

‘WAVE ELECTIONS’, CHARISMA AND TRANSFORMATIONAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT After India’s General Election of 2014, political analysts coined the term ‘Modi wave’ to depict the phenomenon of a strong leader who manages to obtain a major gain in a landslide victory. Still wondering whether this would be a one-off phenomenon, analysts found in 2019 to their surprise that India’s most recent Parliamentary elections created a repeat wave. The article theorises the concept of ‘wave election’ and revisits earlier Indian elections to track the appearance of such waves. It then proceeds to examine what may make the most recent Modi ‘wave’ pertinent for future analysis, suggesting that more attention to the phenomenon of charisma and wider transformational agenda of governance rather than excessive focus on religion and saffron elements may be crucial to understand what is happening in India.

KEYWORDS: charisma, elections, governance, India, Narendra Modi, transformation, ‘wave elections’

Introduction

The term ‘wave’ is part of a journalistic jargon that describes an electoral phenomenon, leading to a major gain or loss for a political party, often a manifestation of pro- or anti-incumbency sentiments of the electorate. A wave election provides a massive mandate to a party saddled in power or decisively defeats it, signalling an almost tectonic political shift in a country’s power structure. Witnessing a metamorphosis in the Indian General Elections of 2014, which idiomised the ‘Modi wave’, this not only captured the imagination of many citizens, but also propelled Narendra Modi as a leader figure into political folklore. The electoral broadcast of Modi as a strong leader, who can solve, or at least claims to tackle, the multiple crises plaguing India created a personality cult and an electoral wave that initially appeared surreal and media-manufactured. Earlier, there had been other, highly visible representations of Modi as

a leader figure, wave-like reflections in the crowd such as the Modi mask (Ghassaem-Fachandi, 2019), and the image of Modi also appeared on kites flown all over India in various local variations of kite-flying festivals. The elections in Uttar Pradesh in early 2017 became another important wave-like phenomenon along the way, too. There were also electoral setbacks, when the BJP spectacularly lost state elections, first in Bihar in 2015, and later in 2018 in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

However, the electoral verdict of 2019 brought a psephological surprise, as the BJP riding high on another national Modi wave, scripted a spectacular victory in these general elections. This not only enabled the BJP to cross the majority mark (282 out of 543 seats) in the Lower House of Parliament, with 303 seats, but also marked the ascendancy of Modi as the tallest leader in India's contemporary politics. The earlier 'Modi wave', accepted by some observers but dismissed by others with reference to a fragmented opposition (Ahmed, 2014), altered the political and ideological spectrum of India in 2014. It became a figure of speech and continued to gain electoral traction, as it defied the political gravity in many state elections to extend the saffron footprint in 22 out of India's 29 states. The electoral weave of the Modi wave was phenomenal, as the outcomes of several state elections in recent years would not have gone in favour of the BJP. Modi's electoral polemic, combined with cinematic gestures in state election competitions, created a kind of 'Pied Piper' effect on the Indian electorate, so that people not only stepped into the voting booths in larger numbers, but also exercised their franchise for the BJP. A remarkable 'There is No Alternative' factor in favour of Prime Minister (PM) Modi in the political arena of the country became a form of self-belief embedded in the minds of Indian voters, as elections turned into referendums for brand Modi, already well before the remarkable 2019 ballot.

A quick analysis of the 2014 national elections and the state hustings that followed reveals that a two-dimensional electoral wave determined the majority of the verdicts favouring the BJP. Victory in state elections, barring Delhi, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Punjab, has been mainly due to the simultaneous political streaming of a pro-Modi wave and an anti-incumbency wave against the ruling Congress or the dominant regional party in the respective state. This domino effect of the Modi wave in electoral conquests within the political space in India is unparalleled. Whenever the BJP lost a provincial election, it became a prime subject of hostile and biased criticisms in media discourse. The electoral reverses suffered by the BJP in state elections in the Hindi heartland (Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan) in 2018, once again, brought the Modi wave under the public scanner, with critics wishfully pointing out that it has finally declined. However, the National Elections 2019 in India proved political and media experts quite wrong as the BJP, propelled by a muscular Modi wave 2.0, won an astounding 303 parliamentary seats. The BJP not only gained 21 seats, but also spiked its vote share by seven percentage points, after scoring 31 per cent in the 2014 General Election, decimating the principal opposition parties in the country. Thus, it becomes pertinent to ascertain the true value of any knowledge claims about 'waves' in Indian General Elections, and to conceptualise their historicity within the contextual

framework of competitive party politics in India. The historiography of this electoral phenomenon not only helps in decoding the political gravity of the Modi wave, but may also explain its linear progress and repetitive winning quotient in electoral politics.

