India – 2019 Parliamentary Poll: Outcome, Drivers, Consequences – An Exploration

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Contents

- [The Poll Outcome](#)
- [The Landslide in Historical](#)
- [Two Advance Signals](#)
- [The Drivers](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

Intro

The 7-phase 17th Lok Sabha poll had commenced on this April 11th and concluded on May 19th, covering 542 of the total 543 constituencies. Polling in the remaining constituency, in Tamil Nadu, stands deferred. The counting commenced on May 23rd and concluded the next day.

The broad outlines of the outcomes were, however, available on the first day of the counting itself.

The incumbent regime came back to power with a bang.

Never before, in the recent past, India was so keenly awaiting the results, because never before in the recent past India stood so sharply divided.

So much so that the *Time* magazine described Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi as India's "divider in chief" on the cover of its May 20 issue [1]. Modi's picture was on all international issues of the magazine except the United States edition.

The cover story [2], written by novelist Aatish Taseer, has the headline: "Can the world's largest democracy endure another five years of a Modi government?" A second one [3], however, by Ian Bremmer, treats Modi far more positively, suggesting that Modi is "India's best hope" for economic reform.

Even otherwise, much before that - on March 15, a parliamentarian from the ruling BJP, since 1996 with some gaps in between, Sakshi Maharaj - also a saffron-robed Hindu monk, had predicted that after 2019, there will be no election in 2024.[4]

Even before that, on Jan. 25th, "(i)n his customary address to the nation on the eve of the 70th Republic Day, President Ram Nath Kovind Friday [had] said [5] that the 17th Lok Sabha election is not 'once-in-a-generation' but 'once-in-a-century' moment".

All in all, the extraordinary salience of this poll, broadly mirroring that of the 1977, was widely acknowledged.[6]

The Poll Outcome

In a nutshell, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in a "landslide" victory, won 303 seats (out of total 242 for which polls were held), up from previous 282, and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance won 353 seats. The Indian National Congress won 52 seats - up from 44, and the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance won 91. Other parties and their alliances won 98 seats.[7]

In as many as 16 states and UTs together, the BJP secured more than 50% of vote shares.[8]

Nationally, the BJP's vote share was 37.36% - up from 31.34%, while the Congress secured 19.49% - down from 19.52%.

In terms of vote share, the next three largest parties are: AITC (4.07%); BSP (3.63%) and SP (2.55%).

However, in terms of number of seats, DMK - a Congress ally, is the third largest party with 23 seats - all from Tamil Nadu.[9]

One of the other notable aspects is that the Congress failed even to open its account in Rajasthan - with total 25 seats, won a lone seat in Madhya Pradesh - out of total 29, and only 2 out of 11 seats in Chhattisgarh.[10]

Congress had won the state assembly polls in these three states, under the same leadership, displacing the ruling BJP, led by Modi-Shah duo, just about six months back.[11]

It, however, did fairly well in Punjab - winning 8 out of total 13, where it had scored a convincing victory in the last assembly poll in early 2017. Its vote share rose marginally, as compared to the assembly poll - from 38.5% to 40.12%.[12]

It did rather spectacularly - more so, keeping its overall dismal performance in mind, in Kerala, winning 15 out total 20 seats and its alliance partners another 4, conceding only 1 to the CPI(M) - the leader of the ruling coalition in the state.

In Tamil Nadu, it won 8 out of total 38, as the second largest partner in the DMK-led alliance.

The CPI(M) is down from 9, last time, to 3 - 2 in Tamil Nadu, as a constituent of the DMK-led alliance, and 1 in Kerala, as the leader of the ruling LDF.

It could not secure even the second position in any of the seats in its erstwhile bastions - Tripura (2) and West Bengal (42).

The AAP is down from 4 (all in Punjab) to 1 (in Punjab).

Last time, it had come second in all the 7 Delhi seats and 1 in UP (Varanasi).
This time, it conceded the second position to Congress, in 5 out of the 7 seats in Delhi. Did not contest from Varanasi.

The AITC is down from 34 to 22 seats (all in West Bengal), with a small rise in vote share.

The BSP is up from 0 to 10 (all in UP, in alliance with the SP and RLD), with some fall in vote share.

