

The Indian elections are arguably the most colourful and raucous ones in the world. The carnival-like gaiety serves to mask some very bitter battles. For those months in the run-up to the elections, however, all of India is seized with a sense of optimism, even hope that what is in store has to be better than what we had. It is an illusory sentiment as we have so often seen, but few can resist getting caught up in the spectacle that signals a renewal of our democracy.

BJP's sin of omission

The saffron party's inclusive image could be dented by the complete lack of Muslim candidates from UP

It is no secret that Uttar Pradesh is the crucible of Indian politics. He or she who wins UP is most likely to win the Centre. With every indication that the prize will go to the BJP this time, it is in this state that the party's new, inclusive mantra will be tested. And so far, it has been found wanting. The state, home to a sizeable number of Muslims who have been ruthlessly used as vote-banks, ought to have found representation for them in the candidate list of the saffron party. It has not. In fact, of the 75 candidates that the BJP has announced, there is not a single Muslim. It is valid that a party does not choose its candidates on religious lines, it has to take into account several other factors. But this is an election in which the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, Narendra Modi, is trying to convince the electorate that he is as 'inclusive' as the next aspirant. It is difficult to believe that of the 18% population of Muslims in the state, not one person has so far been found worthy of a ticket. Mr Modi has rightly maintained a safe distance from hardline Hindutva. He has not even mentioned the Ram temple or minority appeasement in any of his speeches. But, the party's claim to inclusive politics would have carried more weight had it been a bit more representational.

To his credit, Mr Modi has made efforts to reach out to the Muslims and allay their fears. Party president Rajnath Singh's "try us once..." comment was widely perceived as an effort to bring the minority community closer to the BJP and thereby boost its chances in the elections. The party was quick to clarify that Mr Singh's comment was not an apology for the 2002 riots in Gujarat, but an assurance that it will not shy away from apologising for any future mistakes.

The BJP is counting on the upper caste votes and is building on the support of the OBCs. Back-of-the-envelope estimates suggest around 40 seats for the party in the state. In the state's crowded electoral pool this is a commanding figure. But the party will have to put its money where its mouth is. This also gives other parties, especially the Congress, which has fielded 11 Muslims from the state, a stick to beat the BJP with. The skewed candidate list is perhaps one flaw in an otherwise well-oiled political strategy unleashed by the BJP.

GAME BUT NOW THAT IMAGE HAS BEEN TARNISHED.

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Illustration: SIDDHANT JUMDE



TIGER WANTS TO MURDER HIM HE CALLS IT FEROCITY: GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

The US still holds the reins of the Internet

Parminderjit Singh

The US administration recently declared its intention to relinquish its oversight over Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which assigns domain names and Internet addresses. This move and ICANN's head's offer to kick-start a process of reform of global governance of the Internet under Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff, who was outraged that her personal communications had been intercepted and commercial secrets of Brazil's oil companies stolen, seem to be an apparent effort to mollify her and the global community that was shocked by Edward Snowden's revelations about the extent of the US' National Security Agency's surveillance.

There are a few important caveats though.

One, the global outrage following Snowden's revelations had little to do with ICANN oversight, and everything to do with other elements of the extreme dominance of the global Internet by the US — the US-based monopolistic Internet companies and de-facto global application of US laws. The US should not be allowed to deflect attention from these important issues by offering some yet unclear concessions on ICANN oversight. Moreover, the fact still remains US laws, including those that are regularly used to further its various foreign policy objectives, apply to ICANN.

For instance, under the Foreign Assets Control Regulations, any US organisation,

which includes ICANN, can be barred from having any relationship with any designated foreign country or entity.

Thus, ICANN must get incorporated as an international entity, under international law, with complete immunity from American laws.

A new globally representative oversight body is, therefore, needed to replace the US' current oversight role. Decisions of this body can be made subject to appeal with the International Court of Justice. Such an oversight body, while not being an inter-governmental committee, can consist of, say, three members from each of the five geopolitical regions.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

Modinomics is the stuff of nightmares

For those who are worried about the environment, Modi's ascendance to the top post is a cause for worry

greenmatters

Ashish Kothari

Narendra Modi as India's prime minister will be a development disaster. In Gujarat, his tenure as chief minister has seen worsening or stagnation of the health and livelihood prospects of the poor, and widespread ecological damage. In a recent campaign speech in Goa, he declared that as prime minister, he will re-open mining (never mind that it is stayed by the Supreme Court due to its severe impact on water, environment and livelihoods). And his aggressive pushing of a statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, at a staggering cost of ₹2,500 crore, is a scary indication of a megalomania with grave national implications.

