Which Way'll You Swing?



emarkably, after seven dejoyed nationwide popularidhi and Narendra Modi. I am not counting Lal Bahadur Shastri, or Rajiv Gandhi (whose only electoral win was on the rebound from his moth- Indira Gandhi spoke English, Hindi er's death).

can meld into every region. Worse, none currently is truly multilingual in a nation with 22 official languages.

P V Narasimha Rao, the ultimate dhi loyalist, cut his political teeth in February 7. the Nizam's Hyderabad and so was ered to learn any of the other three southern languages — Kannada, Malayalam or Tamil.

year term, albeit at the head of a minority government, without a Nehru-Gandhi hovering over him. A grethe most tumultuous periods in post-tani and English. 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, cades of spirited democra- Tamil Nadu, in January. His presumcy, India has produced only ptive rival Rahul Gandhi, who has had three leaders who have en- enough time in five years in Opposition to hone his Hindi, leave alone lety — Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gan- arn a second Indian language, still struggles in staccato, stilted prose.

Speech Therapy

and French, and made a point of utte-We haven't yet produced a truly na-ring at least one sentence in the local tional politician who is at ease in evelanguage in her stump speeches. She ry corner of the country. Modi comes was clever at presenting herself as close: he is an archetypal road war- either the bahu (daughter-in-law) or rior, and can sway crowds anywhere the daughter of different regions. with the force of his overwhelming Modiuses a similar tactic in his speepersonality. But no single politician ches, 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 nality, misgovernment and econothe enemy, does not guarantee politiorganisation man and Nehru-Gan- his 90-minute Lok Sabha speech on mic chaos spawned the Nav Nirman callongevity. But to go back to the transience of

fluent in Telugu, Urdu and Hindi. He 'mass popularity: in 1971, Indira Ganalso taught himself Spanish, and sp-dhi won her biggest electoral victory oke good English. But he never both- on the 'Garibi Hatao' (Remove Poverty) platform, capturing 352 seats and 53.14% of the votes in the 441 seats Congress contested — the highest Rao was the first prime minister the party's vote share has ever been from southern India and the only since Independence. Even in the first ed in the 491 seats it contested in 1984, Congress leader to rule for a full five-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 threeat survivor, he was not a crowd-pull- language formula was first propoer, although he presided over one of sed, himself spoke only two: Hindus-

Indira frittered away her huge 1971

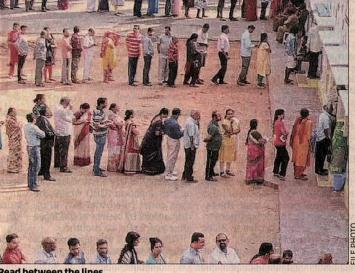
mandate, as well as the euphoria lat-res of different parties in this year's er that year of the liberation of Bangladeshand victory over Pakistan. We know only too well what followed: ve-tory in a war, or leadership against agitation in Gujarat and Javaprakash Narayan's 'Sampurna Kranti' (Total Revolution) in Bihar, and the AtalBihari Vajpayee's leadershipdur-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 pollwhile BJP won just two seats and 19.2% in the 224 seats it contested. Yet, after five years of Rajiv Gandhi, power for the first time in 39 years. Congress slid to defeat with 197 seats, and the BJP rose to 85.

as precipitously as its seat tally: it won 41.03% in the 510 seats it contested. The Janata Dal led by V P Singh, a larger share than Congress.

We can only surmise the vote sha- on voters swing this time?

general election, but the post-1971 Indira Gandhi tale holds a lesson: vic-



Bullet No Help for the Ballot

ing 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. Therewasa10.7% swing in votes towards Clement Attlee's Labour party from Churchill's Conservatives, who lost

Compare this with 2014, when BJP won 282 seats, the first single-party Congress' vote share fell, but not majority in three decades, with just 31.34% of the vote, and Congress crashed to 44 seats with 19.52% of the voed, while the BJP's vote share went tes. Despite the smaller percentage up to 26.97% in the 225 seats it contest- of national votes, there was a dramatic swing towards the BJP, which who headed a short-lived coalition won 18.8% of the votes in 2009, and away from the 28.55% of Congress.

Which way will India's 897.8 milli-

Indira Gandhi frittered away her huge 1971 mandate, as well as the euphoria later that year of the liberation government, won 41.39% of the votes of Bangladesh and victory over Pakistan