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India 2014: Return of the One-Party Dominant System

by Neera Chandhoke

ABSTRACT

The current elections, which gave to the BJP a majority in Parliament, have brought back the one-party dominant system that was once used to describe the hegemony of the Congress party, and the lack of an opposition. The "new" one-party dominant system is however dramatically different from the original one. The BJP unlike the Congress is a cadre based party and subscribes to a distinct ideology. It is also headed by the powerful figure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose image looms larger than the party and his colleagues. India will witness a qualitatively different style of governance in the next five years.

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Introduction

As results of the 2014 general elections in India flashed up minute by minute on television screens on 16 May, political analysts were to wryly remark on the irony of Indian politics. For the last five years India had no government, and now it has no opposition. So complete is the electoral defeat of non-BJP parties, particularly the Congress, and so complete is the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In the process, an integral and critical component of parliamentary democracy, a viable opposition that can keep watch on the government, and that can bring it to book for acts of omission and commission, has been practically wiped d out. In order to qualify for the status of an officially-recognized opposition in the 543-member house, a party has to secure 10 percent of the total seats. The Congress, with 44 seats in its kitty, simply does not qualify, nor does any other party.

This is not the first time in India's electoral history that a political party has won an impressive majority on its own in the popular house of Parliament, the Lok Sabha. In the general elections held after the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1984, the Congress, led by her son Rajeev Gandhi, won 414 seats in a house of 533 members, and secured 49.01 of the votes cast. It is also not the first time that there is no officially-recognized opposition in the Indian Parliament. In 1984, the second largest party, the Telugu Desam, won only 30 seats in the general elections.

It is also easy to exaggerate the scale of the victory. The BJP has secured 282 seats in the house, with a vote share of 31 percent. Traditionally the lowest vote share of the winning party has been 41 percent. The BJP mark is below this by 10 percent. It has been estimated that less than four out of every ten voters voted for the BJP. The vote share of the BJP plus the Congress makes for 50 percent of the total vote share; the implication is that half the electorate voted for other parties. If we count the vote share of the allies of the two coalitions, the tally goes up to 38.5 percent for

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the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and to almost 23 percent for the United Progressive Alliance (UPA). It still means that 39 percent of the electorate voted for other parties. This is a problem that is intrinsic to the first-past-the-post system of elections; the vote share of a party has little connection to the number seats it gets in Parliament. The vote share of Congress, i.e. 19.3 percent, is higher than the vote share of the BJP in 2009, i.e. 18.5 percent. But the Congress has got 44 seats in today's Parliament, whereas BJP's 18.5 percent fetched it 116 seats in 2009.

Even so, this election is remarkable for at least three reasons. One, for the first time in India's electoral history a non-Congress party has come into power on its own. Two, a political party has won a majority for the first time in thirty years, i.e. since 1984. In the period between then and now coalition governments ruled at the centre. Small and mainly regional parties clustered around the two national parties, the Congress and the BJP, to form coalitions, namely the UPA and the (NDA). Three, for the first time in thirty years, or since the death of Ms Indira Gandhi, the image of a charismatic leader looms larger than his or her party, and dominates Indian politics in general. Like Ms Gandhi did earlier, Mr Modi has caught the imagination of Indians across class and caste.

Commentators have run out of adjectives in trying to describe the BJP win: historic, landmark, landslide, and game-changer are some of the embellishments that are regularly attached to the analysis. The win is indeed remarkable not only because for the first time a non-Congress party has secured a majority in the lower house of Parliament, but also because the election has changed the nature of the party itself. The BJP now has a national presence, electorally speaking. It has emerged as a pan-India party, with representatives winning from Kanya Kumari in the southernmost tip of the country, to Arunanchal Pradesh in the North-East Jammu in the state of Jammu, and Kashmir in the North-West.

The party won an impressive tally of 71 seats in one of the country's largest states, Uttar Pradesh, which sends 80 representatives to the lower house. It won all the seats in the states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Delhi, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and Goa. The BJP also secured most of the parliamentary seats in Chattisgarh, Jharkand and Bihar. The bulk of the winning seats continue to be from the North and the North-West. In Orissa, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal, regional parties emerged victorious. But the BJP opened its account in Tamil Nadu and managed to win a considerable percentage of the vote share in West Bengal.

