


THE NEEDLE'S EYE  Nobody speaks in the languages of the masses

Which Way'll You Swing?


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Remarkably, after seven decades of spirited democracy, India has produced only three leaders who have enjoyed nationwide popularity — Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi and Narendra Modi. I am not counting Lal Bahadur Shastri, or Rajiv Gandhi (whose only electoral win was on the rebound from his mother's death).

We haven't yet produced a truly national politician who is at ease in every corner of the country. Modi comes close: he is an archetypal road warrior, and can sway crowds anywhere with the force of his overwhelming personality. But no single politician can meld into every region. Worse, none currently is truly multilingual in a nation with 22 official languages.

P V Narasimha Rao, the ultimate organisation man and Nehru-Gandhi loyalist, cut his political teeth in the Nizam's Hyderabad and so was fluent in Telugu, Urdu and Hindi. He also taught himself Spanish, and spoke good English. But he never bothered to learn any of the other three southern languages — Kannada, Malayalam or Tamil.

Rao was the first prime minister from southern India and the only Congress leader to rule for a full five-year term, albeit at the head of a minority government, without a Nehru-Gandhi hovering over him. A great survivor, he was not a crowd-puller, although he presided over one of the most tumultuous periods in post-1947 history. It was during Rao's tenu-

re that the BJP, riding on L K Advani's rath yatra and the destruction of the Babri Masjid, rose to national prominence.

The native-Gujarati Modi is extremely fluent in Hindi, and has become more comfortable in English. He does not speak any other Indian language fluently, although he is adept at reciting memorised Sanskrit verse. As an example, Modi made a speech entirely in English in Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu, in January. His presumptive rival Rahul Gandhi, who has had enough time in five years in Opposition to hone his Hindi, leave alone learn a second Indian language, still struggles in staccato, stilted prose.

Speech Therapy

Indira Gandhi spoke English, Hindi and French, and made a point of uttering at least one sentence in the local language in her stump speeches. She was clever at presenting herself as either the bahu (daughter-in-law) or the daughter of different regions. Modi uses a similar tactic in his speeches, as the son who has sprung from the soil of whichever state he is in. He has also made a fetish of referring to himself in the third person: he uttered 'Modi' at least 14 times in his 90-minute Lok Sabha speech on February 7.

But to go back to the transience of mass popularity: in 1971, Indira Gandhi won her biggest electoral victory on the 'Garibi Hatao' (Remove Poverty) platform, capturing 352 seats and 53.14% of the votes in the 441 seats Congress contested — the highest the party's vote share has ever been since Independence. Even in the first general election in 1951-52, Congress under Nehru won 45.41% of votes polled in the 479 seats it contested. Nehru, during whose time the three-language formula was first proposed, himself spoke only two: Hindustani and English.

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Read between the lines

mandate, as well as the euphoria later that year of the liberation of Bangladesh and victory over Pakistan. We know only too well what followed: venality, misgovernment and economic chaos spawned the Nav Nirman agitation in Gujarat and Jayaprakash Narayan's 'Sampurna Kranti' (Total Revolution) in Bihar, and the Emergency. She suffered an ignominious defeat in 1977.

The only other time any party has won a plurality of votes was when Congress won a crushing 404 Lok Sabha seats and 52.8% of the votes polled in the 491 seats it contested in 1984, while BJP won just two seats and 19.2% in the 224 seats it contested. Yet, after five years of Rajiv Gandhi, Congress slid to defeat with 197 seats, and the BJP rose to 85.

Congress' vote share fell, but not as precipitously as its seat tally: it won 41.03% in the 510 seats it contested, while the BJP's vote share went up to 26.97% in the 225 seats it contested. The Janata Dal led by V P Singh, who headed a short-lived coalition government, won 41.39% of the votes — a larger share than Congress.

We can only surmise the vote sha-

res of different parties in this year's general election, but the post-1971 Indira Gandhi tale holds a lesson: victory in a war, or leadership against the enemy, does not guarantee political longevity.

Bullet No Help for the Ballot

Atal Bihari Vajpayee's leadership during the Kargil war did not fetch him victory in 2004. Winston Churchill, who led Britain through World War 2, suffered a humiliating defeat in general elections held two months after victory over Nazi Germany. There was a 10.7% swing in votes towards Clement Attlee's Labour party from Churchill's Conservatives, who lost power for the first time in 39 years.

Compare this with 2014, when BJP won 282 seats, the first single-party majority in three decades, with just 31.34% of the vote, and Congress crashed to 44 seats with 19.52% of the votes. Despite the smaller percentage of national votes, there was a dramatic swing towards the BJP, which won 18.8% of the votes in 2009, and away from the 28.55% of Congress.

Which way will India's 897.8 million voters swing this time?