

# India's landmark election

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**There are numerous reasons why the 2014 general elections to India's lower house of parliament, the Lok Sabha, constituted a post-independence landmark event. But the most important is that it signifies for the first time ever the replacement of the Indian National Congress by the Hindutva-motivated Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the central point of reference of the Indian polity. Add to this a Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who as Chief Minister of Gujarat state in February-March 2002 oversaw (and for many was directly implicated in) the eruption and prolongation of one of the worst anti-Muslim pogroms since independence. If India is as secular and democratic as so many liberals make it out to be then that alone should have permanently disqualified him from reaching where he now has. [1]**

## Contents

- [The longer view](#)
- [The evolution of the Sangh \(...\)](#)
- [The new government](#)
- [The newcomer](#)
- [Building an anti-neoliberal](#)

This denouement carries profound implications for the foreseeable future that need to be scanned. But first a look at what the voting patterns that emerged have shown.

Of the 543 elected seats the BJP achieved (to its own surprise) a majority of 282, its highest ever tally, while the Congress (never before getting less than a 100) was reduced to 44. The regional allies of the Congress gave the pre-poll coalition of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) 15 more seats; while the pre-poll regional allies of the BJP - the Shiromani Akali Dal of Punjab (4), the Telegu Desam in the south (17) and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra (18) - helped raise the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) total to 336. The BJP can rule on its own terms and has handed over only minor ministerial berths to its allies. Its previous best was in 1998 with 182 seats and a 26 per cent vote share. This time it secured 31 per cent overall yet obtained a simple seat majority, although previously whenever a party has got a ruling majority the vote share has varied between a low of near 41 per cent to a high of near 49 per cent. What does this signify about the BJP victory?

Even allowing for the disproportion between seats and votes inherent in a first-past-the-post electoral system, this is an exceptionally large imbalance reflecting the fragmentation of the non-BJP vote. With the Congress getting around 19 per cent, regional parties still garnered half the votes polled.

It could therefore be argued that the regionalization of the Indian polity inaugurated in the 1991 elections still holds. This view gains credibility from the fact that the key to the BJP's success came from its unexpectedly good performance in two key north Indian states (not ruled by it): Uttar Pradesh, where it won an extraordinary 71 out of 80 seats on a 42 per cent vote share; and 22 out of 40 seats on a vote of 29 per cent in Bihar. Without these two the BJP would not have crossed the 200

seat mark. In Uttar Pradesh, though the Samajwadi Party (SP) was only 1 per cent short of its score in the 2009 elections (23 per cent), its seat tally fell from 23 to 5, while the party of Dalits, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), lost all its 20 seats despite carrying 20 per cent of the vote. In Bihar, regional forces again got reasonable vote shares but lost out seat-wise.

Yes, the BJP benefited from a fragmented opposition vote but one should not underestimate the extent of its breakthrough, magnified as it is by the precipitous decline of the Congress. The latter has no representation now from 14 out of the 29 states of the Union. The BJP is now the only national party making inroads into newer states and even into the former left bastions of West Bengal and Kerala. In West Bengal, where the Left Front ruled for 34 continuous years (1977-2011) under the leadership of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), the BJP got 17 per cent of the vote compared to the CPM's 22.5 per cent, picking up 2 seats each as the regional Trinamool Congress Party (a former breakaway from the parent Congress) swept 34 out of the 42 seats available. In Kerala, the BJP almost did the unthinkable in coming close to winning one seat and for the first time crossed the 10 per cent vote mark.

If geographical extension was one big gain another has been its social advance across castes, classes and tribes (Adivasis). In Jharkhand state, where the tribal population at 27 per cent is more than triple the national average, the BJP got 12 out of 14 seats. In Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, the BJP won around three-quarters of all upper caste votes and over half of those of the intermediate castes (whose upper layers are largely landed upper/middle peasantry) or 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs) other than the Yadav community who remained loyal to the SP; and 40 per cent of the Dalit vote, barring the Jatavs who remained loyal to the BSP. In Bihar a similar story prevailed among upper castes with the BJP also securing over half of the lower OBC vote and one-third among Dalits. Lower castes and lower classes broadly overlap. The one social group that remained relatively immune to the Modi appeal were of course the Muslims (overwhelming poor and educationally backward, they form approximately 15 per cent of the population). In fact for the first time ever a majority ruling party will not have a single Muslim MP. Apart from this group much of what should be the natural class constituency of the left voted for the right.

Any attempt to rectify this drift must understand why this happened. In the absence of class mobilizational politics by the left, Modi's promise of better development and governance proved highly attractive. Over the last two decades there has been some 'transformation' of class politics but it has been by and for the right. Of the various processes whose complex interweaving has most shaped the Indian polity over the last three decades - the forward march of Hindutva and of the intermediate castes, Dalit affirmation, Muslim ferment, regional assertions - the one with the most explicit class referent is the emergence of the misnamed but growing 'middle class'. Currently comprising the top 15 to 20 per cent of the 1.2 billion population, this is not a median category providing a social buffer for the dominant classes as in the West, but an elite category of mass proportions. And it has provided the most important base for the rise of reactionary right-wing politics, whether practised by the Congress or by the BJP.

