

A government with purpose: Modi has transformed the mood from despair to optimism about the future

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Everyone knows, as the old gag puts it, that half the time in government is wasted, but no one knows which half.

Indian voters, turned cynical by experience, are rarely in a hurry to believe that the political class can be a force for the good. But when they find a national government with purpose, pace, direction, not only is it in a hurry but also confident about horizons, it is logical that the initial electoral chemistry has begun to mature into alchemy.

There was enough reason for cynicism in 2014. A decade of sinking growth and exploding corruption had stripped the electorate of hope, and drained out any illusion. The corrosive by-product of frustration is intense anger. But in a charismatic eight-month election campaign, Narendra Modi transformed the mood from despair to optimism about the future.

The problem was that change cannot come at the speed of magic. Stunned opposition parties, demanding instant delivery, fanned a backlash with a ferocity that, in hindsight, only confirms how anxious they were about their immediate relevance. However, Prime Minister Modi's nerves are dipped in steel. In less than three years, trust has returned to the grassroots; self-belief is back in the air.

That was confirmed in UP. Elections are a natural barometer in democracy. But there is also much to learn from corners where elections are neither in process nor even imminent; where the storm has not yet broken, but fresh winds are beginning to whisper.

Quiz question: Which part of British India did not become independent on 15 August 1947? Answer: Maldah, Bengal. A magistrate from what was then East Pakistan was administrator for two days, till 17 August, before the tricolour was unfurled to end confusion (other disputed territories were either European colonies like Goa, or princely states like Hyderabad; not part of British India).

The reason was demographic. Maldah is a Muslim-majority district adjoining Bangladesh, watered by a generous Ganga before it splits at Farakka into Hooghly river while the other tributary decants across the eastern border. Maldah has history; perhaps too much of it. It is mentioned in Puranic texts as Gour, capital of ancient Bengal, and remained as the seat of power through the famed Pala dynasty, and then into the era of Sultanate and Mughal nawabs.

Since the 1950 general elections Maldah has been consistently loyal to Congress. I visited Maldah in mid-April for a political foray into a small township called Gazole, a modest cluster of shops and homes serving a large rural hinterland. It would be

immodest to call the gathering at our public meeting a crowd. Between the partisan and the curious, the number could not have been more than 2,000.

Bengali voters are the vociferous centre of a noisy democracy, but they take their time over any decision. A good place from where to observe any shift in thinking is the dais at a public meeting. An audience's mind is visible through eyes, gestures, a silent nod or loud applause. It was clear to me that another churn has begun, although how far it travels depends on both the predictable and the unforeseen. But if Maldah is in play, you can be certain that any stronghold is no longer very strong.

Objectively speaking, voter stability is a bit baffling, given the stagnant rural economy, disparity and rising aspirations. Sectarian loyalties of course play their role. But if a seven-decade status quo is now wobbly, there is one primary reason: corruption.

Corruption switched from background resentment in Bengal to foreground anger thanks to a sting operation, relayed continually on television, which showed Trinamool MPs and state ministers taking bribes and stuffing cash into their pockets. Mamata Banerjee, who has always claimed to live on high moral ground, startled people by publicly justifying this blatant bribery in her usual belligerent manner. This became, for voters, collateral evidence for rumours that her close relatives were on the take in a growing culture of malfeasance. The current talk is that her high-pitched rage against demonetisation was fuelled by loss of stashed currency.

Corruption was a game changer in 2014, but that game now seems to be the semi-final. The finals will be in 2019. Interestingly, opposition leaders with highest profiles are currently stumbling through this swamp. Congress, with its familiar repertoire of in-laws and out-laws, is led by a dynasty that has added financial manipulation and asset transfers in the National Herald to its woes. Lalu Prasad, already convicted, is back under scrutiny while his political heirs are beset with accusations of receiving property through "gifts" and ghost companies.

Mayawati has to worry about allegations of extortion just made by her trusted aide, Naseemuddin Siddiqui. A senior minister in the Delhi government, Kapil Mishra, is ripping apart the façade of virtue around Arvind Kejriwal.

The voter is witnessing something unusual. The era of cosy back-scratching between elites is over. No one lives above the law. Colourful personalities like Vijay Mallya are discovering that money does not buy immunity. The voter welcomed demonetisation because it was part of the same narrative. Best of all, there are no allegations against the present government, in sharp contrast to the Congress decade before 2014.

This systematic and sustained mission segues easily into the larger story of good governance, with rapid elimination of harsh poverty as its central objective. India's poor believe that corruption is theft of public money. Massive investment into social welfare is beginning to change their lives. They believe the PM when he says that

the first fruits and largest share of growth must go to those who need it most, the impoverished.

And they know that Narendra Modi has no time to waste.