

The Indian Catastrophe - The April-May 2019 Elections

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India's elections show that right-wing Hindu nationalism has achieved total hegemony over Indian society.

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Even among opponents, it was widely believed that though the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would remain India's single largest party, even perhaps by a large margin, after the country's elections, it would definitely fall short of a majority. Few would have dared to predict the eventual outcome. Topping its single majority tally of 282 out of 543 Lok Sabha seats in 2014, the BJP has now breached the three hundred mark while its vote share has jumped from 31 percent to 38.

The reasons for that earlier prediction seemed well founded. In the three previous general elections the single most important factor determining election outcomes was the state of the economy. In 2004 its failures brought down the BJP-led coalition government; in 2009 better performance returned the coalition government led by the Indian National Congress (INC) to power; and in 2014 its deficiencies, allied with Modi's central campaign slogan of "development for all," secured for the first time after thirty years, a single party majority for the winning party — this time the BJP which, with pre-poll allies gathered under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), has formed the government.

This time the economic situation was a mess. Widespread agrarian distress provoked major farmer mobilizations, joblessness (particularly for younger newer entrants into the job market) reached new peaks, and accelerating inequalities of income and wealth created stronger comparative dissatisfactions. And in the Hindi heartland region of North and Central India where the BJP has been most strongly entrenched, in the late 2018 provincial assembly elections held in the three such states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Chattisgarh, BJP administrations were replaced by Congress governments. Surely this was a sign of a shift away from the BJP to the Congress and other regional formations?

In the all-important state of Uttar Pradesh, having the single largest number of eighty Lok Sabha seats, the electoral alliance this time of the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Socialist Party, with their bases among significant sections of the Dalits and middle castes respectively (put together, their vote share was equal to that of the BJP in 2014), along with anticipated support from Muslims (nearly 20 percent of the state's population), was expected to seriously erode the BJP's seat tally.

In the campaigning for the latest general elections, the BJP avoided references to the economy, making its central planks unity and national security supposedly threatened from without by

Pakistan and Muslim migrations from neighboring states, and from within by Muslim (and secularist) hostility to, and distance from, the culturally Hindu foundations of Indian nationalism. Such dangers then could only be warded off by the stewardship of “our” Hindu strongman, Narendra Modi.

The Congress focused on the deteriorating state of the economy, promising special policy measures for the poor but not daring to confront the BJP on its chosen ground for fear of being branded as “Muslim appeasers” while sharing (as did other opposition parties) the BJP’s projection of a more belligerent and militaristic nationalism.

As to the final outcome: the BJP maintained its hold on the Hindi heartland states, in the west (Gujarat and Maharashtra), and on its one southern bastion, Karnataka, while expanding for the first time into the Eastern region in Orissa and, most importantly, into West Bengal, where it never before had a serious presence. Here, it was a close second (eighteen seats) to the dominant and ruling regional party, the Trinamul Congress (twenty-two), with the mainstream left parties completely wiped out in their historical stronghold, getting no seats while the INC got the remaining two. Only the south remains relatively unconquered.

A Tectonic Shift

A far-right authoritarian populism that has consciously sought to establish mass identification with a “supreme leader” as the embodiment of the “popular will” has triumphed. There are unmistakable similarities here with the carefully constructed appeal and style of fascist-type formations.

On one side there has been this shift towards greater personalization of politics. This has been a growing feature over time promoted by the policy convergences of the main contenders for power while the technological transformations in the forms and patterns of mass communication have made the skills of image projection increasingly influential for a public whose attention span or interest in rational debate and argument has diminished.

On the other side there is the huge activist base of the BJP and even more importantly the literally millions of cadres belonging to one or the other of the organizations that together form the cohort called the Sangh Parivar or “Family.” These cadres screwed down the ideological moorings of Hindu Nationalism with its Modi exemplar where it did not exist, and reinforced those moorings where it already existed.

Post-2014, economic frustrations and anti-incumbency could lead to victories for the Congress in the assembly elections of MP, Rajasthan, Chattisgarh, and for a new Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) emerging in Delhi taking sixty-seven out of seventy seats. Come 2019, in all four there was a BJP sweep of nearly all Lok Sabha seats.