After 1989, political pundits had declared that henceforth India would be governed by coalitions, that the days of the one-party dominance of the Congress were definitively over, and that the two national parties, the Congress and the BJP, would never be able to secure a majority on their own. The era of coalition politics had catapulted to the forefront the political agendas of regional parties that are more or less confined to their states. On their own none of these parties can form a government at the national level, simply because they are state-centric. But in alliance with either of the two national parties, regional parties managed to wield considerable clout, even if they had only two or three members in Parliament. As a

signifier of a U-turn in Indian politics, this election has brought back the one-party dominant system.

1. The one-party dominant system

The phrase "the one-party dominant system" was originally fashioned by the noted political analyst Rajni Kothari to capture a phenomenon peculiar to electoral politics in India, and to the Congress party in particular. India's electoral system, wrote Kothari in 1970, approximates neither to the established model of the two-party or multi-party system, nor to that of the one-party system. For almost two decades after independence, the Congress, which had led the freedom struggle in the country, controlled the central as well as state governments. The domination of the Congress and the lack of a viable opposition in Parliament could have caused concern, as the one-party system did in many Sub-Saharan countries.

Kothari, however, rescued Indian democracy from the negative connotation attached to one-party rule in closed and authoritarian systems. He suggested that the Congress was an umbrella party; a coalition of interest groups that often opposed each other within the party. Party decisions were therefore the outcome of a compromise between different and incommensurate views, forged through intricate processes of mediation and arbitration within the party. The opposition was there, within the party, even if it was not a significant presence in Parliament.

According to Kothari, the features of the one-party dominant system are (a) an open and competitive party system, (b) a fractured opposition that cannot provide an alternative to the government, but which can press the government to do certain things, or not do these things, and (c) a democratic and consensual dominant party.[1] Kothari seemed to suggest that the Congress was a condensate of the de-centred and plural nature of Indian society, where decisions are produced through difficult and protracted negotiations between rival views. What is important is that in the final instance, these decisions arrived at a consensus.

It is well known that since the 1920s the Congress brought together a number of interest and identity groups to forge a broad coalition. The party leadership was however dependent upon a network of "big men", large landowners, the middle peasants, industrialists, professional classes, caste and religious communities, women and youth organisations, workers and peasants. This network of big men, who exerted both material and symbolic power, mediated the relationship between the Congress leaders and the rank and file of the party on the one hand, and competing points of view on the other. The network also enabled the High Command of the party to control popular upsurges that had been launched under

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[1] Rajni Kothari, "The Congress 'System' in India", in *Asian Survey*, Vol. 4, No. 12 (December 1964), p. 1161-1173. The argument was expanded in his 1970 work *Politics in India*, New Delhi, Orient Longman.

its aegis.[2]

After independence, writes Bhagwan Dua, the inherent composite character of the Congress was preserved by the accommodation of diverse social interests, and through a continuous search for dynamic equilibrium in the midst of internal competition among shifting political coalitions within the party.[3] The implications of this thesis are plain. In the first two decades after independence, assertions by the subaltern classes were mediated as well as controlled by powerful "big men" who owned land, labour, and resources. Symptomatic of this arrangement was reliance on state leaders. National leaders relied upon state leaders to manage contentious issues in their own regions, such as the formation of linguistic states as units of the federal system in the 1950s and 1960s. The federal-like structure of the party enabled the decentralization of power as well as control.

The institutionalisation of democracy, however, tends to breed its own logic and unforeseen results. India was no exception. In the late 1960s and the 1970s, the "Congress" system imploded. In the 1967 elections, sections of the party broke away, formed their own regional parties, competed in state elections, and won. Congress lost control of state politics, and it has never been able to regain complete power over the country. More seriously, in the 1970s, under the charismatic leadership of Ms Indira Gandhi, the party atrophied organizationally. In the 1971 elections, Ms Gandhi appealed to the national electorate across regions, castes, religion and gender on the populist platform of "remove poverty." The federal nature of decision-making within the party yielded to a highly centralized form of policy-making under a charismatic leader. The party degenerated into a band of courtiers. In the process it lost its capacity either to represent or to arbitrate between plural and conflicting views. The decisions of the dynastic leader were the decisions of the party. Increasingly the party was to lose touch with the people it had once led to freedom.

This Congress has paid heavily for organisational degeneration and its complete reliance on the Nehru Gandhi family to hold it together. Both these factors contributed significantly to the massive defeat of the Congress in 2014.

