

INDIAN ELECTIONS 2004: A SETBACK FOR BJP'S EXCLUSIVIST AGENDA

Zoya Hasan

Nehru University, New Delhi

The Indian general elections in which more than 350 million turned out to vote has produced a big political upset, perhaps the biggest upset in Indian politics. No pollster or media pundit or party leader of any significance predicted a verdict in which the Congress, not the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), would emerge as the single largest party in the 14th Lok Sabha. Nobody could foresee the Congress-led alliance ending up 30 seats ahead of the BJP-led combine. Nobody could predict the significant increase in the weight of the Left in national politics, with more than 60 seats in a 543-member Lok Sabha and, given these numbers, qualitatively well placed to influence the economic, political and foreign policies of the new Government.¹

The forced exit of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government was indeed a momentous day in the history of Indian democracy - one that now has a Muslim president, a Sikh prime minister and a Christian woman of Italian origin as one of its tallest leaders, elected or endorsed by large numbers of the Hindu majority.² Before she made history by her decision to decline the Prime Ministership, Sonia Gandhi had the support of 322 members of Parliament. There can't be many elected leaders in the democratic world who have renounced the top job after carrying their party on their shoulders to a victory.

Perhaps no election result, not even the defeat of Indira Gandhi in 1977, has been as thrilling as this. The 1977 election was dominated by a crisis of regime fostered by the imposition

¹ 'Meaning of Verdict 2004', *Hindu*, 14 May 2004.

² Rajeev Bhargava, 'The Magic of Indian Democracy', www.opendemocracy.net 27 May 2004.

of authoritarian rule. This election was without a national crisis, no overwhelming national issue, and no prior mobilization. Moreover, the changes in 1977 were directed from above by parties, leaders and slogans. In this vote people's everyday concerns and choices have played a decisive role. For sheer drama and because it represents the most remarkable turnaround in Indian politics, the 2004 verdict will be remembered by future historians of Indian democracy as more significant.

What was this election about? Was it about secularism? Was it a mandate against economic reforms? Or was it about the leadership of Atal Bihari Vajpayee versus the foreign origins of the Congress leader, Sonia Gandhi? Was it only about local issues, as the BJP has claimed? Or was it simply a case of rejecting the BJP?

Newspapers and the opposition are currently engaged in an intense ideological debate over interpreting the unexpected verdict, a battle that is almost as passionate as the election itself. Those who want to minimise the significance of the verdict are blaming it on anti-incumbency, State-level misgovernance, the choice of alliance partners by the NDA or simply the Indian populations's rising expectations. Breaking his silence, the BJP strategist and former Deputy Prime Minister L.K Advani, has blamed the error of the India Shining slogan for its debacle, while the former Prime Minister Vajpayee has blamed the Gujarat violence as the major factor in the party's shock defeat. Pro-economic reform commentators and media pundits have unanimously blamed the Gujarat pogrom for the BJP's reverses. The actual election results are too varied and too complex to be explained by any single factor. Even though the verdict is a fractured one, there is no uncertainty in this astonishing verdict. It contained three unambiguous political messages. First, it rejected the Vajpayee-led NDA government by reducing the alliance to a minority in the Lok Sabha. Secondly, it dismissed firmly the government's claims - symbolised by the India Shining slogan - about the growth and development the country achieved under it and disapproved of the politics of Hindutva practised by the BJP. Thirdly, the emergence of the Sonia Gandhi-led Congress as the single largest party made it clear that an overwhelming mass of people have rejected the campaign against her on the basis of her foreign origins. All in all, the main message is against political and economic divisiveness. It is an expression of dissatisfaction and frustration with the existing political order and a rejection of the anti-poor, non-inclusivist character of the BJP-NDA.

