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How Modi used 'hope' as strategy and what Congress can do to demolish it

June 5, 2020, 10:14 PM IST [Dr Muneer](#) in [The Medici Way](#) | [India](#) | TOI



Abraham Lincoln must be turning in his grave for not taking into consideration we Indians when he had delivered those famous lines: "You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time." For, what the political class has been doing to us over 72 years since independence.

Hope. It's a powerful emotion that can efficaciously influence human behaviour. It is almost fervently like faith, a confident trust in someone or something. It makes us aspire for more – like in Bollywood movies – for a better, even if implausible, future and drives us to dream and act. Hope is a fabulous marketable commodity. It's not a buzzword; it's a real feeling of possibilities. People look towards actors and politicians for hope, just as also countries, social groups, families, and religion.

Hope is not strategy is what experts say. But hope as a positioning strategy works eternally and is a trillion-dollar industry. Take for instance the key positioning of most products and services: Soap, shampoo, cosmetics, business schools, lifestyle products, and of course, politicians. Remember the promises of "roti-kapda-makaan", "bijli-paani" and of course the "achhe din" and nationalism? Our research into the manifestos of political parties exposes that many items of the '70s campaigns continue to lure us even today.

Most of the leaders, once elected, simply forget or don't care about fulfilling that hope. Prime Minister Modi, however, has been brilliant in mesmerising, if not hypnotising, us with hope even after a disastrous five-year term. Pro-government media, with the help of cross-holdings in competing media houses by a willing tycoon, still say over 68% of people brim with optimism despite worsening or no change in their quality of life. Even a pandemic has been turned into an opportunity.

Modi came in at a time when our political system was ensnared in controversies, corruption, leadership deficit, nepotism, primogeniture, and exploitation of the poor. He was like a fresh breeze in contrast to a media-shy, media-incompetent, and back-foot-driving UPA. He kindled hopes of millions with possibilities because he was projected as someone from the lower middle class ("chaiwallah"). The brilliant PR and social media blitzkrieg did the rest to set the campfires of hope.

Arguably, Modi panache with the "corruption-free and congress-mukth bharat" mantra, and the promise of Rs 15L in every Indian's pocket worked like magic. And how did he follow this through for the next term mandate? Safety and security for India and the Pulwama attack in 2019 February came astonishingly handy for using that as the main plank for the election campaign. A new hope of strength and patriotism that gagged the opposition totally.

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Dr Muneer

Muneer is a global expert columnist, writing on topical issues looked through management frameworks. He wears multiple hats including that of a social evangelist as the co-founder of the non-profit Medici Institute that was mentored by the late Dr Kalam, management consultant and startup entrepreneur. His expertise is in strategy execution having worked with global brands across borders. Current passion is in driving governments to execute what they promise. He is the managing director of CustomerLab Solutions, an innovative consulting firm in partnership with leading minds of the world and also that of a US-based deep-tech startup. He pioneered the setting up of thought leadership seminar industry in India in the late 1990s and had been instrumental in delivering cutting-edge knowledge to the C-suite, in partnership with Times Group.

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Can Modi become a custodian of hope and craft it in a way that makes things possible for us, and impossible for the opposition to replicate? He can do so by taking two dominant strategic tracks: One, by making hitherto perceived impossibilities into possibilities, which he seems to be attempting well, and two, by aggrandising the craving for more.

Regarding the first track, some people draw parallels with Kennedy and his moon mission when Modi initiated demonetisation as a route to rout out corruption. Kennedy avoided skepticism by being eloquent on his mission and following through with meticulous execution in the cold war era to retain America's confidence. Modi launched DeMo for a seemingly impossible mission, with lousy execution. Like Kennedy, Modi found connection with the masses for whom the idea of the rich suffering was a brand new hope, even if self-suffering endured. And the reports of CEOs attributing poor results to DeMo helped reinforce that hope. That the opposition failed in busting the myth of the Rich-Misery, aggravated their defeat in UP. Modi went further to achieve another impossibility: Abolition of beacons, the VIP symbolism. The strategic framework for managing hope: Show the overall possibilities first, followed by the possibilities in the individual, and finally those in the process. That it all failed to deliver the "achhe din" is another issue altogether but then opposition had failed to project that to the vote banks.


As for the second track on increasing the craving for a causatum, Modi needs to work harder and it can be tricky. And that is showing in this term as the economy is weakening, not enough knowledgeable people surrounding him and inability to execute anything is obvious. He will have to try increasing the perceived importance of the outcome and by increasing the degree of its association with an acclamatory goal. It is worth looking at cow vigilantism, triple talaq, Ram Temple, or the ongoing CAA-NRC controversy through this lens. It may be to divert attention from the core issues (growing unemployment, deteriorating economy, escalating cost of living, troubling NPAs, etc) so that the craving gets boosted.

