

## The Needle's Eye



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# Da, Da, Da: Scripture for Our Modern Times

Damyata, datta, dayadhvam. "This very thing the heavenly voice of thunder repeats da, da, da, that is, control yourselves, give, be compassionate." In the ancient Hindu text Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Prajapati or the creator is asked by his three-fold progeny – gods, men and demons – for advice, and he utters the syllable da three times. Self-control, giving and compassion, he says, should be the three guiding principles of all creatures. The English poet T.S. Eliot used these words in his long poem *The Waste Land*.

Why am I getting philosophical all of a sudden? I was reminded of the three da's when the elections to the Delhi state assembly triggered a number of introspections. Arvind Kejriwal, who was voted to power in Delhi, made a passionate speech to a huge crowd of supporters at the Ramlila grounds when he was sworn in. He was humble, almost prayerful. He warned his followers against arrogance. He said his 95 per cent majority was a miracle that should not be frittered away.

The trouble is that the euphoria over his Aam Aadmi Party's triumph hides a simple truth: you cannot be compassionate and unleash a torrent of giveaways without self-control. Where is the money for the free water, the cheap electricity, the security blanket of CCTV cameras and free WiFi connectivity going to come from? Kejriwal has already announced sops for small factories

to be set up virtually licence-free. Not a word about the pollution they will add to a choking city. No sign either of Kejriwal on a war footing to battle Delhi's epidemic of swine flu, which needs everything from cheaper and plentifully available face masks to more blood-testing kits and hospital beds. Kejriwal is not going to buck any trend here. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, which has vowed to curb its fiscal deficit at a near-impossible 4.1 per cent of gross domestic product, quietly slashed India's health expenditure late last year by close to a billion dollars, or one-fifth of the full year's budget. We already boast one of the world's lowest health-care budgets, hovering around a paltry 4 per cent of GDP.

One week after Kejriwal's triumph sent out a loud signal that voters were beginning to tire of growing intolerance and religious targeting – one newspaper story described how Hindu groups allied with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party were sifting through voters' lists to identify Muslim and Christian names – Modi also decided to try and practise those Upanishadic exhortations. Speaking at a celebration of the canonisation of a Catholic priest and nun from Kerala, Modi used clear and unmistakable language to warn that religious extremism would throw the world back to the "dark days of bigotry, fanaticism and bloodshed". He said he believed in the undeniable right to freedom of

religion. "My government will not allow any religious group, belonging to the majority or the minority, to incite hatred against others, overtly or covertly. Mine will be a government that gives equal respect to all religions," he said.

Those were ringing words, and they were welcomed by Christians, whose churches have been attacked recently, and by Muslims who are sought to be 're-converted' to

## GOING SOFTER

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Hinduism. It also appears that both the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its myriad affiliates have decided to ratchet down a little from their crescendo for a few obvious reasons. One, the BJP, which had just nine months ago won all seven of Delhi's parliamentary seats, has been deserted by the capital's Muslims – indeed by all its communities. Two, the Hindu chorus was threatening to derail Modi's development-first ambitions and repel fickle foreign investors. Three, Finance Minister Arun Jaitley needs a strife-free backdrop for his 2015/16 budget next week, which everybody hopes will ignite the economy's booster rockets. And finally, key legislation hanging fire when parliament's Budget session starts on Monday could be stonewalled by an opposition that has a

majority in the upper house and is emboldened by Kejriwal's victory.

Whether the standard-bearers of resurgent Hinduism are prepared to mute their invective to suit a larger political agenda is doubtful. The BJP's monk-MP Sakshi Maharaj, who had urged Hindu women to have four children each to counter a rising Muslim population, was slapped down publicly on Monday by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat, who said Hindu women are not 'baby factories'. But what can you say about the binary logic employed by Rajiv Malhotra, a writer and speaker based in Princeton, who was on an India tour this month? Malhotra wrote on Monday that the BJP won 30 per cent of the vote in last year's national elections, and non-Hindus comprise roughly 20 per cent of the population. The remaining 50 per cent, therefore, are rootless 'non-Sangh Hindus' who swing here and there and fall prey to the latest scandal – hence Kejriwal's success, he said using intriguing arithmetic that completely ignores other religious groups.

Back to the concept of datta. Former President S. Radhakrishnan writes in his translation of the Upanishads: "Men are naturally avaricious [Prajapati said] and so they should distribute their wealth to the best of their ability." Modi heeded this precept, too, by putting up 465 gifts he had received as prime minister for auction. Interestingly the auction is being conducted over three

days in the Gujarat city of Surat by a district administrator. Prime ministerial gifts were always in the past sent to the foreign ministry's toshakhana or treasury for disposal or dispersal, but Modi doesn't want us to forget he hasn't forgotten Gujarat. The gifts include the famous suit Modi wore to his lawnside chat with President Obama whose pin stripes consisted of 'Narendra Damodardas Modi' in tiny gold lettering. One admirer promptly bid Rs 1.1 crore (\$177,000) for the garment. The proceeds will go to the Clean Ganga Fund, set up by the Modi government last year.

Sadly, Prajapati's precepts seemed to have little meaning for Kiran Bedi, the ex-policewoman who has been hung out to dry after her catastrophic performance as the BJP's top candidate in the Delhi elections. A few days ago she let go of her self-control and her compassion to give as good as she had got. In her rambling open letter to her fellow Indians was this lament for politics:

"Indian Democracy if it truly wants many well meaning people to stake their experience for mature and good governance, needs a civil culture and law abiding environment. (I am being mild in saying this).

Here is my tryst with electioneering... Am relieved my parents were not alive to hear the foul words hurled at me."

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