The DMK is up from 0 to 23 (all in Tamil Nadu), with some rise in vote share.[13], [14]

The Landslide in Historical Perspective

The poll outcome, this time, has been dubbed by quite a few media outlets, very much in tandem with their roles all along, as TsuNaMo (= Tsunami + Na(rendra) Mo(di)) or its various variants.[15]

The label may be pretty well justified in terms of its (devastating) impact on the psyche of too many Indian citizens.[16]

And, it is also a fact, this is by far the best performance by the BJP ever.

This time, it has won 303 seats and secured 37.36% vote share as against 282 and 31.34%, last time, the best till then. Its previous best performance had been in 1998: 182 and 25.59%.[17], [18]

So much so that even "sober" analysts have now started terming it as the confirmation of India's transit, commencing in 2014, from, the now extinct, "Congress system"- a term coined by an eminent social scientist, late Rajni Kothari [19], to denote the dominance of India's multi-party democratic polity by the Congress, to a new"BJP system".[20]

So, it won't be quite out of place to have a relook into what was the "Congress system".

In 1952, the very first general election, the Congress had won 74.2% of the total seats, as against 3.3% by the second largest party and 45.9% vote share as against 10.6% of vote share. (The second largest parties in terms of seats and vote share were different.)

In 1957, 75.1% of seats and 47.8% of votes, whereas the second largest, in terms of seats - 5.5%, and the one in terms of votes - 10.6%.

In 1962, 73.1% and 44.7%. The second largest in terms of seats - 5.9% and the one in terms of votes - 10.0%.[17]

In all these three polls the Congress mascot had been Independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

The "Congress system" did not only mean the dominance of the parliament by the Congress but the states as well.

Nehru would pass away in 1964.

The "Congress system" suffered a very major jolt in 1967, by losing a number of state assembly elections.

The INC suffered significant losses in 7 states which included: Gujarat where INC won 11 out of 24 seats while Swatantra Party won 12 seats. Madras where INC won 3 out of 39 seats and DMK won 25 seats. Orissa where INC won 6 out of 20 seats and Swatantra Party won 8 seats. Rajasthan where INC won 10 out of 20 seats Swatantra Party won 8 seats. West Bengal where INC won 14 out of 40. Kerala where INC won only 1 out of 19. Delhi where INC won 1 out of 7 while remaining 6 were won by Bharatiya Jana Sangh. The decline in support for Congress was also reflected by the fact it lost control of six state governments in the same year.[21]

That, essentially, signalled the end of the "Congress system".

Nevertheless, even in 1967 parliamentary poll, the Congress had won 54.4% of seats and 40.8% of votes. The closest opponents: 5.9% and 10.0%.

In 1971, in the parliamentary poll, the Congress faction led by Mrs Indira Gandhi would, however, score a very convincing victory: 68.0% and 43.7%. The nearest opponents: 4.8% and 10.4%.

The number of seats won by the Congress, as compared to its vote share, came down because higher index of opposition unity.

Regardless, the era of unilateral dominance by the Congress party had ended in 1967 itself.

The Congress, under Indira Gandhi - post-Emergency, suffered an ignominious defeat in 1977, with its vote share plunging to 34.7% and seat share to 28.4% - this time as a result of across the board opposition unity coming on top of widespread popular revulsion against the Emergency. The party that replaced the Congress in the parliament was, for all practical purpose, a coalition of parties, which could not hold together for far too long.

The era of coalition, effectively, got inaugurated.

The Congress would, however, reach its peak parliamentary poll performance in 1984: 78.6% of seats and 49.1% of votes. The nearest opponents: 4.3% and 7.7%.

But, that would prove to be just a flash in the pan, which had been, understandably, triggered by an extraordinary situation marked by bloody Khalistani movement in Punjab, consequent Hindu exodus, capture of the famed Golden Temple by the armed militants, followed by the "Operation Blue Star" by the Indian Army causing a large number of deaths and severe damage to the temple, the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister by two of her Sikh bodyguards, sparking off massacre of Sikhs in Delhi and also elsewhere.

The "national security" card was used by the Congress, now led by the just deceased Prime Minister's only surviving son, to the hilt.

To that extent, the just concluded poll bears an eerie resemblance with that one.

The fall of Congress, since '84, has been fairly steep.

The "Congress system", as it appears, had been born with Jawaharlal Nehru as the first Prime Minister of India and withered away with his death.

