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India at a crossroads

Prime Minister Narenda Modi wins the Indian general election by promising the country's millennials a glorious future

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India is at a crossroads. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his strategist Amit Shah have managed to top the brilliant 2014 election results of their right-wing conservative Hindu Nationalist BJP party. This time, they've won even more votes and the absolute majority. No one had expected such a bitter defeat for the largest opposition party, the Indian National Congress party (INC). According to recent projections, the INC hardly improved its disastrous performance of 2014. It's likely that Rahul Gandhi will not even be able to hold his family's traditional constituency.

When he took office in 2014, Modi made clear that he was not thinking of leaving after five years: he had a master plan for a new India that needs more than one mandate to realise. His narrative about a new Hindu awakening and India rising to its true grandeur appeals to the millions of young Indians who have lost patience with the country's old, bureaucratic system. Youth who have grown up with smartphones want quick and simple solutions. Testing before talking is their motto that mirrors the transition from the clever but quiet Manmohan Singh, who was prime minister between 2004 and 2014, to the charismatic Narendra Modi, who knows how to charm the world.

In contrast, although Rahul Gandhi has gained in gravitas, and in 2018 finally became the INC president, his mother and predecessor Sonia Gandhi is still pulling the ropes. Rahul Gandhi's tragedy is that he knows what India needs. He knows that the INC's greatest strength have always been compassion and inclusiveness. Spontaneously hugging Modi in Parliament and telling him, 'I will take this hatred out of you and turn it into love', reveals that Gandhi could become a Justin Trudeau or Jacinda Ardern, guided personally and politically by hope and public spirit.

But Rahul Gandhi struggles with himself and his country, as well as the

enormity of the challenge and the will to power. He's afraid to break with his mother and the party establishment. He fears taking a stand and taking the great leap. He still can't break from all those who cling to the tried and tested and shy away from risk. Trust in past strengths perpetuates the status quo. That Rahul's sister, the down-to-earth Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, who has just entered the political fray is portrayed as the new Indira speaks volumes about the appeal of former greatness and a return to yesterday's perfect world.

For a new India, or against Modi?

The Congress Party has always stood for economic redistribution, social security and protecting the poor and minorities. But over time it has become an elitist caretaker party that campaigns from on high for the weak and never addresses systemic issues. The INC is no party for social advancement: it's concerned with votes, not empowerment. Rahul Gandhi's proposal for an unconditional basic income for the poorest of the poor was definitely right and necessary, but it doesn't offer any hopeful alternatives for an India that has got to change.

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India needs politicians to develop completely new approaches to respond to the impact of climate change, rural depopulation and digitalisation. Millennials make up more than half the country's population. They distrust the fossilised bureaucratic state that obstructs any chance of rapid change, and despise the trade unionists and politicians they regard as just corrupt old men. The romanticised notion of a simple country life à la Gandhi means nothing to them. They want to advance and shape their lives, and they do not want to wait any longer!

True, the governing BJP *also* 'inherited' nearly half of its seats in Parliament. But someone from a lowly background who, like Modi, worked his way from selling tea to being prime minister embodies the entrepreneurial spirit all Indians need to have better, self-determined lives. Empowerment or paternalism, *for* a new India or against Modi: These two poles of the political debate express which of the two parties and candidates incarnates a genuine will to shape India's future.

India's incredible potential

Paradoxically, India has all the ingredients for a really good social-

democratic narrative. Modern India's founding myth is based on liberation – from the colonial rulers, and especially from the caste system and social discrimination. India has one of the world's most progressive constitutions that emphasises protecting minorities and the socially vulnerable. Redistribution and social balance are other core elements, along with the independence movement's non-violent resistance. India has a long tradition of religious tolerance and secularism.

Probably few countries beside India have such a vibrant and diverse civil society. 'The Argumentative Indian' by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen stimulates public discourse as much as witty stand-up comedians who attack patriarchy with spirited wordplay. Incredible diversity makes India a land of unlimited opportunities in a permanent state of stable instability. Calm navigation through everyday chaos and *Jugaad,* the uniquely Indian inventive spirit, make the country a suitable prototype for how to respond to rapid change, excitement and uncertainty.

India is loud, colourful, exhausting and of course, it also has its dark sides. It's precisely India's special masala mixture that the country and the world need today more than ever. For the next five years, however, India will only be seasoned with saffron, the colour of the BJP and Hindutva (Hindu-ness). In small doses saffron has a healing and stimulating effect; in excess, it quickly turns bitter.



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