This article comprises of three major parts. The first briefly delves into the various media definitions of wave elections in the USA and its psephological origin and usage in India. The parameters framed by academic scholars on wave election studies are a starting point for conceptualising the quantitative and quantifiable dimensions for measuring waves in national elections. The second part focusses in more detail on historical perspectives of the wave phenomenon in general elections in India to identify its key characteristics, nature and any issues that determine its occurrence. This discussion deconstructs wave elections based on the number of seats won or lost by a political establishment in the Lower House of Parliament, changes in vote share and overall implications on national politics. The final part traces specifically the origins of the Modi wave and delineates its political gravity, which comprises charismatic leadership, electoral rhetoric and transformational governance. Analysing the impact of Modi's strong and clearly charismatic leadership, with its different dimensions in light of Weberian analysis, in creating a perceptive belief among the electorate will help to foreground the bandwagon effect of the Modi wave in establishing the present political dominance of the BJP in India.

Media Definitions of 'Wave Election'

The phrase 'wave election' in psephology refers in its positive sense to an episode that enables a political party to mobilise a majority of voters on important issues and win a substantial number of seats with visible political gains. A wave for a political outfit in an election may be favourable or unfavourable and occurs mainly due to issues with direct or indirect policy implications on the country's electorate. The conceptual origin of 'wave elections' may be traced back to a 1892 dictionary of American politics, which carries an entry about 'tidal wave' elections (Brown & Strauss, 1892). In political parlance, an election is said to be like a tidal wave when the majority of the winning party is unprecedentedly large. The US presidential election held in 1874, which favoured the Democrats, was depicted as the first tidal wave election. The term then continued for some time, but fell into disuse by the end of the nineteenth century (Brown & Strauss, 1892).

The expression 'wave election' became popular again in the USA later on and now specifically denotes an election dominated by a single national issue and/or signifies that a party also has candidates who win, while in a more neutral national environment, they would have no chance to succeed. There is no standard definition for a wave election or what components such an election has to have to qualify as a wave. There is also no defined number of seats that constitutes a wave election. Rothenberg (2011), who has spent decades analysing US Senate and congressional races for his non-partisan *Rothenberg Political Report*, defines a wave election where one party experiences a net

loss or gain of at least 20 House seats and the other party has minimal losses or gains. Such a 'political wave' is an election surge strong enough to sweep candidates to victory who would not ordinarily win, either because of the make-up of their districts or the limited funding of their campaigns, for example (Rothenberg, 2011).

In India, political scientists and scholars have termed some national elections as wave election, but there has been no serious academic effort to date to delineate its basic quantifiable constituents (Ahmed, 2014). A 'wave' election is one in which a clear tendency begins to develop in one direction or another towards a national party or its leader(s). Based upon an issue or set of issues that transcend local calculations and coalitions, this draws the bulk of uncommitted and wavering voters in the same direction, with increasing momentum in the last days of the campaign (Brass, 1985). According to Ahmed (2014), the idea of 'electoral wave' in the Indian context could be evoked in three different ways: as a result of shirking competitive politics at the national level, as an outcome of higher voter turnout and as an effect of higher vote share. Differences in voter turnout could be taken as an important aspect for measuring an electoral wave, as this is inextricably linked to voters' political enthusiasm. An electoral wave might therefore also signify a moment when voters get more deeply involved in the election process because something motivates or inspires them.

In the absence of any clear-cut parameters for defining a wave election, it becomes imperative to decode the general elections held in India between 1952 and 2014, both on qualitative and quantitative indicators for categorising the electoral phenomenon. The fundamental for a national election result to qualify as a wave would be when a political establishment crosses the majority mark in the Lower House of the Indian Parliament and succeeds in forming a national government on its own. Broad coordinates for measuring a wave for a political party in national hustings could include: (1) when it gains or loses a substantial number of parliamentary seats, (2) when there is a significant increase or decrease in its voter support base, (3) when there is an issue that galvanises the electorate to vote en masse against or in favour of an incumbent government and (4) when there is a massive mandate for a new political dispensation with a vision of alternative politics or ideological underpinnings.

Historicity of National Wave Elections

In India's first two general elections after independence in 1947, held in 1952 and 1957, the Congress under Jawaharlal Nehru won more than 70 per cent of the seats in the Lower House of Parliament with a vote share of almost 45 per cent and more. Ahmed (2014) provides a fairly detailed Table of all Lok Sabha elections between 1951 and 2014. This shows that Congress did lose three seats in the 1962 national elections, and quite a few more in 1967, but its overall numerical strength in Parliament continued to be humongous and constitutes an outlier in the classification of wave elections. The overarching electoral success of Congress in the early years of Indian competitive politics was mainly due to its crucial role in securing independence from British rule.

