



**Commentary: The stunning invincibility of Narendra Modi in India's elections**  
**The BJP owes its crushing triumph in this election primarily to the positive image of Modi, says the Jindal School of International Affairs' Professor Sreeram Chaulia.**

**By [Sreeram Chaulia](#) - 24 May 2019 06:41AM (Updated: 24 May 2019 08:40AM)**



**India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves towards his supporters during a roadshow in Varanasi, India, April 25, 2019. (Photo: REUTERS/Adnan Abidi)**

**NEW DELHI:** The thumping victory for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India's general election is a milestone in the history of the world's largest democracy.

Not since 1984 has a single political party won such a massive landslide in national elections.

And not since Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (who served two terms from 1966 to 1977 and 1980 to 1984) has a politician grown into a larger-than-life symbol of the country and the carrier of its aspirations like Modi.

The BJP owes its crushing triumph in this election primarily to the positive image of Modi, whose personal integrity, mass communication skills, and ability to connect with ordinary Indians across socioeconomic and ethnic divisions are unparalleled.

**A FIRST-RATE TOP LEADER**

Indians love saints. They look for the rarest of rare ascetic and non-materialistic qualities in their top leaders and are quick to downgrade politicians who seem unethical.

The construct of *Rama Rajya* or benevolent rule by a divine, incorruptible figure who works tirelessly for the welfare of his subjects, is ingrained in the Indian psyche from classical Hindu mythological epics.

Through his conduct, Modi approximates this ideal and has left his contemporary peers way behind in the morality stakes.

While captivating Indians as an economic moderniser open to influences from the outside world, Modi simultaneously represents India's core inner civilisational spirit of worthy individuals pursuing goodness and greatness.

States like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Delhi — where the BJP had underperformed or even lost power in the provincial legislatures in the past few years — showed a remarkable surge for the BJP in this general election precisely because Modi was on the ticket to be Prime Minister.

This puzzle of differential voting between past provincial Assembly elections and the national Parliament elections since Modi became Prime Minister in 2014 is explained by the fact that average Indians have utmost faith in Modi, which has only increased.



Reports putting Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party on course for a big win have sent equities and the rupee surging  
AFP/Daniel ROLAND

Conscious of his status as the number one crowd-puller, Modi's election campaign rhetoric was full of third person references to himself and how he was standing as a *Chowkidar* (watchman) against greedy and opportunistic coalitions of foes which had nothing in common except to unseat him.

### **STIRRING UP PATRIOTISM AND NATIONALISM**

The BJP was unbeatable in this general election also because Modi has been stirring a tremendous wave of patriotism among ordinary Indians.



The nationalistic narrative he built around responding daringly to terrorist threats from Pakistan and deftly dealing with China, from the border confrontation at Doklam in 2017 to rapprochement in Wuhan in 2018, and the US over trade to India's advantage was instrumental in this election's outcome.

He roused the masses and played to the latent Indian desire for recognition and superiority in the international arena.

Modi's nationalism smashed narrower forms of belonging to caste, religion, region and language which were previously considered to be key determinants of voting behaviour in India.

Unlike the opposition Congress party and a variety of regional outfits from different states which adopted particularistic models of targeting voters from specific ethnic communities, Modi positioned himself as the candidate for India as a whole.

When armchair pundits were churning out sociological analyses of which caste group or linguistic sub-group in such and such region would drag down the BJP, Modi put forth a clear and persuasive vision of India as one organic nation rather than an artificial collection of fragmented castes, religions and languages.

The BJP's overwhelming win rode on the average Indian voter's emerging belief that the sum is greater than the parts.

Mobilising and sustaining national consciousness in an ethnically heterogeneous country like India is no easy task.

The BJP's 100 million loyal cadres, who are ideologically committed to its cultural nationalist values, worked assiduously for months before this election throughout the length and breadth of India in a ground game that was unmatched in enthusiasm and financial resources.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping during the 18th Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Qingdao, China on Jun 9, 2018. (Photo: India's Press Information Bureau/Handout via REUTERS)

The BJP's packaging of the Modi government's first term achievements since 2014 in terms of social welfare and development schemes, pro-business reforms and international accolades was second to none. The journalist Prashant Jha's phrase for the BJP, "India's greatest election machine", aptly described it.

### **JUST ENOUGH FOR VOTERS**

Critics of Modi had erroneously prophesied that he would pay a price for failing to fulfil his 2014 general election promises of generating millions of jobs and raising incomes of rural farmers.

But for ordinary Indians, the fact that he was making an earnest effort to clean up a historically corrupt and over-bureaucratized Indian polity and economy was enough.

They saw in him the only hope for continuity of necessary economic reforms. Expectations that the economy would move up in the right direction and improve the personal circumstances of voters if Modi got a chance to govern for five more years overrode expert arithmetic about the unemployment rate or agrarian indebtedness.

Having ridden the crest of India's aspirations for upward mobility and reached a pinnacle, the onus is now on Modi to carry out far-reaching reforms that accelerate India's already healthy economic growth and further propel its ascent in world politics.

With few structural barriers to decision-making like messy multi-party coalitions to worry about, the Prime Minister is unchallengeable and will surely try to embark on ambitious transformative domestic and foreign policies in his second term.

Knotty obstacles like land acquisition and labour market rigidity, and the crying need for higher budgetary allocations for defence and foreign aid, will have to be addressed in his second term.

The fact that Modi is unassailable within India's fractious democratic setup gives him a huge advantage in the international negotiating space, where respect ultimately stems from how strong a leader is at home.



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves to the media as he arrives to attend a thanksgiving ceremony by Bharatiya Janata Party leaders to its allies at the party headquarters in New Delhi, on May 21, 2019. (Photo: Reuters/Anushree Fadnavis)

Modi sought a decisive mandate from his people to enhance India's international position. The domestic consensus he has mustered through this epic election will add to India's heft at the global high tables.

If there is one politician who can lead India to close the still considerable power gap with China and the US, it is Modi. His own vision of restoring India's pre-colonial grandeur is no less compelling than Chinese President Xi Jinping's "Chinese dream" of national rejuvenation.

Modi went to the polls with the slogan of a strong and stable India. His mission has been accomplished, but he has many more miles to go.



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