

A tale of two speeches

For those wondering why Narendra Modi beats Rahul Gandhi each time...

We understand perfectly well that surface changes are vital in the age of social media traction, Facebook intellectualism and soundbite soliloquys for all political leaders. But, as the German Romantics put it (or was it Faust), without context we do not exist. Congress president Rahul Gandhi, perhaps overly buoyed by his accession to the Congress' top post and the perceived disillusionment with the Narendra Modi regime, overplayed his hand spectacularly in his address to the Indian diaspora in the Bahraini capital of Manama where he proceeded to wash dirty domestic political linen in public, inviting sharp criticism from opponents and neutrals alike for doing so on foreign soil. Perhaps his minders advised him that he would have a simpatico audience given that a majority of Indian expatriates in the Gulf country are from Kerala and that adherents of the Syriac Orthodox Church from the State carry considerable heft in those parts, but to accuse the Government of dividing people on the basis of religion and — all sense of irony lost given the Congress' own recent record in Gujarat and Maharashtra — caste was ill-advised to say the very least.

In what was his first address to an Indian diaspora after taking over the reins of India's oldest political party, Gandhi alleged that "hatred between communities'



was actively being promoted by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance Government to deflect attention from the lack of jobs, opportunities for the youth and a crumbling education system even as he appealed to the Non-Resident Indian community to help fight the "forces of hate and division". Talk of living in an echo chamber! Not only is the Congress president being highly selective with facts, to carry his political campaign to foreign shores is simple unacceptable, especially at a time when the world is increasingly looking at India as an ancient nation that has finally found its voice and a modern state that despite

the troubles it faces has stayed true to the path of inclusive, in the main (muscular) liberal path of the rule of law. Gandhi has made a grave political miscalculation if he feels that the incipient disgruntlement among a section of the electorate at the Modi Government's shortcomings, which can hardly be termed unexpected in the last leg of its term, is symptomatic of mass anger.

It is a fact that Prime Minister Narendra Modi still enjoys the trust and confidence of millions of Indians and election after democratic election in the past few years have served to emphasise that point. The Teflon coat is very much intact and is premised on a 'he means well and is thinking about the country not his family' assessment among the citizenry; anybody willing to leave the confines of his/her privileged, air and sound conditioned environs and hear what the unwashed masses, as it were, have to say, will tell you that. Modi, who himself addressed the first Persons of Indian Origin Parliamentarians Conference in New Delhi on the same day as Rahul was in speaking in Manama, seems clearly to have a better political understanding of both his strengths and weaknesses. Of the former, he rightly emphasised his administration's championing of India's civilizational verities linking them with the BJP's 2014 election campaign slogan of '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikaas*' and Hindustan's tradition of respect for all religions and cultures, apart from contemporary geo-politics in his veiled reference to India's unembarrassed and robust pursuit of its national interest vis-à-vis Chinese expansionism. Of the latter, he underscored the USD 60 Million Foreign Direct Investment in 2016-17 as a pointer to his focus on the economy, which is a concern, now that the structural corrections have been completed. His narrative made sense, was appropriate to context, and very Prime Ministerial. Rahul's *bon mots* on the hand, while pearls of wisdom to the faithful no doubt, did sound a bit lame. In addition, his promotion of a sense of victimhood among a section of Indians was inappropriate and the tenor of his speech a classic example of political overreach.