The Lok Sabha election in 1967 returned Congress to power, but it lost 122 seats with a 4 per cent decline of its vote share (Rai & Kumar, 2017). This dip in the political fortune of Congress was due to the death of incumbent PM Lal Bahadur Shastri and the elevation of Indira Gandhi as PM. This created dissensions and factions within the party, leading to a loss of face for Congress. Overall, the performance of Congress in the four first General Elections (1952–67) cannot be called an electoral wave although the party managed to get a clear majority in the Lok Sabha and its actual vote share was relatively much higher than that of any other party. The lack of formidable opposition during these years no doubt produced the political idiom of anti-Congressism; yet, the Congress as a 'system' continued to gain from its virtual dominance (Ahmed, 2014).

The 1971 General Election was then contested by Indira Gandhi on the populist slogan of poverty elimination (*garibi hatao*), which created a strong wave in her favour, with Congress winning 69 more parliamentary seats compared to the 1967 election (Rai & Kumar, 2017). The newspapers were flooded with headlines of an 'Indira wave' across the country and the restoration of Congress dominance in party politics in India. As Table 1 shows, the first real Indian electoral 'wave', then, was the Indira wave of 1971, based among other issues upon an identification of voters with Mrs Gandhi in her defiance of the old party bosses, and strengthened by her 'garibi hatao' slogan, which drew the bulk of low-caste poor and landless voters towards her (Brass, 1985). 'No Indira wave this. It is a hurricane', wrote Sham Lal, editor of *The Times of India* (Malhotra, 2014). This election witnessed a strong pro-incumbency factor in favour of Indira Gandhi's strong leadership that transcended the institution of Congress and created a larger-than-life image of her. This provided a positive mandate and was the first instance of an incumbent government in Delhi voted back to power with a larger Lok Sabha majority. Since an electoral wave can also be evaluated by invoking the relative difference in vote share, the 1971 election turns out to be an electoral wave also due to the huge difference of vote share, 38.56 per cent, between Congress

Table 1 The Wave Phenomenon in Indian National Elections

| Year | Total Seats | Winning Party | Seats Won | Gain/Loss (Seats) | Gain/Loss (Vote Share) |
|------|-------------|---------------|-----------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1971 | 518 | INC | 352 | +69 | +3 |
| 1977 | 543 | JP | 295 | +295 | +44 |
| 1980 | 543 | INC | 353 | +199 | +9 |
| 1984 | 543 | INC | 404 | +61 | +5 |
| 1989 | 543 | INC | 197 | -218 | -8 |
| 2014 | 543 | BJP | 282 | +166 | +9 |
| 2019 | 542* | BJP | 303 | +21 | +6 |

Source: Data compiled by the author from Election Commission of India (ECI) statistics.

Note: * Election in Vellore Parliamentary Constituency was cancelled by ECI.

(43.68 per cent) and the runner-up Communist Party of India (CPM, 5.12 per cent), as Ahmed (2014) highlights.

However, the 'Indira wave' of 1971 receded and several by-elections were lost, including one seat which had been in Congress hands since the first General Election in 1951 (Rai & Kumar, 2017; Rudolph & Rudolph, 1977). The General Election in 1977 then became one of the largest wave elections in India, as a huge section of citizens, upset with the 'National Emergency' imposed by Indira Gandhi, during which human rights were suspended, vented their anger by voting against her. The nature of competitive politics changed quite significantly in the post-Emergency period, as anti-Congressism turned into an anti-Indira electoral wave (Ahmed, 2014). This negative wave had mammoth proportions, while the Janata Party (JP), an alliance of opposition parties cobbled together on the eve of the elections, registered an empathic victory on its electoral debut. It won 295 out of the 543 Lok Sabha seats, with an impressive vote share of 41 per cent. India's second wave was thus the massive Janata victory of 1977, based on people's large-scale resentment against Mrs Gandhi's 'Emergency' regime excesses, and on the promise of a new era by the coalition of respected and well-known older leaders in a single political formation (Brass, 1985). Congress was reduced to 154 seats and 35 per cent of the vote, thus underscoring the importance of oppositional unity (Ruparelia, 2015: 67), as the excesses of the Emergency between June 1975 and January 1977 and the Janata oppositional unity crested a wave against Mrs Gandhi. This first anti-incumbency wave in Indian national elections was attributable to a single issue, namely Congress having imposed authoritarian rule in the country and trampling the fundamental rights of Indian citizens.