In the arena of competing Indian nationalisms Hindu nationalism has not just expanded its geographical reach but raised its emotional intensity. At one time it could have been said that a fringe, mobilized by the forces of Hindutva, truly hated Muslims. Although in absolute numbers quite large one could argue that, relative to the total Hindu population, this fringe was small. Yes, a much larger section of Hindus was no doubt indifferent to the plight of Muslims who as a broad category belong (along with Dalits and Tribals) to the most deprived sections of society. But, as these elections show, no longer is there room for such semi-comforting illusions.

A much stronger spectrum of emotions concerning Muslims from fear to contempt to anger to hatred now prevails among much wider sections of Hindus. When a fiery, hate-filled woman preacher, Sadhvi Singh Pragya, a murderer accused, is not only put up as a BJP candidate but can in the

course of her campaigning declare her admiration for Godse the assassin of Mahatma Gandhi and yet win by a margin of over three hundred thousand over the nearest other candidate, then we have every reason to be shaken. Modi himself made viciously communal statements during his campaigning (some other BJP candidates were as bad or worse) which according to existing rules should have led to his punishment by the Election Commission. The EC by a majority refused to take any such steps indicating how suborned this institution, among others, has already become.

What Now?

The INC has garnered fifty-two as compared to its earlier forty-four seats. Had it seriously wanted to forge a broader electoral alliance with other regional parties in the Hindi heartland then it would have had to make significant concessions to their ambitions to grow outside their existing areas of influence in those very states where the Congress was relatively so much stronger than them. For the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and Socialist Party (SP) accommodating the Congress in UP had to be balanced by substantial favors for them in MP, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, and even Jharkhand. AAP's willingness to join hands with Congress in Delhi where it is the ruling party was to be traded for concessions by the ruling Congress party in Punjab.

But after November 2018 and the successes in the assembly elections of the three heartland states the Congress in a newfound hubris decided that it should prioritize its own growth as a national force by winning as many seats possible for itself which in turn meant putting up the maximum number of candidates everywhere. Its strategy has comprehensively failed. Despite its status as the second party it is now like the other opposition parties merely a regional force. Those other parties have no national, let alone international, vision or program but are simply locked into the limited horizons of wanting to strengthen and expand beyond their existing sectoral and regional bases.

The Congress Party is talking of revamping itself and of possible leadership changes away from the dynasty. But this is to dodge its problem — it has to establish a distinctive ideology and vision for itself and cannot do this. It shares too much with the BJP. Nationally, the Congress will not move away from a soft Hindutva. Indeed latest developments will lead to many internal voices demanding more open courting of Hindu majoritarianism. Nor will it abandon the pursuit of neoliberalism but may push for a more compensatory version. Internationally, The Congress wants to building a “strong India” on much the similar lines upheld by the BJP. More likely in the coming years is not rejuvenation of the Congress but a split or breakup though this cannot be deemed certain.

As for the new BJP administration it is again the transformation of the domestic arena that will be its paramount concern. Regarding the economy, the BJP will do everything to sustain its current status as the preferred party of Indian capital and push policies accordingly, including a more systematic assault on the power of organized labor.

This was already presaged in Modi's first term by a draft paper on ushering in a new labor code which the administration can now, with minor concessions, depending on the strength of resistance, make into law. As in the first term, some selective welfare sops for a deeply atomized labour force may well feature. Similarly, in foreign policy there will be more of the same: consolidating the strategic relationship with the United States against China plus two BJP flourishes — deeper connections between India and Israel, possibly more muscle-flexing and bravado vis-à-vis Pakistan.

One can be sure that the political executive, headed by the prime minister and his office will go all out to control and suborn all the institutions that exist within the broader umbrella of being government agencies but have by law substantial autonomy of operation from that executive. These range from the repressive apparatuses to top investigating agencies to central and state educational

bodies to the civil services to the top economic and financial watchdog bodies like the Reserve Bank of India. What was started and pursued in Modi's first term is hardly going to be abandoned.

Furthermore, the creation and consolidation of an "ethnic democracy" i.e., of a Hindu India and state in which other religious minorities are to be reconciled to their second-class citizenship status, must involve major changes in laws below the level of the Constitution. With the NDA having close to a two-thirds majority in the lower house and the possibilities arising for gaining a majority in the upper house during the next five years, there will be efforts as well to bring in constitutional amendments of the kind that the BJP and the Sangh Parivar have always wanted. How successful they will be remains to be seen but the effort will certainly be made.

