

OPENING PIECE

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The stunning verdict of Election 2004 signifies a fundamental change in Indian democracy. Once the surprise of the final outcome, the sheer relief of regime change, the suspense over government formation and the verbal duels about who has the mandate give way to reflection on the meaning of this verdict, we might notice a change of fundamental order than this outcome has quietly ushered in. Election 2004 may be remembered not for its realignment of political forces and experiments in coalition building, but for a more basic realignment of social and political power. The election verdict signifies a radical shift in the social basis of political power.

The shift has been in the making for well over a decade now. The Mandalisation of north Indian politics in the 1990s triggered off a process that was not confined to the OBCs or to north India. The 1990s witnessed greater participation and more intense politicisation of the marginalized social groups in democratic politics. While urban middle classes were busy bashing politics and politicians, the democratic space provided by electoral politics was being used more deftly by dalits, adivasis, women and the poor. This 'second democratic upsurge' from below was the distinguishing mark of Indian democracy in the last decade.

Yet, paradoxically, the same decade was marked by the rise of a political force that was fundamentally opposed to the interests of these very groups. The 1990s were also characterised by the rise to power of the BJP and the sangh parivar. There was no direct relationship between these two developments. It is true that the BJP tried, in some cases with partial success, to court the lower OBCs, dalits and the adivasis. But even in those cases, the BJP did not become the political instrument for the rise to power of the lower orders of society. This was the paradox of

Indian politics in the 1990s: the national political power rested with social groups that lost out in the democratic contestation. The BJP had forged a political majority of and for a power social minority.

The BJP managed to perform this unusual feat with the help of a nuanced understanding of democratic politics and social change. The BJP formed its own 'social bloc', a social coalition that offered enduring support to the party. The core of this support was a strong allegiance from the upper caste and well-to-do sections of Hindu society. Cutting through the various local rivalries that divided this segment – the traditional political rivalries between the Rajputs and Brahmins that dominated many states before the 1990s – the BJP created the upper caste and the 'middle class' into a unified political bloc. BJP's alliance building was either to consolidate its hold among this social group (as in the case of its alliance with the AGP and the BJD) or, more often, to supplement its core with some additional social groups that it could not have accessed otherwise (as in its alliance with Akali Dal and Shiv Sena). In some cases – Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, for instance -- the BJP itself courted the OBCs with some success. A highly skillful management of alliance politics and party's caste factions enabled the BJP to manufacture a majority from its narrow social base. What made this possible was the political fragmentation of newly politicised lower orders. An overwhelming social majority failed to secure a political majority for itself, while a minority of the socially powerful managed to manufacture a political majority by creating a high level of internal unity and strategic alliances outside.

The significance of Election 2004 lies in the fact that it signals a reversal of this process and the possibility of an alternative social bloc that represents the democratic upsurge of the recent times. The loose anti-NDA political coalition that has emerged during and after this election represents a deeper social coalition of the forces thrown up by the democratic upsurge. The coalition is no doubt only partial. The pre-electoral alliance of the Congress excluded the two most significant political carriers of the second democratic upsurge, the BSP and the SP. Many of the coalition allies – the NCP in Maharashtra, the TRS in Andhra and indeed the Congress itself in Kerala and West Bengal – are hardly representatives of the upsurge from below. Notwithstanding all these weaknesses, the success of the Congress alliance in this election demonstrates the power of even a partial coalition of the social majority.

To be sure, the Congress is not the architect of this fundamental transformation. If anything, the Congress is the unintended beneficiary, or just the vehicle, of this change. Far from designing

and orchestrating this change, the Congress has resisted it as long as it could. For Congress the current coalition is nothing more than a political alliance, a necessary and in the long run an avoidable evil in its own eyes. In that sense it is not the Congress that has chosen the socially marginalized groups as an element of its core political strategy. In fact a hidden hand seems to be guiding these groups into choosing the Congress and the emerging political coalition as its political vehicle. The profile of Congress' own voters has undergone a change in the last ten years or so. Earlier it represented a rainbow coalition of all the sections of Indian electorate. The rainbow was thicker at the edges and always included more than proportionate share of the votes of the minorities, dalits and adivasis. In the last few elections, however, these groups have become the core supporters of the Congress, especially in those parts of the country where the Congress faces the BJP. The Congress has now become a party that draws most of its support from the poor and socially disadvantaged groups. Thus the Congress has been well placed to build an alternative social coalition, but it did not show the vision and determination to do so. Election 2004 represents a major step in this direction.