However, the JP victory celebrations were short-lived, as anti-Congressism could not unite the alliance parties for long. Internal contradictions surfaced within three years, leading to acrimonious splits and ultimate collapse of the multi-party coalition government. As the Janata constituents lacked effective leadership, compelling ideas and broad-based organisation, resultant squabbles and rivalries, once in power, robbed them of any chance at that moment of marking a long-term watershed in Indian politics (Ankit, 2017). Congress seized the opportunity and contested the snap national polls in 1980 on the plank of providing political stability under the time-tested leadership of Indira Gandhi. Congress was returned to power with a thumping mandate, winning 353 parliamentary seats, a whopping gain of 199 seats since the 1977 elections. The 1980 General Elections evoked strong negative incumbency sentiments against the JP due to power mongering among the alliance partners and vendetta politics against Congress leaders. The 1980 Indira wave was thus the third, much less formidable wave, facilitated by a combination of three factors, discontent of people with the disintegration of the Janata coalition, a sense of re-identification with the lone figure of Mrs Gandhi contending against a group of old men bent on harassing her and widespread scarcities of essential commodities and high prices (Brass, 1985).

Thereafter, the 1984 General Election was an exceptional event, held following the assassination of PM Indira Gandhi. This created a strong sympathy wave and a landslide

victory for Congress, which scripted a record-breaking victory by winning 404 of the 543 parliamentary seats. This wave for Congress expressed the electorate's sentiments for Indira Gandhi's supreme sacrifice for the nation and constitutes a situational electoral phenomenon. The 1984 Congress wave was impressive in terms of seats won and was also an unquestionably authentic wave in terms of great increase in the Congress vote share (Brass, 1985). However, the election in 1989 witnessed yet again a strong negative wave against the ruling Congress, which lost 218 seats. The reasons for this debacle were multiple crises, including terrorism in Punjab and India's dubious role in Sri Lanka's civil war. The kickback taint on PM Rajiv Gandhi in the Bofors gun defence deal was probably the main driver in creating a severe political backlash against Congress and its complete rout in the election, so that Congress lost its political pre-eminence and single party dominance in the 1989 General Election (Rai & Kumar, 2017). An unprecedented increase in voter turnout in 1977 and 1984, respectively, underlines that the voters' eagerness to participate in polls was comparatively much higher in these two elections. The anti-Indira sentiment led to a significant increase of over 5 per cent voter turnout in 1977, compared to the previous Lok Sabha election. Similarly, the Congress victory in 1984 might also be seen as a repercussion of a 7 per cent increase in voter turnout at the national level (Ahmed, 2014).

The period between 1984 and 2013 then witnessed seven national elections in India, but no political party was able to cross the majority mark in the Lower House. Hence, except for the 1989 results, these data are not included in the conceptualisation of wave elections and in Table 1. The wave phenomenon resurfaced, however, in the 2014 national elections, after three decades, as the BJP won a clear majority with a remarkable gain of 166 parliamentary seats and a nine per cent vote share increase, with an 8 per cent jump in voter turnout. The run-up to the hustings added a new dimension to wave elections, as there were two currents running simultaneously. The first, the anti-incumbency factor, was fathomable much before the election, while the second current, the wave in favour of Narendra Modi as a charismatic leader, could be fully identified only after the election results. Thus, the 2014 elections is unique and stands apart from other wave elections in India, as the strong anti-incumbency wave against Congress was predictable well in advance, while the second wave, in favour of Narendra Modi, was emerging in the public domain, yet few observers believed it would be so strongly reflected in voting patterns. The overwhelming support for the BJP in 2014 is, in retrospect, testimony to the fact that a 'Modi wave' indeed existed (Rai, 2014). This Modi wave subsequently became a topic of lively academic and media debates in India, and also abroad, with the dominant view that it is a superfluous concept and a one-off national phenomenon in contemporary Indian politics, which does not seem to signify any electoral wave, but rather a fragmented opposition (Ahmed, 2014).

Hence, the 2019 national elections were initially perceived as a somewhat limp, waveless party political competition, with the BJP alliance in the lead, but strong opposition showing, too, so that the result could go either way, it was predicted. We now know that the second Modi wave defied political gravity and wishful predictions

by negating any potential incumbency disadvantages and showing PM Modi's ability to win an even bigger mandate. Modi leveraged the breakdown in the patronage-based party system prevailing in India by connecting directly with the citizens-voters through mass media and multiple mega election rallies. Making minimum use of institutionalised party structures in his populist election campaign, he set about seeking another term. The fact that the BJP added 21 more seats to its previous tally of 2014 and that its vote share grew by six percentage points, too, vindicated the surprising phenomenon of the present Modi wave in India.

