

# **India after the BJP-NDA electoral victory: Understanding the Catastrophic Victory of the Fascists and the Long Term Consequences**

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**The Indian parliamentary elections of 2019 ended with a huge victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). What was significant was not just the huge increase in votes and seats of the BJP and the NDA, but the total shift of votes and discourse to the right. Any attempt to minimise this by mechanically referring to classical Marxist texts and quotations would be suicidal.**

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Before we go into left responses, though, we have to begin by looking at what happened and explain why.

A summary comparison between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> Parliaments would be useful, as a starting point. In 2014, the BJP won 282 seats with about 31% of the votes, and the NDA as a whole received 38.5% votes and 336 seats. Later, some of the NDA partners left, notably the Telugu Desam Party led by N. Chandrababu Naidu, which had won 16 seats. Given India's first past the post system, opposition parties and intellectuals had often pointed out the voting percentages.

In 2019, the BJP obtained 303 seats and the NDA as a whole 353. This involved the BJP getting 37.4% votes and the NDA as a whole claimed about 48% votes, which means practically one in two Indian voters voted BJP and its allies. The two BJP allies who got badly mauled were the AIADMK in Tamil Nadu whose seats came down from 37 in 2014 to just 1 in 2019, and the Shiromani Akali Dal in the Punjab which got 2 seats.

The main opposition bloc, the former ruling bloc for a decade from 2004 to 2014, was the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), led by the Indian National Congress. In 2014 the UPA had 60 seats, while in 2019 it has 91. But the Congress seats have gone up from its worst ever performance of 44 seats to only 52, its second worst. In terms of vote share it has actually lost 0.8% compared to 2014. The main gain for the UPA has come from the DMK in Tamil Nadu. It had no seats in 2014, and has secured 23 this time, making it the third largest party in parliament.

Parties outside the two blocs have fared worse than in 2014. In 2009 such parties had 122 seats, in 2014 147, while in 2019 this came down to 98. Among those most badly hit were, on the extreme right, the Trinamul Congress, which is the ruling party in West Bengal (34 in 2014, 22 in 2019), and on the left, the CPI and the CPI(M), the two major parliamentary fragments of the original Communist Party of India. [1] The left had 11 seats in 2014 and 6 in 2019, of which the CPI and the CPI(M) together had 10 seats in 2014 and 5 in 2019. The final seat in both cases was held by the Revolutionary Socialist Party, allied to the CPI and the CPIM in West Bengal, but opposing them, and allied to the Congress in Kerala, from where it won one seat. On terms of vote share the CPI(M) shrank to 3.28% in 2014 and 1.75% in 2019, while the CPI was 0.78% in 2014 and 0.58% in 2019.

The Bahujan Samaj Party, which is the most powerful Dalit (the formerly untouchable castes who are still oppressed and marginalised despite the formal abolition of untouchability in the Indian constitution), had formed an alliance with the Samajwadi Party, the most powerful party of Other Backward Classes in the key province Uttar Pradesh. But the SP barely retained its 5 seats with a slight drop in votes, while the BSP won 10 seats, up from zero in 2014. However, it had polled over 4% votes across India in 2014, and it does not seem to have increased that.

### **So what were the factors that led to this rise of the BJP?**

We need to make a distinction between the longer term narrative and the immediate background. The BJP, and its previous incarnation, the Jana Sangh, were electoral arms of an aggressive Hindutva nationalist political outfit, the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh. It was founded in 1925 to assert Hindu dominant caste (primarily Brahmin) supremacy. By the 1930s, its leaders were in touch with Mussolini and then with Hitler, and were among the most fervent supporters of the Nazis from the time of the Krystallnacht, arguing that such should also be the future of Muslims in India. At the same time, they were loyalists in Indian politics, refusing to take part in the freedom struggle, while explaining to their cadres that the real fight would be the one between Hindus and Muslims, not between the British colonial rulers and the Indian people.

The murder of Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, who had formally resigned his RSS membership before the murder, resulted in a ban on the RSS. It finally came out of the ban by promising not to take part in politics, a promise it interpreted simply to mean that the RSS would not contest elections. Hence the electoral arms like Jan Sangh. A strategy of long term penetration in civil society by building up a wide range of institutions followed. They included schools, where through philosophy, history, and literature, Hindutva (political Hindu nationalism) was glorified. They also included specific organisations targeting different segments of the population, including Dalits and other subordinate castes.

The 1970s saw a change in the fortunes of the Hindutva right, as mainstream bourgeois and socialist/Stalinist left all displayed some degree of willingness to collaborate with them in order to defeat the congress, led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In the 1977 elections she did lose. But much of the cadre base was provided by the RSS in the fight against her. As a result, the united opposition that fought the Congress (I) during the elections of 1977 enabled them to get a considerable number of their members elected to parliament, and for the new government to carry out quite a bit of the RSS agenda.

By the late 1980s, the Congress, the traditional party of the Indian capitalist class, was facing a crisis. 1984 was the last time the Congress won a majority in parliament on its own, and it did so by a shift to Hindu communalism, with Sikhs as the target. Again, there was an attempt by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to create a balance of communalisms, including opening up a dormant

communal tension over a mosque in Ayodhya, supposedly built by destroying a temple back in the 1520s.