One can summarize the ambitions and the policies and actions it is now likely to pursue under four basic themes: 1) Expanding its political presence and dominance even further and thereby permanently eroding and displacing all opposition parties. 2) Keeping Muslims in their place. 3) Not eliminating the structures of democracy but hollowing it out from within. 4) Ideological homogenization:

1. The BJP secured enormous funding from corporate donors through the deliberately opaque (to all but the government in power) system of such donors having to purchase from select government-owned bank branches "anonymous" electoral bonds in favour of their chosen party. In these elections well over 80 percent of all funds raised from donors went to the BJP. Using this money power one can be sure that the new central government will seek to depose opposition-controlled state governments, the Congress certainly, but others also will need to watch out.

2. There will be the application of a much harder line and greater repression in Kashmir. There will also be strong efforts to pass the Citizenship Amendment Bill making it an Act whereby Muslims coming from Bangladesh, Pakistan, or Afghanistan are denied asylum or residency while non-Muslim migrants will find it easier to get naturalized status and permanent stay. The National Register of Citizens may well be extended to the whole country making it easier to expel Muslims who don't have officially prescribed documentation to prove their citizenship status while non-Muslims caught in the same web will not suffer such treatment.

As part of the process of pushing for the further ghettoization and terrorization of Muslims, routinized micro-level violence against Muslims by Hindutva acolytes serves as a stimulus to this end, and will essentially go unpunished by law and order forces subservient to local political authorities in BJP-ruled states. For Muslims matters are clear. Accept the new India. Keep your heads down in your ghettos. Functional interactions and work exchanges are okay but don't socially intermingle with Hindus. Don't publicize your faith let alone indulge in conversions. Don't politically resist the BJP or Sangh by joining or supporting other parties and show this obedience by politically and electorally supporting the BJP. In return we can let you leave in relative peace but on our terms. These injunctions are in fact being followed by many Muslims in Gujarat setting the BJP desired template for elsewhere.

3. Leaving to one side the opposition parties, to monitor and subdue actual or potential resisters among civil society actors and groups including recalcitrant NGOs, popular movements against this or that aspect of our government policies or against our Hindutva beliefs and practices, existing antidemocratic and repressive laws such as those on sedition, impunity for armed forces no matter their crimes, preventive detention on mere grounds of suspicion of terrorism or of possibly carrying out unlawful acts — must all be retained. In addition, stronger and newer mechanisms of surveillance must be put in place and making the holding and wider use of the Aadhar (personal identification) card obligatory will help.

4. To bring about much greater ideological homogenization the key is to have greater and lasting control of a) educational institutions, public or private, and b) the media. The first can be pursued through curriculum changes, regulation from above, appointment of loyalists and sympathizers to teaching positions, harassment of private institutions unwilling to cooperate. Regarding the print and electronic media one can use money power and government pressures to suborn them. But social media cannot be controlled in the same way. Here, the presence of Hindutva narratives must be maximized through troll armies and closer relations with digital giants like Facebook, Google, and WhatsApp which, as basically business enterprises, will see the value of cooperating with governments in various ways including prioritizing their messaging.

A Long-Term Struggle

Hindutva is not just hegemonic but is here to stay for a considerable period of time. Its rise has been part of a worldwide phenomenon one of whose key underlying causes has been the material and emotional turmoil created by a globalizing neoliberal economic order but expressed politically and culturally in nationally specific ways. But it is a much longer-term problem and threat than other forms of right-wing authoritarian populisms/nationalisms elsewhere. There are two major reasons why this is the case. First, no other far-right force comes close to matching the Sangh Parivar's implantation in the pores of Indian civil society. We are talking of a party, the BJP which in 2016 claimed over a one hundred million members, admittedly because a mobile phone call is enough to secure such membership. But this still says something about the size of the constituency which is sufficiently attracted as to want in this way to become at least passive members.

