

# Decoding Modi magic post-Karnataka

Good communication skills, mass public outreach, delivery on promises and the charismatic presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi have all contributed to the BJP's good showing

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Just before the elections in Karnataka, when there was gathering skepticism about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's chaste Hindi breaking through the language barrier in the South, observers were not sure if he could spin his wand of magic. Although he had been mentioning Kannadiga icons in his speeches over the last few months, regional chauvinism was frankly somewhat of a wall. All depended on his local translator Ganesh Yahyaji. But on D-Day, the interlocutor realised that though he had the papers in his hand, the Prime Minister never used the script during his spontaneous speech. And he somehow couldn't get a grip on Modi's emotions and impassioned gestures. So though he translated with long gaps, it was more than just words that swelled and washed on the audience, comprising a divergent rural populace, and brought the BJP within calling distance of the southern gates. Some of us wondering if the Modi magic had waned and in bipartisan spirit speculating on a Congress revival, were surprised when the results defied projections and showed that if anything, the BJP juggernaut needed the wingspan of Modi to course it through.

It may not have been full sail but the last-minute dose worked more than the avid number-crunching on the ground by the BJP's strategists and lobbyists for over a year. Octogenarian women on TV screens chanting Modi and the sub-nationalist Kannadiga reposing faith in a mainstream discourse could be interpreted as staged optics but the truth is the Modi magic should never be seen through the prism of urban intellectualism or cynicism. That's why the magic, when it casts a potent spell, appears to be beyond comprehension. But let's give it to him, he has managed to connect with a large mass of people by making them believe he is just not one of them but born of them and, sharing their destinies, he would reclaim what is the people's at all costs, scouring the filth and challenging the odds. Critics perceive him to be a demagogue of sorts; which, literally, means a "leader of people" which these days is used to describe a leader who vaunts his sense of purpose, capitalizes on popular perceptions and prejudices and posits his arguments based on emotion rather than reason. Modi straddles both extremities of interpretation. Much like the Greek politician Cleon, who was known to have owned the stage and blustered at his opponents while drawing on the anger of his audience, Modi has made the connect that leads people to believe that a long legacy of denial by a political oligarchy has been overturned and he needs the people's push to decimate it forever. Unlike Cleon, who was an aristocrat, Modi has championed such causes and scripted such pitches that he is seen as an unassailable messiah of the masses, a simple man with straight-forward solutions.

He embodies Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega who wrote in *The Revolt of the Masses*,



"If from the viewpoint of what concerns public life, the psychological structure of this new type of mass-man be studied, what we find is as follows: (1) An inborn, root-impression that life is easy, plentiful, without any grave limitations; consequently, each average man finds within himself a sensation of power and triumph which, (2) invites him to stand up for himself as he is, to look upon his moral and intellectual endowment as excellent, complete. This contentment with himself leads him to shut himself off from any external court of appeal; not to listen, not to submit his opinion to judgment, not to consider others' existence. His intimate feeling of power urges him always to exercise predominance."

What else would explain his acceptance in the North-East and the deep South, places where he didn't have a relatable context to begin with? But in the season of a nationalized bank's favours to Nirav Modi and his easy run abroad, Modi chose to highlight another aspect altogether. Campaigning in Udupi, he said that though banks had been nationalised, the poor had been left out of the system by past regimes while the privileged were allowed to loot it and that he had decided to empower the masses with the Jan Dhan scheme and provisioning for loans to farmers and rural youth. While some recipients are still awaiting their deposits, Modi has been able to prioritise the creation of a participative module over the mediocrity of execution. Be it demonetisation or the GST and their attendant ills, subsequent verdicts in heartland States showed that his positing these big reforms in a simplistic, even

Robin Hood format of squeezing the rich and corrupt and punishing them, had more carriage than the Opposition campaign that more than 90 per cent of the "mop-up black money" campaign had returned to banks. The Mudra loan scheme for small traders scored higher than the financial overhaul that is still a work in progress.

Much of Modi's mass programmes are not complicated at all, be it the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the Ujjwala scheme, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Awas Yojana or Saubhagya, and basically an upgrade of the *roti, kapda aur makaan* theme with ease of convenience and collective stakes. In this respect, he seems to have understood the formula of cracking the lowest common denominator better than any master strategist. Though his performance in real terms could be said to be moderate or just above given the challenges of India, he has been able to create dependencies through dissemination channels like the common man's radio via his *Mann ki Baat*, or the Nammo app through smartphones in prosperous rural belts. He has the farmer's ear, through constant emphasis on their distress, suicides, pesticide woes and increasing yields, hackneyed to our kind of thinking but relevant for those turning up at the voting booth. His bardish style of posing rhetorical questions to his audience may appear dramatic but is deeply symptomatic of his latent magnetism.

Time and again, Modi, by virtue of being a grassroots RSS worker, has lived up to the deliverer tag because he has first-hand experience of crises and can articulate mass concerns first hand rather than the para-trooped

skills of the Congress leadership. By cultivating an immediacy and empathy, Modi has been able to make the Congress appear even more elitist. So, though observers in Delhi wonder why he harps on his tea boy origins to this day, it's only to keep his associative matrix with the common man intact as opposed to the prince of the Congress clan who deigns to dine at a Dalit house or go muth-hopping. In between, he cleverly weaves in his litany of achievements as one that is responsive and real as opposed to one that is opportunist and power-driven. Appearing as an avenger of the dispossessed, he keeps up his barrage of broadsides against the Congress' first family and gains immense traction. Modi also engages in dissociative imagery. By speaking in the third person and casting himself in the role of a *pradhan sevak*, he still continues to be the friendly insider who is serving the people rather than the halo of a brand that he has created, which is what his critics would like you to believe; he also genuinely believes he is an ordinary mortal soldiering on the side of the voter despite the plush robes or the crown that he has been invested with and that comes through in his personality projection. This is why Modi is considered an enigma: A politician who can appear ego-less to supporters but come across as egoistic to skeptics.

Many wonder why then does his deep-seated image need to be bolstered from time to time by polarisation and conspiracy theories. Well, sometimes you need to do straight talking on the weaknesses of the nation and be blunt about its challenges rather than just focus on the positives. And the cadre needs ideological issues to be enthused. Modi is working from the same template as other pugilistic leaders like Donald Trump, whose every decision is self-avowedly made to "make America great" or even Putin, who astride a bear or driving a bus, is unapologetic about putting Russia first. Of course, this also casts these leaders as heroes to those who agree with them and why not? While none of them have gone into too much detail about how they would accomplish their goals, Modi has projected himself as being capable of devising a solution simply because he has been able to communicate the analytics of abject Congress failures, reeling off figures of non-performance of the UPA regimes and making his own moderate strides look gigantic by comparison over the past four years. He is, therefore, seeking more time to ensure continuity, incubation and successful completion of his nation-altering schemes.

As a stellar performer, Modi has been able to build an aura of conviction and earnestness about aligning his own dreams with that of India, making them look bigger and brighter. And though the crowds in Karnataka may not have been a tidal surge, they were convinced enough by his knowledge of local issues to trust him with their future by giving the BJP the largest number of seats. The verdict is not just about giving him his last-mile connectivity, it is about a reconciliation with his sense of leadership that the people desire at this point in time.

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