From a broader perspective, this election can be read as a battle over two different ideas of India, one inclusive, the other exclusive and elitist.³ The first is the Nehruvian idea backed

³ Vir Sanghvi, 'Two Ideas of India', *Hindustan Times*, 16 May 2004.

by a wide spectrum of Gandhians, Congress, Socialists and Leftists and numerous progressive NGOs. In this version, democracy, secularism and social justice are paramount. This model ensured some level of distributive fairness and still tried to achieve economic growth. The problems with this model were, and still are, that it works very slowly. There is, however, a second model, one that owes a lot to the flourishing economies of East Asia. This model has very little place for liberal values, secularism, social justice, accommodation, and compassion. In this model democracy is a convenience to be used and disregarded as the need arises, witness the BJP's refusal to accept Sonia Gandhi as the Prime Minister. The priority of this model is economic growth and making people rich.

The BJP government believed, in essence, in the second model. Even though the right wing BJP never won more than a quarter of the vote, its rise to power represented a dramatic shift in economic and political policy. It mounted the most potent challenge to the first model which is closely related to the inspirations behind the freedom struggle and its modernist ideas. For the BJP the key issue was progress and prosperity, and transforming India into a Great Power by 2020. It believed that as long the upper and middle classes were rich and happy, the bulk of the Indian population did not matter. Indeed it allowed an economic minority to prosper at the expense of the majority. It regarded the level of the Sensex as a measure of India's success, and acted as though rural India was another country and the rural population does not matter anymore.⁴ But now the second idea of India has been defeated because the Congress in this election succeeded in reviving and projecting the first model with its stress on pluralism, accommodation and social justice.

The BJP-led NDA, taken in by its own hype, which was sustained by several opinion polls, decided to advance the Lok Sabha elections by eight months, and campaigned on the slogan of India Shining and Feel Good factor in the air, which it was convinced would pay the coalition rich electoral dividends. It was also banking on the positive impact of Vajpayee's peace initiative with Pakistan. But India Shining campaign backfired spectacularly and completely overshadowed the peace initiative. If economic reforms mean policies that better the lives of millions, then surely people want them. In so far as economic reform in India has come to mean a neo-liberalism that sells Indian assets to foreign investors, relentlessly dismantles anything state-owned, and regards any state intervention in the economy as wrong, then the election results can plausibly be seen as a rejection of reform. The clearest evidence of this comes from the findings of the post-poll survey conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Society (CSDS), which shows that "there is very little approval among the ordinary citizens for economic

⁴ Ibid.

reforms" and that "there is a very high degree of popular consensus on this matter that cuts across class and party lines."⁵ In other words, the elite consensus on economic reforms is not reflected in public opinion and there is evidence of widespread unease and anxiety among the ordinary voters about their economic conditions and livelihood, an anxiety that was heightened by lack of trust in a government perceived to be pro-rich.⁶

The choice of India Shining and Feel Good as the campaign slogans had the unintended consequence of making the economy into a central election issue. As it ran a pan-Indian campaign at the cost of Rs 4.5 billion claiming that the nation was on the move, the illogical nature of the slogans became manifest. The middle and upper classes thrived as growth averaged 6.2 percent annually in the 1990s, but 65 percent of the population lives on agriculture, a sector that has stagnated. Through the growth years the gap between the rich and poor and between rural and urban areas grew dramatically.⁷ The government's so-called achievements benefited only the rich, and the upper middle class, and these sectors did not require any advertisement campaign to be reminded about their progress during the past five years. By contrast, the India Shining and Feel Good slogans only served to remind the vast majority of the population that the government's achievements have not reached it, and this section did not want the NDA to have another term in office. In the end, the ordinary citizen voted to puncture the illusory aspects of this success, with a vote, which even if it was not against economic reforms in principle, was certainly against the perceived indifference of its champions to the plight of those excluded or adversely affected by it. The great blow was that Congress, like its allies on the left, raised real issues: poverty, water, health care, the minorities right to live.⁸ It wasn't difficult for it to show that India was not really shining for everyone. The Congress sponsored advertisements captured the frustration of the majority in the disarmingly simple question: *Aam aadmi ko kya mila* (What has the common man gained?).

