

Back To Practical Hinduism

Just as pundits settled into the comfort of magical thinking – faith in Modi's charisma and grand national narratives – India's voters have given us a lesson in political realism. While the digital classes in Delhi and Bengaluru cheered the moon landing and the G20 summit, and the magnates in Gujarat celebrated the temple in Ayodhya, other matters have been on the minds of people in deep India.

India's swelling GDP and its new status as the world's fifth largest economy have been closely tracked by soaring unemployment, which has risen from 3.2% to 7.6% since 2013. This contrast reflects the gulf between the benefits of Modi's economics for the rich and the poor.

India's banks are no longer crippled by bankrupt billionaires, foreign investment has acquired confidence. While physical and digital infra, from airports to the digitisation of money, have expanded, life choices of the country's poorest and most vulnerable have shrunk. Crores of India's farmers and migrant workers have been left behind.

Lakhs of small and tiny, often grey-market, businesses that run day-to-day India and form the country's economic backbone, are still recovering from demonetisation and GST policies. The small-enterprise sector has shrunk to

19% of India's GDP, from 27.5% pre-Modi. While inflation soars, there has hardly been any growth in real wages since 2014 and the share of educated young people among the unemployed rose from 54.2% to 65.7% over the two Covid years.

Manufacturing growth is painstakingly slow, agri profits have fallen precipitously, private consumption expenditure descended to a two-decade low, while household debt rose to an all-time high. According to World Inequality Database, India's economic inequality is worse than it has been in a century.

While pundits brooded over political messaging and national ideologies, predicting a Modi-4-eva govt, voters in the fields and on the streets were rethinking their loyalties. Modi rode high on hope with two wildcards he received in the previous elections. This year, he was judged less on his promises than on what he has already done.

The verdict does not only damn Modinomics, it drastically cuts his image to size. Ensnared in a bubble of media pundits, political technologists and sycophants, critics say the PM has become an auto-devotee, believing himself divinely ordained to lead single-handedly the new Bharat. Ignoring local leaders, failing to reward veteran party workers and sidelining

RSS have cost the party dozens of seats. Seats won in UP, Kerala, Odisha and Rajasthan went to known and trusted community leaders, not Modi's envoys.

Modi's polarising comments, arguably made when he realised this election will not be an easy ride, may have backfired, leaving many Hindus unimpressed. "India does not need to talk of Hindus and Muslims," says a *chaiwallah* in Jaipur, "We need roads and jobs."

In a survey conducted across Indian cities, 35% of BJP supporters said they had no interest in Ayodhya. Even the middle-class

Hindu women, who, as the keepers of faith, are more susceptible to Hindu nationalism, joined the party mostly through economic self-help groups, not theological associations.

Once again, India rejected totalising, abstract national ideologies, proving its politics to be as local, pragmatic and pluralistic as the Hinduism actually practised by most. Its political judgments have proven more agile and self-possessed than any sitting-room analyst's.



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