Regardless, this time, the BJP has won 51.93% of seats and secured 37.36% of votes. The Congress, the nearest opponent, in terms of both seats and vote share: [21].40% and 19.49%.[13]

Moreover, except for Kerala, the Congress had, till 1984, fought the general elections, by and large, without any ally. That's far from the case with the BJP.

Even leaving aside the situations in the states, the present situation can hardly be bracketed with the Congress dominance till 1967, not even during the period from 1971-84, barring 1977-80.

There is, of course, a more salient dividing line separating the two – while the "Congress system", despite some serious aberrations, operated broadly to strengthen the "Idea of India", that underpinned the Indian Constitution, this time, that very notion is faced with a mortal threat.

More later.

Two Advance Signals

Even before the actual counting of votes began, two advance signals, as regards the likely outcome, became available. One, explicit, the other, implicit.

The obvious signal was, of course, the results of the various exit polls, released after the conclusion of the final phase of polling on May 19th.
The exit poll projections, however, widely diverged.

While the India Today-Axis predicted (around) 352 seats for the (BJP-led) NDA - with a clear and emphatic majority by a margin of (around) 80, and (around) 92 seats for the (Congress-led) UPA, the NewsX-Neta, at the opposite end of the spectrum, predicted 242 for the former and 164 for the latter, and, thereby a hung parliament with the NDA enjoying a clear advantage.[13]

It is specifically in this context, the second (implicit) signal became significant.

Reproduced below is an introductory comment [22] to a mail posted by this analyst on May 21.

Considering the provisional figure of 67.11% of polling this time, it's a rise of 0.71% points over the preceding poll in 2014 (66.40%, as reported by the wiki).

2014 itself had seen a jump of a rather phenomenal 8.50% points: 66.40% - 57.90% (as reported by the wiki).

The outcome was that since 1984, for the first time, a single party did win absolute majority, even if it had fought the poll in alliance with a few others and its vote share of 31.34% was the lowest ever for a party winning absolute majority.

The fact that the voting %age has further gone up, even if only marginally, would tend to indicate a wave, given the phenomenal jump in the preceding poll.

The only plausible candidates available to cause a wave are Pulwama/Balakot and anti-minority prejudices/anger.

The Nyaya (read: NYAY), in any case, meant for the bottom-most 20% of the populace, most difficult to be accessed, is hardly a competitor.

The other likely candidate could be strong disaffection with the present dispensation - the hoax of "Acche Din".

But, that'd have, normally, had brought the polling percentage down, not pushed it up.

Btw, exit polls, almost unfailingly, miss the magnitude of a large swing.
But, all these are, admittedly, speculations.

One'll have to wait for the 23rd, just two days away.

In the event, the NDA won 353 and the UPA - 91.13

That is pretty close to the projections made by one extreme of the spectrum of exit polls - by India Today-Axis.

The Drivers

The last time, the BJP, as an opposition party, had polled 31.34%.
It may not be too irrational to assume that, by that time, it had accrued a rather stable/core support base of at least around 20% - 2/3rd of its total votes polled.

In 2009, it had polled 18.80%, in 2004 - 22.16%, in 1999 - 23.75%, 1998 - 25.59%, 1996 – 20.29 and 1991 – 20.04%.[17], [23]

Thus, around 20% may be taken to be rather steadfastly committed to the ideology of "Hindutva" – an Indian shorthand for Hindu nationalism/supremacism.

The last time, Modi could gather around additional 10% points over and above its (presumed) core support base.

The reasons were, as it appeared then, mainly the following:

I. Rampant corruptions indulged in by the outgoing UPA-II and, the preceding, UPA-I. The public perception of the corruptions was triggered by the then CAG reports and court cases and, further, sharply aggravated by the agitation led by Anna Hazare – an ex-military man, paraded as a Gandhian, collaborating with a Hindu Yoga guru-cum-entrepreneur having a large fan base, Baba Ramdev, and aided by among others, his the then lieutenant Arvind Kejriwal.

II. The consequent "policy paralysis" on the part of the government, as trumpeted, especially, by the corporate media.

III. Modi being able to raise and communicate these issues from his campaign platform, with telling effect, and his promise to end corruption, bring back black money – accompanied with the alluring assurance of depositing Rs 15 lakh in every poor/salaried person's bank account.[24]

IV. This was further accentuated by his call of "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas!" [25] (With All, Development of All!). Also tersely captured in the slogan/promise of "Acche Din!" [26] (Better Days!).