Is the geographical and social expansion of the BJP vote an exceptional one-time affair due primarily to proximate factors like the remarkable nature of the election campaign waged by the Modi-led 'Sangh Parivar' or the family of Hindu Nationalist organizations and fronts of all kinds headed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or National Volunteer Corps?

Certainly the communal riots in Uttar Pradesh of autumn 2013, in which the hand of the Sangh is widely suspected, helped polarize the elections that followed in that state and elsewhere. Moreover, even apart from Modi's own indefatigable efforts - between September 2013 and mid-May 2014 he traversed some 300,000 km, and in the last two months held a daily average of four to five rallies or meetings - this campaign set new standards of money power, technological gadgetry and cadre

mobilization on the ground. The total expenditure by government, parties and candidates, projected at Rs. 30,000 crores (probably less than the actual), compares with the \$7 billion or Rs. 42,000 crores spent during the US presidential election of 2012. The BJP easily received the lion's share of monies given by a corporate sector (large and medium) strongly biased towards the Modi candidature as the authority figure who could fast track policy clearances in its favour as he had done during his long reign in Gujarat as Chief Minister.

Add to this money power the massive use of social media messaging, of hologram technology to project 3D images of Modi to some 1,350 locations, as well as the manpower strength of the RSS for face-to-face mobilization on the ground. The Congress's campaigning, led by an uninspiring Rahul Gandhi as heir-apparent, was but a pale shadow of this. The BJP high command divided 428 contested constituencies into 'favourable', 'battleground' and 'difficult', assigning more cadres to the latter two for patrolling several hundred thousand polling stations. Voter addresses and telephone numbers were centralized and distributed accordingly with the aim of ensuring a very high turnout, especially of the young. [2] Since 1991, whenever the turnout has been over 60 per cent the BJP has done better. This time the turnout at 66 per cent was the highest ever. Among the close to 100 million first-time (18-22 year old) voters, there was a 68 per cent turnout - of which the BJP got the biggest single chunk.

One could argue that India is following in the steps of advanced industrialized democracies, where even in parliamentary systems the mediatization of electoral politicking has meant greater personalization as well as presidentialization. Discussion of programmes and the choices to be made between them - what elections are classically supposed to be about - take more of a back seat to public relations skills in messaging. This is not to say that differences between what contending parties claim to stand for are unimportant. But in a media-soaked context without class mobilization and the political confrontations flowing from this, how these specificities are articulated or obscured can become decisive. Between 1971 and 1989 India had five general elections, two of which (the ending of Emergency Rule in 1977 and the sympathy wave after Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in 1984) were wave-like shifts, and three were referendum-like (with the slogans of 'removing poverty' in 1971, 'bringing back stability' in 1980, 'removing a corrupt regime' in 1989). The pattern of those years was repeated in 2014 but with one crucial difference. This time the central appeal was not a policy promise but a highly personalized one of giving power to a 'strongman saviour' who would then resolve all basic ills.

### **The longer view**

However, there are more fundamental reasons for the BJP's and Modi's ascent. It is the culmination of a process going on since at least the late eighties with a neoliberal turn in the economy being accompanied by the rise of a Hindutva-influenced consolidation of 'common sense' socially and a stronger authoritarian inflection politically. These developments have all been normalized and now set the limits of the 'acceptable' range of mainstream discourse on what policies and practices should be followed at the central and provincial levels. The prime culprit is of course the Congress Party - whose long-term historical and historic decline through its acts of omission and commission set the stage for the emergence of these developments. In a comparative sense the Congress's decline broadly mirrors the trajectory taken by its 'nationalist populist' equivalents in Latin America, where after prolonged periods of rule - e.g., Peronism in Argentina, Vargism in Brazil, the PRI in Mexico, APRA in Peru, MNR in Bolivia, Acción Democrática in Venezuela - these formations either went into oblivion or transmogrified into smaller, explicitly right-wing parties. But in a few of these countries this created the space where, unlike in India so far, left-wing formations grew much stronger and successfully contested for state power precisely because they struggled to transform

oppressive class relations.

There have been three turning points in the story of the Congress's decline. The Congress's dominance in the states was first broken in 1967, partly through defections from its social base and by some party higher-ups. Non-Congress alternatives rose to power in certain states. At the central level, increasing volatility of electoral preferences created wave and referendum-type elections between 1971 and 1989 in which a non-Congress centrist alternative came to power twice (1977 and 1989) but did not last a full term. The second turn was in 1991 when a minority Congress government initially engineered defections and this was followed by a period of coalition rule in which a third non-Congress centrist alternative failed to last a full term in power. In its wake a BJP-led coalition emerged and ruled for a full term. Two Congress-led coalition governments followed it, but now the BJP has replaced the Congress as the most preferred vehicle for carrying on the right-wing agenda of domestic and foreign capital.