The once mass-based party that mobilised millions of Indians in the cause of independence has lost its hold over the popular psyche. Much as he tried, Rahul Gandhi could neither rebuild the party, nor prove a worthy rival to a Mr Modi on the warpath. As a piece in the *Frontline* was to comment, the 2014 elections "exposed the generational change in the Congress, represented by Rahul Gandhi, as bereft

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[2] Ravinder Kumar, "Introduction", in Amit Kumar Gupta (ed.), *Myth and Reality. The Struggle for Freedom in India, 1945-47*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1987, p. xiii-xxviii, at p. xxiv-xxv.

[3] Bhagwan D. Dua, "Congress Dominance Revisited", in Paul R. Brass and Francis Robinson (eds.), *The Indian National Congress and Indian Society, 1885-1985. Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Dominance*, Delhi, Chanakya Publications, 1987, p. 349-372, at p. 357.

of political imagination and lacking in people-connect, creativity and efficiency".[4]

In the 1980s, two events of considerable magnitude transformed the party system in India, as new agendas filled the space vacated by the Congress party. The BJP, which at that time was more or less marginal to Indian politics (it gained two seats in 1984), began to whip up political passions around the building of a temple dedicated to Lord Ram, one of the Gods of the Hindu Pantheon. Building a temple was not a problem; the problem was that the temple could only be constructed if the site was vacated by the demolition of the Babri mosque. Implicit in this agenda was a communal project.

The BJP is the political arm of a rabidly right-wing organization termed the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or simply the RSS, along with a number of smaller organisations. The complex of groups that subscribe to Hindu majority rule had been languishing on the periphery of Indian politics since independence, representing as they did the religious right wing. In the mid-1980s, the complex asserted itself and brought a new idiom into Indian politics. The campaign gained steam through a mix of theatrics, symbolism, impassioned rhetoric, and hate speech. In 1992, the mosque was razed to the ground by mobs belonging to various organisations of the Hindu right. The demolition of the mosque was followed by some of the worst communal riots between Hindus and Muslims that the country had ever seen. For the BJP, the polarization of Indian society on the basis of religious violence bore electoral results, and in 1998 the party came to power at the centre in alliance with other parties. The party that had been typed as untouchable by the left and the liberals, because it single-mindedly pursued the project of building a majoritarian India, now governed the country, albeit in alliance with other parties.

Interestingly, at the same time the BJP's ideology of majoritarianism and anti-minorityism was rent apart by caste-based parties. These parties challenged the idea that the Hindu community was a homogenous or unified entity. Hinduism is hierarchically organized on the basis of caste, and some of these caste groups, such as the *dalits* and the backwards, had been excluded from cultural, social and economic life by a complex system of taboos based on notions of purity and pollution. Now formerly marginal castes asserted themselves politically as a party, and aggressively promoted the interests of their own group. Prominent among this genre of party is the Samajwadi party headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav that currently holds power in Uttar Pradesh, the Bahujan Samaj party led by Mayawati in the same state, the Rashtriya Janata Dal led by Laloo Yadav in Bihar, the Janata Dal (U) led by Nitesh Kumar which rules in Bihar, and the Lok Janshakti party led by Ram Vilas Pawan. The rise of caste-based parties with their own agendas contributed a great deal to the democratization of the country insofar as groups that had been marginalized in the Hindu social hierarchy began to participate in power structures. Yet in 2014 all these parties, except the Paswan-led party that had

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[4] Venkitesh Ramakrishnan, "Right at the Centre", in *Frontline*, Vol. 31, No. 11 (31 May-13 June 2014), p. 4-10, at p. 6.

joined the BJP before the elections, lost to the BJP.

The wheel has turned full-circle, with one party dominating national politics and a fragmented opposition that cannot offer alternatives. We are back to the days of the one-party dominant system, but in a new avatar.