This had gained considerable credibility based on the, skilfully constructed and forcefully propagated, narrative of "Gujarat (the state of which Modi was the Chief Minister by then for well over a decade) model of development".[27]

IV. The last, but not the least, was resort to (accentuated) communal polarisation, in a calibrated and targeted manner, aided by the Muzaffarnagar riot in western UP.[28]

While the collapse [29] of the "Acche Din"– the enchanting promise of better days, should have had effected significant erosion in the floating votes gathered last time, Pulwama-Balakot, or rather the (concocted?) narrative[30] built around it, aided by a conniving EC and blared ad nauseam by the obliging, and "patriotic", media - the electronic even more so, made it a surefire game changer.

The ruling party, in a way, got merged with the (brave) armed forces of the country.

Modi claimed and got the full credit for the (presumed) resounding slap delivered by the Indian forces in the face of Pakistan.

He would thus urge the (first-time) voters: "can your first vote be dedicated to the veer jawans (valiant soldiers) who carried out the air strike in Pakistan. Can your first vote be dedicated to the

veer shaheed (brave martyrs) of Pulwama (terror attack)?"[31]

"Ghar Me Ghus Ke Marunga" [32] (I'd finish you off, by invading your holes!) - the shrill cry emanating from the Indian Prime Minister, was, arguably, the most emblematic campaign line of the Modi-BJP camp.

The main opposition in the field, the Congress, found itself utterly helpless.
It could neither challenge the narrative - that might have had proved even more disastrous, nor posit an alternative narrative with matching appeal, more so, given the biased nature of the media.

The "NYAY" - in any case, ostensibly directed at the bottom-most 20%, presumably, the most difficult to be accessed, was just no match, even if one sets aside the issue of credibility.

Despite the, apparently, spirited fight-back, the inevitable has happened.

A wave of nationalist jingoism unfailingly helps a right-wing party, particularly, if in power.

Thus Vajpayee had scored a clear victory in the 1999 poll, on the back of the Kargil War – facilitated by a monumental failure of the military intelligence on the Indian side, despite the far premature and ignominious collapse of the coalition government led by him. He would, however, suffer a defeat, next time (2004), unaided by any such surge, despite successfully running the coalition, this time round.

Moreover, no factor is a stand-alone entity.

The surge of jingoism emerged out of the latent, or even overt, feelings of animosity towards the (hated) "other" – the Muslims, persistently cultivated [33] by the regime.

The surge only helped to cross the tipping point, to propel the voter vote for Modi/BJP, despite all his glaring fiascos – on the economic front, in particular.

Reproduced below is a rather longish, nevertheless worth citing, extract from a recent write-up [34] carried by a South Asian journal:

Five years later, barring qualified progress in some areas – toilets, roads, renewable energy, cooking gas – Modi's promise of vikas has turned out empty. Even governments we rate below-average have arguably delivered similarly spotty progress, as in the preceding UPA regime. Make in India, Skill India and Digital India mostly remain slogans. Demonetisation showed the gaping idiocy and dangerous autocracy in Modi's decision-making, which callously overruled the advice from experts that only a miniscule amount of black money was in cash. Far from raising India's prestige and soft power in the world, the press in Europe and North America mostly brackets him and his movement with dubious figures like Trump, Putin, Ergodan and Bolsonaro. Modi has said the climate is not changing, our tolerance for the weather is. He holds asinine views about ancient Hindu feats in genetic science and cosmetic surgery. Despite a historic windfall from low oil prices, he now presides over a deepening farm crisis, an economic slowdown and the highest unemployment in 45 years. Vikas?

In 2014, Modi ran on a platform of vikas but mostly delivered Hindutva. In 2019, he ran on a platform of Hindutva, with little talk of vikas, smart cities, beti bachao, black money, or Skill India. In 2019, Modi wore his religion on his sleeve. He and his party incited fear of the 'other' and made dog whistles and thinly veiled threats of violence and genocide. He gave Lok Sabha tickets to noted communal bigots of the RSS, including one who calls Godse a patriot. So what can we rationally expect from Modi this time? Even less vikas, I think, when the mandate is clearly for Hindutva,

paving the way for the far right's dream of a Hindu Rashtra, a state legally conceived not as secular but a Hindu polity and whose structures and institutions are based on the forms and priorities of Hindu culture and religion.

