

Indian Elections - The Triumph of the Will(ie): Prasannarajan Anoints Modi in the Open

Wednesday 21 May 2014, by [SENGUPTA Shuddhabrata](#) (Date first published: 18 May 2014).

The televised coronation (or should I say Rajyabhishek) of Narendrabhai Damodardas Modi has featured a supremely photogenic set (the Dasashwamedh Ghat in Benaras), a chorus line of calisthenic priests lining the riverfront of the Ganga with blazing torches, a script (being written, even as the epic is being canned, in every television studio and editorial office) talented producers and art directors, an army of happy-clappy extras, and even its own battalion of masked stunt doubles.



Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh and Narendra Modi, at Dasashwamedh Ghat, Varanasi/Benaras on 17 May 2014. Courtesy, Amar Ujala website.

Like any good bollywood blockbuster, it cannot but be a homage to an extant cinematic classic. S. Prasannarajan, editor of the *Open Magazine* has even told us what that classic is. On the cover of *Open*, beneath a pensive, tight lipped and determined Narendrabhai looking out at the magazine's reader through a shower of rose petals and rimless Bulgari glasses, four words spell out in bold capitals the film's name - 'TRIUMPH OF THE WILL'. Dejavu, anyone?



Mr. Prasannarajan, erudite essayist and editor that he is, knows what he is talking about. You don't just throw 'Triumph of the Will' at your readers because it has a nice, well, triumphant sounding, lofty and faux-Nietzschean ring to it and looks good in sans-serif font. Idioms, headlines and titles have histories.

'Triumph of the Will', probably the most cited propaganda film in Cinema History [1], was an epic pean to a Nazi Party rally in 1934 at Nuremberg (with a Führer descending from the sky in an airplane in a manner we have grown accustomed to seeing) directed by Adolf Hitler's chosen artist, Leni Reifenstahl [2]. This is the film that did more than anything to forge the image of Hitler as the

man of the moment, the redeemer of an adoring people.



Poster of 'Triumph of the Will' by Leni Riefenstahl

I am normally allergic to the knee jerk invocation of the history of the NSDAP (National Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei) or 'Nazi' Party when talking about the ascendance of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party). As rhetorical flourishes go, this easy (and in some ways lethargic) resort to the crafting of parallels between two different moments has its limits, and can be overdone on occasion. Politicians do not have to be Hitler clones for us to be watchful of their ascent to power. 2014 is not 1933. Delhi is not Berlin. Narendrabhai is Narendrabhai and Adolf, Adolf.

But when an admirer of Narendra Modi as ardent as S Prasannarajan makes the comparison between Narendra Modi and Adolf Hitler to underline his commitment to the cause of *Ek Bharat, Shrestha Bharat, Uber Alles*, then I do have to sit up and take notice. And I would urge you all to do the same.

A Modi acolyte is telling us that his master is like Hitler, and is doing so on the cover of a mass circulation English language news magazine. Inside the magazine we find a bouquet of articles that tell us about his early life, that inform us about how it would make sense for a Modi led India to form a strategic military partnership with an aggressive Abe led Japan, that even highlight how sexy he is and how good he would look in the clothes designed especially for him by a clutch of young designers. We find Tavleen Singh in awe, and an eloquent Shiv Vishwanathan (who has to say in the last paragraph of his essay that he is a Modi critic because reading him we would not have known as much). Prasannarajan tells us, in what must be the acme of breathless purple prose in the recent annals of Indian journalism -

"Narendra Damodardas Modi, the winner of 2014, is the story of our time, a story in which the power of one man's will merges with the possibilities of a nation still dreaming...he was his own Michaelangelo, sculpting his personal mythology to perfection. He was his own Boswell, writing his legend in tune with the spirit of the times...When Candidate Modi was the only viable option for his party to regain India, it was the mark of a man who would make himself the only One (sic). Soon, he would make himself indispensable to an India crying out for leadership. On Friday, more fabulous than fateful, the triumphant Modi wore the first notation of a new india, and his name would acquire the status of being an adjective to a nation that took the most defining Right turn..."

Clearly, the editorial department at *Open Magazine* has an election erection. This open triumph of their collective willie causes them no embarrassment. But it does embarrass me. And to cap it all they title their cover story, unselfconsciously, without irony, 'Triumph of the Will'. What substances do they have on offer as refreshments in the busy offices of the *Open magazine*, I wonder. I mean, does it make sense to compare the dear leader chosen by the people of the world's largest democracy in the world's largest election to the genocidal Adolf Hitler, while genuflecting in the direction of Leni Riefenstahl ?