2. What does the mandate represent?

The electoral verdict represents impatience and discontent with a number of factors that have bedevilled Indian politics over the last five years. The first factor that caused unease was coalition politics at the centre. Very often, smaller parties in the alliance held the Congress leadership hostage, as they pressed their own claims and their own interests upon policy. Threats of withdrawal of support hung like the sword of Damocles over the leadership. The DMK, for instance, withdrew its ministers from UPA-II government because A. Raja, who belonged to the party, and who was the telecommunications minister in the central government, was convicted in the telecoms scam. The constant threat of destabilization of UPA-II led to policy paralysis, and abrupt reversal of decisions. Dual centres of power within the Congress party also bred adverse consequences, because ministers preferred to report to Ms Sonia Gandhi, the president of the party, than to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The Prime Minister lost moral authority within the party. Consequently he was unable to fashion a team that could work together under his authority. In the middle of polity paralysis Mr Modi emerged as a national leader on a platform of stability and a thorough shake-up of the system. This agenda appealed to the people across castes and classes because it promised an end to dithering, and endless compromises, U-turns in decisions, and no decisions.

Two, the defeat of caste-based parties in the elections illustrates sheer impatience with narrow agendas, and a focus on hand-outs, such as more quotas for this caste or that. Caste and its petty hierarchies have not gone away; but we seem to have entered a new phase of politics within caste. Caste-based parties will have to rethink their strategies. Take Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's largest state in which the BJP won 71 out of 80 seats. UP has been ruled in the recent past by two caste-based parties, the Samajwadi party, which is grounded in the backward castes, and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which speaks for the *dalits*. The BSP, which won 27.42 percent of the vote and 20 seats in the general elections in 2009, was completely wiped out this time. The 2009 win was largely due to the fact that the BSP leader Mayawati was able to forge a constituency beyond her traditional *dalit* base. She brought upper castes into the party, and this strategy proved successful. In this election she gave tickets to 20 Brahmins and 19 Muslims, but *dalits*, which comprise 19 percent of the population of the state, voted for BJP. Her own sub-caste Jatav, which comprises 12 percent of the *dalit* population, remained loyal to her.

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The BJP appealed to the most marginalized among the *dalit* castes, and the most backward among the backward castes, because it promised them rewards. More importantly, the party's agenda fits in with the rising aspirations of a middle class in the lower and backward castes. The election has proved that people, newly emancipated from poverty through various anti-poverty programmes, are no longer content with hand-outs. Their search for dignity demands access to structures of opportunity. The BJP promised them this dignity and these opportunities. Ironically, the Congress party, which in UPA-I and II had enacted a number of social policies that brought the people out of poverty, seems to have become irrelevant for these strata.

Above all, Mr Modi played up his origins as a member of a backward caste, and as the son of a man who sold tea on railway platforms. For the "lower" castes, Mr Modi represents entrepreneurship, hard work, and drive. The appeal of a backward caste member, enormously successful as the Chief Minister of Gujarat, and now an aspirant to the post of Prime Minister, was stupendous. It tells us a lot about the changing mood of an aspirant middle class. The appeal of a trans-caste agenda was combined with aggressive campaigning by the RSS, a cadre-based formation, membership of which overlaps with that of the BJP.[5] The upper castes and the middle classes have always voted for the BJP. The Muslim vote was fragmented.

Three, Mr Modi's campaign tapped into the powerlessness, helplessness, and sheer anger felt by Indians across the board. He exploited to the hilt the inefficiencies and the corruption of the previous government, its inability to provide jobs, its lack of decisiveness, economic decline, unemployment, rising prices of foodstuffs, and general listlessness. Above all, the Congress party and its allies in UPA-II that had been voted back into power in 2009, was wracked by massive corruption scandals.

A groundswell of deep-rooted anger against a non-performing and corrupt system was first visible when Anna Hazare went on fast in Delhi in 2010. Crowds thronged the space where he was fasting, and expressed their rage at large-scale corruption at the very time that unemployment, inflation, and rising prices dogged the footsteps of Indians. Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, it is generally agreed, is an upright man; but he presided over one of India's most corrupt regimes. Mr Modi captured a moment of discontent.

Four, Mr Modi's vision of a new India and a new social compact caught the imagination of a new generation of one million globalised Indians born after Dr Manmohan Singh introduced economic reforms in 1991. This generation has no memory of Nehruvian India, of the values of socialism or indeed those of secularism. The middle class aims for jobs in the corporate sector, and for a life-style modelled on designer codes. Those who have been newly liberated from poverty through social policies enacted by the Congress look for opportunities. It has been estimated

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[5] Badri Narayan, "Remaking the BSP", in *The Hindu*, 26 May 2014, p 10, http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/remaking-the-bsp.

that the vote share for the BJP among the youth was 5 percent higher than among the general population. The election itself was marked by high electoral turnouts of 66.7 percent. Though empirically little correlation can be established between high turnouts and the desire for change, in this case the correlation seems to stand.