In the developing world, national-populist bourgeois parties, with both left and right factions mediated by a holding centre, were a characteristic of the phase of import substitution industrialization developed amidst the space created globally by Cold War systemic hostility. Once ISI gave way to free-market fundamentalism and the Communist bloc was no more, the new consensus, in India certainly, was that neoliberal globalization was not just the only but the best direction to take, with mainstream debate confined to how 'welfarist' a face it should have. On the economic front it was the Congress that even in the eighties embarked on the neoliberal journey (legitimized after 1991), and then also initiated the search for a closer strategic relationship with the US and Israel. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) of 1999-2004 further consolidated this approach, but added the nuclear bomb, something it had wanted from even before the Chinese test in 1964. The irony is that the Congress, throughout its decline until 2014, was always more electorally favoured than the BJP by the poor and deprived, but repeatedly betrayed this support base.

The fact is that by the seventies the Congress had lost the organizational structure that had emerged out of its role in the struggle for independence, whereby intermediary bodies headed by powerful local and regional leaders kept it connected to the grassroots. The degeneration continued thereafter with its elite leadership moving steadily away from even the old Nehruvian rhetoric claiming to promote state-led development. [3] Given the social character of the Indian state as it has developed over time - where now Indian and foreign big capital together outweigh the landed elite - this turn further to the right was not at all surprising. It could only have been countered effectively if there was organized class resistance from below, which of course the Congress would not pursue. The non-Congress regional parties were aligned to their own local rural and urban elites, while the BSP got itself mired in an identity politics abjuring cross-caste, lower-class mobilizations.

The Congress had become a vast electoral machine whose activists, lacking any ideological commitment or inspiration, were effectively silent except at various election times (local, regional and national). The glue that held the Congress together was its ability to come to power at various levels and thereby sustain the patronage-clientelist links that substituted for it not having any internally democratic structure or a vibrant culture of political discussion and debate. The 'family dynasty' was crucial because only it could serve as final arbiter in the factional conflicts within. Unlike the ideologically-driven cadre-based Sangh and left parties, electoral fortune or misfortune plays a much more decisive role for its very survival and well-being.

Ruling classes in capitalist democracies ideally want two 'safe' contending parties so that one or the other can act as the alternative when public discontent with the politics of class war from above becomes too disturbing. So there can still be corporate and media support for the Congress. But this alone cannot resurrect a decaying entity that has to find its own political resources to generate

stronger public support, and of this there are no signs yet. The BJP and the Sangh are in a much better position.

Neoliberal globalization does not diminish the importance of states, but actually requires states to play the crucial role of stabilizers and legitimizers for its expansion. There is then a dialectic of the international and the national. Growing transnationalization of market relations can happily go hand in hand with the assertion of nationally particularist right-wing politics and ideologies. This is where the Indian specificity of Hindutva comes in and has disproportionately influenced the dominant form of Indian nationalism.

This would not have been possible if the Sangh had not been capable of mass mobilizations and of steady, long-term work in the pores of civil society to win adherents and activists to its cultural-political messages of Hindu unity as the way to 'making India strong'.

The Congress not only did not resist the Sangh's activities in this regard, but abetted this process through its own pragmatism, assuaging communal elements among Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. The Congress failed to confront the Sangh's mass campaign to demolish the Babri Masjid, the famous sixteenth century mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, a campaign which openly defied the constitutional commitments to secularism and left a trail of riots and communal violence against Muslims. After it was destroyed in 1992 amidst a political rally that developed into a riot involving 150,000 people, there were further riots and deaths in Uttar Pradesh and elsewhere. The Congress could have forcefully prevented this demolition but did not; nor were top Sangh leaders ever punished. Indeed, in 1991, the Congress government had enacted a 'Place of Worship (Special Provisions)' Act to protect shrines of all communities from communal vandalism, but kept the Ayodhya Babri Mosque out of its purview. The official Liberhan Commission set up shortly after to investigate the demolition was supposed to submit its report in three months; it actually finally submitted its Report 17 years later in 2009. The Report indicted all the top Sangh leaders including the 'pseudo-moderate' former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as privy to this criminal conspiracy. Not only were these leaders not punished, Vajpayee is now widely portrayed even by 'secular liberals' as something of a 'statesman'.

The underlying reality is that even allowing for the Congress's ineptitude and culpability, the Sangh's Hindutva project could never have advanced as it has if the social and political soil had not been long fertile for its flourishing. Those liberals who have repeatedly waxed eloquent on the virtues of the National Movement, the secularity of the state and its 'remarkable' Constitution have never been prepared to admit this reality. [4] For millennia 'Hinduism' was little more than a compendium label for multiple sects with differing beliefs and rituals possessing no unifying thematic. The Gandhi-led National Movement introduced the poison of religiously inspired appeals that were necessarily oriented towards mobilizing the majority Hindus. Both before and after Gandhi there has been a steady process of what the eminent historian Romila Thapar has called 'syndicated Hinduism'. This has entailed the more or less systematic consolidation of an ever-widening Hindu self-consciousness across castes. [5]

Where once local Hindu and Muslim communities shared more cultural similarities with each other than with their distant co-religionists, today Muslims all over India share a consciousness of being besieged, while a sense of Hindu belonging cuts across castes, sects and even linguistic barriers, even as those identities remain strong and in many cases primary. At the very least this has meant that where a Hindutva-motivated minority harbours genuine hostility towards Muslims the vast majority of Hindus are simply indifferent to the plight of Muslims. The Sachar Committee Report of 2011 highlighted their socioeconomic plight, but its recommendations for affirmative action for Muslims - as given to Dalits, tribals and OBCs - was ignored by the Congress government. The fact is that the Sangh has changed the terms of public discourse, and secularism is now seen as a code

word for justifying the 'appeasement' of Muslims, which is 'unfair' to Hindus and a 'diversion' from the more pressing everyday needs of the broader public.

