

The Thirty-nine Steps: Why PM Has to Worry About Recency

The Needle's Eye



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In business, especially in human-resource management, appraisers are cautioned to evaluate an individual's or department's performance over a sustained period and not let 'recency', the most recent events (especially the turbulent ones) colour their judgement.

I was reminded of this axiom by the Narendra Modi government's current stint in Trishanku's heaven. For those of us interested in Hindu mythology, history and legend (some would call it legerdemain), Trishanku was an ancestor of Rama's who was condemned to spend eternity in a faux-paradise suspended between his reality and the heaven he wished to ascend to.

Unfortunately, politicians are not corporations or employees; they are answerable to voters. And as this government moves into its fifth year, it is flying into the headwinds of recency. Tuesday's revelation by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj that the 39 Indians missing in Iraq since June 2014 had been killed by Islamic State terrorists in Mosul is the latest bad news.

Hindsight is always 20-20, and it is moot whether the Indian government ought to have held out hope that the hostages were alive in a series of statements. Swaraj told the Rajya Sabha: "I would like to inform you that this entire process has been very complex, extremely difficult, and sad. We faced many hurdles—such a big country, endless deserts, and ISIS terrorists." The families of the dead men will inevitably

blame the government for keeping their hopes alive (despite the fact that the government handled the matter responsibly and sensitively), but closure is often contentious and angering.

I was reminded of John Buchan's 1915 thriller, *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, about war, intrigue and murder, which has been made into a movie at least three times. Thankfully we don't need a Richard Hannay, the hero of that novel, to come to our aid. But we could be living a film script of our own this very hot summer.

Political air-currents shift swiftly and suddenly. The Bharatiya Janata Party, fresh from its triumphs in Tripura, Nagaland and Meghalaya (and don't forget the party has won outright majorities so far only in two north-eastern states, manipulating its way into power in four others), was dealt a sharp blow in the Gorakhpur-Phulpur Lok Sabha byelections and in Bihar's Araria. Yogi Adityanath and his deputy Keshav Prasad Maurya did not resign their Lok Sabha seats for six months after they took the two top posts in Uttar Pradesh.

For the Yogi to lose his pocket borough is a huge insult. Perhaps his Hindu Yuva Vahini storm-troopers are stretched too thin as the Gorakhnath head priest tries to extend his sway to the entire state. One pro-government commentary said the Vahini was 'scattered, weakened and confused' but still had faith in its 'Maharaj'.

Amit Shah proclaimed that the losses were not a referendum on Adityanath. Will they weaken the Yogi's robust musculature in solutions like killing "dreaded criminals" in encounters? The last time a UP chief minister took this brazen route was in 1982, when I exposed V.P. Singh's vow to annihilate 'dacoits' as nothing but a state-sponsored killing spree. Did that stop Singh from becoming India's prime minister? There's a morality lesson in there—and a warning for Modi.

The opposition's byelection wins will have a brief shelf-life, especially if Modi calls fresh Lok Sabha polls before this year-end. But the ground

is shifting under the Prime Minister's feet. The BJP is now down to 274 Lok Sabha seats from 282 in 2014; Congress is up at 48 from 44. The Telugu Desam Party's exit from the National Democratic Alliance with its 16 MPs, and its noisy (and so far unsuccessful) attempts to introduce a no-confidence motion along with rival YSR Congress (9 MPs) are not life-threatening, but the opposition has smelled blood.

Mamata Banerjee's Third Front talks with the Telanga-



na Rashtra Samithi (34 plus 11 seats) and Mayawati's olive branch to Akhilesh Yadav (his Samajwadi Party is now up to seven seats after the UP wins) are all wind in the opposition's sails.

The Congress is trying to reinvent itself, but whether Rahul Gandhi can persuade jaundiced voters that he can counter Modi and his vision of a clean, new India remains to be seen. The party's plenary session last weekend, the first after the young dynasty took the reins from his mother, was replete with morale-boosters including an 11-page economic resolution that had sentences like "The economy is in the hands of ignorant and incompetent policy makers who have derailed

economic growth through reckless and bizarre policies such as demonetisation and a hasty imposition of a flawed Goods and Services Tax regime."

Nomura Securities said the BJP is on the back foot and the opposition is rising from the ashes, adding: "...political uncertainty and noise is only set to rise in the next year and some consideration needs to be assigned to the opposition parties performing better than in 2014".

We will see more unrest among distressed farmers who see not a sliver of hope that their incomes will magically double over the next four years. And as a senior banker told me, the ballooning crisis in our state-owned banking sector could be Modi's Achilles heel.

As if all this were not enough, this week will see Anna Hazare's threatened rally and

revival of satyagraha in Delhi. The government must wish it will fizzle out, but Hazare's demand for a Jan Lokpal will surely attract car-petbaggars, although he has vowed

there will not be "another Kejriwal" and asked his lieutenants to sign affidavits swearing they will not enter politics. Our scientists have just been reassured about our prehistoric prowess. We are reminded by the powers that be that our forebears had figured out the secrets of the universe long before Newton, Einstein or Hawking (let's not forget that the first Nobel Prize was awarded only in 1901, many centuries after Aryabhata's trigonometric calculations and definition of pi, and the exposition of the zero or shunya).

Don't count out the BJP's electoral mathematics, though. In Karnataka, where it has waded into caste politics with a tainted, over-aged chief ministerial candidate, manna has been raining down from the party's heavens. Who needs recency?

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