

There's something about the way Modi's using BJP— Like Left Front, it hurts democracy

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi with BJP leaders during the BJP national executive meeting in Hyderabad on Sunday | PTI

Rajpath, situated at the heart of New Delhi, was renamed by the Narendra Modi government as ‘Kartavya Path’ on 8 September. To one young Indian, the new name has a feeling of “Indianness” to it, whereas Rajpath reminded him of British rule. There is much unpacking that can be done of the notion that Rajpath is a ‘colonial’ inheritance — that argument would have been easily made had India persisted with ‘Kingsway’, the original name of that stretch of the road. I doubt whether the sizeable plurality that makes up ‘New India’ has the time for such subtleties. Instead, it would simply suffice to say here that in a week where news poured in that the Indian economy continues to be deeply mired in a K-shaped economic recovery — daily wage-earners now constitute a fourth of the total number of suicides in the country as per recent National Crime Records Bureau data — the Narendra Modi government has used the renaming of the iconic road to remind us: “Ask not what your country can do for you..”

In many ways, this moment dramatises the sharp disjuncture between economics and politics that has been a steady feature of life under the ruling dispensation. The Bharatiya Janata Party, in its second term in power, has been very unambiguous in claiming a mandate for itself to transform Indian politics. It runs parallel to the continuous messaging that PM Modi runs a tight ship — transport minister Nitin Gadkari, who had famously said that he would rather drown in a well rather than join the Congress party,

was recently ‘demoted’ within the party organisation, ostensibly for his public lament that he often felt like quitting politics since it had become complete power play. Both claims are meant to remind people that the party is here for the long haul, not to be measured by the regular five-year electoral cycle. Indeed, it is best to describe the BJP in its current avatar as a ‘movement’ party — one that sees itself primarily as the vanguard of a social movement seeking to upend ‘obsolete’ ways of doing things and replace them with its preferred values, whether it be ‘New India’ versus ‘Old India’ or ‘America First’ versus ‘America Last’.

All that being said – political parties, after all, cannot be legally bound to interpret their mandates more or less expansively – the important question is: What does the emergence of a movement party with a highly disciplined structure do to a democracy? The ability of voters, at least in theory, to throw out incumbents who preside over imprudent economic policy choices, gives democracy moral legitimacy. Movement parties block this crucial process of democratic renewal.

Even a cursory reading of the experiences of other democracies with such parties and India’s own history support this idea.

Messianic politics in UK

Take, for instance, the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher or the Labour Party under Tony Blair in the UK. In each case, the parties came to power promising some kind of messianic politics – economic austerity under Thatcher or “New Labour” under Blair. Both the governments lived well past their expiry dates; Thatcher and Blair left office with abysmal ratings long after their promises of transformational politics had faded.

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It is worth noting here that this tendency of messianic parties overstaying their time is particularly germane in parliamentary democracies. Given that executive power is fused with legislative authority in these settings, party members have a tendency to stay together even when a sizeable section within the party silently disapproves of the actions of the leaders.

Also read: *On Kartavya Path, ask not what Modi can do for you...ask what you can do for Modi's India*

Where do the promises go?

In India, one need only look at the Congress under Indira Gandhi or the Left Front government in West Bengal. Indira Gandhi's 'Garibi Hatao' initiative of 1971 infamously got shaded into the politics of the Emergency four years later. In the case of the Left Front, few would deny that its first decade in power brought modest — though important — improvements in living standards in rural Bengal. But fewer still would deny that the state, despite seeing a transition in power in 2011, continues to be haunted by the legacies of the last two decades of dogmatic Left rule. It was a time when the ideologically driven need to exercise complete organisational control over society took precedence over the more socially beneficial imperative of initiating new economic and political reforms to lift the state's agrarian sector from the early 1990s' productivity crisis.

Indeed, several of the tropes that are now commonly associated with the current incumbent party, the Trinamool Congress — the politics of *elaka dokhol* or area domination — are lifted directly from the Left's playbook in its latter years in power. The BJP, proclaiming to "write history of country's growth" in the midst of deep economic distress, is consistent with this trend.

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US model now in tatters

Interestingly, in contrast to parliamentary democracies, presidential democracies are considered to be immune to takeover by movement parties. The separation of executive and legislative power through the institution of independent presidential elections is assumed to lead to the creation of weakly disciplined parties, which, in turn, increases the chances of bipartisan consensus on important policy issues.

The United States, till the early 2000s under Bill Clinton, was held up as a model illustrating the virtues of the presidential system. Much of that edifice, of course, now lies in tatters as the percentage of representatives of the Democratic Party and the Republican Party voting along with the party majorities on key policy issues has increased sharply since the early 2000s. Interestingly, a study summarising the plausible reasons for the

rise of political polarisation in America observes that its source was neither party elites nor the electorate. The impetus for polarisation came from party activists – like the Tea Party Caucus within the Republican Party – who worked in the trenches, to paraphrase Antonio Gramsci, to polarise the parties at all levels.

My point here is not to say that political parties with agendas for social transformation cannot contribute to democracy-building. There is little doubt that these parties, whether the BJP under Narendra Modi or the Republican Party under Donald Trump, come to the foreground in response to a political crisis. But it is what they do once they come to power that is my concern here. M.K. Gandhi is said to have proposed to Congress leaders – amid the euphoria of Independence – that the party had done its historical job and should now eschew power politics and devote itself to social work. The track record of movement parties across various contexts suggests that they could do well to at least ponder Gandhi's words.

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(Edited by Humra Laeeq)

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