## **The evolution of the Sangh Parivar**

The Indian state formally and legally is still a secular state and this does count for something. But in substantive terms this secularity, always weak to begin with, has eroded to the point where the country's most important religious minority of Muslims are in effect second-class citizens, having less hope than ever of transcending this status. For all the degree of psychological-emotional uplift that lower OBCs, a growing number of Adivasis and the bulk of Dalits may derive from feeling that they are part of a wider Hindu collective which is 'on the rise', in other material ways they too share the plight of fellow Muslims, if not their distinct sense of insecurity of being potential victims of communal violence. Hindu self-consciousness does not automatically translate into Hindutva ideology and politics. But it is no barrier to the latter's growth and spread. One of the most persistent claims of academic political science on India is that, given such unparalleled segmentation across multiple lines of social, cultural, economic, linguistic, religious, racial differentiation, only a broadly centrist-moderate force on social and cultural fronts can hope to come to power at the centre and be stable thereafter. Up to the early eighties the prevailing wisdom was that the BJP had to choose between remaining a party of the Hindu rassemblement or else moderating so as to become a mass party and a challenger for central power. Instead the BJP and Sangh moved rightwards, launched the Babri Mosque campaign and came to power eventually in 1998-99. Now, in another twist, they have achieved majority rule by moving further to the right as the choice of its new leader and the latest party manifesto should make clear. This does not mean there are no pressures to 'moderate', but that these would at best be movements towards a 'centre' that has itself moved considerably to the right.

Historically, the Sangh emerged in the mid-twenties as a Hindu nationalist and revivalist force partly inspired by European fascism, but has lasted as long as it has because of the way it has evolved (though retaining some fascist characteristics). The RSS is the parent organization from which emerged various other limbs after independence: the electoral-political wing (called the BJP since the 1980s), the cultural front of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council created in 1964) and scores of other bodies catering to all groups from Adivasis to professionals. The Sangh has now jettisoned its economic nationalism and thus made itself more than acceptable to globalizing capital (which includes some big Indian capital). But it remains a creature of the hard right whose ultimate objective is establishing a Hindu Rashtra ('Hindu nation'), for which a Hindu state in all but name (and perhaps that as well) is seen as a prerequisite. For decades the principal route to this social transformation was seen to lie in civil society, where day-to-day activities and regular mobilizations were to be carried out by ever expanding numbers of highly disciplined and dedicated members.

They would be rigorously trained and indoctrinated and connected horizontally by a network of tens of thousands of shakas (branches) throughout the country and vertically by a military-like hierarchy of specially chosen full-timers. The transformation sought would be achieved in the long term and independent of the vagaries of who occupied central state power. This began to change in the seventies partly because the RSS appeal was diminishing at least in relation to its grandiose goal, and partly because the Emergency of 1975 (when its members and leaders were imprisoned by Gandhi to give her regime a progressive face) forced it to recognize the importance of state power. This was reinforced when the electoral wing of the Sangh became a component of the ruling Janata Party that ended Emergency Rule in 1977.

By the start of the nineties the Sangh came to the view that capture of power at the state and central

level was to be the main route to achieving its goal. Civil society activism of the traditional type remained important in its own right, but would now serve as a complement to the main effort. This naturally meant that the weight within the Sangh of the BJP would become relatively greater even as the compromises forced on the BJP and their policies vis-à-vis other parties would be a source of unease within the RSS.

The first BJP-led coalition government of 1999-2004 both strengthened the Sangh as a whole, including the RSS, and frustrated it because many of its key demands were put on hold. But it was the ten years after this when it was out of power that was so disturbing to the Sangh. This created tensions within the BJP leadership between many top party leaders and the RSS hierarchy, which saw this weakened unity and the greater autonomy of the BJP as factors contributing to this political exile.

## **The new government**

In this respect 2014 is again a turning point. During his reign in Gujarat, Modi had effectively suborned the state-level RSS to himself as Chief Minister and head of the state BJP. Modi was not then a favourite of the RSS top leaders for the prime ministerial candidacy, but enormous pressure from the ranks of the RSS pushed them to propose him despite unhappiness among more senior BJP leaders. The highly personalized character of the campaign and then his astounding victory has enthused as never before the mass membership of the RSS and the other Sangh organizations. Thus the RSS and BJP are now once again unified, but with a new twist. For the first time it is the BJP head, not that of the RSS, that will call the shots in the Sangh overall. This integration means that the ideologically driven concerns of the Sangh will be pursued, but Modi will determine their timing and manner of pursuit. Cabinet formation and reorganization of the Prime Minister's Office confirms that this will be a highly centralized administration under his strong control over all major policies - the same style of functioning as he has shown in Gujarat.

