

Indian General Elections - Fusing Hindutva With Corporate Power: The menace that's Modi

Monday 12 May 2014, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 12 May 2014).

As the momentum of India's nine-phase Lok Sabha election shifts in favour of the Bharatiya Janata Party's opponents, a new bunch of writers and social scientists have risen to defend its Prime Ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. Some of them see virtue and talent, indeed even poetic genius, in a man who presided over the mass butchery of Muslims in Gujarat. (One of them compares Mr Modi's ghastly poetry with Kabir's!)

Yet others are shamelessly writing barely-disguised job applications anticipating a Modi victory. They include former diplomats and intelligence officers associated with the extreme-Right pro-Hindutva think-tank Vivekananda International Foundation [\[1\]](#), and Arvind Panagaria, a US-based neoliberal economist, and on his behalf, his mentor Jagdish Bhagwati.

Panagaria—who holds a chair at Columbia University named after (surprise, surprise!) Bhagwati—is lobbying for the post of chief economic adviser to the government. What little claim this undistinguished economist might have had to that post stands undermined by his recently propounded “theory” that Indians are genetically differently constituted from other human beings in that they are predisposed to being shorter and smaller. So standard international norms of measuring malnutrition or stunting by height-for-age and weight-for-age ratios don't apply to Indians.

This is Panagaria's answer to the widespread criticism of India's neoliberal reforms—viz, despite faster growth and poverty reduction in recent years, the country continues to suffer from worse child malnutrition than nearly all Sub-Saharan African countries with lower per-capita incomes.

Panagaria's thesis is bogus in scientific terms. It has been powerfully refuted by economists and nutritionists. [\[2\]](#). Underlying it is a deadly combination of voodoo economics, misplaced nationalism and genetic racism—and apologia for GDP growth as a panacea against poverty and malnutrition.

In reality, malnutrition makes almost half of India's children vulnerable to common infections and recurring illnesses which reduce their ability to learn and grow as normal children do. Instead of being ashamed of this enormous waste of human potential, and taking corrective steps urgently, we should do nothing but promote lopsided growth which prolongs Indian children's misery!

Some other Modi apologists have tried to whitewash his role in Gujarat-2002 citing the Special Investigation Team report, based on flawed interrogation, ably exposed by journalist Manoj Mitta in his recent book *The Fiction of Fact-Finding: Modi and Godhra* (Harper Collins).

Mr Modi's tall claims about Gujarat's “development” have been systematically dismantled in Atul Sood's edited volume *Poverty Amidst Prosperity* (Aakar Books), summarised in his article in *The Hindu* [\[3\]](#) and reviewed in *Kafila* [\[4\]](#).

Other Modi apologists have come up with even more weird arguments. Thus, former corporate CEO Gurcharan Das holds that India faces a stark choice between secularism and GDP growth. Growth alone can produce a “demographic dividend”. Mr Modi is best-placed to stimulate growth through neoliberal policies. So we should violate the Constitution and compromise the safety of millions of non-Hindu citizens by embracing communalism to promote “growth”!

A slightly more sophisticated argument contends that Mr Modi has turned “moderate” and isn’t running a communal campaign: hasn’t he said that he would prefer to lose the election rather than seek votes on the basis of religion? And hasn’t the BJP dropped its divisive Trident (Article 370 on Kashmir, Ram temple at Ayodhya and a Uniform Civil Code)?

But the Modi campaign is thoroughly communal. This is in fact the most communalised and the dirtiest, ugliest election that India has witnessed, with Mr Modi stridently promising to throw out all Muslim (as opposed to Hindu) Bangladeshi migrants, with countless references to the “pink revolution” (export of buffalo, not cow, meat), and demonisation of Modi critics as “Pakistanis” and all of Azamgarh as a “terrorist base”.

Mr Modi says God himself has “chosen” him to lead India, and Ma Ganga urged him to contest from holy Varanasi. These are deeply religious-communal motifs, as was the use of images of Ram and a temple at the May 5 campaign rally in Faizabad, which violated the election law.

The BJP’s decision to give tickets to leaders charged with instigating the Muzaffarnagar-Shamli riots also speaks to its brazenly communal approach. It has temporarily dropped the Trident issues from its manifesto for purely opportunist reasons, namely, fear of antagonising its potential allies—just as it did in 1998, only to return to them in 2004 and 2009.

The Modi campaign also has a strong upper-caste bias, as shown by Ramdev’s deplorable remarks about Rahul Gandhi visiting Dalit homes for “a honeymoon and a picnic”, and senior Bihar BJP leader CP Thakur’s call to end reservations for underprivileged groups. The BJP is mining upper-caste support for votes and running a confrontationist campaign against the Election Commission.