The UPA's record on environmental and livelihood concerns has been poor, with 250,000 hectares forest land sacrificed for mining, industrial and infrastructural projects, and with stagnation in employment generation. But even this could be overshadowed if Modinomics is given free rein.

That development cannot be successful at the cost of the natural environment is evident from the widespread social impacts of ecological destruction. Even the World Bank, a promoter of such unsustainable development, recently admitted that environmental damage like air pollution knocks 5.7 percentage points off

India's economic growth. Effectively, if other damage is added, there is zero or negative economic growth. Not to mention the incalculable socio-cultural impact of displacement, dispossession, disease, premature death, malnutrition, and loss of employment. The UPA's economic policies ignored all this, and so will Modinomics.

In a recent report, labour and environmental activists Rohit Prajapati and Trupti Shah laid bare the Modi government's record in Gujarat: Inflated figures of employment created chronic underpayment, deliberate dispossession of farmers to create cheap labour for industries, and the dubious distinction of having 30% of India's 'major accident hazard' industries as also its most 'critical polluted areas'. Other analysts have brought out the abysmal state of health and education, especially among the state's adivasis and Dalits.

Modi's 'developmentalism' includes sidestepping all norms to make land and water available to corporate houses. It means taking over the land and water of 70 villages to promote the Patel statue as a tourism zone. It involves Project Kalpasar, a 30-km dam across the Gulf of Khambhat, ignoring potentially colossal social and ecological costs, ignoring also the much cheaper, more sustainable, and more democratic alternatives to water security such as those demonstrated by civil society groups in Kachchh and Saurashtra. Given all this, it will not be a surprise if, as PM, he instructs the Union ministry of environment and forests to dilute or

sidestep environmental laws to enable corporate take-overs.

The UPA at least brought in some progressive legislation and schemes, under the influence of civil society. Will Modi be open to such influence? Activists in Gujarat report an atmosphere of intolerance and authoritarianism that discourages dissent. Activists peacefully protesting against the Patel statue, or a proposed nuclear power station in Bhavnagar district, or industrial expansion into ecosystems that fisherfolk, farmers, adivasis are dependent on, have been dealt with by heavy police bandobast and repression. The largest number of RTI activists killed or injured in India belong to Gujarat.

Those who will cheer most if Modi becomes PM are the corporate sector and a part of the upwardly mobile middle classes. To them, people's struggles for justice, movements by the poor to resist displacement and land acquisition, and environmental activism, are all 'hurdles' to profits and further enrichment. Unfortunately a large section of the population may also vote for him, dreaming of joining the 10% of India that own 53% of its wealth. But for those who worry about the 'jobless' growth of today's development model, about half of India still deprived of basic needs, and how future generations are being robbed of their right to a healthy environment, Modi's ascendance to India's top position is a cause for nightmares.

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The BJP and Modi don't compete but complement each other

This refers to Sidharth Bhatia's article *He has Modified the saffron party* (March 28). Though the author is suggesting that Narendra Modi is trying to overshadow the BJP, the truth is that the BJP wants him to lead. Every political party has to persistently evolve and rally behind a leader who can ensure victory for the party in the elections. The old guard cannot hang on to power forever. They have to make way for the young. Moreover, Modi is a far more worthy contender for the post of prime minister than other senior party members, with due respect to their tenure in the party and the contributions they have made. Modi's image as an incorruptible leader and his popularity give him an edge over others. The BJP and Modi complement each other.

MC JOSHI, via email

The UPA's welfare schemes were hijacked by corrupt officials

With reference to Abhijit Banerjee's article *It could have worked out well* (*Poverty Line*, March 26), no matter how much one gloats about the success of the UPA government's social welfare programmes, the fact remains that these schemes, including the MGNREGS and the mid-day meals, were mired in corruption. These schemes, which looked good on paper, were hijacked by corrupt officials and little was done by the government to hold anyone accountable.

CR NATH, via email

The Congress' manifesto for the LS polls is old 'whine' in old bottles

With reference to the editorial *Going over the same ground* (*Our Take*, March 27), the Congress' manifesto cannot be a game-changer as there is nothing new in it. In 2009, the party had an impressive track record of UPA 1 to bank upon; today it has nothing to cling to. The party promises to tackle corruption but yet the scam-tainted politician Ashok Chavan got the ticket to fight elections from Nanded. The Congress' promise to get the women's reservation Bill passed in Parliament seems hollow as it did little for the women's cause in the last 10 years. Moreover, the ambitious food security Act came too late in the day to help the party reap dividends from it. To say the least, the party's manifesto is old 'whine' in old bottle.

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