Decoding the Political Gravity of the Modi 'Wave'

The origin of this wave as an electoral spectacle is rooted in Modi's political ascendancy as the Chief Minister of Gujarat in 2001, as well as subsequent events (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2019). Under his stewardship, Gujarat witnessed phenomenal economic growth, popularly known as the 'Gujarat Model of Development'. This economic growth story was due to a three-pronged strategy that included infrastructure upgrading of the state to attract private investments, tweaking governance to facilitate corporate ease of doing business and government incentives to entice national and international corporates. The development of roads and airports, uninterrupted supply of power and exports from major industries and high agricultural growth of 7–8 per cent in the state (Dutta, 2019) grabbed national and international attention, so that Gujarat became one of the hottest destinations in India for neo-capitalists and private sector investments. The growth part of this Gujarat story is the least challenged element in the emerging Modi wave. In an important review, Breman (2014) comments on the fact that in the introductory chapter of Hirway et al. (2014), the editors confirm that there was indeed a major spurt in economic growth from 2002–03 to 2011–12.

The significant economic growth of Gujarat had dual collateral political fallouts. First of all, it helped Modi in registering back-to-back victories in state elections in Gujarat after 2001, so that his political stature escalated over time from an honest and hardworking BJP chief minister to a charismatic, albeit firebrand Hindutva leader. Even though the 'Gujarat model' cultivates social polarisation, Modi was able to win state elections three times, as the beneficiaries of this 'model' were not only the middle class, but also a 'neo-middle class' made up of those who have begun to be part of the urban economy or who hope to benefit from it as the 'neo-middle class', which is primarily aspirational (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2019). These groups were numerous enough to allow Modi's BJP to win successive elections in Gujarat (Jaffrelot, 2015). Further, Modi created an electoral constituency in Gujarat, relying on a majoritarian Hindu electoral support base that scaled the caste–community divide, while leaving out Muslims (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2019). The Hindu voters were not only institutionalised in saffron ideology and remained electorally loyal to Modi, but also became the torchbearers of his novel brand of right-wing Hindutva politics. This, then, is clearly a case of social polarisation in which the ethno-religious identity quest of the middle and neo-middle

classes continues to play a key role (Jaffrelot, 2015), while a new form of majoritarian state is beginning to emerge in India (Chatterji et al., 2019).

It appears that the exemplary governance and development record of Modi in Gujarat resulted in a major change in his political stature and trajectory, which catapulted him from the state level to the position of a national(ist) leader in the BJP hierarchy of central leadership. The earlier failure of the BJP led by L.K. Advani in uprooting the UPA government in the 2009 elections had created a leadership crisis. When the BJP elevated Modi as the prime ministerial candidate in 2013, his restricted state-based popularity now found a national platform to expand its political wings and create a pan-Indian presence. The communication spin of Modi as a strong and decisive leader created a Modi wave in India that not only put the BJP back into power in 2014, but also resulted in winning several state hustings and now the national elections of 2019. This Modi wave, which is instrumental in painting the electoral map of India in much saffron colour, comprises three political components, namely charismatic leadership, the strength of electoral rhetoric and a vision of transformational governance, which are still unfolding and will be extremely important to watch closely in the next five years. The sections below analyse these three core elements.

Charismatic Leadership

Max Weber's important theorisation of charisma concerns the validity of claims to legitimate authority, which may be based on rational, traditional or charismatic grounds (Weber, 1974: 328). It has thus been applied to secular and religious contexts alike and is closely related to his discourses about different forms of rationality and the genesis of values (D'Avray, 2010: 104–5). Noting that the concept of 'charisma' is taken from the vocabulary of early Christianity, Weber (1974: 328) posited:

In the case of charismatic authority, it is the charismatically qualified leader as such who is obeyed by virtue of personal trust in him and his revelations, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope of the individual's belief in his charisma.

This heavily contested concept of charisma is 'not usually found in historical cases in pure form' (Weber, 1974: 329) and has a variety of different types (Weber, 1974: 359). Generally, it can be 'applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities' (Weber, 1974: 358). Notably, as Weber (1974: 358–9) continued, '[t]hese are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader'.

As explored further below, this charisma generates transformational energy, and Weber himself suggested that values 'can start with a charismatic leader' (D'Avray, 2010: 104), who therefore has the power of innovation and maybe a vision of a future aim

or ambition that, as a politician, such leaders may wish their followers to endorse in elections. D'Avray (2010: 104) also cites Weber as stating that charisma 'is the great revolutionary power in epochs that are in the grip of tradition', and further elucidates that as a rational force,

charisma can be a transformation from the inside, which, born of necessity or enthusiasm, means a fundamental change in the direction of central convictions and actions with a completely new orientation of all attitudes to all specific forms of life and to 'the World' generally. (D'Avray, 2010: 104–5)

The Weberian discourse also brings out the potential for an almost revolutionary capacity of charismatic leadership, as 'charismatic authority repudiates the past, and is in this sense a specifically revolutionary force' (Weber, 1974: 362). Hence, according to Weber (1974: 363):

Charisma... may involve a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflict, or enthusiasm. It may then result in a radical alteration of the central system of attitudes and directions of action within completely new orientation of all attitudes toward the different problems and structures of the 'world'.

