

STATES OF MATTER

New year, fresh takes

Personal appeal, dynastic or otherwise, may diminish in power as the country enters a crucial election year



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Game of thrones After being virtually written off as a likely challenger to Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi has now emerged as the one most likely to topple him PT/MANVENDER VASHIST

With just weeks to go before the country goes into full-fledged campaign mode for elections to the Lok Sabha, strategic planning by the contestants seems to occupy a position secondary to the constant jostling for pre-eminence between personalities. Away from the media gaze, there are strenuous efforts underway to minutely detail strategies for the local level.

To a degree, the decline of the Congress as a political force across wide swathes of the country could be read in terms of its loss of the ability to micro-manage local factions to create winning combinations. It is a deficiency the party has sought to remedy through the power of personal appeal, representing its dynastic prince Rahul Gandhi, as embodying the hopes and aspirations of the nation.

The personality cult is vulnerable to failure when countered by competent electoral micro-management, as also a rival messianic claim. The Congress suffered this double debility in 2014. While Narendra Modi ran a campaign blitz premised upon his alluring but ultimately vacuous slogan of better days in a class and caste neutral regime of "development", his lieutenant Amit Shah ran the mi-

cro-level enterprise, which was key to the BJP's sweeping triumph.

Five years on, with a record of default behind him, Prime Minister Modi is defending a precarious parliamentary majority and facing the further hazard that his leadership status is not furnished by any presumptive claims to legitimacy, other than an ability to swing elections. Given the internal dynamics of the BJP and its servitude towards ideological masters at the RSS headquarters, Modi is unlikely to enjoy great latitude for one failure.

His principal challenger bears no such handicap. Rahul Gandhi operates within a cocoon of dynastic legitimacy that indemnifies him from the consequences of failure. In that environment, the Congress's victories in the recent state Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh have served as a heady elixir. After being virtually written off as a likely challenger to Modi, Rahul Gandhi has now emerged as the man most likely to topple him.

There is a certain confidence in the manner that Rahul Gandhi is dealing with factions within his party, as also prospective allies out-

side. Early agreements have been secured in the vital states of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, while the BJP still flounders in search of allies to beat back the consolidation of votes on the Congress side.

Since the Congress system of recruiting factional loyalties began faltering in the mid-1960s, India's general elections have followed two broad patterns. The initial phase was marked by "wave" type elections, with decisive statewide and sometimes nationwide votes for or against the dominant party. Then came a phase of proliferating choices, where no single party could assert a claim towards statewide or national dominance.

For a time, governance was assumed by large coalitions forged after results were in. After 1999 though, coalition politics acquired stability, with pre-election alliances entering the electoral fray with identifiable leaders.

The reprise of the electoral "wave" in 2014, was built upon growing disgruntlement with the Congress-led alliance and its futile battle to push back the creeping economic malaise that began in 2008. Several traditional Congress constituencies left in droves to gather under the BJP banner. And even while deliberately spurning the allegiance of the minority faiths, the BJP made good that deficit by courting sections of the dalits and backward classes that had failed to gain a foothold within other parties.

The BJP now faces the prospect of losing these constituencies just as easily as it gained them. Well over a 100 among the BJP's initial strength of 282 in the Lok Sabha had at some point been associated with the Congress as active and loyal members. Recent experience has shown that in Indian politics, there is no limit to how often ideology can be embraced or sloughed off according to the convenience of the moment.

Modi has anxiously sought out icons from India's past, to underline the breadth of his appeal in comparison to Rahul Gandhi's dynastic inheritance. The Congress has pushed back against his effort to assume the legacy of Sardar Patel and Netaji Bose. And in perhaps the strangest partisan invocation of a historical icon, Modi recently released a postage stamp honouring the medieval warrior-king

Suheldev. A dalit party currently in alliance with the BJP in UP, was unamused by this appropriation of an icon that it claims as part of its myths of origin.

Speaking to the valedictory session of the Constituent Assembly in 1949, BR Ambedkar had warned of the dangers to democracy from India's proclivity towards "hero worship". "Bhakti in religion," he said,

"may be a road to salvation of the soul." But when part of politics, it was "a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship". The 2019 general election may be an occasion for India to remind itself of these truths, after the momentary but rather expensive lapse of 2014.

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