That this popular resentment against an insensitive and divisive government, was not picked up by the news media should keep researchers engaged for a few years. One can offer two reasons why the media missed the Big Story.⁹ Since the news media is made up of people comprising India Shining, it did not submit the dubious slogan to the scrutiny and scepticism it deserved and they were willing to swallow the NDA government's propaganda about its economic record simply because the media believed that issues that really matter to it

⁵ K.C. Suri, 'Reform: The Elites want it, the masses don't', *The Hindu*, 20 May 2004.

⁶ Yogendra Yadav, 'Economic Reforms in the mirror of public opinion', *The Hindu*, 13 June 2004.

⁷ Unemployment is estimated at 7-10 percent with ten million entering the workforce every year, while illiteracy over 40 percent.

⁸ Antara Dev Sen, 'India's Benign Earthquake', www.opendemocracy.net 20 May 2004.

⁹ P. Sainath, 'Mass Media vs Mass Reality', *The Hindu*, 14 May 2004

matter to the people.¹⁰ The second reason was that journalists were swept up by the propaganda about India becoming a "superpower" under the BJP. They swallowed the talk about "India rising", which was why they were carried away by the India Shining campaign. They basked in the praise from abroad about India as an economy of the future.¹¹

Verdict 2004 is a rejection of the BJP's divisive policies pursued most viciously in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh and also in the educational arena. Although many commentators saw the BJP as a party that had matured and had diluted its divisive and majoritarian agenda in order to survive in power, the electorate was apparently not convinced. Even though this election is not a definitive test of the success or failure of big principles or ideologies, this election was a setback for religious extremism and ultra-nationalism, and a gain for pluralism and secularism.

Numerous former Members of Parliament of the NDA, who have been thrashed at the hustings, are saying that they were defeated by the Gujarat riots. In hindsight, the BJP must be rueing the day it looked the other way when Chief Minister Narendra Modi allowed the goons a free rein in his state after the horrendous Godhra attack. The decision to let him off the hook taken at the National Executive meet in Goa a few weeks after the pogrom, cost the BJP dearly. Modi's politics of whipping up communal passion may have won the party a state in Gujarat Elections 2002, but it was one of the big factors that caused it to lose in 2004. Despite its best efforts to woo the minorities, they remained alienated from the Vajpayee government, because of its reluctance to make the BJP in Gujarat accountable for the post-Godhra riots. Modi's continuance in office despite the Supreme Court's indictment seems to have influenced Muslim voters across the country. Coopting a few Muslims on the eve of elections failed to work for the BJP-NDA. There is very little evidence to show that the BJP made inroads into the Muslim vote which went to the non-NDA parties.

The verdict is a fractured one which in principle, it does not unequivocally give any single party or person the right to rule. But credit must be given to the Congress for reorienting its position. Indeed one of the most striking features of this election has been shift in the avowed position of the Congress party. The Congress manifesto talked of revival of public investment, of emphasis on the agricultural sector, of strengthening the public distribution system for food grains and other essential goods, of not privatising profit making public enterprises, and above all, an employment guarantee scheme that would ensure a

¹⁰ For an analysis of why the media went wrong see Ram Manohar Reddy, 'The media must introspect', *The Hindu*, 23 May 2004 and P. Sainath, 'Mass Media vs Mass Reality', *The Hindu*, 14 May 2004.

¹¹ Ibid.

minimum of 100 days per year to at least one member of each household.¹² Further, if the election was a vote for any one person, it has to be Sonia Gandhi. Faced with humiliating defeat in the December 2003 state assembly elections, Mrs Gandhi mounted an extensive campaign, going from village to village, mingling with the people, sharing their fears, and finding out their problems. She is responsible for the current rejuvenation of the Congress party. It is she who made judicious alliances and led an efficient campaign across the country.