It is not a pseudo-*sickular*, left wing loony, anti-national pointing out the resemblance between Herr Hitler and Shri Modi-ji. It is S. Prasannarajan. But could he, for once, be right after all?

A Tale Told in Numbers

Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany after the election of November 1932 with a mandate from 33.1% of the German electorate. At least 66.9% of German voters did not vote for Hitler in that fateful election.

The total population of India today is 1.27 billion people. The total electoral is 810,000,000 (810 Million people), out of which the total polling percentage in this election was 66.3%, which brings the number of people who voted to roughly 541,000,000 people. The election commission website says that 165,480,309 people voted for the BJP. In other words, the BJP's vote share in this election hovers around 31% of those who voted.

66.9% of German voters did not vote for the NSDAP and yet Hitler came to power.

69% of an 810 million strong Indian electorate did not vote for the BJP and yet Modi has come to power.

If you add to the number of people who are not eligible to vote (the very young, the uncounted, the ones who were missing from electoral rolls for some reason) it is clear that Narendra Modi cannot claim to represent a billion Indians. The people who voted for the BJP in this election do not amount to more than 14% of the current Indian population. Is /Was this transformative history in the making (in India/Germany) or is/was this sleight of hand or is/was it both?

Comparison with vote shares of winning tickets in past elections is instructive. In 1977, the Janata Party got 41.1% for 295 seats. If we add the Janata Party's allies, who took part in the government, it got 52% votes for 345 seats. The combined NDA vote share (BJP + allies) of votes polled in 2014 does not exceed 35%.

Interestingly, in 1977 in the post Emergency election which saw a decisive defeat for the Indira Gandhi regime, her party, the Congress (I) got 34.2% of the vote share, which is 3% more than what the BJP has managed to get in 2014.

In other words, the defeated Congress in 1977 was more representative (if vote shares are assumed to represent the popular will) than victorious BJP's of 2014. There has been a persistent decline in the 'representative' character of elected governments in India over the last twenty five years. But if we take a cold look at the numbers than it is clear that the 2014 elections have given us the least representative government so far.

As of now, the numbers have spoken. Or have they really? Have we really heard what they have said in the din of ecstatic celebration ?

I do not know about anything else, but to believe that there is a 'Modi Wave' in the light of what the

'vote share' actually tells us, one requires, not intelligence, or the ability to read and interpret numbers, but a triumph of the will. People outside television studios, editorial offices and party headquarters (and it is becoming difficult to tell which is which nowadays) tend to be skeptical of dramatic claims to destiny. Adolf Hitler faced a similar predicament when he came to power in 1933. And that is why Leni Riefestahl was commissioned to do her job.

S. Prasannarajan and his colleagues in television, tabloids, newspapers and magazines (Gupta, Goswami, Sardesai, Roy & Co) have already scripted the desi sequel to Reifenstahl's film. And I don't really have to say it, they are saying it themselves. They are right. And there really is a crying need for another Collector's Issue of Open magazine with Arnab Goswami on the cover, and another admiring, adoring essay by S. Prasannarajan. And this one could be called -



'Triumph of the ShriII', courtesy, Soutik Biswas

In a recent Facebook post, Prof. Nirmalangshu Mukherjee has called out the BJP government-to-be as 'the most unpopular and unrepresentative in republican India' based on a reading of the numbers polled. Could this just be the biggest stolen election in the history of democracy? This, combined with the fact that there is no substantial opposition to the NDA in parliament means that the real task of opposition to a profoundly unrepresentative regime will have to be forged outside the legislature, through creative mass democratic mobilizations of many different kinds. We need a new politics. And perhaps a little honest arithmetic.

Shuddhabrata Sengupta

(I am indebted to the observations made by Prof. Nirmalangshu Mukherjee, Javed Iqbal, Jeebesh Bagchi and Rakesh Sharma in different facebook posts and discussions for the thoughts behind this post. Thank you, Soutik Biswas for sharing 'Triumph of the ShriII' on Facebook)

P.S.

* From Kafila. MAY 18, 2014:

<http://kafila.org/2014/05/18/the-triumph-of-the-willie-prasannarajan-anoints-modi-in-the-open/>

Footnotes

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triumph_of_the_Will

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leni_Riefenstahl