

OFF THE BLOCKS

Get set: Campaign 2019 will rivet, horrify and confound you

FOR THE SECOND TIME in five years, I was struck by how apposite Rudyard Kipling's poem 'If' is in relation to Narendra Modi. At one place it says:

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch...*

Candidate Modi certainly has the common touch, and unmatched stamina: he is the single most effective campaign weapon the Bharatiya Janata Party possesses.

Between his first campaign speech on March 26 2014, and the last one on May 10 in Ballia, Uttar Pradesh, Modi spoke at 440 election rallies – an average of about ten a day. "Since September 13th 2013 when the responsibility of being the BJP's PM candidate was given to me, I have been travelling across the length and breadth of India," he wrote on his website in a post titled 'Extensive, Innovative and Satisfying: The Story of 2014 Campaign'. "Friends in the Party told me that I have addressed rallies and programmes in almost 5800 locations, covering a distance of over 3 lakh kilometers."

Modi was dead certain he would win. On May 15, 2014, two days before the results were announced, a post titled 'NaMo Wave during Rallies as lakhs throng Rally Venues' breathlessly said: "Neither the rain nor the hot sun could stop them from attending his rallies. When he speaks, they cheer and amid loud applause they cover every inch of the rally grounds not even sparing poles and roof-tops. The crowds that thronged Narendra Modi's rallies shattered records and made history everywhere he spoke."

Remember that was before he controlled the levers of power. This time, Incumbent Modi is standing for re-election. He is sure to shatter more records over the next few weeks as he fights to retain his majority in the Lok Sabha.

One sign of the frenetic pace: Modi inaugurated over 50 projects worth at least Rs 2 trillion in the 16 days before the Code of Conduct took effect, banning

government largesse. Multiple Cabinet meetings cleared 94 proposals, *Business Standard* reported. In the 26 days after the Pulwama terror attack on February 14, Modi and the BJP made national security their core talking point. Modi made 46 speeches before the election dates were announced; his main rival Rahul Gandhi spoke at half as many public events, *Scroll.in* said.

Truth is certain to be a casualty in Campaign 2019, and the lava of vitriol has already begun to flow. Interestingly, Modi and Rahul kicked off on March 12, the 89th anniversary of the launch of Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March, by invoking the man who wrote *My Experiments With Truth*.

Modi published a blog post in which he wrote: "Sadly, the Congress has never hesitated from dividing society. The worst caste riots and anti-Dalit massacres happened under Congress rule. Bapu said in 1947, "It is the duty of all leading men, whatever their persuasion or party, to safeguard the dignity of India. That dignity can't be saved if misgovernment and corruption flourish. Misgovernment and corruption always go together ... the nation has seen how Congress and corruption have become synonyms."

The Congress president in turn tweeted: "On the anniversary of Gandhi Ji's historic Dandi March, the Congress Working Committee in Ahmedabad, resolved to defeat the RSS/BJP ideology of fascism, hatred, anger & divisiveness."

What's your poison? **BW**

The author is former Editor, Reuters Asia, Editor-in-Chief of The Hindustan Times and Editor of Business Today



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