The elections of 1989 and 1991 saw new issues coming to the fore. The BJP, founded in 1980, initially attempted to present a more moderate face than the erstwhile Jan Sangh, talking about “Gandhian Socialism”. But it won only two seats in the parliament of 1984, and decided to shift to more aggressive Hindutva thereafter. Meanwhile, a dissident Congress minister, Viswanath Pratap Singh, pushed for the recognition of oppressed castes and social groups (collectively Other Backward Classes) who had never been “untouchables” but who were part of the socially marginalised. Aware that this posed a threat to its strategy of Hindu consolidation, the BJP, which had supported Singh during the 1989 elections and had propped him up in his coalition government, went for a very aggressive campaign to destroy the Babri Masjid and build a so called Ram temple there.

Three issues would dominate thereafter – Indian capitalism and its march to globalisation, and the rival discursive strategies of Hindu nationalism versus Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi-Muslim alliance building. The shift from a welfare state model to the neoliberal economy however took place initially under the Congress. The BJP was far from being the first choice of the ruling class during the 1990s. However, the weakening of the Congress led to a change in ruling class attitude as well. The various attempts at building “third fronts”, whether sponsored by the left or not, saw regional parties, concerned with local voter bases, making demands that often went against the core demands of the bourgeoisie. And anytime the parliamentary left was a partner, for all its limitations, it insisted on reforms that would provide (within capitalism, certainly) some benefits to its core constituencies. As a result, while the 1999-2004 Vajpayee government was formed initially without any huge bourgeois support, the performance of that government changed the attitude of the ruling class. From 2004, the BJP has increasingly become the preferred party of the bourgeoisie. This also has links with the specific problems faced by Indian capitalism.

### **Globalisation, Indian Capitalism and the BJP**

Indian capitalism has developed an aggressive appetite. The Global Wealth Report 2018 published by the Credit Suisse, an investment bank, says India now has 343,000 persons owning over one million US dollars, or about 7 crores of Indian rupees, worth of wealth. According to the World Inequality Database, the income of the top 1% of the Indian population was Rs 33 lakh per adult or Rs 275,000 per month (just under US\$ 4000). Mukesh Ambani’s wealth is currently put at 53200 million US\$, Ratan Tata’s wealth is seemingly much less, but that is because much of it is concealed as company property which he fully controls. But the Tata group has under his stewardship acted aggressively to take over Tetley (by Tata Tea), Jaguar Land Rover (by Tata Motors) and Corus (by Tata Steel). However, Indian capitalism has been forced to compete with much more powerful US, European and Japanese capitalism, and recently with Chinese capital, from a weaker base. As a result, and lacking any historic colony, Indian capitalism has the need to impose super-exploitation on the Indian working class. This includes a huge burden on the adivasis (including evicting them from forests where they have dwelt, compelling them to work for abysmally low wages, etc) as well as destroying the organised working class altogether.

This is where the Congress has been unable to deliver the goods. The privatization of the finance sectors have been slowed down due to massive struggles by finance sector employees. The very existence of some of the older labour laws, however much they are flouted, create benchmarks against which workers can raise their demands. And this was something that became clear in 2004-2009, during the UPA-I government, when the left had 61 MPs, and Congress had to rely on

the support of those MPs. Some reforms which from above appear very insignificant actually provided quite a bit of bargaining power to the rural poor. These included the MNREGA, which provided that one person per poor family would get 199 days guaranteed work per year.

The Gujarat Model of Narendra Modi consisted of ignoring labour laws, ignoring environment protection (since that increases the cost for the individual capitalist), and promoting big capital. [2] In 2002, after the Gujarat carnage, sections of the Indian capitalist class, members of the Confederation of Indian Industries, had criticised the then Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi. Led by diamond merchant and businessman Gautam Adani, a group formed an alternative body, Resurgent Group of Gujarat, and even threatened to leave CII.

Adani pledged a sum of Rs 15,000 crore for the first Vibrant Gujarat summit (held in September-October 2003). Thereafter, Adani was one of the principal lobbyists for Modi consistently, including outside India. Other capitalists began to see the value of the Modi/Gujarat model. Unlike in the case of previous BJP leaders, the Modi for Prime Minister campaign was launched at Vibrant Gujarat summits, with prominent Indian capitalists sounding the tocsin.

The Modi government started repaying their friends. When it became a Modi government at the all India level, this repayment was even more fulsome. The BJP had a few campaign planks in 2014, one of which was its opposition to corruption. But from Anna Hazare down, all the “anti-corruption” crusaders who had targeted the Congress, remained silent as India’s big capital, and to a certain extent certain major international capitalist concerns including Monsanto, made huge inroads.