What one may presently witness in India, in the light of such Weberian thought, is a reconfiguration of Indian leadership that is significantly different from early postcolonial leadership under Congress, which was formed by the specific historical contexts of its own time and the perceived developmental needs of the late 1940s and early 1950s. In the second decade of twenty-first century India, the somewhat radical alteration that Weber mentioned in the quote above seems to inspire a sense of duty felt by a new charismatic leader to take the country forward into a different direction than the earlier leadership envisioned. Weber (1974: 359, italics in the original) puts this in terms of 'the conception that it is the *duty* of those who have been called to a charismatic mission to recognise its quality and to act accordingly'. One could go as far as arguing that this duty extends not only to the charismatic leader figure, but even to voters who have made a conscious choice to share the new developmental philosophy and vision.

Looking back, the traditional arena of late colonial and early postcolonial India offered many opportunities for charismatic leaders to leave their mark, not the least a persona like Mahatma Gandhi, who of course played no role in India's postcolonial elections because of his assassination in 1948. Apart from Gandhi, though, several early charismatic political leaders in India with exceptional power or qualities arose, their mass appeal stemming from quite different settings. The charisma of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel (1875–1950) was cultivated in the independence movement, and particularly for Nehru within a largely secular modernistic value set, while Jayaprakash Narayan (1902–79) and more recently Arvind Kejriwal, born in 1968, developed their respective appeal in social movements and activism against corruption in public life. On the other hand, the charisma of

Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi emanated due to political dynasty, as they inherited the proud legacy of Jawaharlal Nehru and sought to further its reach. The iconic status attained by Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh is due to her Dalit caste identity assertion, while C.N. Annadurai was worshipped in Tamil Nadu for his Dravidian pride and cultural politics.

The charismatic leadership qualities of Narendra Modi may well be partly Gandhian, given his Gujarati roots, but were above all largely nurtured through dedicated work as a skilful leader at state level, though not without problematic aspects (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2019: 90). Including a vision of alternative politics, on the one hand, this resulted in a pragmatic focus on the development of Gujarat and perceptible improvements in the standard of living of most of its inhabitants. The self-made credentials of Modi and his humble background created on this account an instant connect with aspirational citizens, making him one of the most compelling political and indeed charismatic leaders in India. At the same time, Modi's Hindutva leanings also made him appear as a charismatic leader in the perspective of many other Indians. Several election studies of Lokniti-CSDS that tracked the popularity ratings of political leaders in India found that Narendra Modi was way ahead of his closest rival Rahul Gandhi, with a lead of 19 per cent during the national elections of 2019. Table 2 shows how this is reflected in his popularity ratings.

Narendra Modi evidently continues to be the people's present first choice as India's Prime Minister, a clear vindication of his charismatic personality transcending the normative structure of party politics. It remains to be seen how the next phase of his leadership will pan out and whether this charismatic momentum can be maintained. On this aspect, a careful re-reading of Weberian theorising offers surprisingly pertinent advice, too, which PM Modi himself may have already internalised, but many of his Hindutva-focused critics studiously ignore. Weber (1974: 369) suggested:

For charisma to be transformed into a permanent routine structure, it is necessary that its anti-economic character should be altered. It must be adapted to some form of fiscal organization to provide for the needs of the group and hence to the economic conditions necessary for raising taxes and contributions.

Table 2 Popularity Ratings of Narendra Modi and Others in Percentages

| <i>Name</i> | <i>2014</i> | <i>2017</i> | <i>2018</i> | <i>2019</i> |
|-----------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Narendra Modi | 36 | 44 | 34 | 43 |
| Rahul Gandhi | 16 | 9 | 24 | 24 |
| Mayawati | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Mamata Banerjee | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Other Leaders | 17 | 19 | 19 | 13 |
| No Response | 28 | 24 | 17 | 15 |

Source: Lokniti Team (2019).

In that discussion, Weber (1974: 369–72) indicates, notably with reference to historical experiences from Buddhism and Hindu sects, certain modalities of how followers of a charismatic leader need to become responsible state officials or party officials. Intriguingly, Weber (1974: 370) also mentions the need of striving for security, an extremely relevant point, given current concerns about excessive or disproportionate securitisation in India (Chatterji et al., 2019).