So how did Modi win this time? A big part of the answer is the powerful opium of Hindu nationalism. The BJP won because a great many Hindus are high on Hindutva. The Sangh Parivar has learned to exploit the well-known cultural inferiority complex of the Hindu middle class, which grew out of India's colonial encounter with Europe. Alongside, they stoke fears that a billion-plus Hindus are under siege by Muslims, refugees, leftists, Pakistan and pesky "anti-nationals." The well-funded propaganda arms of the BJP and Sangh Parivar spread a lurid and manufactured sense of historical hurt, key to sustaining Hindutva nationalism. Run by an army of paid trolls, they fan both hate and pride by peddling fantasies of past greatness, military might, superpower dreams, surgical strikes and fake news. The ordinary Hindu's sense of history is now filled with malicious lies and manufactured resentments against pre-colonial Muslim rule and he wants to settle the score by punishing today's Muslims.

* * *

During the voting season, I'd predicted that BJP's decision to lead with Hindutva and its cynical post-Pulwama airstrikes would be a winning strategy. It more than offset their failures on the economy – a trick that countless demagogues have tried. Stated differently, the BJP's actual performance on the economy became irrelevant against the joys and psychic highs of Hindu pride and nationalism, which the BJP stoked, playing the people like a fiddle. The BJP turned hate and anger into an animating, intoxicating and rallying force – risking the unleashing of even darker forces that, in time, they may not be able to control. Among other big contributors to the BJP victory were a brazenly partisan media that stumps for Modi and cultivates support for authoritarian rule; high octane propaganda on social media; and a hopelessly divided political opposition, who undercut each other's votes in India's first-past-the-post system.

That's fairly comprehensive.

However, it does appear to severely underrate, though not outright overlook, the salience of the Pulwama/Balakot factor [35] in the last poll.

In fact, with the Election Commission very much on his side [36], Modi, further accentuated its effect, making a mincemeat of the Model Code of Conduct, via a nationally televised address to announce the successful firing of an anti-satellite (ASAT) missile in the outer space – the first time for India [37], when the poll process was already on.

(In fact, it looks rather miraculous that for the bulk of post-poll analyses – across the lines, Pulwama-Balakot – so very glaring, as if, just never happened!)

Consequent to the stirred up jingoist surge, Modi could further reinforce the strongman (56") image – built up assiduously over the last five years using the official machinery to the hilt, of himself.[38]

Other than that, another analyst [39] puts spotlight on three (presumably decisive) factors: Money – highly asymmetric access to financial resources (largely engineered via a controversial Act, legislated through stealth, for the specific purpose [40]), (Electronic Voting) Machine and Media – acting, by and large, as a partisan player.[41]

The point made regarding the EVM is, however, pretty much controversial [42].
The social media, manipulated by a huge troll army, also, predictably, played some part [43].

Apart from toilets (under Swacch Bharat), Ujjwala (cooking gas for poor households) – as mentioned in the extract reproduced above, regardless of patchy performance, the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi [44] also appears to have played a role. So did rural housing scheme [45].

But, these sundry factors – including 10% reservation [46] for "economically backward" members of the castes/groups not till then covered by the provisions of "reservation", in themselves, cannot but be anything more than minor add-ons.

The main and, in fact, the only national opposition – relentlessly campaigning against the ruling Modi/BJP, the Congress, presented a fairly decent poll manifesto.[47] But, with its limitations of resources – in terms of finance, as compared to the ruling party, organisational structure and, perhaps most importantly, the way it was treated by the mainstream media, it failed to reach out.

Apart from that, its masthead slogan – Ab Hoga NYAY [48] (Now Justice Will Be Done), had, apparently, a basic design flaw. One, the NYAY scheme, meant to give out substantive cash doles to the (economically) bottom-most 20% households held no promise for the rest 80%. Two, it had the issue of credibility [49] – whether it could be really implemented, given the financial constraints and structural limitations of government machinery. Three, it might have had even evoked adverse reactions, in various degrees, from the rest 80% - out of envy from those just falling beyond the limit and the better off ones, in particular, conceiving it as a forced waste of their "hard-earned" money. Fourth, the bottom-most 20% is, in any case, conceivably the most difficult to be accessed.