But it was not simply a matter of corrupt practices (the so-called crony capitalism). It was a matter of systematic inroads on the workers and poor peasants’ livelihoods for the profit of big capital. However, there were roadblocks. The Indian working class is much weaker now than it had been three decades back. Nevertheless, the call for changing the labour laws, the speeding up of the privatization of Public Sector Undertakings, got slowed down primarily because of labour resistance. While only about 5-7 per cent of the working class is organised by now, the twenty-first century did see attempts, including by some of the bureaucratic Central Trade Unions, to mobilise not just their immediate members but others as well. General strikes across India, and regular struggles in the financial sectors, meant that the plans could not always proceed. [3]

### **The ideological mobilisations:**

But in 2004, Vajpayee had stumbled here. He too had sought, as BJP leader, to serve big capital. But the India Shining campaign had resulted in huge popular rejection. That was also the last occasion when, as we saw, the left votes had gone up along with seats. Though that was a matter of 59 seats of the four LF parties ( CPIM 5.66%, 43 seats, CPI 1.41%, 10 seats, RSP - 0.43%, 3 seats, All India Forward Bloc - 0.35%, 3 seats) along with 2 more by their allies , this was an indication that the masses of people were willing to vote for alternatives if these were posed before them. Also, the BSP had won 19 seats (5.33%), the SP 36 seats (4.32%), and in Bihar the Rashtriya Janata Dal (the SPs rough equivalent in Bihar) had won 24 seats (2.41%). In 2009 too the UPA had trounced the NDA. But this was followed by the old guard of the BJP being pushed aside, and a firm, aggressive new leadership taking over. Between 2014 and 2019, this leadership consolidated itself.

The Hindu nationalist rhetoric was modified, because it was clear that merely pushing for Hindu unity was not paying adequate dividend. At the same time, a series of policy measures by the government had created popular anger. This was eventually translated into votes in several state assembly elections in 2018. In May, the Janata Dal (Secular) and the Congress tied up after the elections to form a JD(S) led government. The BJP tried to spend huge sums of money to buy up

several MLAs but was foiled. In November-December, there were elections in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Rajasthan, and Telangana. The Congress lost Mizoram to the Mizo National Front, but gained Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh from the BJP. The Telangana Rashtra Samithi swept Telangana, defeating both BJP and Congress.

The BJP showed that it was prepared for these setbacks. While this also calls for a discussion of the errors and flaws of its opposition, we need to understand that right from 2014, the BJP had taken up a multi-pronged strategy. One was a shift from merely Hindu nationalism to a full-fledged appropriation of Indian nationalism in its ugliest form. The distinction lies in the past of the RSS. The RSS does not have, as we saw, the freedom struggle in its genes. So it has in the past stressed that it is fighting for the real rights of Hindus. But this time, Kashmir, Pakistan, these became important buzz words. In place of previous governments with their attempts at some degree of carrot and stick policies in Kashmir, under Modi there was simply a big stick with no attempt at either carrot or talking softly. From a very early stage, Modi projected himself as a strong man. Kashmir was a key component of this chest thumping nationalism. Violence in Kashmir was firmly justified. This was the way in which the Sangh worked itself into nationalism. Violence in Kashmir is not new. Between 1990 and 2017 about 41,000 persons have died due to the conflicts. They include 14000 civilians and 22,000 real or alleged militants. However, there was clearly an upward graph from 2014. And this has resulted, with the Pulwama incident, in the emergence of purely home-grown cases of militants, even though Pakistan had to be blamed for political (primarily electoral) reasons.

National security trumps civil liberties -this was the message. The failure of the RSS student wing, the ABVP, to win the JNU Students Union election, led to aggressive nationalism and fake propaganda, which however was dramatically effective. The JNUSU President Kanhaiya Kumar (a member of the CPI dominated AISF), along with students belonging to other left organisations, such as Umar Khalid and Anirban Bhattacharya, were accused of having raised anti India slogans at a meeting which was held over the commemoration of the hanging of Afzal Guru. Guru was a Kashmiri who was hanged in a case that will remain one of the worst cases of legal violence, with ample evidence that he was framed by the police. Many lawyers, civil rights activists have protested his conviction and hanging. Kumar and others were charged with having shouted anti India slogans. They were arrested, Kanhaiya Kumar was assaulted in front of the Patiala House Court. While no legal case could stand, the bulk of the electronic and print media were used, with shouting brigade leaders like Arnab Goswami (then Times Now, currently Republic TV) leading the pack. The aim was manifold. First, Kashmir was made into a seat of evil. Modi was shown as the first muscular leader tackling Kashmir the way it should be, namely by massive and unrelenting violence. Second, leftists of all shades were depicted as "anti-national" for talking about civil rights in Kashmir. Of course their utterances were distorted so that they, including someone like Kanhaiya Kumar, belonging to the CPI (all moderate left parties take the position that Kashmir is an integral part of India, and differ only over how to conduct control there), was supposed to have advocated Kashmir's right to self-determination to the point of secession. Third, as these were JNU students, and much of the left and liberal intellectuals of Delhi, and because it was a Delhi based incident, intellectuals and students all over India stood by them, it was argued that liberal intellectuals by definition were suspect, with a tendency to become anti nationals.