The Congress party that once ruled India without much challenge has performed above expectation everywhere - with the exception of Kerala where, for the first time since Independence, the Congress has not won a single Lok Sabha constituency in a general election. The Congress did well where it took a clear and unambiguous stand on livelihood issues and on secularism because its adoption of a broadly left-of-centre position corresponds to the people's mood. Where it fought the Left by adopting a conservative Right-leaning stance (as in West Bengal and Kerala), it did badly. In other words, inclusivism and livelihood issues shaped the overall outcome much more than the BJP had anticipated. The BJP has done well in its traditional strongholds of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh; slipped a little (along with its hard-core ally, the Shiv Sena) in Maharashtra; and has opened a gateway to the South through its strong showing in the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections in Karnataka. Its biggest losses have come in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Delhi, Haryana - and Gujarat. Some of its heavyweight Cabinet Ministers have been humbled, among them Murli Manohar Joshi, Yashwant Sinha and Sahib Singh Verma (not to mention the Speaker in the last Lok Sabha, the Shiv Sena's Manohar Joshi).

Elections in three different states capture the result: Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. In Gujarat the electorate voted against BJP's right wing economic policies and the state-sponsored carnage in Gujarat in 2002. This did not happen in the 2002 Assembly elections as there was no real alternative since the Congress was playing the sort Hindutva card. Andhra Pradesh results are an unambiguous rejection of Naidu's corporate style politics, neglect of agrarian distress and starving of the social sector.¹³ As agrarian distress and farmers suicides grew, people could see the difference between reality and hype. Also this was the only state where the opposition, especially the Congress party mobilised people in a sustained way. In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP has suffered the biggest losses, halving its strength, and substantial decline in all the regions. The party's defeat in Ayodhya, Kashi and Mathura is extremely significant - it confirms what is well known that the

¹² Prabhat Patnaik, 'India: A Setback for Neo-liberalism', Al Ahram, Cairo, 10 June 2004.

¹³ Praful Bidwai, *Hindustan Times*, 18 May and 14 June 2004.

temple issue cannot win votes anymore.¹⁴

However, an examination of the vote share and seats won by various parties points strongly to another important underlying phenomenon - the growth of regional parties at the expense of the BJP and the Congress. As much as 37 per cent of the total vote was won by 'regional parties', a category that excludes the Left parties but includes national parties with region-specific bases, such as the Samajwadi Party and the Bahujan Samaj Party. This is a small but not insignificant increase over 1998 and 1999 when these regional parties won 36.0 per cent and 35.2 per cent of the total vote respectively. In striking contrast, these parties managed only 19 per cent of the vote in the 1996 Lok Sabha election.¹⁵ This electoral pattern reveals that parties with region-specific bases have continued to grow since 1998, a watershed election for them. Secondly, it suggests that, in the absence of a reversal of this trend, the politics of coalition is here to stay.

According to initial estimates and analysis conducted by the CSDS, the Congress received the highest share of votes among the Muslims. This stands at 47 percent, perhaps less than what the Congress would have liked or hoped for. Some of this vote went to caste-based parties in north Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and to the Left parties in Kerala, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh. Equally significant from the standpoint of the two views of democracy and development is the Dalits vote. Congress establishes a huge lead among Dalits by securing 35 percent of the vote, while the BJ-NDA trails with 23 percent. Again if the Congress does not get a larger share of the vote, it is only because the Bahujan Samaj Party takes away nearly 30 percent of the vote across the country.¹⁶ On the whole, the major support for the BJP comes from the upper caste/clans Hindus. Its a simple enough axiom: the higher the economic status higher the vote for the BJP.¹⁷ The Congress on the other hand does very well among the less well off sections in the economic hierarchy.

The stunning verdict signals the strong roots that electoral democracy has struck in India. The sheer fact of people across a vast subcontinent acting in unison, without any prior contact with one another, despite being fragmented along language, religion, caste and other lines, is indeed quite awesome. This reflects a more basic realignment of social and political aspirations and power on the ground which was tapped by the Congress coalition. The loose United Progressive Alliance that has emerged during and after this election represents a social

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'Regionalisation and the Vote' *Hindu*, 25 May 2004.