Politically, priority will be given to winning over states where the BJP does not rule and whose assemblies will come up for re-election in 2014 and 2015. Success here will give the BJP easier legislative passage in the upper house, the Rajya Sabha. This will also keep the cadres of the RSS and other Sangh organizations active and motivated. Economically, the new government will seek more foreign investment, especially in infrastructure and defence production, and liberalize accordingly. Modi has admired the East Asian development model of Japan and China and this may lead him to be more cautious than gung-ho about further liberalization of the capital account, though he will push for more FDI into hitherto restricted infrastructural areas. He will seek support from Indian big capital with easier clearances for industry, mining and land acquisitions regardless of environmental considerations. This will likely mean a more ruthlessly repressive approach towards existing popular movements and of their support structures - hence the campaign launched against the more progressive organizations in the voluntary sector. These movements resisting corporate-led exploitation because of their livelihood concerns are being accused of hampering Indian development and by implication therefore of being anti-national. Yet he will probably not scrap existing targeted welfare schemes, but try to run them more effectively and economically. In a taste of things to come, the BJP-ruled state of Rajasthan is proposing changes to existing labour laws that would make industry's firing of workers and hiring of contract labour easier and union recognition (and therefore formation) more difficult.

On foreign policy, Modi has little choice but to promote better relations with the US, as he also will, more enthusiastically, with Israel and Japan. Relations with Pakistan will be trickier because in keeping with his image he will be tempted to respond 'strongly' to cross-border terrorist attacks,

even if these cannot be prevented by Islamabad. Besides seeking a complete ban everywhere on cow slaughter, his administration will seek to change school and college syllabi in ways that promote 'Hindu pride' in India's past with little regard for historical accuracy. It will also attempt to recruit the 'right' kind of people at all levels in research and teaching institutions of all kinds.

The government will take tentative steps towards abrogating Article 370 of the Constitution. That a Muslim majority region in India should enjoy special autonomy has always been anathema to the Sangh idea of a Hindu Rashtra. Similarly, there will at some time come a push for a uniform civil code, which would override the existing Muslim personal law. It is the imposition of uniformity on Indian Muslims that is the Sangh's driving motive, not the desire for maximizing secular and gender just laws for all women.

The process of identifying Muslim migrants from Bangladesh in search of livelihoods in India has begun with a view to eventually expelling them. Though their only crime is illegal entry, they are dishonestly designated as 'infiltrators' while Hindu migrants from Bangladesh are considered 'refugees' to be helped. Finally, there will also be a push for building a Ram Temple in Ayodhya at the site of the destroyed mosque. This could be done through contrived negotiations with some puppet Muslim religious group or pursued in some other way. It would be a powerful expression of not just the righteous assertion of the true Hindu-ness of India, but also the declaration of a message to India's Muslims that even their existence as second-class citizens must be on terms set by the Sangh. As in all the above-cited cases, the issue is not if but when and how the goals of the Sangh will be pursued.

### **The newcomer**

No tears should be shed for the decline of the 'secular' Congress. This has created the space not just for the right, but for centrist forces and for a rejuvenated left to grow. A centrist push has come from the newly formed Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) or Common Man Party. The AAP was basically thrown up by the largely urban-based, middle-class anti-corruption movement that erupted in April 2011 and lasted for more than a year, with especially large mobilizations in Delhi. Its symbolic leader was a culturally conservative Gandhian, Anna Hazare, who runs a 'model village community' in Maharashtra. But the real organizers were the group around Arvind Kejriwal, a former civil servant turned social activist. The campaign ended with a Congress promise to pass an Act setting up a powerful and independent monitoring body and Ombudsman to check corruption.

Unlike Hazare, who places himself above party affiliations, Kejriwal and cohorts felt that a new party had to be created to cleanse the body politic and that the time was opportune. In late 2013 the AAP was formed (after much grassroots activity) precisely to fight state assembly elections in Delhi in early 2014, very much with an eye to the forthcoming general elections.

Eschewing the presentation of a full-fledged programme, the AAP concentrated on opposing corruption, including illegal corporate funding of parties or bribes for personal or policy favours. It cleverly produced 70 local manifestos for each of the 70 assembly seats in Delhi, focusing on concerns such as protection against crime and harassment and cheap and adequate provision of water and electricity. It used the internet and social media innovatively to make transparent its own funding through high-volume small donations directly from the public as well as getting across its party messages and for recruiting members for a nominal fee. Large numbers of middle-class youth and professionals of all ages joined it in Delhi while it also had a national impact. To the surprise of all, it won 28 seats to the BJP's 32 and the Congress's eight in the Delhi assembly.

Thereafter its troubles began. Initially insisting it would never take support from either the Congress



or the BJP, it assumed the reigns of the Delhi government with the Congress's agreement only to resign shortly afterwards on flimsy grounds, essentially because it wanted to concentrate on mass campaigning in the general elections. Its basic strategy even before it fought the Delhi elections was that its breakthrough there would give it the credentials to fight the general elections. It would make a dramatic showing there by garnering between 20 to 40 Lok Sabha seats through simultaneous recruitment and campaigning on a mass scale. With such a performance the AAP could expect to become a major governmental contender by the 2019 elections. The assumption was that a political breakthrough would not have to come through the slow accumulation of members and credibility through years of activity; rather sheer mass disillusionment with both the BJP and the Congress would immediately produce a wave in favour of the new anti-corruption party.