Besides the BJP there are three other all-India bodies belonging to the Sangh such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or World Hindu Council; the Bajrang Dal (Lord Hanuman's Troops) comprising mostly lumpens and unemployed youth who attack marked-out targets absolving other Sangh affiliates from responsibility for violence; and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) or National Volunteer Corps, in many ways the fountainhead of the Sangh with some five million members and close to sixty thousand branches all over the country that meet daily, weekly, and monthly for their members, differentiated by age, profession, and motivational levels.

The RSS has around three dozen affiliates, ranging from associations of ex-servicemen, scientists, accountants, etc., to one of the largest trade-union federations, a peasant organization, a women's organization, and the biggest student wing. It has the country's largest network of private schools, the Vidya Bharati and close to eight hundred NGOs working in areas of disaster relief, health, and development.

Second, in the various countries seeing the rise of right-wing and far-right populisms whether from above or below, such as The Philippines, Brazil, France, Hungary, Poland, etc., there remain in these countries other political parties of some significant strength which separately or in combination can hope or expect to prevent their opponents accession to state power or over time displace it from that pedestal.

In India one party is hegemonic also because the whole of the opposition is so fragmented and weak in comparison that even jointly they don't match up. The issue is not that the BJP's electoral dominance is permanent or incontestable. Future electoral reversals in response to BJP governing failures or in reaction to acute crisis situations, economic or otherwise, can propel even a rag tag bunch of smaller parties including the Congress (assuming it is around) to collective prominence even at the center. Rather, it is the question of progressively eroding the hegemony of Hindutva whether somewhat modulated at times, or not.

This is the central task and there is no option but to recognize that this more fundamental struggle is going to be a very long one. There is one development that could suddenly foreshorten this time scale. That would be the emergence of a dramatic political shift to the left in one of the advanced capitalist countries such as in United Kingdom or the United States because the much more interconnected character of the world means political and social, and not just economic, shock waves in one part of the world travel faster than ever to other parts. But barring such unforeseeable and unpredictable events what are the ways to go about this struggle in India? I will suggest five possible pathways which do cross and connect with each other at times but have their own distinctive directions and ultimate goals.

First, work to revamp and rejuvenate the existing parties in opposition. Here, there is no getting away from the Congress Party. In the immediate aftermath of these elections a division among liberals has occurred. One side says the Congress should fade away by merging itself as but one input into the construction of a wider coalition or body that is more than a stitching together of separate parties with different interests, programs, and aims. The other side insists that for all its limitations, the Congress is still the tallest among the opposition forces and alone among them, has a continuous history and record of repeated rule at the center as well as being the principal legatee of the secular and democratic values created by the National Movement and the Constitution, no matter how tarnished its role as a carrier of this political tradition has been. According to my earlier outline of what the Congress is and where it is going, this is not the path one should tread, especially since it does not give sufficient weight to the fact that all these parties remain beholden to capital and support in one way or the other the neoliberal project.

Second: it is still a fact that objectively speaking, the continental size and incredible cultural diversity and social complexity of the country creates real and powerful obstacles for Hindutva's homogenizing project. So put one's faith not on any of these failed and failing parties but on the still many progressive peoples and social movements that continue to exist and dot the Indian landscape in so many places. Here the crucial question becomes how to connect them together. The one major effort to do this — the National Alliance of Peoples Movement (NAPM) set up in 1992 — has been very limited in its overall political and electoral impact. There are other reasons for believing that contra Manuel Castells a "network of networks" is not the organizational path that will bring about a dramatic social and democratic transformation.

Third: One of the weak spots of Hindutva, it is said, is caste. So creating a unity of Dalits with the lower and most backward sections of the middle castes is crucial. Once established this will be the hub around which other oppressed sections can coalesce. Lower caste rather than working-class unity is the key. It is true that there since the late 1980s there has been Dalit and lower-caste assertion but it is important to understand why this has not been a serious barrier to the growth of Hindutva once the Sangh accepted reservation policies for the middle castes as well as for Dalits and Tribals. Talk of this caste assertion being nothing less than a "second democratic revolution" was always misleading.

