



USUAL SUSPECTS
SWAPAN DASGUPTA

Modi insurmountable challenge for Opp

Ram Nath Kovind's emphatic victory last Thursday in the presidential election did not come as any great surprise. The numbers were too heavily stacked in favour of the unassuming man from Kanpur Dehat for the challenge offered by the Sonia Gandhi-Mamata Banerjee-Lalu Prasad-Sitaram Yechury alliance to make any real difference. Indeed, all that the token candidature of former Lok Sabha Speaker Meira Kumar succeeded in doing was to reaffirm the BJP argument that the Congress ecosystem is incapable of looking beyond the dynastic principle.

Ironically, this point was further driven home when Gopalkrishna Gandhi was nominated as the common Opposition candidate for Vice-President. Gandhi, no doubt, has many accomplishments of his own to bank on pedigree alone. However, in the context of the attempted bid to craft a

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grand anti-Narendra Modi alliance, the selling point is that he is the grandson of both Mahatma Gandhi and C Rajagopalachari.

Ancestry may have been a definite plus point in another era. But at a time when Modi has mounted a fierce populist challenge to the culture of entitlement and put a premium on self-made individuals, pedigree may not always be the most appropriate theme song.

The contests for the posts of President and Vice-President have turned out to be symbolic. The outcomes have never been in any serious doubt. Nevertheless it is a fact that the four stalwarts of the Mahagathbandhan strategy did try their utmost to ensure that the contest for Rashtrapati Bhavan

became a political litmus test for the Modi Government. What else can explain Meira Kumar's assertion that the contest with Kovind was a battle of ideologies? What else can explain Gandhi's claim that he was articulating the anxieties of the common man?

The President and the Vice-President hold Constitutional posts. Rashtrapati Bhavan is the symbolic pinnacle of the Indian state but the post of the President is largely symbolic. It does not matter in the least what ideology the President, as an individual, professes or what his/her idea of India is. He is there to ensure that the Constitution is adhered to. In most other matters he is there to act on the advice of the Council of Ministers. His discretionary powers are zero, except in the matter of selecting a Prime Minister in the event there is a fractured electoral verdict. Even on this count he is guided by certain broad principles that he can't deviate from.

In terms of protocol and grandeur, the Vice-President is many notches below the President. Yet, his is a more hands-on job. The most important of this is his chairmanship of the Rajya Sabha, a post that is important at a time the Modi

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Government doesn't command a full majority in the Upper House. On top of that there is also the control of *Rajya Sabha TV*, a channel that, over the past three years, has become a sanctuary for Left-liberal practitioners of journalism. Other job functions of the Vice-President depend almost entirely on the individual. Vice-President Hamid Ansari, for example, was used by the Government for many diplomatic missions. If he wins, M Venkaiah Naidu may find other areas of activity to involve himself.

The larger point is that these two ceremonial posts should not have become point of contention. The Grand Alliance strategists tried but didn't succeed. More than anything else it revealed the inability of the Opposition to find a clear focus for its anti-Modi politics.

The Opposition has no doubt succeeded in creating an international concern over lynchings and the anti-beef

vigilantism. These are valid concerns but there is a limit to how much political mileage this outrage can secure. What was discernible in last week's Rajya Sabha debate on the subject was that Opposition indignation over vigilantism was coupled with defensiveness over cow slaughter. Not only the Congress but even the BSP was forced into a defensive position over a perception that they were somehow less than wholly committed to respecting the touchiness of the average Indian over beef.

The GST was another issue that the Opposition believed it could milk politically. No doubt the Government was nervous over how a completely new system of tax assessment would work. However, reports from the ground indicate that the hiccups have been far less than anticipated. The troubles in the main have been confined to sectors where a tax-free business model has been in operation.

It is understandable that those businesses that operated

outside the compliance regime are upset at having to now pay tax. But while their immediate discomfiture can be politically exploited, standing up for tax evaders isn't good politics. The political test of demonetisation during the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election showed that there is a groundswell of support for the Government's anti-corruption moves and that ordinary people are willing to endure personal inconvenience for a larger good as long as they are convinced that the motives are pure.

For the Opposition, the biggest obstacle still remains Modi. Despite the contempt with which the PM is held by a section of the chattering classes, his mass connect is intact. Modi is perceived as an agent of change and ethical cleansing. At the same time he has succeeded in portraying many of the Opposition stalwarts as the representatives of an old system based on venality and privilege. As long as the Opposition fails to reinvent itself and Modi's image is intact, the political initiative will rest with the Government.