The focus on national security and nationalism was successful. The elections of 2004, 2009 and 2014 were all fought on primarily economic issues. In 2004 BJP went into the polls claiming India was shining. It had a fully articulated aggressive neoliberal policy, while the Congress, the original party that had ushered in neoliberalism in India, was talking about social security. The left won its highest ever number of seats. In 2009, the UPA-II government was formed because UPA successfully defended its economic record, including the MNREGA. In 2014 Modi and the BJP focused on corruption, economic failures. Hindutva was worked in, but with a distinct economic tinge in areas

like West Bengal and Assam, where “infiltration” by Muslims was linked to outsiders (real or alleged immigrants) taking away jobs from locals. In 2019 by contrast, the economy was in a mess. So much so that the government of India stopped data from being published. As we write this the Government, now securely in place for five years, has acknowledged that the growth rate had plummeted to 5.8% and that India’s unemployment rate hit a 45 year high in 2017-18. But the success of the BJP lay in its ability to move the entire campaign away from the economy. The Congress did try raise issues relating to the economy as well as corruption (the Rafale deal), as did other parties. But the BJP stayed firmly on course for an ideology driven campaign that stressed national security, a strong leadership, and anti-Pakistan rhetoric. Nor was this last something invented only after Pulwama and the Balakot strike. This chest thumping belligerent nationalism was ratcheted up immediately after the 2014 victory and stayed the entire course. And no party, not even the left, was in a position to take this on adequately (in most cases not at all).

### **Ideology, Institutional Subversion, Force:**

There is a need to understand the different dimensions that were integrated in this success. The ideological triumph, while backed by force and fraud, cannot be discounted. The RSS-BJP has succeeded in becoming the hegemonic voice across much of India, spreading beyond the North and the West to Eastern India and to parts of the south. It has used local issues, but woven them into its core outlook.

Three decades of neoliberalism have shown that there is no trickle down. Wealth accumulates at the top, and simply stays there. This has created frustration. There is a tremendous sense of anger, insecurity and frustration among the youth, many of whom were the first time voters in the elections of 2019. The BJP government’s policies over the last five years certainly contributed strongly to their economic crisis. Yet, a disproportionately high fraction of them appear to have voted for the BJP. No mechanical understanding can explain this. For this, it is necessary to look at how their imagination has been captured, how their anger has been shifted in certain directions by astute politics.

This involves taking on and defeating the challenges from left and subaltern politics. Electorally, one of the challenges mounted from the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, was the attempt to create political identities called Dalit politics and OBC politics. While caste oppression is a living social reality in India, specific caste groups or jatis are linked to particular occupations. The change from pre-capitalism to capitalism has partially transformed that. That has also given the opportunity of cobbling together a discursive alternative based on shared experiences of oppression, humiliation and the desire to fight back and gain social identity and pride. B.R. Ambedkar started this process, but it was in independent India, with the adult suffrage, that a serious attempt was made to build table, cohesive political projects around this.

The Dalit assertion for greater dignity, and recognition as equal humans, as well as the struggle for material benefits, came up against the recognition that without political power these were not going to be possible. The Dalits, their aspiring political leaders and intellectuals, saw the left as non-serious about them at best, because of the repeated arguments that when all the exploited improved their social conditions Dalits would find themselves in a better situation. This seemed at best a failure to recognise the special oppression they faced, and at worst a reassertion of upper caste (in recent parlance, savarna) domination in the name of class leadership. So there was an attempt to build Dalit parties within bourgeois politics, the most successful being the Bahujan Samaj Party of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati. Historically Dalits were the “outcastes”. The “shudras” were people who came to occupy places a little above Dalits but were also oppressed. This essay cannot trace fully the class-caste interfaces and linkages. However, a large part of them were the ones who came to be



identified as the Other Backward Classes. Here too, social engineering and a political project based on that went together. But that political project fragmented into state level entities, like the Samajwadi Party in UP, the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, etc.

These were however political processes based on discursive identity politics. There was no easy road to unity based on the argument that Dalit-Bahujans constitute the majority and are oppressed. Both parts of the statement are true, but they could not easily be turned into lasting political vehicles. Apart from the interests of the elite, and certainly Brahminism is a component of the elite in India, this political process required a material basis that did not necessarily emerge. Thus, in UP, the core area of the BSP, the Jatavs formed its most enthusiastic supporters, and got disproportionate support and patronage from it, so that it has been argued by analysts that other Dalit castes have not remained as strongly loyal to the BSP as in the past. Equally, the RJD and the SP were backing mainly the most powerful OBC group, the Yadavs. In Bihar this led to the split between RJD leader Laloo Prasad Yadav and the Kurmi leader Nitish Kumar. The BJP has taken note of these processes and has encouraged the formation of small parties based on one or two smaller but significant castes, or forged alliances when such parties existed, in order to ensure that the project of a Dalit unity or OBC unity does not materialise. Hindutva, allegedly very catholic and capable of embracing diversity, was pushed as the key to how these different castes could all be accommodated. At the same time, the BJP has shown greater flexibility in recent times. It has moved to acceptance of reservations while diluting them (e.g., through the so-called economic reservation) It has absorbed gods and goddesses traditionally worshipped by people outside the elite brahminical hierarchy, while ultimately ensuring that the cooption is on the terms of the Sangh. And through sustained scapegoating of Muslims, it has actually managed to make Dalits in many parts of India hostile to the Muslims, so that even real brahminical oppression has not led to Dalits siding with Muslims. One of the ugliest cases in the past was of course the successful mobilization of oppressed castes against the Muslims during the 2002 pogroms in Gujarat.

