

---

# INDIAN ELECTIONS: A TIME TO BE HOPEFUL

Rohini Hensman

**T**hanks to its electorate, India's reputation as the world's largest democracy stands vindicated. Defying the pollsters and analysts, who with a few exceptions were predicting a sweep by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance even after the first phase of polling, voters took the opportunity to register their outright rejection of the politics of hatred and violence. How can we explain such a reversal of the BJP's fortunes?

## Hype versus Reality

**T**here were two basic planks in the BJP's election strategy. One was their 'India Shining' (in Hindi 'Bharat Uday') campaign, on which they spent over four-and-a-half billion rupees of public money: the picture of India as a prosperous, almost-developed country, doing well in every conceivable way. The other was a personal and sometimes extremely nasty attack on Sonia Gandhi, the leader of Congress, who has been an Indian citizen for more than twenty years but is Italian-born. The attacks on her ranged from saying that having her as Prime Minister would be like going back to foreign rule, to scurrilous statements by Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi to the effect that he would not employ any member of the family as a chauffeur, or rent them a house, etc.

Obviously, the electorate was not impressed. Part of the reason was a vigorous counter-campaign spearheaded by Sonia Gandhi, and the introduction of charismatic youngsters, especially Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi and Jyotirao Scindia, into the Congress fold. Sonia Gandhi also learned from the debacle in 1999, when Congress tried to go it alone, and this time crafted alliances with a range of secular parties. But these factors by themselves probably would not have been sufficient to shift the result dramatically. In many parts of the country, Congress waged a lack-lustre campaign. The final result was as much or more a negative vote against the BJP.

Most commentators felt that the 'India Shining' campaign and L.K.Advani's 'Bharat Uday Yatra' backfired. To the overwhelming majority of the population, struggling to obtain the bare necessities of life, these slogans could only seem like a cruel joke, emphasising the fact that they had no place in the BJP's India. And to a large number of activists who regarded the BJP as a threat to democracy, the whole campaign, as well as the unethical use of public money to plug a particular party, were obvious targets for criticism. For example, the 'Vote With Your Conscience' campaign based in Bombay brought together activists from various groups – Insaaniyat, Ekta, Insaf and the Forum Against Oppression of Women – who researched and produced a booklet and factsheets entitled 'Is India Really Shining?' in English, Hindi and Marathi. Widely distributed in Maharashtra but also sent out to other parts

of India, they demonstrated the hollowness of the so-called 'feel-good factor', providing factual justification for those who were not feeling so good and couldn't see the shine. The huge and mounting fiscal deficit and footloose foreign exchange underlying the supposedly shining economy, widespread malnutrition and actual starvation deaths while foodgrain stocks overflowed and rotted, denial of potable water to large sections of the population, systematic destruction of jobs in the formal sector, infant and child mortality rates worse than in many of the Least Developed Countries in Africa, per capita government expenditure on health way below the levels in Mexico, China or even Sri Lanka, high levels of illiteracy, especially among females, and by far the largest number of child workers in the world – as someone remarked, the picture could better be described as Darkness at Noon rather than India Shining!

Clearly, one thing evident from the election results is that people do not appreciate being treated as fools and fed with lies. Telling you that your country is shining after you have been left to starve and die is adding insult to injury, and anger is an understandable response.

## Justice and Democracy Undermined

**T**he other major issue taken up by non-party anti-BJP campaigners was the unleashing of communal hatred and violence by the party and its associates such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Much of this was all but invisible to those who were not tracking the movements of the RSS family: for example, inculcating communal prejudice in lakhs of schoolchildren, and taking over educational funding institutions in order to do the same at university and research institute levels. But the visible tip of the iceberg was the genocide in Gujarat which began in February 2002, and whose fallout is still very palpable in 2004. The methods used by the BJP to deal with this range from Narendra Modi's 'gaurav yatra' – a perverted affirmation of pride in the fact that thousands of rapists and murderers roamed free in Gujarat – to statements by Atal Behari Vajpayee and L.K.Advani that the carnage was a regrettable but inevitable consequence of the burning of a coach of the Sabarmati Express at Godhra.