Its main attack line against the BJP was: Chowkidar Chor Hai! [50] (The Guard Is A Thief!). It was, primarily, based on the visibly murky Rafale jet deal steered by none other than Modi himself. But, the roles played by the Supreme Court [51], the CAG [52], the financial watchdog, and, most of all, the media [53] turned out to be pretty much unhelpful. Consequently, it also failed to find a resonance.

The failure of the opposition parties to form a united national alliance - a la 1977, to confront the BJP – apparently, quite a non-feasible proposition - as it appears, eventually mattered rather little.[54]

Just stunned by the official outcome, some of the opponents – both party and non-party, of the regime have claimed that the BJP victory has been engineered by way EVM tampering by the ruling party.[55]

This, however, has been rather compellingly negated [56] by one running a fact-checking website [57] and enjoying considerable reputation for objectivity despite known leftist political inclinations [58].

The same issue(s) had been dealt with in even greater details [59] by an expert, associated with the opposition CPI(M) [60], drawing similar conclusions:

It is not our argument that Indian EVMs are hack proof. No machine built by anybody, however competent they are, can be made free from hacking by skilled hackers. We have argued that it will require physical access to the machines – whether in the factory or outside – to carry out this hacking.

As we have described in detail while discussing the administrative procedures, the EVMs have to pass the various verification procedures that involve representatives of political parties. These checks require that political parties understand and have an informed participation in these processes. Apart from physically verifying the EVMs, there are also randomisation procedures that involve the presence and participation of political party representatives.

Therefore, hacking such a system can be done only with a massive conspiracy, and with either the wilful participation of the opposition parties in this conspiracy, or their complete ignorance of what is going on.

Nevertheless, the final conclusion drawn by this author needs be taken with all seriousness and implemented.

Finally, elections must not only be fair but also seen to be fair. Therefore, our argument is that the ECI must not use the VVPAT as just an ornament forced on it by the Supreme Court, and do a token verification. It should do a real verification by tallying the paper slips of the VVPATs with the electronic count in the EVM. Only then will the ECI be able to put to bed the suspicions people have of their votes being hijacked by a ghost in the machine.

Moreover, the process of filing complaints on observing discrepancy between the button pressed and the paper trail displayed needs be made more complainant-friendly than it is now.

There should also be mandatory counting of all paper trails where the winning margin is 1%, or below, of the total votes polled.

Lastly, a look at how the voters have voted.

The votes cast, as is well-known, are anonymous.

Even then, surveys by non-government institutions are carried out to explore the profiles of the support base for various contesting parties.

At least three noteworthy analyses [61] are available in the public domain. These are not congruent.

Yet, the essential point that emerges is that the BJP has, this time, further consolidated Hindu support, across caste divides. But, it, nevertheless, still enjoys more support from the rich and upper castes, even though there has been a sharper rise in case of lower castes, including Dalits, and Adivasis. In stark contrast, little support from the non-Hindus - 10% or thereabout.

All in all, Hindutva in combination with Modi's carefully constructed image as a strongman riding on the upsurge of jingoism triggered by the narrative built around Pulwama-Blalkot trumped his rather dismal failure on all other fronts and very much neutralised the opposition campaigns.

The roles played by the (supposedly neutral) Election Commission and the mainstream media were, apparently, of huge significance.

Also the grossly disproportionate access to financial resources.

Of course, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are the two most glaring exceptions. There are a few others as well.

But, the BJP virtually swept the heartland, except in Punjab.
What Now?

As far as the opposition camp is concerned, the first response to the defeat is dismay and disarray.

The main opposition party Congress, with its President, Rahul Gandhi, announcing his decision to quit his post regardless of the urgings to the contrary by its highest decision-making body, Congress Working Committee (CWC), is still in turmoil.[62]

Others also appear to be rather nonplussed.

The case of the West Bengal Chief Minister is an illustrative example.[63]

The Muslims, the bete noire of the BJP (and its ideological anchor organisation, the RSS), are, apparently, dispirited.