The scapegoating of Muslims has been done systematically, and taking into account local issues. Thus, in Bengal it is "infiltration". In Assam it is linked to an older anti Bengali sentiment. So while it has variations, there has been generated a massive fear, hatred and anger against the Muslims within a considerable part of the Hindus. While leftists have often pointed out rationally that the Sachar Committee Report and other documents show that the majority of Muslims are actually socially and economically in a worse position than for example Dalits, the BJP-RSS way of handling popular religiosity and promoting the hatred against Muslims rides over such rational arguments.

At the same time, there have been massive institutional shifts. This needs to be understood to recognise the nature of the BJP victory. The BJP had sustained support from most newspapers and TV channels. This is not surprising. It is sometimes said by well-intentioned but totally erroneous commentators that the media has been purchased, the journalists have been purchased. The reality is simple. Most newspapers and television channels are owned by capitalists who are part of the hegemonic bloc that sees the BJP as the sole stabilizing force. So journalists are instructed to take pro BJP lines. The social media was also dominated by the BJP. There were large numbers of paid social media operators sending out messages, cartoons, memes, fake news to vast numbers of citizens. There was the tapping of the UID (Aadhaar) data and its use. There were the shifts in the Supreme Court and the Election Commission. There is no need to accept conspiracy theories like the EC creating EVMs where whatever button is pressed the BJP would get the votes. The EC did other things which were quite visible. This began with the EC waiting till Modi's all India tour of inaugurating various projects was over before it announced the election dates. This continued with the EC giving clean chits to Modi's numerous violations of the Poll code.

From the point of view of funding for the elections, this time there was simply no comparison. The BJP had about fifty times the funds all others had. It was like a super heavyweight fighting with a

number of bantam weight boxers, and the media gleefully attacking the bantamweights for not being able to go the entire distance.

To this we need to add the matter of force and fraud. A vast number of Muslims and Dalits found their names deleted from the electoral rolls and therefore could not vote. During the election campaign there was massive show of force and threats. Thus, Muslims in many UP seats were subjected to threats of various kinds, like Maneka Gandhi, the BJP candidate from Sultanpur, openly threatening Muslim voters that if they did not vote for her, after the elections she would not help them. This is not an empty threat, because the EC's use of EVMs mean that its Form 20 data, released after the polls, allows everyone to check how each booth, or each EVM, voted. This breakdown practically nullifies the secrecy of the vote.

## **The Opposition and the Strategy of the Congress**

The possibility of defeating the BJP rested on forming a wide block of parties. Any such alliance would have been a bourgeois alliance, and there is no question of our supporting it. But an objective analysis would show that whereas in the first half of 2018 the Indian National Congress was keen on moving to some sort of alliance of that type, the victories it got in a few state assemblies changed its outlook.

In UP the major alliance was the Samajwadi Party-Bahujan Samaj Party alliance, which tried accommodating others. But the Congress made huge demands. For the SP-BSP alliance to accommodate a very weak Congress any further than they did (they did not put up candidates in the seats contested by Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi), the Congress had to respond in places it was stronger (Madhya Pradesh, Punjab etc), which it simply did not. The Aam Aadmi Party, which controls the Delhi government, tried negotiations about the Delhi seats but the negotiations fell through. The Left front in West Bengal all but begged the Congress for at least a seat adjustment if not an alliance, but there too it was the Congress that showed disdain.

It was clear that the Congress was more interested in putting itself forward as the only legitimate alternative to the BJP than with winning elections and putting together a coalition government. Its pitch was successful among liberal and soft left intellectuals of certain types, who were urging votes for the Congress. One key element in the liberal arguments for the Congress was that all other parties had at certain times allied with the BJP and given it legitimacy (including the Left front), while the Congress had not. Of course - since the Congress was usually the party against which such alliances had been put together in the first place. Moreover, the Congress took a soft Hindutva policy over a series of issues. In Kerala, where the contest was primarily between the CPI(M) led Left Democratic Front and the Congress-led United Democratic front, there was a Supreme Court verdict that stopped the regressive practice of not permitting women who were of roughly the age when women would menstruate into a temple known as the Sabarimala temple. In order to win the Hindu conservative vote, it was the Congress which aggressively mobilized people, basically demanding that the provincial government should not help any woman trying to enter the temple. Certainly, in Kerala the UDF won 19 out of 20 seats, though not only for that reason. Finally, of course, if we look at the economic policies that the Indian capitalist class, or at least its dominant sections, want, it was the Congress that started pushing for them from the end of the 1980s and particularly in the 1990s onwards.