Five, Mr Modi promised other good things as well, such as maximum governance and minimum government, a corruption-free regime, economic growth, employment and access to economic opportunities. He promised that sacred rivers, which happen to be the most polluted in the world, will be cleaned up, and that roads, infrastructure, and bullet trains will connect every part of India and give a fillip to trade and commerce. Mr Modi's pro-development and pro-economic growth stance, his no-nonsense style of governance, his emphasis on results, and his personal uncorruptability persuaded many that he was the solution for India. He set forth a vision of India modeled on the philosophy of the market, efficiency, transparency, governance, and infrastructure. This vision of India appealed to a new generation. Remarkably, the language of the market proved victorious over the by now tired emphasis on caste politics or Mandal, or even the BJP's dream, a temple or a Mandir. Under the charismatic sway of Mr Modi, the BJP put onto the backburner its traditional commitments and came to speak his language.

The emphasis on the institution of the market and its potential to resolve issues is not new. After all, it was Dr Manmohan Singh who had designed the neo-liberal regime in 1991 in his capacity as Finance Minister in the government of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. Trade and financial liberalization, the loosening of state controls on industry, and opening up the economy to foreign investment marked a turnaround in economic policy at a crucial juncture. But economic reforms were blocked in the days that followed the entry of the Congress into power in 2004 by a variety of factors, such as the need to placate allies in the coalition, a lack of a majority in Parliament, and general lethargy. It is this language that has returned to Indian politics. And India has returned to the one-party dominant system.

3. The newness of the one-party dominant system

The second avatar of the one-party dominant system is, however, radically different from the umbrella-like Congress, which offered something to everyone, and which lapsed into populism on predictable occasions, notably elections. By contrast, the strength of the BJP lies in a strong, ideologically-oriented, disciplined, and cadre-based formation, the RSS. The RSS is well-organised, committed, and austere. It is also known for its anti-minority stance, commitment to a strong variety of nationalism, fervent promises to safeguard national frontiers, suspicion towards Pakistan, and solid dedication to the building of a Hindu India. The RSS presents itself as non-political and as a social service organization, but research has shown that this meticulously organized and rigidly disciplined organization spreads its ideology through neighbourhood committees and the politics of everyday life. Mr Modi belongs to the cadres of the RSS, as did former Prime Minister Vajpayi.

But Mr Vajpayi was able to transcend the limitations imposed on his government by RSS ideology and to govern according to the tenets of liberal ideology. He also functioned within the constraints of a coalition government that moderated his policy.

This time, the one-party dominant system has returned to Indian politics, but the BJP is nothing like the Congress in its heyday, i.e. a loosely-knit coalition of different interest groups bargaining with each other within the precincts of the party. Not all members of the BJP belong to the RSS, but the latter tries to influence the party agenda. Hence the reiteration in the party manifesto of abrogation of the special status of Jammu and Kashmir (see Article 370 of the Constitution), the building of a temple at the site of the demolished mosque in Ayodhaya, and the enactment of a uniform civil code that would do away with the personal laws of the minorities. How is Mr Modi going to manage these contentious issues? How is he going to balance his commitment to the RSS and to a plural society in which people worship different gods and speak different languages.

Initially during the election campaign Mr Modi showed strains of intolerance towards Pakistan, and towards Bangladeshi migrants in India. He had attacked the Muslim minority in his speeches in Gujarat on earlier occasions. And he finds it difficult to shrug off the stain of presiding over a government that kept silent when Hindu mobs targeted the Muslim community in 2002. This communal riot left 1000 dead and many more homeless. The majority of these homeless and jobless are Muslim.

Mr Modi's detractors have, however, been taken aback by his actions after he was elected Prime Minister. His invitation to the leaders of member countries of SARCC to attend the ceremony was a masterstroke. Though his interaction with the Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif was closely watched, critics could find no fault with the bonhomie and the courtesy on both sides. Mr Modi will have to out-negotiate the RSS if he wants to be a democratic Prime Minister. And this is something he is aware of. After all, this is the man who genuflected at the doors of the Indian Parliament, terming it the temple of democracy. And democracy makes no distinction on the basis of caste or creed.