The latest was witnessed when he addressed the nation for "janata curfew" and clapping of hands at 5pm on March 22. What followed was a social media campaign, explaining why he chose this auspicious time to ward off the virus, connecting moon and stars! This was followed by two subsequent prime time TV addresses for clapping hands in European style from balconies and diya-lighting tamasha to energise the lethargic middle class. When the "walking class" migrant issue exploded on humanity, he brought out a 20 lakh crore loan hungama which at best can only postpone the mass suicides of the poor to a later date but the publicity machinery of the government went all out to convince the masses it was a "wow" package from Modi. The Covid-19 has become the perfect storm for the government for all the economic issues ailing the country for the last 4 years and the media has already hailed him as the messiah saving India from the pandemic. Even the pandemic has become an opportunity to build hope further and his followers are now proposing to get him no less than a Nobel Prize for Peace!

By following the two tracks Modi will continue to retain the blind loyalty created via hope, and people will forgive below-expected performance. Several studies across the globe justify optimism: People will ignore or rationalise poor performance when hopes are high in a brand, person, or outcome. More importantly, they need less persuasion than to be convinced further. Herein lies the Catch-22 for the opposition: Damned if they do, damned if they don't.

The opposition needs a better strategy to steal (or dismantle) the hope platform. Secular? Nah. Anti-Modi rhetoric? Nope. The rising unemployment and poverty? Perhaps for diluting the hope platform, but not to bring in new hopes. They could have started off a "satyagrah" for the resignation of Modi for failing to protect the migrants, and for causing more deaths than any act of terrorism has caused so far. Nor did they demand the


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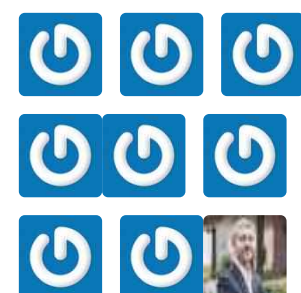
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resignation of Railway Minister for lying under oath that no migrant lost life while in the trains.

Instead of applying Newton's third law to every NDA action, they should focus on the core ones driving optimism and demolish each. Without bringing disdain they will not be able to build new hopes. Data-fudging issue is something that will find currency with business community. A Grand Alliance is unlikely to bring any new hope, as it is just a coalition of the same perceived-corrupt, mother-father-son-daughter set. Do they have a clear vision that enhances hope? None was visible in the total silence on cow issues, minority/dalit hunting, CAA and so on. Worst, the party that could really lead from the front has shown its utter poverty in leadership by sticking to the mother-son-daughter drama.

The Congress should embrace a disruptive strategy that will torpedo Modi's hope strategy. Perhaps focusing on the more progressive deep similarities between the majority and minority instead of disagreeing with the BJP's focus on superficial differences between the religions may be a good narrative. Look no further than the Kerala society for proof of this pudding. The Congress is fast missing a great opportunity to mobilise the migrants and the poor for a mass movement that can totally destruct the hope platform given the utter disaster in the time of pandemic.

Three key traits are hallmarks of people who can instill hope in others: Caring deeply about, and working for, people; having the focus on what is possible and matters most to people; and speaking from the heart, like perhaps Kejriwal. Perhaps Congress should lead the disruption agenda by letting someone with the above traits to lead the party. Clearly a family member will not be able to occupy the position given the framework of hope. Our "Pulse" research indicates that people prefer a leader who they can identify as someone like them to lead the Congress, and if they do that with internal bottom-up democratic elections, BJP will have no narrative against them, which hitherto has been solely focussed on the dynasty. "The-Nehru-legacy-shall-be-the-party-and-not-the-family" is a good narrative for Congress, and is certain to enhance the hopes of the party workers, if not of the entire nation.

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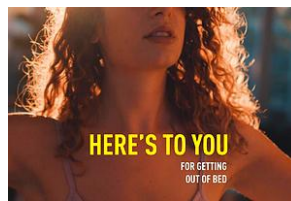
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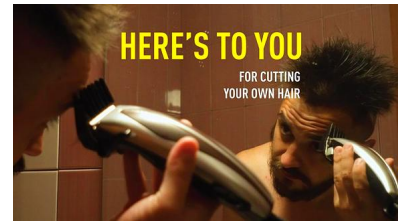


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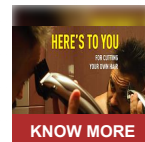


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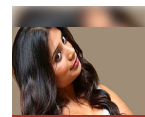
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