The gamble failed. The electronic and mass media that first strongly welcomed it turned against it, citing its flip flop in Delhi, which had also dismayed many of its own supporters as well as other onlookers. Even as it declared itself in support of the market system and capitalism generally, the AAP's decision to attack crony capitalism - and therefore some of the biggest business houses in the country - alienated the corporatized media. The fact that the AAP also saw itself as a movement-cum-party that would regularly resort to protest actions like mass sit-ins to press its demands made it suspect to elite standards of 'sobriety'. Moreover, standing candidates in over 400 constituencies meant there was little check on their quality, with only Kejriwal having national brand recognition. Its comparatively minimal resources were also stretched to the limit. It obtained a nationwide vote share of 2.3 per cent and only 4 seats (all from the state of Punjab); not bad perhaps for a first time entrant, but way below its expectations.

The AAP's effort to appeal to the widest cross-section of the public was a severe mistake. In presenting itself as a 'non-ideological', pragmatic, problem-solving entity, its ideological fuzziness ('neither left nor right', said its leaders) was a major deficiency in such polarizing times, when clarity of purpose was demanded. And by going so fast so soon it did not erect an internally coherent structure for debate and democratic decision-making to go along with its otherwise positive efforts at setting up neighbourhood committees for regular consultations with the local public. Aiming to challenge both the Congress and the BJP, the AAP can only do so by outflanking them not from the right but from the left. But how far to the left will it tack? This remains quite unclear. Does it have a classic social democratic vision of capitalist development? Or will it remain within the confines of a neoliberalism with a human face?

There is a lesson here to be learnt from the Latin American experience, where in Brazil, Bolivia and Ecuador new parties have developed out of social movements based on the factory working class and/or the poor peasantry and/or the indigenous population. This gave those parties a solid core base whose concerns were reflected in their programmes and in the social character of their activists. Operating from this position of relative strength they then sought to attract sections of the middle class. The AAP trajectory has been the reverse. First attracting middle-class activism, it has sought to extend its appeal downwards. This has already created debilitating tensions and contradictions within. It wants to grow as a movement-cum-party, but also wants to avoid sharp class and caste conflicts, i.e., be a something-for-everybody centrist force. Whether it will survive and grow as such, whether it can be pulled significantly leftwards or whether there will be a substantial left-directed breakaway grouping that wants to engage in more transformative class actions from below are still imponderables.

### **Building an anti-neoliberal platform**

In Modi's first victory speech he called for a public mandate of ten years to complete his promised

'transformation'. The challenge then is to build a broad anti-neoliberal platform to prevent and reverse this Hindutva-ized right-wing class project. Where does the left figure in this effort? [6] The parliamentary left of the CPM and the CPI (Communist Party of India) – separated by bureaucratic rivalries, not irresolvable programmatic differences – suffered their worst ever defeat, securing nine and one seats, respectively. Long-term co-optation into the system reduced this left to trying, when in provincial power (West Bengal and Kerala), to become 'better' managers of capitalist development even after its neoliberal turn; and otherwise to being a 'responsible' opposition nationally. Stalinist-Communist collapse put an end to an already ongoing process of ideological demoralization of its cadres, rendering this left for the most part not capable (as it once was) of leading large scale and sustained mass mobilizations (although it remains involved in a few progressive grassroots struggles here and there). This loss of interest in, and capacities to, pursue such politics of mass protest is its real dilemma. In programmatic and policy terms, the left has become in all but name a social democratic force drifting rightwards domestically. It does not oppose state crackdown on 'Naxalites' or defend the right to full self-determination in Kashmir or the Northeast. But it maintains a stance against Western imperialism (its criticisms of Russia and China remain muted) that keeps it to the left of European social democrats.

Indian Maoism for the most part rejects electoral involvement. The CPIML (Maoist) is rooted among the poorest and most deprived Dalits and especially Adivasis of central India. It has waged armed struggle against the state for decades and survived, even grown, with a membership estimated in a few tens of thousands. But it fails to recognize the basic strategic dilemma facing Marxist revolutionaries everywhere – how to bring about a fundamental transformation in class power in liberal democratic capitalist societies, even if the strength of their 'best political shell' (as Lenin called it) varies. To be sure, in India liberal democracy is weak and brutalized. But even so, it is still meaningful and real. Moreover, even in backward capitalisms armed apparatuses of the state are strong and can look for outside support whenever seriously threatened.

Ruling classes have learnt that if quick victory is not possible prolonging the war plays into their hands. Internal divisions arise among the insurgents and their mass base gets war-wearied. As it is, there is a disjunction between the Maoist base that looks primarily for concrete, near-term improvements in livelihood and the more uncertain, remote and ideologically driven aim of the leadership to capture state power. Over the last two years there have been many more defections and captures from the middle and higher levels of leadership. It is quite possible that the party has passed its peak of strength and influence and is in decline. Certainly the Modi government promises to ruthlessly crush them.