Up till now, the Prime Minister has not touched any one of these contentious issues. His focus is on the financial crisis and economic decline, development, economic growth, infrastructure, an efficient and corruption-free government, and an aggressive foreign policy. All this is communicated through powerful rhetoric, interesting plays on words and significant turns of phrase, confident, and even aggressive, body language, and catchy slogans.

Electoral democracy breeds its own reverberations. The necessity of speaking to a constituency wider than the one he ideologically belongs to has moderated Mr Modi's stance, and now he speaks the language of governance and development, which is unexceptionable to most sectors of society. The agenda is peculiarly apolitical, but for that very reason attractive to people who are simply fed up with

old-style politics. The citizen has become the consumer and the government the provider of services. This is Mr Modi's agenda, and most people believe that he will run the country well. He is certainly running the country's foreign policy well.

4. The foreign policy angle

In democracies, foreign policy follows a broad continuity. Though in opposition the BJP mounted harsh criticism of neighbours, especially Pakistan, the invitation to leaders of SARCC countries to attend the swearing-in ceremony emphasized the importance the new government places on the region. A stable neighbourhood is an essential precondition to internal stability and peace. More significantly, no country can aspire to the status of a major power unless it sorts out its problems with its neighbours. This is the message that the swearing-in of the cabinet carried. The ceremony was meant to showcase the success of electoral democracy in India. It was simultaneously an attempt to hold out the hand of friendship and solidarity to countries that had been vilified in the electoral campaign. During the campaign Mr Modi had attacked Pakistan for exporting terror, criticized illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India, and also condemned China for laying claim to territory in the North-East of India. But in politics there are no permanent friends and no permanent enemies. Parties in opposition are known to radically transform their stances and their hostilities the moment they come into government. And the Modi government is no exception. The Prime Minister moved away sharply from his own aggressive nationalistic stance, as the previous BJP Prime Minister Vajpeyi had done. The leaders of every member country of SARCC attended the ceremony, but all eyes were upon the Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif, who had braved criticism from hardliners and the army in his own country to come to India. As one analyst pointed out, Mr Modi appreciates the fact that foreign policy begins at the borders of the country, and that economic and political transactions with neighbours are of utmost importance.[6] The invitation also carried the message that the building of good relations with neighbours requires contact beyond the formalities of bilateral negotiations and regional summits. These contacts should be made routine to a certain extent.

The policy of giving primacy to the region in a way continues the initiatives of the previous government, which encouraged cross-border trade, took initiatives for the economic integration of the region, tried to arrive at an agreement with Pakistan on the Siachen and Sir Creek disputes, and on river water sharing with Bangladesh. The previous government also placed great emphasis on helping war-ravaged Afghanistan and Sri Lanka by building infrastructure.

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[6] C. Raja Mohan, "Five-Point Someone: The Foundations of Modi's Vigorous Diplomacy", in *The Indian Express*, 26 May 2014, p. 10, http://m.indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/five-point-someone-2/2071308.

In the previous government these initiatives could not be carried to their logical conclusion as a result of the exigencies of coalition politics. The Trinamool Congress had prevented Dr Manmohan Singh from finalizing an agreement on the sharing of river water with Dhaka, and the two parties in Tamil Nadu barred the Prime Minister from attending the Commonwealth Heads of State meeting in Colombo in November 2013. Mr Modi, secure in the majority his party commands, is not bound by these constraints. Ignoring the plea of the Chief Minister of Tamil, Mr Nadu, that President Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka should not be invited to the swearing-in ceremony, Mr Modi went ahead and invited him. There is reason to believe that the government of India will pursue a regional agenda with determination.

Central to the foreign policy agenda of the new government, and indeed the main driver of external relations, is economic diplomacy, which is focused on trade and increased investment in India. The Prime Minister has recommended that individual states should engage with foreign countries in order to attract investment, as Gujarat did in its annual global meeting referred to as "Vibrant Gujarat." Mr Modi has suggested that an economic advisor, whether a foreign service official, a businessman, or a professional, should be attached to every Indian embassy, and that the Indian foreign service must recruit economic and regional experts on trade and security. For this strategy to succeed, he has emphasized repeatedly that India must put its own house in order. His objective is to raise India's ranking in the World Bank's "Ease of Doing Business" index from its current position of 134 to higher than 100.[7]

After the region, the priority of the Modi government is Japan. Japan was one country that did not boycott him after the 2002 communal riot in Gujarat. Subsequently, Mr Modi has fostered tremendous goodwill with Japan, and drawn upon the country's expertise for his development plans for Gujarat. Mr Modi and the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe admire each other because they follow similar strategies, namely strong nationalistic positions and a commitment to economic growth. Mr Modi has made it clear that his government will aim for a mutual strategic partnership with Japan. As Chief Minister of Gujarat he had established strong contacts with other Asian countries. China and Singapore became his preferred destinations, and his search for investment and expertise in infrastructure bore results in both these countries.

