

India Finds A Prime Minister

■ Dr. M.N. Buch

For ten long years we had a person, personally honest and a thorough gentleman, Manmohan Singh, who occupied the constitutional post of Prime Minister without ever being what he is meant to be, “prima inter pares” or first amongst equals. He certainly did not lead the Council of Ministers whose members, constitutionally, the President is required to appoint on the advice of the person whom he has appointed as Prime Minister. The Council of Ministers consisted of persons whom an outsider, Sonia Gandhi, approved and the Prime Minister was only the instrument through which her decision was conveyed to the President. However much one may discount Sanjay Baru’s book on the grounds that the Press Adviser to the Prime Minister should have been more reticent and Natwar Singh’s book on the grounds that he should not have revealed information which he acquired through close acquaintance with Nehru/Gandhi family, the fact remains that these two, who saw the working of government at first hand, have stated authoritatively that which was common knowledge, that is, Manmohan may have reigned but it was Sonia who ruled and that this diarchy was worse than the one the British had introduced in India. In any case unless accountability and responsibility go with power there can never be good government and in the case of the UPA government whereas accountability and responsibility may have vested in Manmohan Singh the authority was enjoyed by Sonia Gandhi who was answerable to no one. One could safely say that whereas the trappings of constitutional government existed in India between 2004 and 2014, actually we had no Prime Minister. Today the position is different because in Narendra Modi India has found a Prime Minister.

Narendra Modi became Chief Minister of Gujarat and shortly thereafter had to face major problems, of which the riots which followed the 2002 killing of pilgrims returning from Adyodhya in a railway train at Godhra erupted into major communal riots in the districts of Central and South Gujarat. It took almost a week for the situation to be brought under control with the help of the Army, but Modi and his government was accused of deliberately sponsoring or at least encouraging the riots which resulted in about 1500 Muslims being killed. Ahmedabad, Mehsana, Kheda, Baroda, Panchmahals, Bharuch, Bulsar and for a short while Surat were the districts which saw widespread rioting. The neoliberals, many activist NGOs, political parties ranging from the Congress to the Left accused Narendra Modi of fomenting the riots, encouraging them, failing to suppress them and of being responsible for the murder of a large number of Muslims. He was considered communal, anti Muslim and a criminal. The then government used CBI and the courts to try and indict Narendra Modi, a fact of which our media took immediate and gleeful notice. In fact the media became a major prime mover of the anti Modi campaign. The fact that every investigating agency and the courts found no evidence whatsoever against Modi has never been properly highlighted, but in the eyes of the world Modi was projected as a monster. The United States of America used a law which prohibits a person from entering the United States who is accused of racial or religious discrimination, persecution or crime to deny Modi a visa. It is another matter that today the same U.S. Government has extended a warm invitation to Narendra Modi to officially visit the United States, has expressed the hope that Indo-American relations will climb new heights and high ranking U.S. officials and cabinet ministers such as the Secretary of the State have been wooing Modi as if in a *swayamvar*.

This article is not on Modi and the Gujarat period, despite the fact that his handling of the disastrous earthquake has won loud acclaim and whose model of development of Gujarat has been praised by everyone except those who are his blind enemies. This is a paper which looks at Modi as the Prime Minister of the

largest democracy in the world. As Chief Minister Narendra Modi proved that he is an administrator of rare qualities. He showed that he is quick and decisive in decision making, his tight control over the bureaucracy ensured minimisation of corruption and maximisation of delivery of government and the positive attitude of the State towards economic development brought industry flooding into Gujarat. The rapid development of the Narmada irrigation system brought about an agricultural revolution and the guarantee of twenty-four hours power in villages, but on full payment, brought new energy into rural Gujarat, encouraged decentralised manufacture and brought revenue to the Electricity Board adequate to make it self-sufficient and capable of investing in improving the power system. Perhaps it is these achievements which convinced the BJP leadership that in Modi there were the seeds of national leadership. For the 2014 elections, therefore, BJP used the most appropriate strategy. It concluded that the old leadership was worn out, fixed in a groove and unlikely to deliver success in an electoral campaign. In this BJP was fortunate enough to have RSS in the background nudging the party into making the right decisions, which it was able to do because while providing the ideological moorings to BJP the RSS stood above and outside the internal power structures of the party. The party opted for a leadership which was middle aged or younger, the old leadership was put out to pasture and Narendra Modi was selected to lead the campaign. This he did with energy, planning and organisation. He convinced the voters that development was the main agenda of the party, he spoke directly to the young and held out hope for the future and he projected himself as a person who was decisive, who had a programme and would provide real leadership to the country. In an environment in which it was felt that India would never have a single party majority he led BJP to an absolute majority in Parliament, thus ending an era of coalition government. This was an outstanding performance.

