

India: The Shape of Things to Come

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In the wake of the recently concluded 2019 elections India has been dubbed a “majoritarian democracy”. In the near future, it is very likely that more emphasis will be placed on “majoritarian” and less on democracy. The essence of Indian democracy so far has consisted of adherence, no matter how flawed in practice, to the liberal, secular Indian constitution with its promise of equal rights for all, including minorities.

It is no secret that with the unexpectedly sweeping victory of BJP in recent elections the rights of minorities will come under severe threat and calls to amend the secular constitution and replace it by Hindu Rashtra will resound more strongly. In fact, the day may not be far off when India is rebranded as the Hindu Republic of India in symmetry with the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

The rise of strongmen labeled “populists” ventilating the grievances of their supposedly victimized majorities is a trope of modern politics. Modi is very much a part of the phenomenon that has installed Erdogan in Turkey, Orban in Hungary, Trump in the US, Bolsonaro in Brazil and Duterte in the Philippines. India is however a special case in some respects. It was born out of a hugely destabilizing partition of British India on religious grounds based on the political fiction imported from 19th century Europe that nations need to be created on grounds of religious identity. Pakistan, counter to the belief expressed by its founder Jinnah on the eve of independence, soon morphed into an Islamic Republic an identity it has struggled with ever since. The founders of India who had led the freedom movement against British Raj, Gandhi, Nehru, Azad and others, opted for a secular state in which the people of India were all citizens with equal rights regardless of religious identity or other differences. This conception of India was strongly contested by Hindu fundamentalists who had played no role in the freedom movement but once the departure of the Raj grew near these forces mobilized under the banners of the RSS and the Hindu Mahasabha. The two nation theory, viz. that Hindus and Muslims constitute different nations, was formulated by the Hindu leader, Savarkar, over a decade before its adoption by the Muslim League in their demand for Pakistan. The leaders of RSS and the Mahasabha were great admirers of 1930s Germany and Italy as is easily gleaned from the writings of Guru Golwalkar of RSS and B.S. Moonje who praised both Hitler and Mussolini. Hindu fundamentalists were very critical of Gandhi who was probably more authentically religious but whose espousal of non-violence and love even for Muslims was anathema to them. In fact, just a few months after independence Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic who had once belonged to RSS.

Narendra Modi comes squarely from the line of RSS workers; he was an RSS pracharak (preacher) for much of his younger life and since joining politics he has never deviated from the hardline views of RSS except on rare occasions when it was politically expedient. His most notable “achievement” as chief minister of Gujarat was presiding over the pogrom of Muslims in his state in 2002. His stunning victory as Prime Minister of India in the 2019 elections demonstrates the extent to which his hardline Hindutva (i.e Hindu-ness) rhetoric cast in militaristic, jingoist terms and aimed at effectively demonizing the minorities (approximately 20% of the population) has captured the minds of a large number of Hindu voters making India into another majoritarian democracy.

A few months ago in December 2018 assembly elections in three Hindi heartland states, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh where BJP had ruled for many years, saw BJP defeated by Congress. Farmer distress and suicides, joblessness, and numerous scams and scandals like Vyapam seemed to have had BJP and the Modi-Shah duo on the run.

But what a difference a few months made. Whether by accident or by design or some fortuitous combination of both, the Pulwama incident occurred and suddenly Modi shifted into a higher and altogether different gear. Sabka saath sabka vikas (economic development for all) that had propelled Modi to power in 2014 was sidelined and forgotten. In its place came surgical strikes, the anti-national opposition parties, military posturing and the image of the strongman indispensable to the nation's security. Strident Hindutva was not forgotten either. The most flagrant if not outrightly bizarre example was the nomination of the terrorist bomber Sadhvi Pragya Thakur, currently out on bail, as the BJP candidate for Bhopal who promptly decided to flaunt her Hindutva credentials by praising Mahatma Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse as a patriot. Even stranger she was elected showing how deeply Hindutva propaganda has now entered the minds of the voters in the Hindi belt. Predictably, Modi as he often does when someone from the Sangh Parivar says or does something flagrantly outrageous, gave her a proverbial slap on the wrist while letting her use the resources of the BJP to extol the Mahatma's murderer. If some foreign politician had dared to utter what Sadhvi did, he or she would have been reviled by the Indian media. But it is commonly acknowledged that the Indian media by and large acts as an echo chamber for Modi.

To add to whatever image Modi projected that was swallowed whole by a majority of Indian voters are two factors that strongly impacted the result. One is money; the amount of resources that the BJP controlled are estimated to have exceeded by several times the resources of all the other parties combined. The opaque (and likely corrupt) electoral bonds scheme floated by BJP in the last budget are estimated to have brought the party 95% of all the bonds purchased. The other is the presence of almost 2 Crore (twenty million) RSS "kayakartas" (workers) who were paid to influence voters in thousands of voting locations. Commentators have also written about the smarter campaign BJP ran compared to the opposition in key states. However, even given the enormous financial advantages BJP enjoyed, the fact they were able to get inside the head of so many Indian voters shows clearly that Modi is the new avatar of what Indira Gandhi once was. People voted for him not the candidate on the formal ballot.