The government's "look east" policy is likely to be strengthened in the area of trade, particularly if it wants to return India to the 8 to 9 percent growth rate witnessed during the first phase of UPI headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Suhasini Haider recounts how Mr Modi as Chief Minister visited Beijing and Shanghai in the middle of a border row with China to speak about R&D investment from Huawei and a deep-sea port for Gujarat. Despite tensions over the line of control in 2013, Mr Modi hosted an official delegation from Pakistan to discuss solar energy

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[7] Suhasini Haider, "New realities in the world order", in *The Hindu*, 3 June 2014, p. 8, http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article6075692.ece.

projects. His visits as Chief Minister were confined to countries that offer business opportunities, such as China, Japan, Israel, Singapore, and Australia.[8]

The United States has shown interest in strengthening both its strategic and economic partnerships with India, particularly if India is on the path to economic recovery. For the US, a high-growth economy and a middle class in India is of importance for its own economy. For India, partnership with the US is essential to contain China's territorial ambitions and its intrusion into the Indian Ocean. President Obama has invited the Prime Minister to visit the US in September. For western countries that wish to build their trade and investment ties with India, the removal of impediments to doing business will be welcome.

5. Challenges confronting the new government

A successful foreign policy, predicated on economic diplomacy, requires as an essential precondition efficient and trouble-free procedures and institutions. The first challenge facing the government is to streamline a bloated bureaucracy that has become sluggish and even inactive. In many ways Mr Modi relates to the bureaucracy and his colleagues as a CEO does to his company in the corporate sector. He sets targets, asks officials to present achievements and drawbacks in their departments through power-point presentations, and expects periodic reports. He has met the secretaries in charge of departments over the heads of departmental ministers and asked them to approach him directly in cases of problems, again by-passing the relevant minister, and he expects them to perform and to conform. There is every indication that power will rest in the Prime Minister's office, with the principal secretary supervising department heads over the heads of the minister in charge of the department. There is an indication that India will see government by executive fiat. Mr Modi will have to balance effective administration with respect for the norms of cabinet government and the power of Parliament.

The second challenge has to do with the wave of great expectations that the scale of victory has engendered. Victories of this scale give birth to great expectations. How far the new government can achieve an economic miracle is, however, an open question. Thirty years ago, India's GDP was the same as China's, according to a report in the Economist. In China, the increase in the average annual GDP per head from around USD 300 to USD 6,750 over a period of thirty years brought prosperity to millions of people, and reshaped the geography and the economy of the world.[9] India introduced economic reforms in 1991 and has seen economic growth, but its economy has never achieved the momentum that has dragged much of East Asia out of poverty. The human cost, in terms of frustrated, unemployed, ill-educated

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[8] Ibidem.

[9] "India's Strongman: Narendra Modi's amazing victory gives India its best chance ever of prosperity", in *The Economist*, 24 May 2014, http://econ.st/1nh5wNg.

and hungry people, has been immense.[10] How the Prime Minister balances social policy and economic growth, providing citizens with the preconditions for a dignified life with excessive reliance on the market, is again an open question.

The third challenge is as follows. Voters want access to structures of opportunities and prosperity, not hand-outs. But unstable public finances caused by a narrow tax base, inefficient collection, leakages, wastages, the high cost of doing business as a result of commissions charged by middlemen, and banks riddled with bad debts, have destroyed the economic momentum witnessed in the first phase of the UPA government from 2004-2009. India's sluggish rate of growth is 4.5 percent, which is half the level achieved by UPA-I. And this has taken place amidst a revolution of expectations in a youthful population. The new government has to resuscitate a sluggish bureaucracy, clean out the banks, negotiate the chronic deficit, cut subsidies, widen the tax base and allow the central bank to pursue a tough anti-inflation policy. At the same time, it has to create jobs for young people. The challenge of doing this is immense because 10 million Indians enter the job market every year.