Narendra Modi started well by inviting the heads of state and of government of the SAARC nations to attend his swearing-in-ceremony. They all came, including Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan. Modi reached out to all of them, held a prolonged discussion with Nawaz Sharif and he was able to convince the SAARC nations that India would extend true friendship to all its neighbours. He followed up this by visiting Bhutan, where he was able to impress on the Bhutanese that India would do everything in its power to help that nation to develop economically. On 3rd August 2014 Modi went to Nepal and in an epoch making address to the Constituent Assembly/Parliament he put in a stunning performance. He referred to the Constitution which is being drafted as a document which would bind all Nepalese together and compared this with a bouquet of flowers in which every flower has its own colour and fragrance but which together form the whole bouquet. In this he reached out to every Nepali, the ruling elite, the Brahmin priest of Pashupatinath Temple and the aristocratic Rana, the warrior Thapa and Gurung the Limbu, the Magar, the Madheshi. Modi's reference to Ashok as the Emperor who, in the hour of victory, opted for Buddh in place of Yudh or enlightenment in place of battle and his comparison of the Maoists who had exchanged the bullet for the ballot with Ashok was absolutely masterly. So much so that Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also called Prachanda and Bhattarai, the two top Maoist leaders described the speech as being magical, with public acknowledgement that Modi had won their hearts. In offering highways, information highways and transmission ways to Nepal to modernise it, by making available a line of credit of one billion dollars in addition to all other aid that is given to Nepal by India, by offering help in developing hydro electricity and guaranteeing its purchase by India, by stating that India had no desire to interfere in any way with the affairs of Nepal Modi offered friendship, financial commitment and goodwill to that country. By any standards this speech can be termed a great diplomatic triumph for India, especially because Modi said that India is prepared to give Nepal the freedom even to revise its treaties with India. For the first time after Indira Gandhi Modi proved that we now have a Prime Minister firmly in the saddle. The contrast with Manmohan Singh could not have been greater.

The neighbours are and should be our major concern. In the case of Sri Lanka our problem is our own State of Tamil Nadu, which refuses to countenance our dealings with that country because of the manner in which the entity was tackled. What is not realised is that the government of Sri Lanka had no option because until LTTE was destroyed that country could have no peace. Perhaps our government will have to make it clear to the political parties in Tamil Nadu that India's strategic interests in Sri Lanka will take precedence over anything that our Tamils may dictate, but India will ensure that the government of Sri Lanka is persuaded to rehabilitate and assimilate its Tamil population. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, thanks to Pakistani interference, India does have a problem. On Pakistan one has written separately and at length and that need be repeated here. Afghanistan traditionally has been friendly with India and it is only under Pakistani pressure and the radicalisation of fundamentalist Islamic groups that there is a danger of Afghan jihadists being used against India. However, our policy of positive engagement with the government and the people of Afghanistan and our extending development assistance to that country will, in the long run, pay dividends, though there may be some temporary setbacks after the Americans withdraw from Afghanistan. Here wisdom lies in patience, steadfastness and avoidance of panic and knee jerk reaction to developments in that country.

The Left and the so called liberal lobby, with the assistance of a section of the media, have always held the view that India must not get too close to the West especially the United States. There has always been a call for a look East policy. Modi is all for engagement with the West, especially because our economic interests demand this. At the same time he has shown that he will put India's interests first and in WTO India has taken the view that the interests of the Indian farmers and of the poor in this country will always take precedence over its global commercial interests. The signal is that engagement with the West is welcome and even essential, but not at the cost of our own people. The very people who were criticising government of being excessively western oriented are now stating that Modi should not ignore the West, as was done editorially by the Times of India a few days ago. Modi has welcomed the American invitation and will visit the United States in September. However, he has given precedence to Japan which he will be visiting shortly and he has also made it clear that whereas India will stand firm on the border it looks forward to excellent trade and other relations with China. In a way China is a neighbour and Japan is in the neighbourhood.

India is a spirited steed and Modi in the saddle as a rider who knows how to handle such a horse. The question is in which direction will Modi take the horse. India is a much larger and much more diverse nation than Nepal. On the analogy of the bouquet with which Modi compared Nepal India, too, is a bouquet, but the spectrum of flowers in it is very much larger and wider than in Nepal. India faced the trauma of partition in which Pakistan broke away on grounds of religion. However, the majority of Muslims opted for India by not migrating to Pakistan and they today constitute the largest Islamic group in the world after Indonesia. Our Muslim population is larger than that of Pakistan. These Muslims are very much a part of the bouquet that is India, from the Muslim of the Kashmir Valley, to the Pathan origin Rohilla, the Mapila of Kerala to the Muslim of Arcot. The Nawabi families of Bhopal, the Shias of Lucknow, the Sunnis of Patna, the Khwajas of Ajmer, the Moulay Salams of Gujarat, they all are flowers which constitute India. The Kashmiri Pandit, the Namboodiri of Kerala, the Nagar of Saurashtra, the Chamar of Agra, the Tomar Rajput of Morena, the Iyer and Iyengar, the Marwadis, the Bengali Bhadrakol, the Gond of Betul, the Khalsa of the Punjab and the Jat of Haryana are all part of the same bouquet. They follow different religions and sects, the Syrian Catholics of Kerala accept the Pope and the Syrian Christians belong to the Orthodox Church. There are different castes, languages, religions, ideologies all within the fold of a greater India. Very often there are groups almost at war

with each other. Sometimes communalism turns into violence, sometimes State chauvinism targets so called outsiders, sometimes Hindi fanatics insist on Hindi and in Tamil Nadu Hindi texts are burnt, but in all this India remains one and in all matters of national importance India remains united. This may appear to be a paradox but in reality it is this diversity, even the clash of diversities, which is India's real strength. This is what Modi has to understand and appreciate.