Unfortunately for the BJP and fortunately for the activists campaigning against it, the Best Bakery case hit the headlines right in the middle of the four-phase elections. Fourteen people were burned alive when the Bakery was torched in Gujarat in March 2002. Survivor Zahira Sheikh filed cases against members of the BJP and associated organisations whom she identified as attackers,

but then retracted her charges, and all the accused were acquitted in court proceedings that were a travesty of justice, with prosecutor and judges on the side of the criminals and their henchmen intimidating the witness. Subsequently, encouraged and supported by Citizens for Justice and Peace, this courageous young woman revealed the harassment she had been subjected to, reiterated the charges, and appealed to the Supreme Court to have the case transferred out of Gujarat.

On 12 May 2004, Justices Pasayat and Raju passed a judgement not only granting her request, but also condemning what had happened in Gujarat in extremely strong language: 'When large numbers of people including innocent and helpless children and women are killed in a diabolic manner it brings disgrace to the entire society. Criminals have no religion. No religion teaches violence and cruelty-based religion is no religion at all, but a mere cloak to usurp power by fanning ill feeling and playing on feelings aroused thereby... The fanatics who spread violence in the name of religion are worse than terrorists and more dangerous than an alien enemy.' The police and judiciary were also criticised: 'The justice delivery system was allowed to be taken for a ride, abused, misused and mutilated by subterfuge. The investigation appears to be perfunctory and anything but impartial, without any definite object of finding out the truth and bringing to book those who were responsible for the crime,' and the state-appointed prosecutor was accused of acting more as a defence counsel! Most damning of all, perhaps, were the comments on Modi's government: 'The modern-day Neros were looking elsewhere when Best Bakery and innocent children and helpless women were burning, and were probably deliberating how the perpetrators of the crime can be saved or protected.'

## Divergent Interpretations of Hinduism and Indian Culture

As lawyers pointed out, such criticism could easily justify dismissing the state government; the fact that the central government did nothing of the sort, but on the contrary used Narendra Modi in their campaigning, could only mean that the BJP-led NDA government condoned the destruction of justice and democracy that had been perpetrated in Gujarat. At a packed meeting organised by Insaaniyat in Bombay on 24 April to express public support for the judgement, hundreds of signatures were obtained for a statement saying that 'We, the undersigned, welcome the Supreme Court judgement of 12 April 2004 delivered by Justices Raju and Pasayat in the Best Bakery case as an example of all that is finest in our society and our judicial system... The judgement alerts us to the dire danger facing our democracy when 'fanatics who are worse than terrorists' are repeatedly excused not only by the police, judiciary and State Government of Gujarat but also by the Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of India. Justice is a central pillar of democracy; when the former is destroyed, the latter collapses. We value the Supreme Court's determination to restore the credibility of our judicial system in the eyes of the world and safeguard our democracy...'

The elections have been portrayed as a result of the rural poor voting against the BJP, but this tells only part of the story. The BJP did no better in major metropolitan centres; for example in Bombay and Delhi, where Congress had virtually drawn a blank in 1999, the tables were turned in 2004. The urban poor as well as sections of the middle classes and even the elite rejected the NDA this time, and at least part of the reason is the alarm aroused by the BJP's abandonment of the rule of law. Participants in the Insaaniyat meeting were an unlikely combination of the usual feminist, trade unionist and Leftie suspects, with academics, film actors and directors, artists, legal luminaries and even representatives of the corporate world. Two days later, the largely elite constituency of Bombay South voted out a veteran BJP candidate in favour of a Congress greenhorn. It is certainly true that members of minority communities, especially Muslims, voted almost en bloc against the BJP, but this alone cannot account for the rejection of the NDA by a majority of the population.

Conversely, the possibility that Italian-born Sonia Gandhi might become Prime Minister, which most commentators saw as more or less clinching a BJP victory, does not seem to have bothered most voters. Indeed, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, where Modi and Jayalalita waged a virulent campaign against her, were among the states where the NDA suffered major reversals. As CPI(M) leader Jyoti Basu pointed out, Sonia Gandhi is as much an Indian citizen as anyone else, and the racist definition of citizenship which the BJP and others like Jayalalita endorsed is not Constitutional. Faced with a choice between a foreign-born Indian who was defending democracy and an Indian-born Indian who was undermining it, the majority of voters opted for the former.