Some eminent Muslims have, reportedly, written [64] to the Prime Minister welcoming his address on May 26 to NDA MPs and offered "utmost cooperation" to him in reaching out to the community.

Another, known name from the community, has, on the contrary, in a reasoned and spirited appeal [65], urged the community to make common cause with "(l)iberals, social democrats, socialists, communists, large sections of the underprivileged, the poor, and sections of scholars" in the fight for dignified survival.

Obviously, all these are indicative of the ongoing turbulence within.

The BJP – the Modi-Shah duo, in particular, is, obviously, only too elated.

Modi is taking this opportunity also to refashion the organisational power structure.[66] What, however, is far more germane in anticipating the developments in the coming days is that the BJP/RSS has a project - to supplant the "secular" and "democratic" Indian state with a "Hindu Rashtra" (Hindu nation state) - the contours of which are, understandably, not etched in stone, but, even then, would mean complete negation of substantive democracy and pluralism. Of still greater salience, the journey towards it has got to be propelled by constant stirring up of hatred and violence against the constructed inimical "others", in order to mobilise the Hindus as "Hindus", drowning out all other competing identities.[67]

Taking off from that basic proposition, the new regime is likely to have two major focal points on the "political" front [68]:

I. Dismantling of all opposition - both party and non-party.

Towards that, dislodging, maybe even dismissal, of, at least a few, opposition-run state governments.

ED, IT, CBI raids on opposition politicians; also, in some cases, buying out.

Tightening the screw, in a myriad ways – including enhanced digital surveillance, also as regards the civil society organisations and dissenting individuals.

II. Sharply spiking communal polarisation by way of (phased?) nationwide roll-out of the NRC [69], also scrapping of Art. 370 (and Art. 35A) [70] and putting to good use the Mandir-Masjid issue(s) [71], as per the demands of the situation.

Other expected developments are:

(i) Further intensification of non-state physical violence.[72]
(ii) Mega sale of PSUs.[73]
(iii) "Economic reforms".[74]
(iv) Stepped up trashing of environmental norms and safeguards.[75]
(v) Tightening the grip over the education infrastructure and institutions.[76]
(vi) Further defanging of watchdog institutions.[77]
(vii) More repressive laws, if felt necessary.

While the actual (detailed) work plan will evolve and be calibrated, based on the perceived ground situations, and be punctuated with some measures to project a "people-friendly" image78 – to confuse and divide the potential opposition, there is little scope that the general direction would be anything significantly different from the one sketched out above.

It would no longer be business as usual, not even by the standards of the last five years.

Conclusion

Modi 2.0 very much presents us with the looming threat of the dismantling of the "India" - embodying the values of "democracy", "pluralism" and "egalitarianism", that had been wrought out in the crucible of the epic freedom struggle and, in the process, finally emerged on the 15th August 1947 - in pursuance of a project to supplant it with a "Hindu Rashtra" (Hindu nation state) - by mobilising the Hindus of India as "Hindus", drowning out all other identities linked to language, culture, gender, caste, class etc., constantly stoking hatred and violence against the constructed inimical "others".

Regardless of all the (innumerable) flaws and shortcomings that "India" – real and even notional, encapsulates, the success of the above project would prove to be an unmitigated disaster for the vast majority of the people inhabiting this land.

What could offer at least some chance to avert such a predicament is a broad front/fronts: consisting of political parties, as many as possible - including their associated mass organisations, and non-party civil society organisations - based on the common agenda of saving democracy/democratic rights and unity of the country. Backed, actively, by right-minded, otherwise diffused, individuals. On top of the, ongoing and to be taken up, myriad specific issue-based struggles, by various constituents in their own ways – unitedly or independently.

Determined and consistent resistance has got to be offered on all available terrains – including parliamentary, legal, media (both traditional and new) and the streets, and in spaces – political and civil.

It is, admittedly, a stupendous task given that (i) the regime has the levers of the state power under its control – providing it with a disproportionate advantage to set and control the narrative (Pulwama-Balakot being a graphic illustration), and (ii) coming on top of its not too inconsiderable success in vitiating the "Hindu" psyche, via persistent and diligent work, by the RSS and its myriad affiliates, over decades and decades.

Moreover, much of the "opposition" may start melting away even before the real fight starts.

However, one has no option but to hope against hope and fight back.

Sukla Sen, 15 06 2019

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