To return to the analogy of the bouquet, every flower or element which constitutes it has its own shape, size, colour and fragrance. The *champa* is small, the lotus flower is huge, each has its individual beauty but when they are put together their colour, shape and fragrance complement each other. Can the Kashi Vishwanath Temple be the same without Bismillah Khan's *shehnai* and his music? In the last elections Modi won because he appealed to all with his agenda of development. The Congress, the Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party were virtually wiped out because they continued to harp on issues which may have had relevance forty years ago but today are of no consequence. Their main appeal was to vote on grounds of religion, region or caste. That is why there was such a fervent campaign to try and mobilise Muslim votes against BJP. The Muslim is not a fool and he refused to be taken for granted. He voted according to where he felt his self interest lies, not necessarily as a religious group but as an individual. In Madhya Pradesh a sizable number of Muslims voted for BJP. The Congress lost in every constituency in U.P where there was a sizable Muslim vote and seven of them went to BJP. Every party which fought on grounds of caste or religion bit the dust because the voter firmly rejected divisive politics. This is a lesson which Modi must learn so that he uses the diversity of India to create a multi hued bouquet.

Recently in a conclave held at Bhopal Mohan Bhagwat, the Sar Sanchalak of R.S.S, stated that for India to be safe and secure the Hindus must unite. In a way this statement was uncalled for and is in fact contemptuous of the Hindus as a group or class. Is the Hindu not united today in patriotism to India? The British do not speak with one voice on every issue, but when the Second World War broke out every Britisher came together to fight a common enemy. That is what every Hindu does when the greater interest of India is involved. Are the Sikhs, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains and Parsees not united in patriotism? Post the 1947 war in Kashmir, India fought three wars with Pakistan in 1965, 1971 and 1999. In the Kargil War the main brunt of the Pakistani assault was borne by the Muslims of Kargil and they remained steadfast and firmly Indian. In 1965 and 1971 Muslims soldiers sacrificed their lives for India as did Hindus, Christians and Sikhs. The Buddhists of Arunachal Pradesh stood firmly with India when the Chinese invaded us in 1962. The Sikhs have always been the warrior arm of India. As for the Christians, in both peace and war their contribution to India is much greater than the sum total of their population and one cannot think of a more patriotic Indian community than the Christians. This is the country in which Buddha took avatar to counter Brahminical ritualism gone wild. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born out of the Sanatan Dharma and are really an extension of it. The Adi Sankara reformed the Sanatan Dharma and Swami Vivekananda taught us true religious ecumenism. Christianity came to us through St. Thomas just fifty-two years after it was born. The contours of Islam have been softened by exposure to Hinduism and the influence of the Sufi saints like Nizamuddin Aulia and Moinuddin Chisti. The influence of Amir Khusro even on *bhakti sangeet* is immeasurable. Perhaps Islam as practised in India is much closer to the Islam as revealed by Allah through his Prophet than is Wahabi Sunnism as practised in Saudi Arabia. As Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi has to really appreciate that all these diverse elements are what put India together and that a narrow appeal to the Hindus as was made by Mohan Bhagwat is unnecessary and irrelevant.

Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, the former highly respected President of India, reserved his greatest respect for the Tamil Brahmin teacher who taught him in his village school and inculcated in him a love for mathematics. As for the teacher, he was the guru, Abdul Kalam was the *shishya*, it did not matter that he was a Muslim but what was important that the *shishya* was attentive and eager. The Tamil Brahmin poured all the love of the guru into teaching his Muslim *shishya* and the two developed deep affection for each other. Some of the best educational institutions in India are run by the Jesuits and whether he is a Congress man, a Shiv Sainik, or a BJP man the likelihood is that his children have gone to Champion School and St. Xavier's College. The *dargah* of Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti at Ajmer has as many Hindu pilgrims as it does Muslim and the body of St. Francis in Bom Jesu Basilica in Goa attracts pilgrims of every community and every religion. During the Simhastha at Ujjain it is Muslims trusts, faqirs and religious establishments which take care of the pilgrims who come for the holy bath and at Ram Ghat they feed the pilgrims. This is the true tradition of India and if Modi is to bring us purposive development he must live in this tradition of a diverse nation which is united as one. In fact the coat of arms of India should have inscribed on it not only the words '*Satya Meva Jayate*', but also bear the legend '*Bhinnata Mae Ekta*' or unity in diversity. If Narendra Modi rises above factional politics and creates from India's diversity a bouquet in which every flower has an equal place of prominence, then not only would India have a Prime Minister but it would have found a great Prime Minister.