¹⁶ Sanjay Kumar and Alistair Macmillan, 'Caste Matters, but so do a whole lot of other things', *The Hindu*, 20 May 2004.

¹⁷ In the CSDS post-poll survey 55percent of the upper castes voted for the BJP-NDA, while it secures 43 percent vote

coalition of the underprivileged as opposed to the NDA coalition of the privileged. Even though the Congress party has met with limited success in this election in terms of votes and seats, it nevertheless demonstrates the power of even a partial coalition of the social majority.¹⁸ Needless to say the Congress is not comfortable with the idea of being a party of the social majority, many of its leaders would like to fashion it into a bourgeois party. But the social majority has propelled the party almost against its will into representing them, rather than the middle classes. Far from leading the change, the Congress has resisted this prospectus as long as it could. It was the aggressive India Shining slogan, agrarian distress and rising unemployment that compelled the party to challenge the cynical way in which the NDA was seeking to win another term by misusing manipulated indices of economic performance and celebrating the gains that a small upper crust had derived from the liberalisation process. In addition, Muslims everywhere goaded the Congress into taking a more active anti-communal position and also pushed the party to forge alliances with secular parties. In that sense, it is not the Congress party that has chosen the socially marginalised and excluded groups as the centrepiece of its core political strategy, rather these groups have chosen the Congress and the emerging coalition as its political vehicle. The loose preelectoral alliance formed by the Congress worked well for it happened to coincide with and express the popular mood within the political system, the need to create an alternative to BJP's middle class driven social bloc. This is where the deeper meaning and significance of the verdict of 2004 lies.

One final point, in this election the much-hyped Vajpayee factor, which was supposed to render the general election into a one horse race, failed to deliver. The campaign against Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins clearly backfired, as did the highly personalised attacks against her family. What Verdict 2004 highlights is that something as complex and multi-faceted as an Indian general election cannot, through hype and propaganda, be turned into a presidential style contest between two leaders. The attack on Sonia Gandhi was an attack on the Constitution. Her leadership, fearless hardwork and tireless campaigning earned rich dividends for the Congress but the election gains posed a sudden and rather difficult test for India's democracy. The xenophobic campaign against Sonia Gandhi amounted to a refusal to accept the electoral verdict. The ethos in which she voluntarily declined the Prime Minister's post can be appreciated for its outcome which saves the nation from violent divisions around her national credentials. However, that ethos is hardly consistent with India's reputation as an inclusive democracy, especially in a globalizing world when questions of identity and allegiance cannot be reduced to the simple certitude of birth.¹⁹

among the well-off, the beneficiaries of the economic boom.

¹⁸ Yogendra Yadav, 'Radical shift in social bases of power', *The Hindu*, 20 May 2004.

¹⁹ On this, see 'The Future of Hatred', *The Times of India*, 26 May 2004 and 'Silencing Her Critics', *The Hindu*,

The outcome of this election represents a historic opportunity for course correction in several different areas of economic and social policy. Crucial here would be the reversal of past policies which have added to inequality and disparities and which generated jobless growth while impoverishing the majority of the people. The new government formed on the basis of the Common Minimum Programme, which has been broadly approved by the Left parties, does represent a shift of direction away from neo-liberalism, by reasserting the centrality of state intervention for improving the living conditions of the people.²⁰ But of course there is a lot of opposition to this shift, with globalised finance and the bulk of the English language print and electronic media, demanding a continuation of neo-liberal economic policies promoted by the BJP. The outcome of this struggle in the realm of economic policy is far from clear, but in the short run, the new government will at least take some measures to alleviate people's hardships, removing the influence of communalism in education, bringing laws against fomenting communal violence, and generally revamping the secular foundations of the polity.

23 May 2004, and 'Should Sonia Have Declined the Job', *The Economic Times*, 26 May 2004.

²⁰ Prabhat Patnaik, 'India: A Setback for Neo-liberalism', *Al Ahran*, Cairo, 10 June 2004.