Strength of Electoral Rhetoric

Obviously, the way political parties present their messages to voters in elections is an important element in this process. The first dimension is the specific parties' descriptions of the outside world, political 'reality' and various political actors. The analytical focus would be on the extent to which parties make negative references to the outside world, either as general descriptions or as polemical messages against opponents, as an aspect of rhetoric negativity (Håkansson, 1999). The political astuteness of Modi emanates from his strong oratorical skills, first person narrative and robust presentation of facts, which is a binary of quasi-official facts and negative rhetoric, which of course has not remained unquestioned (Chatterji et al., 2019).

Modi's political appeal combined with Hindutva rhetoric decimated the principal parties opposed to the BJP in many state electoral competitions, most notably in Uttar Pradesh in 2017, asserting the dominance of saffron ideology in contemporary Indian politics. In the animated conversations of Modi with the electorate, he highlighted the negative track-record of Congress and of regional parties in state elections, which included allegations of corruption, dynastic politics and minority appeasement. This appears to have led to the consolidation of Hindu votes in favour of the BJP, with supporters of other parties shifting their loyalty to become votaries of Modi in national elections, but notably not necessarily at state level. The rhetorical technique of Modi is inherent in populism, a version of politics that crystallises when a leader tries to relate directly to 'his' nation, circumventing institutions (Jaffrelot & Martelli, 2017). The particular oratorical style of Modi, as Jaffrelot and Martelli (2017) suggest, deserves more sustained research.

The second important dimension of electoral rhetoric is the expression of issues and standpoints that the parties or their leaders aim to bring to the public agenda. The focus would be on messages that are either of the concrete or abstract type, and identify the parties' stand on specific issues (Håkansson, 1999). The advent of Modi marked the beginning of a new era of mediatisation of Indian politics. The policies and programmes of his government were messaged through various media channels, and its mass impact was monitored through social media platforms. The 'Modi wave', which had reached its earlier pinnacle in the 2014 general elections, seemed to have lost its winning intensity when the BJP suffered a severe loss in the 2015 Bihar elections. The BJP also failed to make electoral inroads in Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and Punjab, raising red flags within the party. The decision to demonetise parts of the

Indian economy in 2016, with the prominent agenda of ending black money but also other agenda (Midthanpally, 2017; Rai & Kumar, 2017), and the more recent surgical strike on terrorist camps in Pakistan provided opportunities to arrest the saffron decline and to demonstrate the leader's willingness to act decisively. The electoral rhetoric of Modi on these twin issues appears to have changed the political narrative, so that the BJP won a massive mandate in state elections in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand in 2017, resurrecting a Modi wave at state level. The speeches of Modi frequently rely on references to himself, while the abundant use of numerals, past tenses and the third person singular show his emphasis on economic achievements, personalisation of power and story-telling (Jaffrelot & Martelli, 2017), a particular oratorical style that, as noted above, deserves more sustained research.

Transformational Governance

Connected to charismatic representations, the governance discourse recognises two types of leaders, the transactional mode, in which leaders focus on the relationship between the leader and the followers, and the transformational mode, in which leaders focus on the beliefs, needs and values of their followers. Transactional leadership over human beings is exercised when persons with certain motives and purposes mobilise, in competition or in conflict with others, institutional, political, psychological and other resources to arouse, engage and satisfy the motives of followers in order to realise goals mutually held by both leaders and followers (Burns, 1978). The characteristic of governance in India before the advent of Modi was largely transactional and became routinised in nature, pursuing an agenda that was narrow in vision and lacked political foresight, not to say national ambition and a sense of pride in being Indian. The top-down welfare schemes pursued by Congress were increasingly experienced and perceived as short-term alleviations for people in the margins, with no serious attempts to bring about structural reforms.

However, the Modi government's rather more charismatic and robust emphasis has been on transformation, as his vision of 'New India by 2022' aimed to make Indian democracy more participatory and inclusive, creating a partnership of equals with citizens, suggesting a new paradigm of nation building. Transformational leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality (Burns, 1978). This almost magic complicity in endeavours to achieve a higher aim seems to chime with a much-neglected subsection in the Indian Constitution, Article 51-A(j), which makes it a duty of every citizen of India 'to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavour and achievement'. It is evidently easy to dismiss this as pious rhetoric and to scoff at this. But Modi has repeatedly referred to the Constitution of India as the country's Holy Book, and this may not be empty rhetoric. This is also not merely about 'religion', but concerns all kinds of transformation. Ignoring such semi-hidden

references seems short-sighted when we see that common Indians appear to somehow ‘buy’ the transformational carrots that Modi dangles in front of them.