How then is an anti-neoliberal platform to be generated? Neoliberalism emerged through so great a transformation of class relations in favour of capital and against labour that derailing it would itself require a counter-shift in the relationship of forces so profound as to almost certainly put the issue of moving toward a 'twenty-first century socialism' on the agenda. Striving for a reversion to the postwar social democratic heyday is clearly now a chimera. [7] Raising standard social democratic demands such as universalizing free quality healthcare and education, provision of social security, of cheap and adequate public transport and housing, etc. – precisely because they are not achievable – become crucial spurs for generating an anti-capitalist momentum. This would be reinforced by the call for the spread of more direct forms of public participation and democratic decision-making along with existing representative institutions themselves needing change, as for example in moving towards some kind of proportional representation electoral system in India.

Indian economic development even under the new government will guarantee rising discontent, not least because the Modi promise of jobs for all seekers will fail. Two statistics say it all: 93 per cent of India's workforce is in the informal sector (compared to Brazil's 55 per cent); and the number of jobs generated by each percentage increase in economic growth in India actually fell radically from 2000

to 2010. [8] Capital intensity is rising in all sectors. This means that Modi's goal to raise considerably the proportion of industry's contribution to output (from around a quarter of GDP now) will not produce enough jobs, and even those created will be mostly informal and casualized. Accelerating the large-scale industrialization of agriculture, forced land acquisitions for industry and real estate, and more ruthless exploitation of marine, forest and mineral wealth will worsen the plight of the landless, small and marginal farmers, Adivasis and fisherfolk, as well as cause greater ecological devastation. Although over time the rural population will become a minority, it will remain substantial.

Moreover, there will be no 'disappearance of the peasantry' even as class divisions become sharper. Migration of more family members to expanding urban slums in search of livelihoods in the informal sector creates stronger living links between town and country. Contesting urban class disparities and struggles for the 'right to the city' can connect to more traditional demands for land redistribution and secure rural off-farm jobs and decent wages. [9] Fleshing out such a broad programme for generating a mass struggle momentum from all oppressed sections is vital. But the main issue is how to generate the forces that can wage a prolonged and collective fight for it.

In India, transforming class relations of power must necessarily also be refracted through struggles around other identities of gender, caste, ethnic demarcations of various kinds. Though the majority of Dalits are agricultural proletarians, the majority of the latter are not Dalits. This means cross-caste class solidarities must be built. But this is not what the BSP, the main party of Dalits being led by middle-class aspirations, has so far sought to do. But progressives must nevertheless try and engage with that base through and besides its leadership. One great nightmare for the forces of Hindutva and the dominant classes they most cater to is the coming together of Muslims, Dalits, Adivasis and the most backward sections of the 'middle castes' who, in class terms, have more in common with each other than with others and easily constitute a numerical majority. The point is not to create a mere electoral bloc through promises of sectoral favours. This has been done in the past by both regional parties and the Congress, but does not endure because even as special group needs are to a limited extent addressed, common class needs are not.

Localized agitations in some socially mixed areas against some common oppression, like unwanted mining operations or large scale land displacement/ takeovers, have led to collective organization and struggle. There are many such important struggles going on, but it has not been possible to bring them enduringly together even as this is increasingly seen as necessary by many of the leaders of such struggles and by the radical left. A mere stitching together of an artificial coalition - united only by the periodic meetings of representatives passing public resolutions or solidarity messages or even agreeing to put forward an agreed list of electoral candidates - will not do. The AAP reached out to various social movements up and down the country putting their leaders up as party candidates or supporting them as independents, but to no avail. Real solidarity has to come through collective struggles, not just around one group's problems but through involvement in the struggles of others. The first raises sectoral consciousness; the second a wider consciousness of the need for deeper change, a better appreciation of who one's allies are and a greater sense of self-confidence.

This problem of bringing together the politics of the singular and the universal has always required an organizational framework which, like a spider's web, has activists who are fanned out in different areas of struggle, and yet are integrated enough to be able to share experiences and understandings. This requires developing the capacity to shift personnel and resources in accordance with the differing tempos of struggles and the opportunities for rapid advance that arise on one or another front. There is no single party that can play this role today in India. But there are a whole host of groups and social movements that can help form the components of an anti-neoliberal platform. Nor should the existing left be immediately written off. The very shock administered by the scale of the right-wing Hindutva advance can spark a process of more

fundamental rethinking and reorganization. In the best case scenario, the parliamentary left would recognize that it must completely jettison its Stalinist legacy organizationally and programmatically; forsake its governing ambitions and the compromises necessitated thereof; concentrate on re-energizing its existing cadres by making extra-parliamentary activity its primary preoccupation; and play a non-manipulative and dedicated supporting role where progressive struggles are already taking place. Internally, there should be a complete revamp to promote freedom of discussion with institutionalized tendency and faction rights; and there should be proportional representation at all levels of the leadership pyramid for such groupings (if they exist) as well as for women, Adivasis and lower castes in proportion to their membership.

