY 2014)



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clashed with Nehru's secular liberalism.

The differences had to be settled by Mahatma Gandhi. After Gandhi's assassination, Nehru and Patel had an uneasy reconciliation, but the future direction of India was clear after Patel died in 1950. The nationalists in India like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – suspected of being linked to Gandhi's assassination, and where Modi had his early political tutelage – have always felt that India would have been a different country, had Patel been the PM, instead of Nehru.

Modi has consciously adopted the Patel mantle as an excellent administrator, while being pro-

business. Patel's ambiguous attitude towards Muslims and other minorities was defended by BJP leaders during the election campaign. The stain of Modi's silence on the 2002 Gujarati riots remains, despite his exoneration by the courts – and yet, the Muslims do not appear to have voted against the BJP en bloc.

DIPLOMACY Little was said on foreign policy during the campaign. But with two stable governments in Islamabad and New Delhi, an improvement in relations with Pakistan – with confidence-building measures, at least – is likely, especially after the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

Rumours about a change in the nuclear doctrine of India can be discounted. An improvement of relations with the US is more earnestly sought by President Barack Obama than by Modi. Economic diplomacy will be strengthened, notably with China.

IMPLICATIONS The implications of the decisive Modi victory for Sri Lanka are significant. With Tamil Nadu no longer a decisive factor,

MEDIA SERVICES

Modi has the flexibility to formulate his own Sri Lanka policy, with inputs from the South Block professionals, and others like Dr. Subramanian Swamy and Hardeep Singh Puri. The diplomatic niceties were completed immediately after the election victory, with warm messages being exchanged between Modi and President Mahinda Rajapaksa – with an invitation from the latter, for Modi to visit Sri Lanka.

Outgoing Sri Lankan High Commissioner Prasad Kariyawasam, always the reliable professional, was first off the starting block among the Delhi-based diplomats in congratulating Modi, whom he had befriended well before the elections. It will be up to High Commissioner-designate Prof. Sudharshan Seneviratne to build on this foundation, and his lack of diplomatic experience can be compensated for with the appointment of a strong Deputy High Commissioner from the Foreign Service.

With Modi's emphasis on economics, the time is ripe for Sri Lanka to have India's stake in this country converted from a politico-defence relationship into an economic one. This will require the adoption of the CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Arrangement), with appropriate changes and a huge influx of Indian investment that can trump the emotional tug that Tamil Nadu exerts. It will also mean a more subtle management of Sri Lanka-China relations.

A few weeks ago, Mahatma Gandhi's grandson Gopal-krishna Gandhi (whose maternal grandfather was Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, of Tamil Nadu) provided this recipe for Indo-Lanka relations, in a talk he gave in Colombo on keeping "the touching distances between India and Sri Lanka connected."

He said: "We do not have the right to interfere, but we do have the duty to be concerned. And to ask of each other questions, not in pride, arrogance, conceit and certainly not in an air of sarcastic interrogation, but in honest anxiety to make better societies of our present, deeply flawed ones."