Indeed, the optimistic vision that people can be lifted into their better selves is one of the major secrets of transforming leadership, and it is both a moral and a practical theme (Burns, 1978). The numerous welfarist policies initiated by Modi, often on the basis of earlier Congress planning, include Jan Dhan Yojana, one of the biggest financial inclusion schemes in the world, opening bank accounts for 35 crore uncovered households, and Kisan Yojana, a direct income support scheme for the farming community. Other mega programmes were Awas Yojana, providing housing to 1.5 crore poor people; Ujjwala Yojana, creating smoke-free kitchens for 7 crore families; the much maligned Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (‘Clean Bharat’), providing toilets to around 10 crore people and Saubhagya, a project to provide electricity to all households in India. The fact that such ambitious projects were undertaken, and that they were to some extent successful and effective in addressing the direct needs of many people, is partly responsible for restoration of the credibility of both the government, and of Modi’s style of governance, because people could feel and directly experience the impact of this transformation. It was this trust that made development a people’s movement, which helped in accelerating the pace of transformation of India (Gupta, 2019) and increased the aura of Modi’s charisma. That an enormous amount of transformation remains to be done is beyond doubt and debate, but the electorate largely seems to understand and appreciate this and is not as impatient or negative as many outside observers and internal critics tend to be.

Conclusions

The project to understand the phenomenon of ‘wave’ in Indian national elections was an important political feature that motivated the author to draft an article that was completed before India’s General Elections of 2019. The decision, together with the advice of peer reviewers, to delay the publication of this article until after the 2019 election and to add further comments, has offered an opportunity to provide deeper analysis that goes beyond the usual critiques of saffron domination of political and electoral discourses in India today. The growing realisation that there is more to PM Modi’s leadership model than Hindutva and saffronisation will need to be explored further in future work.

Analysing Indian electoral contests, this article confirmed that the wave phenomenon occurs mostly during single party dominance of highly competitive politics with variations in both electoral context and its meta-narratives. One such period of significant competitive politics was experienced in India during the turbulent 1970s and into the 1980s. Thereafter, the period between 1984 and 2013 witnessed largely wave-less elections in India, with no single party winning a landslide majority. This resulted in numerous coalition formations between the respective leading national party and various regional and smaller parties. The waves in the 1977 and 1980 General

Elections were anti-incumbent in nature, with massive negative voter sentiments, first against Congress and then against the JP, leading in both cases to humiliating defeats. The largest wave in Indian electoral politics occurred in the 1984 General Election, as the assassination of Indira Gandhi stimulated an emotional trigger, resulting in skewed voting that favoured Congress. The earlier 'Indira wave' in the General Elections of 1971 was India's first pro-incumbency wave, as the Congress stormed back to power with an impressive gain of 69 parliamentary seats with a three percentage point increase in its vote share. The more recent 'Modi wave' in the 2014 elections was quite exceptional, as the BJP won 166 seats more as compared with the 2009 election, with a gain of seven per cent in its voter share. The common denominator in the earlier 'Indira wave' and the 2014 'Modi wave' lies in their core of charisma and competency, coupled with authoritarian and populist leadership, which created such strong political tides in their favour in the hustings. The incumbency advantage (as it turned out) in the 1971 and 2019 national elections, combined with a low index of opposition unity, certainly had a multiplier effect in creating two of the strongest waves ever seen in India. This was first a voting upsurge for the transformational agenda of Indira Gandhi, and now in 2019 so strongly for the more explicitly transformational and clearly charismatic vision of PM Narendra Modi.

This suggests that determined focus on transformational agenda in terms of socio-economic development seems to be rated as evidence of charismatic leadership and is treated as more important by the electorate in India than simply certain 'religious' or ideational visions. Religion does not feed people, as Pakistan and Bangladesh next door have also begun to realise with increasing clarity. India's necessarily unique and highly pragmatic way to bring about a sustainable transformation remains, of course, a massive challenge, with many huge disappointments along the way almost programmed into the trajectory. If 'development' in a global perspective is any reliable indication, there will anyway never be a time when all Indians will be truly well-off. As advised a long time ago by Rudolph and Rudolph (1987), the complexities of India's modernisation process will remain a major challenge for analysts.

Presently, it seems that more analytical focus on methods and modalities of charismatic national leadership related to development (Lokniti Team, 2019), rather than the religious characteristics and/or presumed agenda of specific leader figures, may offer finer tools to predict future electoral outcomes in India. In this light, it is quite remarkable that India's most recent electoral wave was not identified by those India specialists who should know, probably because far too many outside observers and analysts tend to pursue their own agenda rather than watching closely enough what is actually going on in India itself.

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