His huge victory, even larger than 2014, raises a number of questions about what will happen in the next five years. A few surmises can be safely made. All potentially independent or quasi-independent official bodies will be curbed to the fullest extent. This has already happened to a large degree with the once fiercely independent Election Commission that displayed a degree of partiality towards Modi in 2019 unimaginable in earlier elections over the last two decades. Modi Bhakts and trolls will be much more emboldened to attack and threaten journalists who dare to question Modi and the regime. What has been happening to the journalist Ravish Kumar of NDTV is truly shameful. For daring to criticize Modi, he and his family have been openly threatened with being killed by Hindutva goons who are not afraid to utter their threats in person in U-tube videos. The police have offered no protection instead they are doing a "threat assessment". Random mob lynchings of Muslims and Dalits by gaurakshaks will doubtless increase and the cattle and meat trade will come to a screeching halt increasing the high rates of joblessness faced by minorities. The remaining Hindu terrorists on trial (one of them is now an MP) responsible for killing over a hundred people in terror bomb attacks on the Samjhauta express train, Hyderabad's Mecca Masjid, Malegaon, etc. etc. will doubtless all be quietly released as the cases against them collapse due to political pressures on the police and judiciary. Attacks on minorities and regime critics identified as threats reminiscent of fascist Europe will multiply and the police will turn a blind eye as they did when Jewish homes and businesses were vandalized by Nazi thugs in Germany. Central Universities will be purged and

Hindutva hacks will be brought in to administer them as is already happening to some extent. Sedition charges against students, academics, and intellectuals will be brought increasingly if they dare to critique policies of the regime on any number of contentious issues. To summarize, it is more likely than not that the premise of a liberal constitutional order will be eroded gradually or swiftly depending on political expediency. Elections will lose meaning as a meaningful opposition is reduced to a mockery. Importantly, the out and out communal Citizenship Amendment Bill that has already passed in the Lok Sabha and awaits ratification in the Rajya Sabha, that could reduce many Indian Muslims to non-citizen status, could be passed shortly creating a veritable existential nightmare for millions of people. A dark night is about to descend on the India envisaged by its founders.

The only possible “kala” in the “daal” of the BJP (i.e. a potential obstacle) is the (maybe uncertain) future Indian voter. None of the “acchhe din” (good times) promised by Modi in 2014 arrived for the average person. A handful of billionaires have definitely flourished during his rule, the Adanis and the Ambani. No doubt they have rewarded, if not him since he is reputed to be personally incorrupt, certainly his party lavishly. But a certain amount of anxiety persists among the Indian middle class as evidenced by an article appearing in the business magazine Moneylife geared to the average upper middle class in Mumbai. In an article entitled Modi Sarkar 2.0, they state that Modi 1.0 was largely geared to his role as economic miracle maker that promised development for all and a business friendly regime, which endeared him to the global media. But the 2.0 election was fought on a completely different platform of Modi the strongman savior of India against the opposition who were soft on Pakistan, etc. However, the magazine asks that the many economic problems that beset the nation: Indian farmer suicides, youth looking for jobs, the failures of demonetization, the chaotic nature of the goods and services tax, huge non-performing assets at public sector banks that will need to be recapitalized at government expense by middle class taxpayers, corruption in the implementation of the Bankruptcy Code and in infrastructure projects, all of these will need to be addressed in Modi 2.0. But the magazine nervously gives a long laundry list of what Modi 2.0 should do rather than what it will do. Perhaps it is genuinely uncertain of what this regime actually can do given the shoddy record of Modi 1.0 and the large number of shady characters it harbors who are themselves highly corrupt and crony capitalists.

Finally, one could view the situation of the opposition parties to assess what their future holds. The grimmest is the state of the Indian Left led by CPM which could win only one seat from Kerala where it forms the state government. In West Bengal where CPM ruled for 34 years until it was ousted by Trinamool Congress in 2011, it could not win a single seat and 39 of its 40 parliamentary candidates lost their deposits. It was widely reported that many CPM voters and cadre went for BJP to give a lesson to Trinamool. Data shows that this percentage of votes that went to BJP in Bengal largely came from CPM’s share in the last election. So this CPM segment believed that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend”! Some friend! The decline in Tripura was as precipitous. Even in Kerala, where BJP failed to win a single seat, the victory went to Congress. It would be tautological to affirm that the Left must introspect on its performance. Congress is being blamed by various left-liberal observers who want Rahul Gandhi ousted. However Congress essentially bested the BJP and its allies in three states: Punjab, Kerala, Tamil Nadu (with its ally DMK), and was able to win small numbers in a bunch of other states. While its tally of 52 seats falls short of the 55 required to obtain the status of the Opposition Party, nevertheless its performance was better than many other opposition parties. The SP-BSP alliance in UP underperformed while AAP drew a blank in Delhi where it rules with an overwhelming majority in the state assembly.

Clearly the 63% of the Indian people who did not vote for BJP need to develop and contribute to their own struggles if BJP and Modi do not respond to their own needs and demands or respond to them in an oppressive and unjust fashion.

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