The historic task of building an alternative social coalition rested with the parties representing the 'third force' in the 1990s. The third force in Indian politics, represented most coherently in recent times by the erstwhile United Front and by parties like the RJD, BSP and SP, arose out of the demise of the Congress system and the inability of the Congress party to represent the interest of the socially marginalized groups. These parties appeared to be the most appropriate representative of the democratic upsurge from below. But the political formations representing the third force were simply not up to this historic task. They were specially unsuccessful in the main task of building and maintaining political coalitions across different regions and interests. Thus the third force could never occupy the third space in Indian politics; the space continues to exist while the front has disappeared. Thus the task of building and sustaining a social coalition of the marginal sections of society has landed in the lap of the Congress, despite itself.

Election 2004 has brought about this fundamental shift, but in a quiet way through a mosaic of apparently state level verdicts. In that sense this election belongs to the era of Indian democracy that began in 1991. Characterised by an expansion in the number of political parties and opening in the structure of party competition, this era has put an end to the days of nation wide electoral waves. The national election verdict in this phase appears to be nothing more than a sum total of state level verdicts. So it does in this election. That is what has inspired many interpreters and the losers of last Thursday to say that there is not verdict in this outcome. The

outcome has been presented as a 'split' or 'fractured' or simply confused verdict that has no pattern except state level anti-incumbency. On this reading, the ruling NDA may have lost, but no one can claim to have won this election. The alliance worked out by the Congress may have finished ahead of the NDA in terms of seats, but if one counts popular votes then the outcome must be described as a tie. Alternatively, one can argue that we are looking at not one but more than two dozen verdicts: each state has produced its own verdict. There is nothing like a national verdict here, except a sum total of state level verdicts.

There can be various ways of countering this reading. Congress supporters have tried to counter this reading by pushing a disingenuous claim that the Congress party has now the mandate to rule the country. More sophisticated readings have suggested that it is a verdict against economic reforms carried out by the outgoing government. A significant section has read this verdict as the triumph of secularism over politics of hatred. The trouble of course is that there is little evidence to support such a straightforward reading. The Congress has added little to its popular vote; if anything its vote share has fallen. The result may have brought down the poster boy of economic reforms, but it needs to be shown that economic reform was the reason for that. While there is good deal of evidence to show that public opinion does not share the elite enthusiasm about economic 'reforms', the link between that and the election outcome is somewhat tenuous. Those who read the verdict as the triumph of secularism need to show that secularism was an election issue in the places where the question mattered, that the voters were driven by it and their vote in some ways shaped by this consideration. Otherwise, it would be a simple fallacy of reading from consequences of the election outcome into the intentions of the electorate.

Perhaps the best way of countering the thesis that this election outcome has given no verdict is to begin by accepting that the basic building bloc of verdict 2004 is the state. In that sense this election has continued the basic features of the 'third electoral system'. The state has emerged as the principal unit of political choice making. Each state is a political system unto itself, with its own party system and political rhythm. If the voters voted in the state assembly elections held in 1970s and 1980s as if they were choosing their prime minister, they started voting in the Lok Sabha elections held in 1990s as if they were choosing their Chief Minister. This radical shift took place in 1991 and has continued thereafter in every election. The outcome at the national level is a sum total of the state level verdicts. Any party wishing to win a national mandate has to weave its way through the different states and secure a verdict in each of these.

The outcome of this election once again demonstrated the primacy and independence of the state level political context in the current political era. The spectacular show of the Congress in Haryana did not save it from the disaster in the neighbouring state of Punjab. While Naidu faced a rout in Andhra Pradesh, Naveen Pattnaik got back to power in the neighbouring Orissa. While anti-incumbency affected the ruling parties in Maharashtra and Gujarat, it did not touch the ruling parties in the states where the government was recently elected. A poor performance by the government gets punished in Jharkhand, but a worse performing if not entirely non-functioning government in Bihar consolidated its political position. Clearly the states were the principal arena of election contest. The NDA lost the battle mainly because it lost some of the crucial states. The reversals for NDA in the six crucial states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Haryana cost it 100 Lok Sabha seats and this election.

