THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY’S (BJP) stupendous victory in the Lok Sabha election comes at a time when India finds itself at a crossroad. The growing expectations of its citizens and intensifying great power competition in Asia pose immense governance challenges.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has proven to be a resolute and capable decision-maker. His new Cabinet comprises skilled and public-spirited administrators. But a worry remains. Will these decision-makers be stymied by the BJP’s philosophical commitments?

The BJP is committed to the ideal of Integral Humanism. Noble and sublime, this philosophy holds that the good life—the life that Indians should aspire to—is one that nurtures not only material but also social and spiritual needs. As a consequence, this philosophy is averse to free markets, which it sees as threatening social and spiritual well-being. It prefers instead state-led welfare programmes that guarantee a basic minimum.

The problem, however, is that free markets are essential for sustained and rapid economic growth and for wealth creation, which are in turn essential for national security. This is a time, then, for clear-headed thinking on the direction India should take. Otherwise, the BJP may find that the more potent threat to its hold on power is not its rivals but itself.

‘Integral Humanism shall be the basic philosophy of the Party,’ instructs Article III of the BJP’s constitution. It is doubtful, however, that many of its functionaries or supporters can clearly explain what this philosophy amounts to. The summary on the BJP’s website, for instance, features mystifying phrases like ‘integration is present in completeness’. Such faux intellectual language is unfortunate because it obscures what is sublime and admirable in integral humanism. It also discourages a serious conversation as to whether integral humanism, which Modi has long described as his “guiding force”, is adequate to meet the challenges India faces, particularly in terms of generating the kind of growth and development required to satisfy and secure the country.

Integral Humanism’s most important exponent was Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya, the high-minded leader of the BJP’s predecessor, the Bharatiya Jan Sangh. Upadhyaya set out to enunciate a vision for the Jan Sangh because of the circumstances in which it was born. As Upadhyaya noted in 1965, prior generations had focused on how to obtain independence, and had therefore thought relatively little about what to do once India was free. The political class of his time could not care less about the question either. The vast majority were “opportunists” willing to say or do whatever would bring them to power. Some—by which he meant the vestiges of the Hindu Mahasabha—wished to revive the past, to be guided by the precepts of ancient India. But this was a futile endeavor because circumstances had changed, and so, taking their inspiration from the Ganga, which does not lose its sacredness by flowing onwards, Hindus should adapt to, rather than loathe, the modern world.

So, what ought the Jan Sangh aim toward? Upadhyaya had no illusions about the challenge it confronted. “I realise”, he readily conceded, “that all the 450 million people of Bharat cannot agree on all or even on a single question”. Still, it was possible, he insisted, to identify at least an ethos or “longing” that every nation felt. If this “more or less common desire of the people” were made the “basis of our aims”, he argued, “the common man” would feel that “the nation is moving in a proper direction, and that his own aspiration is reflected in the efforts of the nation”.

What was, or ought to be, this ‘common desire’? Was it to simply follow in the footsteps of the West, to equal their admittedly “phenomenal progress”? Upadhyaya disagreed, and with good reason. Since the turn of the century, he noted, the West had championed three “good ideas”—nationalism, democracy, and socialism. But it had carried each ideal to an unhealthy extreme. Nationalism had prompted bloody wars, democracy had, in conjunction with capitalism, led to selfish individualism, while socialism had become a grave threat to individuality and human dignity. Worse still, because these ideals conflicted with each other, the West was divided, with the partisans of each camp unwilling to give quarter. In the ensuing political strife, the true purpose of governance—to

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The BJP has softened its tone on Swadeshi economics. But the fact remains that its philosophy naturally makes it deeply ambivalent about free markets and leads it to worry more about redistributing wealth through private enterprise rather than generating wealth through private enterprise.

...suit the United States only too well—allowing it to take down two birds with one stone. One way or another, then, the day of reckoning is approaching. Can India meet China as an equal? It must, for there is no other durable means by which to secure an honorable peace.

Much depends then on the proponents of Integral Humanism finding the courage to diverge from ideals that—well intentioned and sublime though they are—are not entirely fitted to the day. They must shed their ambivalence toward markets and individual choice, and reconcile themselves to advancing moral and cultural values by example and advocacy rather than control and coercion. Otherwise, the victory they desirously rely on today will become the gruesome humiliation of tomorrow, as India's rapidly urbanising middle classes, that favour prosperity and security, balk at limited horizons. Let them remember Bankim's dictum: "That which protects people and contributes to human welfare is Dharma."