

OUT OF MY MIND



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SOMETIMES it is the nearness which obscures the vision. Even three years after Narendra Modi piloted the BJP to a single-party majority, the Opposition fails to see the nature of the ideological transformation he has wrought in the party. His Independence Day speech elicited the usual responses — 'Communalism', 'Intolerance', 'Muslims in danger', 'Hindu nationalism'. Modi may talk of '*Desh jodo*' and 125 crore people. He may talk about

Modi's new BJP

women's rights or removing poverty, but everyone on the other side hears a sinister plan to abolish diversity.

Modi's advantage is exactly that people underestimate him as a thinking person. On the Left, there is a universal belief that the Rightists are stupid and bigoted. I know because the Labour Party made the mistake for many years when Mrs Thatcher was winning election after election. After the fourth defeat, we sobered up and began to learn from the message that Mrs Thatcher had sold to the people.

In Modi's case, few are willing to see firstly how far the RSS has come since M S Golwalkar's time. Remember when Mohan Bhagwat argued for equality among all, everyone attacked him as being anti-reservation. 'The RSS and equal-

ity?'. Nor do they see the way in which Modi has expanded the political space for the BJP. Modi has fashioned a new BJP ideology without abandoning its core. Hindu nationalism was never enough to win a majority. Atal Bihari Vajpayee reached the limit of that. It is Modi who has forced the BJP/RSS to become inclusive.

Two examples. Modi has systematically expanded the BJP reach into Dalit votes. It would have been hard for the hardline BJP to contemplate this. He has done it by taking over Ambedkar as a figure to be honoured. The hatred for Ambedkar among orthodox Congress Hindus, to say nothing of Jan Sanghis, has been forgotten. But Modi's inclusive strategy is not clientelist like the Congress had. By establishing enabling institutions to

help Dalit entrepreneurs, he is appealing to the aspirations of Dalits.

Modi's other innovation is to focus strongly on women's issues, from LPG gas cylinder to the crusade against outdoor defecation. No one until he came along associated outdoor defecation with gender issues. Indeed, through years of socialism, such trivial considerations were beneath attention.

The gender issue also fans out into triple talaq. Who can forget that to prevent Shah Bano from getting alimony, Parliament, with an overwhelming Congress majority, passed the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act. The Act was against the rights of Muslim women on divorce. The Supreme Court in awarding the victory to Shah

Bano had suggested that Parliament could bring in Uniform Civil Code (UCC). This was the stage at which UCC became anti-secular, though it had been a demand of the All-India Women's Conference since the 1930s.

The BJP stepped up its campaign on UCC once the Congress retreated. Now Modi has made it not a secular/communal issue but a gender equality issue. Of course his detractors would say that being a Rightist, he cannot be sincere. That it is just a device for being anti-Muslim. But Muslim women have just the same rights as other women even if the BJP delivers them.

This is the challenge the Opposition faces. Given Modi's luck, they will fail to meet it.