Four, in this election the BJP captured and benefited from tremendous discontent with the previous government. The problem is that Indian society demands much more than just economic growth, the setting and meeting of targets, and jobs. Indian social structure is traditionally plural, de-centred, and anarchic. A political agenda that does not recognize and value plurality will be at odds with itself and with society.

This may be a cynical statement, but stable governments that rest on solid majorities invariably come at the expense of the representation of diverse points of view. And it is precisely here that the BJP's record is troublesome. In setting-up candidates for the elections, the BJP made no special effort to woo religious minorities. Just seven of the party's candidates were Muslim, and none of these won. The only Muslim face in the NDA is that of Chaudhry Mehboob Ali Kaiser, who won the Khagaria seat in Bihar. Kaiser is a member of the Lok Jan Shakti Party led by Paswan. The new Parliament has fewer Muslim 'members than any since 1952, despite the fact that Muslims represent about 13 percent of the population.

The lack of Muslim representation is cause for anxiety given the anti-minority stand of the party. In parts of the country victory processions of the ruling party have engaged in vandalism against mosques. And recently some thugs representing themselves as belonging to the Hindu right murdered a young Muslim technocrat in Pune because of what they perceived as offensive postings on social media. Who is to represent the interests, the demands, and the complaints of the minorities? I do not mean to defend a system of identity-based politics, just to point out the shortcomings of a party that is not socially inclusive and therefore incompletely national. For a long time, the BJP has dismissed secularism as appeasement meant

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[10] Ibidem.

to pacify minorities and to create a vote bank. It is precisely secularism that stands on trial today. Secularism as a political principle that grants the right to freedom of religion and detaches the state from a particular religion becomes more, not less, important in a multi-religious society. Such concerns motivated the distinguished thinker Gopal Gandhi to write an open letter to Mr Modi, as follows: "No one should have the impudence to speak the monarchist language of uniformism to a republic of pluralism, the vocabulary of 'oneness' to an imagination of many-nesses, the grammar of consolidation to a sensibility that thrives in and on its variations".[11] Unlike Gujarat, the Prime Minister's home state, India is complex, diverse, and contradictory given the plurality of castes, creeds, languages, and ethnicities. Citizens are bound to each other by social ties, or by birth into a particular ascriptive community. Citizens are also bound to each other in the political community by entitlements and rights. It precisely the fostering of this political community peopled by different religious communities that will pose a major challenge to the agenda of the BJP.

Finally, Mr Modi's idea of India is strongly nationalistic. He seeks to create a unified India through economic growth, and he seeks to fuse different parts of the country through infrastructure, connected rivers and roads, telecoms and communications. But technology can be dual-edged, it can connect and also disconnect through dis-information, hate speech, and malevolent messages that target minorities in the name of a strong and united India. Technological solutions have to be embedded in robust notions of political ethics and justice. By itself, technology can become amoral and insensitive to human needs.

Good governance is important, but a poor substitute for toleration. Efficiency is needed, but not at the expense of the redistribution of a highly-skewed resource base. Neo-liberalism and the dominance of the market lie at the core of the present government's agenda. The market is not, however, a solution to all problems. It cannot be a solution, for the market is peculiarly amoral. It has a place only for those who have something to buy with, and something to sell. It simply has no place for those millions of Indians who are doubly disprivileged by reasons of caste and class, poor, homeless, malnourished, non-literate, and jobless. The state has to play a pro-active role in ameliorating poverty and in giving people access to social goods to which they have a right. Governance, efficiency, hard work, economic recovery and building India into a major power, have to be tempered by commitment to social justice, entitlements, rights, and redistribution. It is precisely these values that are sidelined by neo-liberalism and the language of the market, of efficiency, and of the delivery of services. The ordinary citizen of India is a person who has constitutional rights to justice, to equality, and to freedom. She is not only a consumer who is entitled to quick delivery of services. The present government will be judged on whether it manages to balance, on the one hand,

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[11] Gopalkrishna Gandhi, "An open letter to Narendra Modi", in *The Hindu*, 19 May 2014, p. 8, http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/an-open-letter-to-narendra-modi/article6023507.ece.

a system of political ethics resting on a mix of toleration and respect for other religions, redistribution of scarce resources, and dignity for all, with the language of the market, on the other.

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