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#SelfishWithModi: Delhi's Political Game of Thorns

The Needle's Eye



Chaitanya Kalbag

The carnage in Delhi could have remained marginal to the larger, Modi narrative if Modi himself had not made it a do-or-die battle, telling Delhi voters they would be voting for a lucky Modi

Arvind Kejriwal is the India Rubber Man. A Leo in politics if there is one, charismatic, mercurial, impetuous and likeable despite his foibles, he has re-invented himself time and again and rebounded into a new avatar: IIT-trained engineer; IRS tax officer; Right to Information activist, anti-corruption crusader; and sidekick to Anna Hazare. Kejriwal couldn't have had a worse debut in politics. His raucous and tenuous run as a minority Delhi chief minister ended in seven weeks. He took heed of invisible supporters to stand against Narendra Modi in Varanasi in last year's Lok Sabha elections, and lost badly. His Aam Aadmi Party was too graven in his own image; even the four Lok Sabha seats it won in Punjab seemed like an aberration. Two years after it was founded, AAP looked like an irritating semi-colon in a new grammar of Indian democracy. The full-stop was the emphatic power granted to Modi.

The Modi juggernaut was on a roll. Many of us forgot that this English word came from the old Jagannath ratha yatra in Puri where the faithful were sometimes crushed under the chariot's giant wheels. Like every revolution, Modi's has begun to devour its own children.

Modi's victory in May 2014 was a triumph of personality over party. His larger-than-life holograms and his overwhelming and tireless campaign laid the foundation for a style of gov-

ernance that was long on promise and short on delivery. Day after day, we are bombarded with slogans, acronyms, schemes, talk, and numbers. Here are a couple: the government says it has opened more than 125 million bank accounts under the Jan Dhan Yojana that Modi loves to tout as a success story in financial inclusion. Yet, two-thirds of them, or more than 84 million accounts, have zero balances. In other words, the poor remain too poor to be bankable. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, which Modi has pushed passionately in his quest for a cleaner India, seems not to be going beyond shamolic photo-ops by celebrities wielding new brooms. Kiran Bedi, a disastrous choice as the Bharatiya Janata Party's chief ministerial candidate for Delhi, said she had been shocked by the dirt and filth in her constituency Krishna Nagar, where she lost. Informal surveys show that open defecation, for instance, is still rampant in northern states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. More numbers: BJP president Amit Shah, over-confident about Delhi, boasted a few days before the election that the party now had 50 million members. It is likely some of them must have worked as silent saboteurs in Delhi, where the old party bosses were resentful about the Modi-Shah top-down imposition of an outsider and AAP renegade.

Bedi was just one of the arrogant

missteps that Modi and Shah took in Delhi. Everything in the weeks leading to the election seemed to be grist for the Modi mill – the Obama visit, long on rhetoric and symbolism; Modi's off-with-the-gloves abuse of Kejriwal and all his foes in his campaign speeches; the #SelfieWithModi photo kiosks set up across the capital for adoring fans and its Twitter and Facebook offshoots; the Modi visage on posters and newspaper ads that projected him as the central issue and figure. Oh yes, the newspaper ads – one media website counted 121 front-page BJP ads in major English and Hindi newspapers in the campaign's final week, versus zero advertising by AAP or indeed the Congress party. And the last-ditch crass drawing of caste lines by abusing Kejriwal's troublesome clan as an upadravi

gotra boomeranged on the BJP, as did the huge noise over old and dodgy political donations to the AAP.

The carnage in Delhi is far more significant than the loss of a tiny principality in a sprawling empire. It could have remained marginal to the larger Modi narrative if Modi himself had not made it a do-or-die battle, telling Delhi voters they would be voting for him – not just for Modi but for a lucky Modi. "My critics say Modi is lucky... If my good luck can bring down prices of petrol, diesel and save you money, then why bring in the unlucky ones?" he asked.

But has Modi really been that lucky for his party? His overweening image completely dominates his government. His development agenda may be music for the markets, but it is getting drowned out by the ugly noises

from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's organs, and by the nastiness of religious intolerance: the love jihad and ghar wapsi campaigns, the alarm bells over a 'falling' Hindu population, the attacks on churches, and abuse like the haramzade allegation.

After the euphoria over Amit Shah's tactical and strategic brilliance in sweeping the Uttar Pradesh parliamentary seats last year, the party apparatus itself has not been as well-oiled as the endless spinning would have you believe. The BJP has not won a clear majority in any state election except in Haryana over the past nine months. Six weeks after the Jammu and Kashmir elections the BJP is still negotiating terms as a junior partner in an awkward coalition.

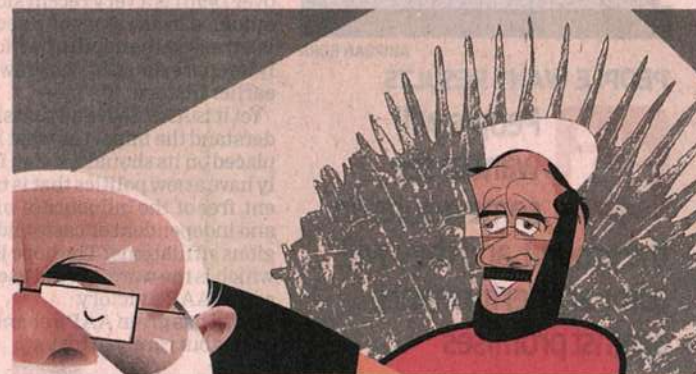
One senior BJP leader I spoke with said Modi and Shah had cleverly not declared any chief ministerial candidate in Haryana, Maharashtra, Jharkhand or J&K, making the campaigns more about Modi and the party than any local personality. That pattern was broken in Delhi with Bedi's projection. From the beginning, her hasty induction was clumsy and infelicitous.

Square peg she may have been, but Bedi blurted out another inconvenient truth after her defeat: she had been appalled by the huge rich-poor divide in Delhi, she told reporters. That goes to the nub of the huge vote swing in AAP's favour: A senior Congress leader said it was a victory

for the underclass. Delhi is home to millions of economic migrants from all over India, he said, and the vote for AAP had cut across all known lines of religion and caste. This was a revenge vote by the have-nots, and the size of the avalanche that carried Kejriwal to power was testimony to that simmering anger.

Let us not focus entirely on the BJP's debacle: the Congress has never suffered so humiliating a white-out in any election since Independence, reduced to zero. Just as the Modi-Shah control and command model failed for the BJP, so did the Sonia-Rahul model of control and do-nothing politics. After it lost power in Delhi in December 2013, the Gandhis dissolved all block and district party committees. They were never re-constituted, wiping out the grassroots organisation. Senior Congress leaders I spoke with have no answers to the party's disembowelment. Here again, numbers are bandied about on the edge of the abyss. It took this bandar or whirlwind to obliterate 15 years of Congress rule in Delhi, and a decade at the Centre, one party analyst said. It has taken Modi only nine months in power to bite the Delhi dust. Looked at another way, the BJP had already been kept out of power in the national capital for 16 years. Kejriwal has added another five to that dismal tally.

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