

Agenda 2019 – Part – I : The Leadership Issue

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The schedule for the Lok Sabha elections has been announced. The next ten weeks will witness a clash of ideas and ideologies, competitiveness amongst candidates and a battle for leadership. There are several issues which occupy the agenda space in an election. Today, I deal with one of the principal issues which occupies a foremost relevance in 2019 General Elections – the issue of leadership.

The Incumbent Prime Minister

India has witnessed several General Elections where incumbent Prime Minister has faced an anti-incumbency. Anti-incumbency is a phenomenon where unhappy people vote an incumbent out. The Opposition succeeds by default. However, if the comfort level and the confidence with incumbent is high, his performance, leadership, ethics and integrity has been tested, the incumbent succeeds.

The country assessed Shri Narendra Modi as the Chief Minister of Gujarat for a period of fourteen years. He emerged a strong leader with development orientations, a nationalist vision, a politician of utmost integrity. He ensured that those who work with or under him also adopt the ethics which is expected from people in public offices. He withstood a false and vicious campaign against him. The facts in the campaign proved false in every legal battle. He did not allow himself to be bogged down by the hostile campaign. He laid down his own developmental agenda for the State and won three successive Lok Sabha elections and three Assembly Elections. He communicated directly with the people. He stands out as a communicator. He created and nurtured a new leadership in Gujarat. The Gujarati population all over the world identifies with him. He inspired them.

He entered the 2014 electoral race when the country saw indecisiveness, a collapse of leadership, a policy paralysis and integrity a big casualty. The people rewarded him with a comfortable mandate.

How does a nation assess him after five years?

He has proved to the world that India can be administered with integrity and honesty. India is capable of tough decisions in order to ensure growth to enable India to secure itself. India occupies the high table in the world. It has become the fastest growing economy. He ensured an economic model where the advantage of the additional resources emerging from the fast growing economy is spent on infrastructure or transferred to the poor, particularly in the rural areas. He did not give slogans but he transferred actual resources to bring down poverty levels and added to the ease of living.

Even his critics are bewildered by his evolution of his national security doctrine. He has evolved India from a nation which only defended itself domestically against terror through intelligence and security network and isolated Pakistan at the global level to a nation which is capable of destroying terror at the points of its' origin. The success of the surgical strikes of 2016 and the air strikes of 2019 points to this direction.

Within the NDA there are no leadership issues. There is absolute clarity. Shri Narendra Modi leads the NDA and will be the Prime Minister in the event of the NDA victory. His leadership is nationally accepted, his ratings are very high. His track record speaks for itself.

Let us look at the other side

What was promised to be 'Mahagathbandhan' is turning out to be a 'gathbandhan' of several conflicting gathbandhans. It is a self-destructive 'coalition of rivals'. The BSP and the SP will contest against the Congress but eventually join hands. So will the Trinamool and the Congress -Left alliance in West Bengal. However, in Kerala the Congress and the Left will contest against each other. The PDP and the National Conference tried to form the Government together with the support of the Congress in Jammu and Kashmir. Today they are rivals in an election and on the dangerous agenda of either 'autonomy' or 'pre-1953 status' but could join hands with the gathbandhan. The Biju Janata Dal, the TRS and the YSRCP are not with the gathbandhan.

The leadership issue is an absolute puzzle. The Congress President Shri Rahul Gandhi is a inadequate leader. He is tried, tested and failed. His lack of understanding of issues is frightening. He aspires to be the leader of this chaotic pack.

Mamata Didi is positioning herself as the 'sutraddhar' of this alliance. She won't concede a single seat either to the Congress or the Left in West Bengal but will want them to be her pillion riders if she drives the vehicle. Her instinctive comments on policy issues are retrograde.

Behan Mayawati, the leader of the BSP, was wiped out in the last Lok Sabha elections. She changed her strategy. She wants a strong BSP and a weak Congress. She holds her cards close to her chest. She will open them only after the results are declared. She has had a strategic 'alliance of compulsion' with the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh but the scars of her historical conflict with its allies have not washed away. She wants a strong BSP and a weak Congress. Leaders with flexible ideologies think that they are acceptable to all. The Opposition alliance is unclear – it is absolutely fragile. None of the political parties is capable of any significant number of seats. The alliance will not have a stable nucleus. It has a set of highly ambitious, self-centered and maverick leaders. Barring the Congress and the Left, most of them have done political business with the BJP in the past. Their ideologies and commitment to their constituents are widely different.

The Contest

The contest is between a leader in whose hand the country is developing and secure. He is trusted. Against him it is no one projected leader. There are multiple leaders, each trying to outwit the other. They can only promise a temporary Government if we go by the past precedents. One can be certain of chaos. The choice is clear – it is either Modi or chaos.