India, the largest democracy in the world, has achieved an enviable distinction in conducting free and fair elections regularly and making the transfer of political power a routine and smooth affair. Some may dismiss this as a mere demonstration of the success of procedural democracy, hiding its failure to achieve substantive democracy. True, Indian democracy falters on many counts – poverty, education, healthcare, employment and governance. But it is a little unfair to demonise this democratic deficit, taking into account India’s gigantic size, population, poverty and enormous diversity in terms of language, region, religion and culture. Incidentally, no democratic country does epitomise perfection and India is no exception, particularly considering its unique features; rather, India’s sanctimonious adherence to procedures needs to be seen as its solemn quest in the direction of perfection.

Pratyay Kanungo

IN THIS CONTEXT, the recently conducted sixteen general elections has not just been a mere mechanical transfer of power from the Manmohan Singh-led Congress to the Narendra Modi-led Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, but it has also been a site of engaging debates over the idea of democracy and its working – covering a range of issues like political leadership, secularism, development, entitlement and governance. No doubt, there was Modi magic all the way, but the magic was no longer an asset since his failure to win in 2009; moreover, his age would not inspire the young voters who were going to play a decisive role in this election.

Narendra Modi, the other claimant, the Chief Minister of Gujarat, being elected for third consecutive time, had huge mass appeal. Controversial for his role in the 2002 Gujarat riots, Modi had been subject to endless scrutiny and censure by civil society groups and media, both in India and abroad, despite the fact that the Court had never found him guilty. Without becoming entangled in this controversy, Modi had strewed deflected national attention towards the ‘Gujarat Model of Development’, which particularly appealed to the aspiring youth. Moreover, his strong leadership and winning spree had already made him the darling of the party cadre. Hence, the RSS sided with Modi and the BJP declared him the Prime Ministerial candidate. A positive, confident and aggrieved Went to the electorate with his mesmerising oratory. Modi’s speeches were well-crafted melodrama that kept the audience spellbound. While exposing Congress’ failure to conduct free and fair governance, he was simultaneously entertaining the crowd with jibes at Sonia, Rahul and Manmohan Singh. Against the backdrop of Congress’ failure, he was offering an alternative: ‘Gujarat Model of Development’ and good governance. Modi was consciously positioning himself as the icon of development – and not of Hinduism – by using slogans such as ‘Sahbhag Yoddha Was [Together with All, Development for All].’ Rahul Gandhi, in contrast, was not even an option for Modi’s oratory and aggression; his speeches failed to inspire the youth and was simply recounting the achievements of the government in the past: the youth was waiting for concrete opportunities for their future, which he failed to offer.

Modi’s campaign was unique in tone and tenor, the text changed with the shifting context. Initially, he called for a Congress mukt Bharat [Congress free India] and attacked the Gandhis. Next, he smartly switched to governance with a corresponding media campaign asche din oole hain [happy days are at home], which became a big hit. His YouTube campaign promised to end inflation, poverty and unemployment, guaranteed education for children, prosperity for farmers, women’s security, transparency, welfare for all, dignity for the poor and respect for the nation. In the final stages, Modi’s campaign focused on Modi Sarkaar [This Time, Modi Government]. Elections have always been spectacles in India, but Modi’s campaign left all previous spectacles far behind, in terms of scale and grandeur. As the star campaigner and master communicator Modi travelled 30,000 km in 100 days, including 470 hours of air-travel, addressed 437 public meetings in 25 states, addressed 2011 ‘3D rallies’, 2 grand Road Shows in Varanasi and Vadodara, and 4000 innovative and interactive media – print, electronic, social – played an unprecedented role, never seen before; the BJP reportedly spent 5 billion rupees, very much close to Obama’s election expenses.

Behind this glitter, there was another campaign being quietly undertaken by the RSS, this mammoth organisation mobilised its affiliates and a large number of committed cades to reach out to each supporter and sympathiser; it also campaigned for high voter turn-out and brought voters to the polling booths. Out of a calculus of voter electorate, 551 million exercised their franchise to elect 543 members of the Lower House of the Indian Parliament. This was the highest ever turn-out (66.3%) indicating popular yearning and aspirations. The RSS played a crucial role in achieving this high turn-out which would go high in BJP’s favour.

The marathon election took place in 9 phases, extending for 36 days, whereby 1.8 million Electronic Voting Machines were used and millions of polling officials worked round the clock under the supervision and control of the Election Commission, perhaps the most trusted public institution in India with a glorious track record. A total number of 8251 candidates belonging to 1627 political parties (6 National, 54 State and 1573 unrecognised and independent) at 5450 parties failed to secure a seat, an introspection of the workings of the present multi-party democratic system is called for.

The outcome of this spectacular victory for the Narendra Modi-led BJP which captured 282 seats on its own. After three decades, a single party with an absolute majority is back in Parliament, thus signifying the return of ‘national’ and retro of a ‘regional’; states like Odisha and Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand were in firm control. Moreover, the BJP, as a non-sense mentor, continuously worked on the party to keep it in proper shape for the next round. The moment Congress started stammering, the savvy RSS sensed a big political opportunity. Sensibly, it first went to settle the leadership issue as Congress was defensive and non-committal on Rahul. The first claimant was veteran L.K. Advani, the anchor of the VHP-sponsored movement, who made it possible for the BJP to come to power in Delhi. In the RSS calculation, he was not no longer an asset since his failure to win in 2009; moreover, his age would not inspire the young voters who were going to play a decisive role in this election.

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