Why the Congress wanted this seemingly suicidal policy of going alone and ensuring its defeat has to do with its alliance experiences and a strategy it seems to have developed. Alliances, whether with the Left in 2004-2009, or even with regional parties (2004-2014) compel the Congress to give too



much ground on core issues of interest to the Indian capitalists and international capitalism. So the Congress strategy, on looking back over what it did since November 2018, was to appear progressive, as the left of centre alternative to the BJP (a fake appearance) while concentrating on the collapse of regional and left parties. Just one example will clarify this. It was the left that was primarily responsible for the big kisan marches in Mumbai and Delhi. The Congress picked up the rhetoric. But after the November victories, the Congress did not hike the crop procurement prices in the provinces where it won, contrary to its pre-election promises. As a result, when the Congress made an electoral promise to give Rs 72,000 annually to 20% families in poorest of the poor category, benefiting around 25 crore people (the NYAY scheme) in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, it made evidently zero impact. The BJP swept those provinces, bouncing back from its defeat just six months back.

### **The Disaster of the Left:**

For Marxists, discussing the rise of an ultra-right force, the key questions are, what is going to be the line of march in the coming period, and how do we fight it? To answer these questions however, we have to begin with examining the extent of the disaster of the left. [4]

The mainstream left, as it is often called, consists of four main parties - the Communist Party of India, the CPI(M), the Revolutionary Socialist Party, and the All India Forward Bloc. The CPI and the CPI(M) belong to the same current, and the historic reasons for the split are long over. The CPI has repeatedly called for a unification of the two parties. The CPI(M) has in the past rejected the appeal with arrogance, arguing that as it is a bigger party, the CPI should enter it instead. This is something that would also enable the CPI(M) to argue that it remain the "correct" legatee of the undivided CPI, even though in fact today the CPI(M) no less than the CPI is a fervent campaigner for an alliance with the Congress.

What is far more important is the experience of being in government and how it has transformed the mainstream left. The CPI and the CPI(M), emerging from the Stalinised milieu, had not been revolutionary parties at any time in independent India. But they did have militancy, and a degree of focus on extra-parliamentary mass action. Even the toppling of the Namboodiripad government of Kerala in 1959, and the toppling of the United Front governments of 1967 and 1969, did not mean a total rupture with that outlook. But between 1977 and 2011, the Left front was continuously ruling West Bengal at the provincial level, and it also had a long stint in Kerala, alternating with the Congress led alliance. In the small state of Tripura it ruled for a quarter century. These experiences, and above all the West Bengal experience, transformed the CPI(M), not only in West Bengal, but across India. CPI(M) cadres in West Bengal did not take part in any real mass movements since 1977, because only when the government had decided what to concede were fake controlled movements launched. This had an impact at the all India level too. While the left parties and their mass fronts continue to be important (the CITU and the AITUC among trade unions, the AIDWA and the NFIW among women's organisations, the two Kisan Sabhas, etc), movements have become peculiar. Thus is most clear when we look at the working class. There has been unremitting assaults in the name of globalisation and reforms since 1991. The left trade unions have responded by periodic general strikes. The massive support these general strikes have evoked show that there is huge popular anger at the government and ruling class policies. Since 1991 there have been 17 general strikes. Yet the grass root work of rebuilding unions, organising the contract workers, launching struggles or deepening existing struggles, these have been seldom done, either in the provinces where the Left ruled in the past, or elsewhere.

Instead, the central thrust became the question of the popular front, adapted to India. The popular

front is the Dimitrov version of the United Front, which is not an attempt to unite the working class, and behind it the other oppressed, but an alliance between workers' parties and so-called democratic or anti-imperialist bourgeois parties. Its Indian version, originally worked out by two British Stalinists, R. Palme Dutt and Ben Bradley, continues to be the dominant ideological guide for the CPI and the CPI(M). Finding bourgeois allies and contesting elections with them remains their key task.

These two dimensions – the transformation of the mass struggles and the crass electoral line have resulted in a deep transformation of their cadres. The fact that the Left Front in power was capable of distributing patronage, and that its very high votes represented that, not just its ideological strength, was ignored. So the decline in its vote shares from 2009 was not properly understood by its own cadres or even leaders in West Bengal. Once it was out of power, and unable to provide patronage, that mode of securing votes was gone. The Trinamul Congress saw to it that even when left leaders were MPs or when the left won municipalities etc, their funds could not be spent or they would not even get funds. A major example is the case of Siliguri. A Left Front-Congress bloc managed to get the majority and Ashok Bhattacharya of the CPI(M) became Mayor of the municipal corporation. The corporation has not been getting funds, and all road development and other work, along with patronage, in Siliguri, has been done through a bureaucratic agency created by the state government.

To top it, there was the massive violence on the left, unleashed during the last panchayat (rural local self-government bodies) elections in West Bengal. Conducted by the state election commission with the state police 'ensuring' law and order, it saw total mayhem by the TMC. And when that happened, while in some areas the BJP-RSS cadres stood up to resist, even at the cost of being beaten up, the Left leadership simply abdicated. Large numbers of left local supporters, candidates or would be candidates, were beaten up, forced to leave their villages for months, while the leaders confined themselves to statements, dharnas (sit down protests) in front of the state election commission office, etc. This made a large part of the electorate feel that the left was not serious about resisting the TMC and the violence it had unleashed. Meanwhile, as the BJP has never ruled in West Bengal, they did have illusions about the BJP as the alternative force that might resist the violence of the TMC.