These are signs not of “moderation”, but of hardened Hindutva. Confronted with this, Modi apologists invent yet another argument: as Prime Minister, Mr Modi will have to work within the constraints of India’s democratic institutions; these are strong and cannot be subverted. So we need not fear Mr Modi’s ascent to power; he will behave “responsibly”.

This flies in the face of Mr Modi’s record in corrupting, manipulating and subverting the police, bureaucracy and judiciary in Gujarat for 12 years. Without doing this, he couldn’t have become complicit in the 2002 pogrom, staged fake “encounter” killings, illegally spied on people in Snoopgate, and covered up the crimes, while subverting the possibility of justice for the victims.

Besides, most of India’s institutions are in a fragile, tattered state, including political parties, the police, the media, the judiciary, even regulatory agencies. “Paid news” and corporate ownership and control of the media have penetrated deep. The media has lost a great deal of its integrity and credibility. Most parties are single-leader-centric and don’t hold internal elections.

Numerous recent scams, including 2G, Coalgate, reckless granting of mining licences, overpricing of natural gas, and countless violations of environmental norms show that all kinds of institutions are vulnerable to abuse.

This is true not just of institutions directly under the executive, like the police, civil service and intelligence agencies, but also institutions charged with oversight of the executive, including Parliament and the courts, and to a lesser extent, even the Election Commission, which is unable or

unwilling to enforce its own rules, including those pertaining to campaign spending and punishing communal propaganda through disqualification of candidates and deregistration of parties.

India's justice delivery system has failed time and again—in the Bhopal gas disaster case, in bringing the perpetrators of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence to book, in punishing the Army's cold-blooded killings at Pathribal in 2000 or the state's creation and arming of the murderous Salwa Judum in Chhattisgarh, in preventing the harassment of innocent citizens falsely charged with terrorist attacks, and extensive abuse of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in Kashmir and the Northeast.

Most institutions aren't accountable to the public, not even to Parliament. Indeed, the BJP didn't allow Parliament to function for five years—and got away. The BJP has been the greatest beneficiary of institutional erosion, which has generated impunity for it. It will greatly accelerate such erosion.

Should a BJP-led government come to power, we should fully expect it to shift the goalposts in education, culture, gender relations, internal and external security, approach to the Maoist movement, policy on affirmative action, and inter-community relations. It will greatly coarsen the quality of public discourse, suppress the freedom of expression, and victimise all dissent.

It would be a surprise if the government did not impose a Hindutva-based curriculum on educational institutions, suppress creative academic research, suborn the ministry of culture and the various akademis and learned institutions under it to partisan agendas, censor books and cultural products such as films, plays, art exhibitions, and encourage vandalism against whatever it considers offensive to Hindutva, as it did in the past.

A BJP-led regime is likely to discontinue or dilute a number of pro-poor social programmes, even as it follows a brazenly pro-corporate policy which further widens social, economic and regional inequalities while pillaging and bankrupting the exchequer in the name of promoting growth through the unbridled privatisation of public enterprises and services.

India's religious minorities have much to fear from the BJP. They will be intimidated, subjugated and socially and politically disenfranchised. They will be reduced to second-class citizens, as they have been in Gujarat. Human rights abuses will become rampant and procedures of accountability will be abandoned. A "strong-state" obsession and militarisation of society will prevail.

India under Mr Modi will be a far worse and more uncompassionate society than under Mr Vajpayee, reflecting Mr Modi's "56-inch-chest" authoritarianism, reinforced by his Islamophobia. Mr Modi will pursue a much more pro-Western foreign and security policy, if only to secure the West's approval. None of this bodes well for India. That's why all freedom-loving citizens who believe in Constitutional values should fight for the BJP's defeat. It's still not too late.

Praful Bidwai

P.S.

* Praful Bidwai's blog. Monday, May 12 2014:

<http://www.prafulbidwai.org/index.php?post/2014/05/12/Fusing-Hindutva-With-Corporate-Power%3A-The-menace-that's-Modi>

Footnotes

[1] www.vifindia.org

[2] www.sanhati.com/excerpted/5950/,
www.transformnutrition.org/2013/01/24/when-myth-is-reality/

[3] Available on ESSF (article 31858), [Gujarat \(India\) : Poverty amid prosperity](#).

[4] Available on ESSF (article 31859), [Modi's India: Gujarat and the Illusion of Development](#).. Also see www.truthofgujarat.com and www.secularstore.net for a series of solidly documented reports on the hideous crony capitalism prevalent in Mr Modi's Gujarat.