

The Ghosts Modi and Nitish Carry On Their Backs

The Needle's Eye



CHAITANYA KALBAG

Both Modi & Nitish have slid into the trap of identity politics. And both need to be careful of the messages they send out

Eight hundred and forty-five years ago, Henry II of England, chatting under a long and abiding rivalry with Thomas Becket, his former friend and the Archbishop of Canterbury, finally burst out in anger: "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?"

Four of Henry's courtiers rushed out, accosted the archbishop in his cathedral, and cut him to death with their swords. His 'martyrdom' earned Becket a sainthood from the Catholic church.

History tells us that courtiers and followers take the cue from their monarch or leader, and each one vies to prove that he or she is more loyal than everybody else. Power and proximity to power, can blind and deafen us.

There is a moral here for Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as for Nitish Kumar, who is going to be sworn in for a third term as Bihar's chief minister on Friday. Both men were elected to power because they swore they would focus on good governance and development. Both men have slid into the trap of identity politics. And both men need to be careful of the messages they send out.

Modi has just returned from a triumphant visit to Britain. Diversity is India's strength and pride, he told 60,000 rapturous Indian Brits packed into London's cavernous Wembley stadium. His speech was overshadowed by the terrorist attacks in Paris. Modi, who has not called a single press conference in India in his 18 months in power, had to face one in London, and was forced to answer a question on intolerance back home. It was significant that the high-decibel, provocative things being said by

Hindu hardliners here died away to a whisper the moment the Bihar election results were announced on November 8. But that does not absolve Modi of the need to speak out against bigotry as forcefully as he has spoken out against international terrorism in Britain and then at the G20 summit in Turkey.

There is little doubt that Modi is passionate about his reform agenda. A couple of days before the Bihar results, he spoke feelingly at the Delhi Economics Concave. After noting that India's economy was doing relatively better than the rest of the world, with a stable currency, falling inflation, and a lower current-account deficit, Modi said reform was not an end in itself. "Reform for me, is just a way station on the long journey to the destination. The destination is transformation of India.

Therefore, REFORM TO TRANSFORM. And reforming to transform, is a marathon, not a sprint," he said.

A senior official who was listening to Modi remembered sitting one seat behind him on a flight from Delhi to Ahmedabad in 2007 when Modi was chief minister of Gujarat. Unlike other politicians, who are mobbed by fawning favour-seekers, Modi sat motionless and silent throughout the journey, the official remembers. He transmitted "do not try to approach

me" vibrations.

What does this have to do with the company Modi keeps? He needs to keep the ideologues and Hindu firebrands in his vast encampment at arm's length; indeed, he needs to banish them to a nether world. At the same time, he needs to grow the number of implementers around

FOR CORRECT ANSWER

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him if he truly wants to transform India. There are three imperatives for the remaining three and a half years of his term: strategy, politics and implementation. Even if he can sort out the first two, the third is a huge challenge.

Four of Modi's most effective ministers - Arun Jaitley, Suresh Prabhakar, Piyush Goyal and Nirmla Sitharaman - are all unelected members of the Rajya Sabha. There have been strong rumours that Modi will soon reshuffle his cabinet. This is his chance to bring in more technocrats, more achievers who will help cement his economic agenda.

Unfazed by the Bihar loss, Modi threw open the gates to foreign direct investment in 15 sectors before he left for London. Prabhakar announced two

huge locomotive orders to General Electric and Alstom which had been pending for a decade. Modi himself sealed 9 billion GBP of new deals in Britain. A new bankruptcy code was laid out. Jaitley said he was confident the Goods and Services Tax would finally get through parliament. The wheels were spinning.

Nitish, who defied predictions of anti-incumbency and an army of pollsters to return to power in Bihar, has no time to lose either. He can point to many achievements over the past decade. Literacy rose handsomely, fewer children stayed out of school, roads and bridges were built, electricity reached more homes, and women were guaranteed half of local panchayat posts. But social scientist Shabhal Gupta says that the difference this time is that Nitish, who was judged earlier by the climb out of the dark age before him, will be compared with his own record over the past decade.

Here again, it will not be made easier by the shadow of Lalu Prasad. It is worth remembering that Lalu is out on bail since December 2013 after serving only two months of a five-year sentence on his conviction in a corruption scandal. Lalu cannot forget either that Rahul Gandhi made sure he was not let off when two years ago he tore up an ordinance that would have gifted Lalua Get Out

Of Jail Free pass.

So the wily Lalu will have to co-habit with one man who drove him out of power a decade ago in a crusade against his chaotic rule, and another who made sure he could not stand again for election. The fact that the disgraced Lalu's party won more seats (80) than Nitish's (71) or Gandhi's revived Congress (27) only makes his revenge that much sweeter.

Most Bihar-watchers agree that Lalu will bide his time because he wants both his sons, Tej Pratap and Tejashwi, to work under Nitish's tutelage and be groomed for future power. Both young men won easy victories in the elections.

We started this column with a historical tale. It will be fitting to end it with a fable. In this telling, Nitish is the King Vikram of Bihar, carrying Betal the ghost on his back. For those of us who do not remember this engrossing set of 25 stories from the 11th century, King Vikram had to try and capture the cunning ghost for a sorcerer, every night the ghost, riding on his back, would narrate one story with a moral riddle at the end. A wrong answer would burst the king's head, a correct answer sent the ghost fleeing back to the tree it inhabited. Throughout his third term, Nitish Kumar will have to carry the ghost of Lalu's moral riddle on his back. Can he answer it correctly?



ANIRBAN BORA

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