In West Bengal, the TMC and the BJP succeeded in achieving a communal polarisation. It has been argued that the Left votes were transferred to the BJP (seemingly plausible because the decline of Left votes and the rise of BJP votes between 2016 and 2019 seem to match). In fact the case is more nuanced. Muslims earlier voting left have often switched to the TMC, as have Muslims voting Congress. Congress won in two seats in West Bengal, but it also saw a decline in its vote share. Many Hindus who had previously voted left voted the BJP this time. But while there have been cases where local CPI(M) leaders have been shown as urging people to vote BJP this is not a systematic case. Those accusing the left of doing so are firstly suffering from the same illusion that the left leaders themselves were — namely that these voters were inert people whose votes the left could transfer wherever they wanted at will. They are anything but that. Secondly, the left lost its deposits in 39 out of the 40 seats it contested in West Bengal. It is ridiculous to argue that there was a set up and a conscious transfer of votes. A covert alliance, or a tacit understanding, between the BJP and the left, would have had to involve the left also getting BJP votes switched in a couple of cases at the least. Finally, had the left not fought with whatever its real and not inflated cadre strength was, there would have been around 8 more seats where the anti-TMC vote would have gone to secure seats for the BJP.

One of the charges that have been levelled against the left, from post modernist intellectuals as well as people claiming to be on the radical left, is that the left parties were bhadrakalok parties, or parties of the upper caste elites, while it was the TMC led by Mamata Banerjee that represents the

subaltern. We cannot discuss this at length here. But even if we look at the elections of 2019, something emerges clearly. In Kolkata, the seat that above all represents the bastion of the bhadralok is Kolkata South. From 1971 to the present, the CPI(M) has won this seat only twice (1980, 1989), while from 1991 to 2011 it was represented by Mamata Banerjee. It was not a subaltern (defined in caste terms) backlash that resulted in the collapse of the left, but its failure to be even a good reformist left (i.e., ensure that extra-parliamentary struggles continue).

### **What to expect and how to resist?:**

The BJP government in the first few days has given clear indications of what we should expect. In brief, it will seek to retain its position as the preferred party of the Indian big bourgeoisie. This means an aggressive attempt to reform labour laws in favour of capital. [5] The draft for a new labour code will now be pushed rapidly, depending on the degree of resistance that can be generated.

In foreign policy, the pro US thrust will be retained, along with something that is distinct to the BJP, namely its extreme closeness to Israel. The anti-Muslim internal ideological politics will be supplemented by anti-Pakistan rhetorics. One especially significant aspect of this is to remember that Balakot was the first case of two nuclear armed states coming into direct military confrontation of the order where one country sends in its air force so deep into another. Much has been written in the Indian media and social media about how many actually died etc. Much more significant is the fact that this happened, and may embolden the BJP to try it again, with aggressive retaliation by Pakistan at some point.

In 2014-2019, the Modi government had already started a process of controlling all segments of the state apparatus. Institutions that previously had some autonomy by law have been gradually brought under control of the Prime Minister's Office. This is likely to deepen.

This means that under a formal retention of "democracy" there will be a steady erosion of all democratic content. The institutional subversions will be backed by the deepening of communalism so that all non-Hindus are relegated to the status of second class citizens. Within a couple of years, it will be likely that the NDA will also have a clear majority in the Upper House (Rajya Sabha). The constitutional changes that the RSS has been pushing for can then be pushed through, making India formally a Hindu Rashtra. We are not predicting that these will all happen, but these will certainly be attempted, and only mass resistance can stop them.

We can expect greater state violence in Kashmir and the attempts to scrap Articles 370 and 35A. There will also be efforts to pass the Citizenship Amendment Bill making it an Act, so that Muslims coming from Bangladesh, Pakistan, or Afghanistan are denied asylum or residency while non-Muslim migrants will find it easier to get naturalization and the right to stay permanently. Muslims across India may be forced to show their officially prescribed documentation or lose citizenship status. This will not only mean they lose their votes, but that they are likely to lose a whole series of basic rights as humans. Muslims are being clearly warned, that if they want to live in the new India they must accept ghettoization, they must not object to the RSS, they must not raise their heads and protest. Here too, what has happened to Muslims in Gujarat since the 2002 pogroms is a template for what will be attempted elsewhere.

The RSS has always had a deep interest in ideological control. This will now involve greater control over education and the media. Curriculum changes are already in the offing. Funding is being linked to loyalty, as well as to a competitive strategy that means that only a handful of institutions will be really high grade, while the rest will be far more easily amenable to control. The appointment of

loyalists to key positions will be another way in which this control will be increased.

Finally, the last five years have also shown that there will be both state sponsored force – the wide use of laws like UAPA, etc, to arrest anyone who protests, the attack on NGOs who talk about issues like environment, health and safety, organic farming, farmers rights, etc.