There is a clear contrast here between the conception of Indian culture as inclusive and diverse, which was affirmed by the electorate, as against the narrow, exclusive definition of the RSS and BJP, which was rejected. And it is surely significant that a majority of Hindus rejected the violent, communal interpretation of their religion fostered by the RSS in favour of a more broad-minded and humane interpretation. This was a vote for a secular, democratic vision of Hinduism and Indian culture as much as it was a rejection of the callous elitism of the BJP.

## Role of the Left

The Left Front played a critical role in the defeat of the BJP by rejecting the idea of a Third Front - which in previous elections had split the secular vote and enabled the BJP to come to power - and by pledging its support to a Congress-led government. Emerging with over sixty seats, it was the third largest alliance, and its ability to work out a feasible programme with Congress will be crucially important to the stability of the new government. One obvious area in which their interests coincide is in stamping out the political influence of Hindu nationalism as much as possible. Clamping down on hate propaganda, for example. And an intervention in schools, where the Left has been curiously inactive,

thus leaving the arena wide open for the RSS. Providing all children with at least a good, secular elementary education and ensuring that secondary and higher education is along similar lines would go a long way towards wiping out the retrograde influence of the RSS in education. The fact that Murli Manohar Joshi (the fanatical Hindu nationalist Human Resource Development Minister in the BJP government) actually lost his seat indicates that there is a democratic mandate for such a step. Having reduced history to myth and introduced Vedic mathematics and Astrology as Science, it was his attempt to take control of the Indian Institutes of Management that finally alerted the elites in the country to what he was doing to education. A systematic reversal of his policies as well as an all-out drive to satisfy the right of all children to a rational, scientific education should certainly be part of any common agenda.

It is in the area of the economy that problems are likely to arise. But these need not be insurmountable, so long as both Congress and the Left are willing to go back to first principles. At Independence, Congress stood for social justice and welfare, and if it returns to these principles, updated to the conditions of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it could chalk out a programme which the Left can support. Conversely, the Left parties originated in a Marxist outlook that was internationalist to the core, and if they return to the idea of working for a just and caring global order rather than confining themselves to a narrow economic nationalism, they can fight for a programme that Congress could support. For example, the Public Distribution System needs to be revamped in order to eliminate not only starvation deaths but also widespread malnutrition, and basic healthcare should be available to all: these can be points in a common programme. Laws like the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), which embody a violation of democratic rights, need to be repealed. The systematic assault on workers' rights, to the point where even the less-than-seven-per-cent who still have some rights were expecting to lose them if the NDA came back to power, needs to be decisively reversed. If this is done by insisting that workers not only in India but in every country of the world are entitled to at least the rights guaranteed by the ILO Core Conventions, India will not lose investment nor become less competitive as a result. Bringing all workers within the orbit of labour legislation would automatically create employment by reducing inordinately long

working hours (currently estimated at around 12 per day) to the statutory limit of 48 per week, and even more employment could be generated by reducing this limit to 40 per week and assisting the formation of workers' cooperatives, both rural and urban. Constitutional guarantees of equal rights and opportunities regardless of sex, caste, religion, or any other difference should be embodied in legislation and enforced meticulously. Very modest changes, none of which are against the principles of either Congress or the Left, and yet, if they are introduced, it would constitute nothing less than a revolution.

This would also be an appropriate time to strengthen and develop regional cooperation among the SAARC countries, eliminating trade and immigration barriers in the region. Perhaps the most positive outcome of the recent India-Pakistan one-day and test cricket series in Pakistan was the number of Indians who came back entranced by the warmth and hospitality of the Pakistanis. One cricket enthusiast who was interviewed on television said that a single day in Pakistan was enough to wipe out twenty-five years of prejudice: 'It's a lovely place,' he concluded. Making South Asia a visa-free zone would encourage far more people-to-people contact, and create an appropriate framework for the resolution of the Kashmir dispute. In general, the new government should reorient India's foreign policy to support human rights internationally, distancing India once again from the war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide perpetrated by the US and Israel.

In many ways, the outcome of the Lok Sabha elections has been the best that could possibly have been envisaged under the circumstances. Taking this advantage further depends almost as much on the Left parties and non-party Left as on the government. Manmohan Singh has promised economic reforms with a human face, and we might reverse the priorities: social reforms without plunging the economy into crisis. But there is space for negotiation, provided the government practises budgetary transparency and activists take the trouble to specify where the money for social spending should come from. After long years of near-despair, it is a time to be hopeful. ■

**Rohini Hensman is a free-lance writer living in Bombay.**