Yet the focus on the states does not mean that there was nothing larger that cut across and binds the various state level verdicts. The larger question is: why did the NDA fare so badly in the crucial battleground of the states? Was it just poor luck that the political cycle of incumbency did not favour the NDA? This is clearly not the case, for the NDA had as much to gain from the logic of incumbency as it stood to lose. Besides, 'anti-incumbency' begs another question: why did this rule affect some parties and not others? The closest we come to understanding the NDA's losses in these crucial states is by focusing on alliance arithmetic. The NDA broke an ongoing alliance in Haryana and Jharkhand and changed the partner in Tamil Nadu to its own disadvantage. The Congress entered into politically rewarding alliances in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Bihar and Jharkhand and took advantage of NDA's state of disarray in states like Haryana. This has been widely noted and commented in the media. But the usual explanation stops here, as if these alliances were no more than matters of political strategy.

This is where the deeper meaning and significance of the verdict of 2004 lies. The election was no doubt lost and won in the states and political coalitions are crucial to this story. Yet the success and failure of these political coalitions is not just a matter of alliance arithmetic. The apparently ad-hoc political alliances relate to a deeper alignment of social and political power. The loose pre-electoral alliance formed by the Congress worked well for it happened to coincide with and express a deeper need within the political system, the need to create an alternative to BJP's social bloc.

This reading allows us to put in perspective some of the developments and strategies that generated considerable excitement in this election. The numbers never favoured the BJP in this election, in that the state level calculus of electoral prospects indicated losses for the ruling alliance right from the beginning. The party's strategists needed an opportune moment, something that could create a national *hawa*, something like Kargil in 1999. The BJP's stunning victory in the state assembly elections of December 2003 provided this moment. The strategy did not work, but it may not be correct to think that this was mainly responsible for the NDA debacle. The move to advance the polls represented the best chance for a party that did not have very much to show for its performance.

The BJP tried to and succeeded in winning the first round of psychological warfare, thanks to the all-too-willing complicity of the media. The choice of India Shining and Feel Good as the campaign themes was part of this grand strategy of creating a media led *hawa* through the country. It seemed to work initially but backfired in the last instance. Once its novelty wore off in this long campaign, this advertising theme served to keep the focus on the economic conditions of ordinary people. This did not bring any additional gains to the BJP and its allies among the so-called middle classes, a euphemism for the wealthy classes, that were already backing it up. But it may have invited a backlash, thus creating a psychological context for forging an alliance of the lower orders of society. The Congress and its alliances provided an avenue for political expression of this emerging social alliance. The long drawn out campaign gave this alliance the space to work itself out. This also ensured that the media blitz unleashed by the BJP could not continue to dominate the elections. In this sense, this election proved that in a large and diverse society like India, there are limits to what micro-management and spin doctoring can achieve.

The election verdict represents only a partial realisation of the alternative social bloc. The Congress led alliance did not include two major constituents of the third space. The left parties have developed a solid and enduring support among the poor, largely from socially marginalized communities. The SP and the BSP have also developed entrenched support base among the OBCs, Muslims and dalits of Uttar Pradesh. If the attempts to create a larger-than-necessary governmental coalition that includes the SP and the BSP succeeds, the new government would be a better representative of the socially marginalized. Sustaining a broad coalition of this kind makes enormous demands on the political skills and judgement of the principal political actors involved in this. It is still not clear if the Congress leadership possesses these skills and has frame of mind necessary to run and sustain coalitions. It also needs to be remembered that the

government of the representatives of the socially marginalized does not become the government for the socially marginalized, unless conscious steps are taken in this direction. While the 1990s opened up the political space by expanding the menu of political choices, this decade also threatened to render these choices meaningless as a result of convergence on ideological and policy questions among all the major parties.

If the Congress has an opportunity today, it is only because it has begun to realise that that the 'Congress system' is dead. If the Congress wishes to make use of this historic opportunity in this post-Congress polity, it must outgrow the infamous, imperious, Congress mindset and learn to share power. The Left and parties representing the third force must focus on using this opportunity for long term consolidation rather than immediate gains. They all must learn from history: parties grow by allowing themselves to be used as a vehicle by rising social classes. Social coalition of the people must be translated into an enduring political coalition, if this shift in the social basis of political power brought about by this election is to be anything more than a passing affair.