The three major responses within left organisations and parties to all this are flawed. For the Maoists, the elections do not matter much. Certain Maoist inclined activists have even displayed greater happiness at the collapse of the reformist left than alarm at the growth of the BJP. But their strategy of a protracted Peoples' War is at a dead-end. The focus on forests and extraction from there, along with the appointment of Amit Shah as Home Minister, presages a far more violent war in the core areas of Maoist influence. Unless there is a radical transformation of their outlook, doctrine, and tactics (which essentially means unless they stop being Maoists) there seems no prospect for serious widening of resistance by them.

For the mainstream left it is business as usual. Where even Rahul Gandhi of the Congress tendered his resignation after his party's failure to gain many more seats, the left leaders, hiding under the cover of collective responsibility, actually do not acknowledge responsibility for the disaster to the left. Rebuilding the old left, with a few poultices here and there, one or two face lift operations, will not gain them anything. This is clearly seen by the fact that the CPI(M) daily in Kolkata has been printing news and op-ed articles that do not address this central issue, the devastating blow suffered by the left.

For many activists, the desire will be to say, we must focus on social movements. But unless all such fragments are brought into a coherent and focused politics, these efforts will all be targeted by the Congress and its liberal intellectual supporters each election time in the name of a rainbow coalition.

What we need to understand is that unlike in many other countries where also there has been a rise of radical right or fascistic forces, in India the opposition is divided, including the popular opposition. The struggle against Hindutva, with the RSS having some 36 organisations and over 800 NGOs working within all sectors of civil society, and having an existence of nearly a century, is different from a struggle against say, Bolsonaro. To damage the hegemony of the RSS-BJP calls for struggles beyond the electoral struggles.

This can however be done only by the building of a new, radical left. The forces for them will have to come from the existing far left, from the sections of the reformist left willing to challenge their leaderships and the drift to the right, the social movement oriented left activists, in particular caste activists. A separate discussion is needed to look further at why the Amedkarite movement in its various forms does not provide a full answer. But one key point is, as long as Dalit parties and leaderships try to fight for upward mobility within the caste system rather than its radical overthrow, they cannot get out of the ultimate trap of Hindutva. Also, as we saw, the political project of Dalit unity has often foundered on ambitions of particular Dalit castes. But a revitalized left has to be a left that takes caste oppression seriously.

Any such new radical left has to therefore reject the politics of Stalinism and Maoism, without going to a rejection of building revolutionary parties altogether. In this struggle, Radical Socialist will lay its role, reaching out to organisations and activists for collaboration and unity. Overcoming fragmentation is the call of the day in today's India.

**Kunal Chattopadhyay**

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## P.S.

• Radical Socialist, 08 June 2019 09:59:

<http://www.radicalsoci alist.in/articles/national-situation/859-understand-the-catastrophic-victory-of-the-fascists-and-the-long-term-consequences>

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## Footnotes

[1] The CPI was founded in Tashkent by M. N. Roy in 1920, and in India in 1925. It was to be deeply influenced by Stalinism in both the ultraleft sectarian and the popular frontist ways. It split in 1964 between the CPI and the CPI (Marxist). In 1967-69, Maoists came out of the CPI(M) and in 1969 majority of them founded the CPI (Marxist-Leninist). Followers of S.A. Dange left the CPI after he was expelled in 1981, and set up the All India Communist Party, later merging with other similar forces to create the United Communist Party of India. The CPI(ML) fragmented after 1972. At present there are many Maoist or partially Maoist parties and groups. The most important party sticking to the original Maoist line is the CPI(Maoist), a party created by the unification of the CP(ML) Peoples War Group, the CPI(ML) Party Unity, and the Maoist Communist Centre. The most important CPI(ML) fragment taking part in elections is the CPI(ML) Liberation, which was at one time in a kind of loose alliance with the DSP Australia. Following the results the CPI has renewed its call for a CPI(CPI(M) unity, which the CPI(M) has once again turned down.

[2] See Rohit Prajapati and Trupti Shah ESSF (article 30098), [India – Laboratory of Fascism: Capital, Labour and Environment in Modi’s Gujarat](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article30098):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article30098>

[3] See Kunal Chattopadhyay and Soma Marik, ESSF (article 39155), [India on Strike – “On September 2, 180 million Indian workers participated in a massive one-day strike ...”](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39155):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article39155>

[4] For past assessments of the trajectory of the left see Soma Marik and Kunal Chattopadhyay, The Defeat of the Left front and the Search for Alternative Leftism:  
<http://www.radicalsoci alist.in/articles/national-situation/614-the-defeat-of-the-left-front-and-the-search-for-alternative-leftism>

Kunal Chattopadhyay and Soma Marik, ESSF (article 1037), [The Left Front and the United Progressive Alliance](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article1037):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article1037>

Kunal Chattopadhyay and Soma Marik, ESSF (article 16125), [Elections and the left in India](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16125):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article16125>

[5] Labour law reforms have been discussed from our perspective in ESSF (article 35757), [The One Day All-India Strike on 2 September, Modi’s reforms, the tasks of revolutionaries](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article35757):  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article35757>