Given the enormous sub-caste divisions among Dalits and among other lower castes, the formation of caste blocs to assert themselves is always partial and limited, excluding other sub-castes within the Dalit fold; the same holding true for middle-caste mobilizations generally led by the upper ranks within the intermediate castes. The aim of this assertion facilitated by the kind of leadership it got was to rise up. This did not mean becoming a higher caste or sub-caste (those older patterns of behavior through what has been called Sanskritization, i.e., emulating the beliefs and practices of those higher up) but seeking to improve one's status and existing position in three key respects — achieving a stronger sense of dignity by getting greater respect or recognition; materially improving one's condition; and finally, getting a hold of the levers of political power. To do this there had to be caste coalitions with other, including higher, castes.

The crucial point however, is despite all the references to the inspiration provided by Ambedkar, the political leadership among Dalits and lower castes never sought to overthrow the caste system and organize the lowest castes to the maximum extent possible. Rather, it sought instead to rise up within the caste framework.

For Ambedkar, Hinduism and the caste system was an inseparable whole hence Dalit freedom, but not destruction of the caste system, could be accomplished through abandonment of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism. The most revealing fact is that the proportion of such neo-Buddhists since Ambedkar's conversion has remained very small and stable. Most Dalits and lower castes have not converted to Buddhism but have remained within the Hindu fold and thus very open to messages espousing Hindu pride as well as sharing common sentiments that scapegoat Muslims for personal insecurities.

Meanwhile, those sub-castes at the bottom which have not benefited from this "second democratic revolution" have been resentful of those sub-castes among Dalits and the lower ranks of the middle castes who have monopolized placements provided through the reservations policy in education and government making them easy fodder for the Sangh. In the latest elections in some 65 percent of the constituencies where only Dalits and Tribals can stand as candidates, the victors belonged to the BJP.

Fourth: the mainstream left parties, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) remain the only hope. The less said about this view the better. Long reduced to primarily an electoral force with a diminishing cadre base that clings to old Stalinist verities when it does think about Marxism, their cadres with a few exceptions in a few places, have lost the capacity and interest in pursuing the politics of popular mobilization around genuine and justified grievances. The crisis facing these parties is much worse than that facing the Congress. Collectively, these two parties secured only one seat in the other supposedly left bastion of Kerala, and obtained four seats in the Southern state of Tamil Nadu, courtesy only of their pre-poll alliance with the far from leftist party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) or Dravidian Progressive Conference.

Finally, the last and to my mind the only realistic option is the creation of a new much more radical left force through a process which for a long time will be one of molecular accumulation but beyond a critical point its growth can become much more sudden and dramatic. Central to this process will be the development of ideologically trained and disciplined cadres involved in concrete struggles on multiple fronts and guided by a larger transformative vision of building a capitalism-transcending socialism whose democratic character will be much deeper than anything capitalist liberal democracy can hope to provide.

The struggle to destroy the hegemonizing drive of Hindutva cannot be separated from this other counter-transformative project of constructing a democratic socialism. If this sounds completely fanciful it is not for two reasons, one both national and international, the other, specifically Indian.

First, contemporary capitalism is not capable of resolving three life threatening-problems which because they are so serious will always generate widespread and growing anger and concern and therefore activism at a mass level that can and must be integrated and channeled to become a powerful transformative force. (i) There will continue to be mass deprivations with denial of basic needs such as health, education, social security, concurrent with the most shameful levels of inequality of income and wealth meaning that there is no global scarcity of resources to eliminate such deprivations for all. (ii) The capitalist despoliation of the environment is damaging in unforeseen ways the delicate balance in the relationship between the global eco-system and the living patterns of the human species. (iii) The dark clouds threatening nuclear war remain in the firmament even as the location over which they cast a shadow shifts.

The second reason specific to India is that up and down the country, there is the presence of various groups and independent activists involved in various progressive struggles who still see themselves as radical and revolutionary leftists even as they have through their own experiences become disillusioned with the hitherto two dominant traditions of the Indian Left — Stalinism and Maoism. There is therefore fertile ground to be ploughing and we need to get on with it.

Achin Vanaik

P.S.

• Jacobin, 05.30.2019:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/05/india-elections-bjp-modi-hindu-nationalism>

• Achin Vanaik is a writer and social activist, a former professor at the University of Delhi and Delhi-based Fellow of the Transnational Institute, Amsterdam. He is the author of *The Painful Transition: Bourgeois Democracy in India* and *The Rise of Hindu Authoritarianism*.