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No confusion: Modi's campaign is complex, layered and carefully crafted

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The Narendra Modi campaign has orchestrated several motifs and hooks through each phase of the election, each tailored for each region while the recurrent theme has been muscular nationalism.

Did Narendra Modi shift lower down the ladder of social stratification in his five years as prime minister? In 2014 he was merely "backward" or a member of the Other Backward Classes (OBC), but after the voting moved to Eastern Uttar Pradesh and North Bihar in 2019, Modi claimed to belong to the "most backward castes." Every other day Modi invents a new narrative to woo voters. Is this an admission that each strategy has failed or is there a design to the constant chopping and changing?

While the theme of the bold warrior who has virtually gone himself into Pakistan to punish terrorists is constant, there have been other local and national themes as well. Notably his image as a "world class statesman" was reinforced by the award of Russia's highest civilian honour, the Order of St Andrew the Apostle, as well the Zayed Medal, a similar honour from United Arab Emirates during the elections. He made much of having addressed former United States President Barak Obama with the pronoun "*tu*" in an interview, although there is no equivalent for this familiar form in the English language.

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He has also projected himself as a "Gujju" in Gujarat; as a man of the soil when addressing farmers, most recently reinforced by the earthy recall of himself in an interview as playful young lad sucking a mango stolen from a more privileged (but generous) farmer's tree. Is this man for real, one might wonder? His skill in assuming different guises excels even folk impersonators like the "*behrupiyas*" known to gate crash weddings as "policemen" or "priests" and to then demand "baksheesh" in exchange for not creating a disturbance.

Changing Tune

Almost certainly, Modi no longer has the coherent, positive and aspirational narrative that marked his debut election in 2014 as the prime ministerial candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). At that time his attempt was to project himself as the harbinger of change and create a constituency yearning for his promise of better days ahead. Remember the slogan at his rallies "*Achche din aanewale hain*"? Even if the promised creation of two crore new jobs a year, an end to corruption in government, doubling of farm incomes, and repatriation of black money which would be deposited in every Indian citizen's account was pure campaign rhetoric, it was nonetheless aspirational. It created a forward-looking voter who gave him a clear parliamentary majority for the first time in three decades of Indian elections.

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> This time around the national security rhetoric predominantly focuses on creating and addressing a fearful (or perhaps, even vengeful) voter who wants Modi to keep India safe. This theme is reinforced through different initiatives at the end of every phase of the five-phase election.

A number of political pundits had predicted that if Prime Minister Modi failed to deliver on governance issues, then nearer the 2019 general election he would engineer a conflagration with Pakistan. In retrospect, it would even seem that the groundwork for this was laid by escalating tensions across the Line of Control and the wanton use of force against the population of Jammu and Kashmir, almost putting together a tinder box which only needed a spark to light it. That spark was the suicide attack in Pulwama in Jammu and Kashmir on 14 February. It killed 40 personnel of the Central Reserve Police Force and unleashed a wave of anger across the country.

Deflecting this anger towards Pakistan allowed Modi to spin out the looming spectre of terrorism as the dominant theme of his re-election campaign. Muslims and leaders of opposition parties could be labelled as the insidious fifth columnists of Pakistan inside India. The national security rhetoric was thus joined by an underlying theme of communalism where minorities became Trojan horses and

"sleepers" waiting to strike.

Opposition's Narrative

Before the Pulwama terrorist attack and the retaliatory bombing of Balakot in Pakistan by the Indian Air Force, the election atmosphere was taking shape around a competing rhetoric of corruption. The BJP played up the questioning of former finance minister P Chidambaram and his son by the Enforcement Directorate, threats to arrest Robert Vadra for custodial questioning and raids by the government's investigating agencies on leaders of runaway allies like Telugu Desam Party (TDP), on formidable contenders like Akhilesh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party (SP), and those close to Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) supremo Mayawati. Highlighting the alleged partisanship of the government agencies, the state governments of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal had even withdrawn their general consent for action by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) within their jurisdiction.

The Opposition's corruption narrative, on the other hand, centred on the Rafale jet fighter deal. It highlighted the incomplete information and half-truths purveyed by the government to Parliament and the Supreme Court on the process of decision making, the pricing of the aircraft and allotment of lucrative offset contracts to "crony capitalists." There was no shortage of ammunition for the Opposition to take on the Modi government with secret documents leaked serially from Defence Ministry files to build a case that the Modi government had flouted procedures and norms for defence purchases. Congress President Rahul Gandhi's catchy slogan " *Chowkidar chor hai* (The watchman is a thief)" continues to dog the prime minister to this day.