The Maoists would need to realize that its current armed struggle strategy is a dead end, learn from the wider non-Maoist, anti-Stalinist Marxist traditions and come above ground to struggle even as they may wish to retain the defensive capacity to effectively protect their social bases against the eventuality of oppressor violence. The Indian state in the past has called for a dialogue with Maoists raising the possibility of mutual agreement on roughly these terms. This may be a deception, but it should be explored. Should New Delhi come to feel in due course that the military balance is so strongly tilted in its favour as to assure early victory then it will no longer be interested in such accommodation.

A more realistic scenario, perhaps, is that the CPI, CPM and CPI-ML (Maoist) will not carry out such self-transformation. In this case a new left will emerge through a process of splits (this has already happened to the student wing of the CPM), recompositions, realignments and fusions via extended dialogue and collaborations between small far left groupings (of which India has quite a few) that are outside the shadow of, and critical of, the big three. This will involve seriously exploring the possibility of engaging with the Bahujan Samaj Party and its Dalit base and of the possibility of a left breakaway from the AAP. There is the obvious necessity of working with the range of progressive social movements, peace groups, progressive medics, lawyers, teachers, the more radical NGOs, etc., up and down the country. These cover the whole range of concerns from civil liberties to the rights of Adivasis, Muslims, sexual minorities, oppressed ethno-national communities in Kashmir and the northeast, the political under-representation of women, domestic violence and public harassment and workplace discriminations of all kinds. There are the struggles against ecological degradation of nature negatively affecting livelihoods and posing potential dangers caused by 'big development' from big dams to nuclear power stations to the proposed scheme to interlink major rivers.

Let us also not forget that the information and communications revolution has meant that the visibility and awareness of inequalities of income, wealth and power are greater than ever, arousing much stronger comparative dissatisfactions and anger. Mass struggles in other parts of the world now have rapid knock-on effects - witness the flurry of protests involving occupation of public spaces in country after country, even if the specific demands raised were different. Many of these struggles appear not to belong to the arena of class conflict, yet they do. Indeed, they must be taken up. Capitalist ruling classes nationally (as in India) and internationally are far more homogeneous despite all cultural, social and regional differences that exist between and among them. Their lines of coordination are smoother and shorter, their capacities for uniting when required quicker. In contrast, those they oppress are far more heterogeneous in their concerns, their lines of communication dispersed and weaker, their broad unification much more difficult to achieve. But it is because there is ultimately a class homogeneity lying behind this great heterogeneity that it is possible for them to coalesce. When this happens on a sufficient scale a revolutionary transformation of class and social relations can take place. Indian progressives know that times of great adversity are also times of real opportunities and possibilities.

**Achin Vanaik**

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## P.S.

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## Footnotes

[1] Precisely this assumption led many after the BJP's election failure in 2009 to underestimate the depth and spread of communal sentiment in milder and more virulent forms and therefore to dismiss the future prospects of the BJP, and particularly of Modi as a potential PM. Since I did not share this underestimation, I feared a BJP comeback, though not as a single majority party and of Modi's possible candidature. See my 'India's Paradigmatic Communal Violence', Socialist Register 2009, Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2008, p. 150.

[2] Times of India, 22 May 2014. This calculated strategy paid off.

[3] Unlike East Asia, India never established a 'developmentalist state'. See Vivek Chibber, 'Reviving the Developmental State?', Socialist Register 2005, Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2004; and also his Locked in Place: State-Building and Late industrialization in India, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

[4] The Constitution originally did not contain the term secular because of basic disagreements among the predominantly Hindu upper caste members of the Constituent Assembly as to its proper meaning. An amendment by Mrs. Gandhi in 1976, intended to put a gloss on her Emergency Rule, introduced the terms 'secular' and socialist' into the Preamble. An Indian secularism must address Hinduism's justification of the caste system that permeates all religious communities and mocks the very principle basic to secularism of a priori equal status of citizens. Caste discrimination was outlawed, but there is no constitutional call for abolishing caste, thereby implying that the existence of caste as distinct from practices of discrimination is acceptable. Affirmative action for lower caste Hindus was sanctioned, and then under pressure extended to Dalits among Jains and Sikhs. But excluded to this day are Dalit Christians and Muslims.

[5] Romila Thapar, The Past as Present, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014, chap.9.

[6] For a more comprehensive treatment of the Indian left see my 'Subcontinental Strategies', New Left Review, 70(July/August), 2011.

[7] For all the justified criticisms from the left of his dismissal of Marxist economic thinking, Thomas Piketty does have the inestimable merit of recognizing (from within the mainstream of neoclassical economics itself) that the 'golden age' of social democracy is an unrepeatably exception. See his *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

[8] The employment elasticity of output between 2000 and 2010, when India had high average growth rates, actually fell from 0.44 to 0.01. See S.Mehrotra, A. Gandhi, P. Saha and B.K. Sahoo, *Joblessness and Informalization: Challenges to Inclusive Growth in India*, Institute of Applied Manpower Research, Planning Commission, Government of India Publication, Dec. 2012, p. 10.

[9] David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*, London: Verso, 2012.