

The new tale of two Indias

In the early 1990s, to explain India to foreign investors, ad guru Alyque Padamsee created an evocative presentation called “Two Indias”, where he described a “strong India” that was urban, educated and well-off, and a “weak Bharat” that was rural and abjectly poor, both in income and education.

Thirty years later, as witnessed in the recent election, the narrative of two Indias, one strong and one weak, continues to prevail. The Modi India narrative is about the spring of hope, economically and aspirationally upwardly mobile, with continuous improvement in living conditions, and the Rahul India narrative is about the winter of despair, economically and aspirationally stagnant, with the majority being left out or left behind, with the ground they had slipping from under them. And, as is true of India, evidence of both narratives exists.

But India changes in sneaky little ways, and so while apparently nothing seems to have changed, many things have changed quite dramatically.

Since 1991, the kaleidoscope comprising the many segments of India has turned many times, and new patterns have emerged. Interestingly, even the old labels have taken on new meanings. Today, “INDIA” is the label of the political alliance that stands for the poor and disadvantaged. The term Bharat, in S Jaishankar’s recent book, *Why Bharat Matters*, stands for the totality of the country’s culture and traditions. And in corporate India, the label “Bharat” stands for tier 2 and 3, rural, less affluent and less sophisticated, mass markets that it believes is the new frontier for consumption growth.

In the 1990s, the concern was that the strong India might be too small to drag the larger weak India upwards, and could itself collapse from the weight of trying. However, thankfully, after many years and various governments, the strong India is now comfortably large to inspire and propel the other India,

as data on household income and living conditions shows. The data also shows that “top half” and “bottom half” is a good way to socio-economically describe the strong India and the weak India. The top half is now well spread regionally and across urban and rural areas. The bottom half, though also spread out, has greater pockets of geographic and rural concentration.

Within the “bottom half”, there is a distinct and growing segment who, with some combination of access to networks, information, government support, and personal circumstances, find the agency and energy to try and strive for opportunities for a better life. Kishore Biyani has called this “India 2”. While anecdotes are not data, most readers will connect these with their own experience. A young girl

from a modest family in small town Madhya Pradesh (MP) joined a caregiver agency, which sent her to a nonagenarian in an unfamiliar city in Tamil Nadu. She hopes to save enough money and appear for the pre-nursing selection test in MP, which will get her admission into an affordable government nursing college. Another young woman in a village in Uttar Pradesh aspired to be a teacher. She interviewed with her (illiterate) migrant father’s employer,

impressed him with her spark, and he decided to fund her education. A young man from Uttar Pradesh doing odd jobs in Mumbai found out about and sat for the Indo-Tibetan Border Police exam because army’s “*bharti*” has not been happening in his village. A vegetable seller who knows exactly how to go up the value chain (take orders on WhatsApp for high-value vegetables and don’t carry inventory) aspires to open a small legit shop while building a home delivery service. WhatsApp and UPI-powered own-account workers or micro-entrepreneurs of all kinds exist in large numbers in the breadth and depth of

India, with amazing learnability, abreast of the latest trends in whatever field they work in. This top half and the aspiring segment of the bottom half is the narrative of Modi’s India. Nowhere near “India shining” but not India stuck-in-a-rut either. No longer the India where you have no chance of getting food if you are down and out.

The narrative of Rahul’s India is of people with no hope, no jobs, fear, poverty, and wanting social justice not economic opportunity. Even the conceptualisation of the welfare state in the two narratives is different — one claims to help build capacity in various ways so that beneficiaries can look towards economic opportunity, while the other commits to increasing reservations in many more ways and redistribution of wealth. If one claims we “help you to make a fishing rod”, the other promises to deliver fish for life.

Each narrative resonates with one segment of India. Which narrative’s resonance is larger? To draw conclusions based on election results requires punditry beyond the ken of this columnist and assumes a simplistic number of variables at play. Based on the speed and scale of adoption of digital utilities and the data on access to amenities and enrolment in higher education as well as primary schools, the “aspiring India” does seem to be larger than the “hopeless India”, with “economic opportunity” being a proposition with more pull than “social justice”. But custodians of both narratives have their work cut out for them — one rides a tiger of unleashed aspirations that must be fulfilled, requiring new policies actions on steroids to feed the opportunity hungry millions and build a bridge from aspiration to possibility. The other needs to truly want to empower the disadvantaged to find their way to be a part of the new India rather than go back to the old days, and to build a bridge of inclusion through enablement.

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