

Hail, Mr Modi!

The coronation is over, it is time to see what one can reasonably expect from the man whose rise to prominence has been unmatched in recent history.

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The coronation of the “Dharti Putra” is over – the ceremony, though not on the scale of the Delhi Durbar, was still impressive enough with the 4,000-odd invitees, much like the Maharajas at the previous coronation, seated according to their hierarchy. The backdrop was, of course, more impressive than the flood plain of the Yamuna in 1911, where, incidentally, the decision to construct the new capital was announced; the ceremony this time took place with the architectural legacy of that “monumental” decision as the backdrop.

Now that the new order is in place, the cabinet announced and the media obsession with who’s in and who’s out is over, it is time to see what one can reasonably expect from the man whose rise to prominence has been unmatched in recent history.

There has been lots of discussion about Narendra Modi’s vision and his penchant for results and so on. The concomitant empowering of the bureaucracy, cutting the red tape, inducting professionalism and inculcating a sense of responsibility within the government have all been commented upon and will presumably be implemented. The stock markets will boom (at least till the Fed keeps quantitative easing and cost of funds low) and there will be, in general, a feel-good elation. Investment will kickstart and the growth rate will pick up from middle single digits to high single digits. And there will be some semblance of governance. After the astounding stasis of the previous administration, all this will be refreshing. In this generalised, breathless euphoria, it would seem churlish to even question whether there would be any structural changes.

And then there is the realm of culture. The ideological moorings of the current administration are not a secret. One can argue that with the kind of mandate that he has got, Modi will be relatively autonomous of the men in Nagpur and hence things like tinkering with syllabi or appointment of “like-minded” people to cultural bodies will not be repeated. This argument is erroneous because it assumes an autonomy of ideology which, I think, is non-existent. The core of the party doesn’t need instructions from Nagpur to introduce *Karma Kanda* courses or vedic mathematics in the curriculum. They genuinely believe that this needs to be done and see nothing wrong with it. The facile defence, as always, will run thus: every government in power has changed textbooks, appointed their acolytes to cultural bodies, so what’s wrong if we do it?

The economy will pick up. There will be some semblance of governance and decisiveness. And the media, with its irritating

excitability, will proclaim the arrival of “*acche din*”. All this is fine. But money is smart. And foreign money is possibly even smarter. The stockmarket can continue to soar for some time on sentiment, but ultimately it will react to the reality on the ground. And that is where things will become a bit difficult.

To see this, think about the impediments to investment which exist. Dilly-dallying in decision-making and bureaucratic delays are ultimately a minor issue for the investor. The real problems come in with the web of roadblocks, from the point of view of the investor, and safeguards, from the point of view of the liberal intelligentsia. Take, for instance, power. The large numbers of almost-completed power plants sitting idle for lack of fuel tell us that it is not political will which is the real issue. There are environmental clearances,

legislations regarding rehabilitation and compensations, rights of indigenous people, the Forest Act, etc, etc, which need to be taken care of before coal can be mined. To oversee all this is the quasi-judicial and judicial infrastructure which frequently proves to be a bigger impediment in speedy implementation of projects. And, of course, the public interest litigation (PIL) has become synonymous with getting justice for the voiceless.

Or take the recently enacted Land Acquisition Act which, from the point of view of the investors, is a huge deterrence for any infrastructural project. Social audits and clauses requiring 70% of the affected people to agree, etc, might be great from the point of view of equity and fairness but are certainly not investor-friendly.

One can find many such examples which deter capital. How any of this will change with the new government is not clear at all. There has always been a broad political consensus regarding the legislations relating to rehabilitation, forests, environment, land acquisition, etc, some of which are very progressive. There is also the judiciary which, thankfully, still works relatively autonomously of the executive. And though the media is more or less completely corporatised and hence partisan in these matters, there is still a semblance of liberal guilt towards some of these causes.

So where does that leave us in, say, a couple of years? The initial euphoria has subsided, the economy is still stuck with all the bottlenecks mentioned above, and investors are getting restless. Tycoons getting restless might not matter that much but what is almost certain is that the feel-good endorphins in the middle-class minds have also ebbed. They didn’t care much while art exhibitions were mutilated, or vedic

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mathematics introduced or a pig was thrown in front of some mosque. But when the Sensex takes a nosedive, their political instincts awaken.

And that is when the danger starts. We now have a person who is self-professedly a “strong, decisive” leader, one who doesn’t brook any opposition when it comes to “development” (as, of course, defined by him). Most dangerously, for the first time, after possibly Nehru, we have a leader who communicates directly with the people. And does it very effectively. And who, by all the evidence we have of his career, can be safely called a demagogue in the strict sense of the term. The propaganda machine which was so remarkably efficient during the election campaign would, of course, be extremely useful in putting a veneer of respectability and necessity on all this.

The safeguards put in place after decades of struggle are proving to be hugely detrimental to investment and hence growth and development. They need to go. If we want a strong and prosperous Bharat, then we need to sacrifice. Never mind that it is not the “we” whose interests are being sacrificed but “they”. Institutions, legislations, etc, which protect the rights of the weak will need to be superseded. The rise of discontent which this might lead to will need to be curtailed by force, if necessary. The interests of capital which get strangely equated to development are paramount.

It was an unusually prescient friend who had suggested that this scenario which can be broadly called “fascism” is what we are staring at sooner rather than later. I agree that the essential contradictions between the liberal and progressive legislative and judicial framework and profit are bound to come to a head. Unlike western democracies, the stratification in our society is too vast for it to be managed smoothly. It is also true we are not yet prosperous enough to buy our way out of these contradictions.

Of course, fascism conjures up all kinds of images which in their specificities will possibly not materialise. There

won’t be any official racism or communalism. The storm troopers will do their vandalism and intimidation while the administration treats them with kid gloves. Socialism and secularism will still be our official doctrine. The overt militarism will be missing but only because it won’t be required. Maybe the use of the term “fascism” to describe the scenario painted above is inappropriate. But then, a rose by any other name... And who knows, we might even have a mass rally at the Ramlila Maidan which will be immortalised by our own version of Leni Riefenstahl from the Bollywood Brigade of cheerleaders, in a rousing documentary with 3-D computer-generated special effects to keep up with the times.

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