Counter Narrative

These competing narratives of corruption were suddenly interrupted by the Pulwama terrorist strike. As the retaliatory and symbolic, but mostly shambolic, Indian airstrikes at Balakot in Pakistan took place less than two weeks before the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced the schedule for the general election, Prime Minister Modi was once again able to dominate the election narrative built around national security. Just before the first phase of polling, an anti-satellite missile was also tested adding to the idea of Indian virtuosity to counter enemies from a space platform as well.

Modi harped not only on how he had punished Pakistan for Pulwama but also forced the international community to put the squeeze on Pakistan, leaving it no choice but to return a captured Indian pilot within 48 hours of his plane being downed across the border. Now he was emboldened enough to invert the Congress' " *Chowkidar chor hai*" campaign, by asking every member of his council of ministers and BJP workers to add the appellation "chowkidar" to their social media handles as well. Stepping up the campaign, Modi tried to shape every voter into an ever-vigilant *"chowkidar"* against real and imagined threats, rallying them around himself as the *pradhan-chowkidar*, the chief security guard of the nation.

Voter attention was diverted from the social, political and economic issues raised by the Opposition with photographs of BJP leaders posing with shots of Wing Commander Abhinanadan Varthaman of the IAF and images of Mig21 aircraft. The expectation was that the party would get brand rub-off from the heroism of the security forces.

Muscular Nationalism

The Opposition failed to question Modi's antics effectively or call him out on the "gains" of the surgical strikes against Pakistan. This lapse allowed Modi and the BJP to run away with their nationalist rhetoric. It browbeat recalcitrant allies like the Shiromani Akali Dal and the Shiv Sena into renewing their electoral alliance with it. Previous governments were projected as having been weak-kneed in dealing with Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, allowing Prime Minister Modi to coin the slogan "*Majboot vs Mazboor* (strong vs weak)" governments. The accusation that the Opposition if elected to office would offer weak governance was reinforced by labelling the opposition coalition of diverse political, regional and ideological provenance as "*mahamilawat*" or "extreme adulteration". Opposition parties were unable to offer an alternative to the BJP's muscular nationalism.

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However, by the end of the first two phases of polling, it became evident that the national security narrative did not have much purchase with the voters. The public mood seemed to be far too disappointed with Modi's governance to be attracted by grand posturing. Other factors also came in the way of a pan-India appeal of Modi's muscular nationalism. The absence of the BJP in large

geographies of India, especially in the South and the North East meant that the larger-than-life image of Modi had hardly any takers there. Even in other parts of India, the regional, linguistic, cultural, social and ethnic variations meant that Modi and the BJP were up against regional leaders; local economic and social issues were making the election granular in a way that could not be encompassed by a national security discourse alone.

Yet another factor that militated against an overarching single-issue electoral campaign was the importance of caste in determining voter behaviour. Upset with his divisive and essentially upper-caste Hindutva politics, the caste-based parties of North India formed alliances to oust the Modi government. This was most evident in Uttar Pradesh in the alliance of the Samajwadi Party (SP), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD); in Bihar between the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Congress and several smaller parties. These caste-based alliances also have extensive support amongst the minorities ensuring that the underlying communal rhetoric of Prime Minister Modi and the BJP could not be effectively operationalised on the ground.

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Intercutting Narratives

Prime Minister Modi has tried to overcome the geographical unevenness of his appeal by trying to engineer events or controversies before every phase of voting, drawing on older narratives of corruption, caste, etc., tailored to local prejudices. Before the second phase of polling, the Income Tax department raided those associated with the Janata Dal (Secular) in Karnataka. Prior to the third phase of voting when his home state of Gujarat was to go to the polls, he played on Gujarat "asmita" or pride once more claiming that as "a Gujju" his opponents thought him unfit to be prime minister.

Before the fourth to the seventh phases of polling in the highly caste-conscious Eastern Uttar Pradesh and North Bihar he claimed to belong to the "most backward" castes.

Worried by reports from the first three phases of polling that the BJP might need additional allies to form a coalition government, he tried to package a softer persona as a well-rounded and likeable guy by organising a "non-political" interview with a Bollywood actor to whom he explained that he preferred to eat his mangoes *au naturel*. This was coupled with pulling out all diplomatic stops to ensure that a largely symbolic measure like declaring Masood Azhar a global terrorist took place virtually on the eve of the fifth phase of polling.

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Modi's electoral campaign, therefore, is based on careful intercutting of a national security rhetoric with smaller local narratives. Big bang events also revive to take the campaign to a sudden crescendo when it seems to be flagging and then once again returning to the basic theme much like a consummate musician would do. The variations depend on the mood of the voters in every region and in each phase of voting. It is a clever campaign, even if it is not as effective in every region as he might have wanted it to be. The long drawn out polling process stretched over seven phases of voting has allowed Narendra Modi to put in place a campaign that is dynamic, complex and layered, while its retains the dominant theme of muscular nationalism.