

# Narendra Modi Wanes a Little At Home & Waxes Abroad

## The Needle's Eye



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Four months after Lok Sabha polls, it seems sometimes like governance by slogan, marketing by catch-phrase, communication by social media

Sometimes, when the late monsoon clouds hover low, India can be spied through the gloom, as if by happenstance. So many geographies, languages, foods, cultures – and regions – thrown together

higgledy-piggledy and powered by a sputtering nationalism that makes us want to be counted among the great powers of the world, rich, strong, and respected. And then you also remember how political a people we are, never tiring of talking

sides, or throwing stones at glass houses, and hoping that somebody else's hurt will win us office and patronage. But you also forget that politics is about people and you cannot commoditise people for too long on the basis of religion, language or belief. This is what happened in Uttar Pradesh this week, when the by-elections, rather than acting like balm for a misgoverned populace, became a communal boil that had to be lanced.

Hubris has no permanent home. It travels hand in hand with arrogance from one shelter to another. Both the Congress and Samajwadi parties

were guilty of a false sense of security, and had their noses rubbed in the dirt in the April-May elections. The Bharatiya Janata Party won 71 of the 80 Lok Sabha seats from UP.

Instead of an inclusive building of its support base, the BJP decided it was too popular now to field either Prime Minister Narendra Modi or party chief Amit Shah in the campaign for the 11 Assembly seats and one Lok Sabha seat at stake last Saturday. The ruling party decided

that the likes of Yogi Adityanath, Sakshi Maharaj, and Sangeet Som (who is accused of complicity in last year's Muzaffarnagar riots and has been granted 2-plus security by the Modi government) were enough to whip up support in UP. That did not happen. Nor did the absent Modi's magic work by telekinetics in Rajasthan or even Gujarat. The BJP can go blue in the face and insist that by-elections are 'local'. Yes, as that

canany U.S. politician Tip O'Neill said, all politics is local, but by-elections are a useful barometer for popular sentiment, and it is clear that UP-ites are tired of the near-endem-



ARINDAM

Yadav can sleep easy; there will be more elections.

Modi marked his birthday in Ahmedabad with a short speech in Gujarat, but his mind must have been on talks that evening with Chinese President Xi Jinping as they dined under a tent on the Sabarmati riverbank. As has become the leitmotif of the Modi reign, yet another alliteratively

named pro-poor scheme was launched to tackle Gujarat's swavalamban (self-reliance), swasthrya (independence) and swabhimaan (self-dignity). Indeed, four months after the Lok Sabha elections, it seems

sometimes like governance by slogan, marketing by catch-phrase, communication by social media. After keeping the news traders' at arm's length for weeks the government's ministers were instructed to meet selectively with the press to discuss Modi's first 100 days in power, but the PM himself stayed aloof.

When he flies to New York next week for the UN General Assembly, he will not carry along a bevy of reporters. He did have to address a press conference during his Japan visit, and the day before Xi's arrival he 'interacted' with a group of Chinese journalists; with them he shared his newest slogan: Inchi (India and China) towards Milles (Millennium of Exceptional Synergy). In Tokyo, he revealed to a bemused audience of women university students that he used to send all the expensive gifts he got during his 13 years as chief minister of Gujarat to the treasury to be auctioned. "When I left Gujarat I deposited Rs 78 crore in the state's coffers." Why he chose to announce that figure thus is something only he and his image managers know.

This week Modi's image is unmistakably larger than life in his hometown, where large billboards carried pictures of him, Xi and Gujarat chief minister Anandiben Patel. Modi is a dab hand at attracting Chinese investment, and he will do so again, even if on the Hindu calendar Xi's visit falls in the inauspicious Shraddh fortnight. Despite the warmth, India has flexed its muscles over the past few days by pushing back a Chinese incursion in Ladakh

and unveiling plans to build more roads and military facilities along the disputed border in Arunachal Pradesh. And President Pranab Mukherjee, visiting Vietnam, signed defence and oil-exploration pacts that have rattled the Chinese cage.

Despite these irritants, China is determined to be the \$100-billion gorilla in our living room. Xi will sign multi-billion-dollar deals to set up industrial parks, build more Indian railway capacity, and perhaps even sell New Delhi nuclear reactors. A big Chinese state-owned bank announced the day Xi arrived that it would lend India \$2.6 billion to buy 30 new aircraft; this comes on top of the \$2.2 billion in Chinese loans to help Anil Ambani buy Chinese power equipment, and \$300 million to help the Ruias pull down their debt. Modi says he believes in a new Silk Route with India's biggest trading partner. Modi's dance card is nearly full; at month's end, President Barack Obama will join the long queue of suitors. The last monsoon cloud should have lifted by then.

## ENOUGH OF HATRED

By-elections are a useful barometer for popular sentiment... UP-ites are tired of the near-endemic tension

ic tension in that state. And yes, the Samajwadi wins were a nice bit of news for Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav exactly mid-way through his term, but he would be foolish to take it as an endorsement of his rule. Two negatives do add up to a positive in a by-election. That does not mean the

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