

India votes in 2019: A trendsetter for majoritarian politics and populism

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Abstract

This SADF Focus outlines the onset of the 17th General Elections in India between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Grand Coalition of parties, which includes the Congress. Political campaigns currently swing between divergent areas – we witness a great variety of promises, including ‘India/Hindu First’ propaganda and strong promises related to poverty removal, promise of employment, and others. Come this 23rd May, the counting of votes would define a choice between majoritarian politics and populism.

Drawing battle lines for the upcoming general elections in India

India is by far the largest democracy on Earth - 900 million registered voters will be casting their votes in the coming months of 2019. Such a large country demands complex organisation; the voting process will take place through no less than seven rounds occurring between the 11th of April and the 19th of May. The Election Commission (EC) will announce the results of the 17th General Elections (*Lok Sabha*), which will set the country’s political-social-economic agenda for the next five years, on the 23rd of May. The Model Code of Conduct, which regulates political parties and candidates prior to the electoral process and ensures free and fair elections, has been issued by the EC on 10th March 2019 (Sinha, 2019). Interestingly, before the enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, the Indian Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi - along with Member of Parliament(s) - have been sprinting

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from one location to another for the inauguration of development projects. These projects focus on areas such as urban development, improvement of quality of life in rural areas - benefits such as cooking gas and electricity – and the inauguration of public infrastructure such as Hindon’s (Uttar Pradesh) operational air base and public conveniences such as metro lines in Delhi and Noida (Uttar Pradesh). The propaganda relating to these developments has been propagated on social and electronic media platforms, transiting the idea that India is progressing at a fast pace, that better days have finally arrived and that the constant competition with arch-rivals as regards social welfare commitments is taken very seriously. The present government attempts to reflect - appropriately - Abraham Lincoln’s quote, ‘*Government of the people, by the people, for the people*’ - the real axiom of Democracy! And yet one can be sceptic of an idealised democracy in the Indian context, for our democratic politics are haphazard and truncated – very far from the ‘ideal’, especially as regards welfare policies, on-the-ground social influences on voting dynamics, and many other aspects of political life.

2019’s political contest between the BJP and the Coalition, wherein regional parties seem to be gaining such influence, brings forth three possible lines of development in future Indian politics. The first possibility includes a democratic upsurge and a departure from majoritarian politics. The expression ‘democratic upsurge’ is understood here as the rise of ‘socially underprivileged’ groups such as other backward classes (Schedule Castes and Schedule Tribes) and the Untouchables/Dalits (Yadav, 2000). These groups have become the most active participants in Indian politics since 2004. The second possibility is more likely (with respect to the 2019 election results); it includes a sort of triumph of majoritarian politics and departure from democratic dynamics – wherein opposition parties are reduced to political puppets. The third possibility would be to find a point of equilibrium between democratic values and majoritarian politics that is a greatly extended government coalition. Most crucial in this process are Swing States such as Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Delhi, Nagaland, Karnataka and others (Shashidhar, 2014). With regard to the upcoming elections, it is a matter of choice for parties to either compete with each other or build alliances so as to form a government at the Centre. That is if the democratic upsurge will either vote the Grand Alliance into power or else lead to a compromise formula within the BJP. The upcoming months will be extremely crucial for both national and regional parties to overcome their ideological binaries and thus strengthen their voter base – to be converted into seats in the Indian Parliament.

Political campaigning – the onset of Indian elections

One of the major cornerstones of political campaigning in India is the release of manifestos. The head and prominent figures from the various parties release their manifestos in the presence of the media, both level workers and supporters. The two major political parties in India are at present- the Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The Congress released its manifesto on the 2nd of April titled ‘We Will Deliver’ (*Hum Nibhayenge*); it is a 55-page document that focuses on the creation of employment opportunities, addressing farmers' distress, establishing a single moderate goods & services tax rate and giving Rs 72,000 (approximately €920.41) per annum to 20 percent of India's poorest families. The party document is also concerned with national security, the situation in Jammu and Kashmir and the North East, foreign policy, defence, the state of the rural economy, the current tax regime and environmental challenges, among other issues. The BJP's manifesto titled ‘Determined India, Empowered India’ (*Sankalpit Bharat, Sashakt Bharat*) promises good governance, security and prosperity for the country. It announces a commitment so as to annul Article 35A or the law which says that no outsider can own property in Jammu and Kashmir, building the Ram temple, and a wide list of other intentions. In short, the BJP's manifesto released on the 8th of April aims to fulfil the aspirations of 1.3 billion Indians. Interestingly, during the release of said manifesto, it was categorically mentioned that “*Women's security will be given more priority. We have constituted the Women's Security Division in the Home Ministry, and have made strict provisions for transferring the laws in order to commit crimes against women, in particular in a time-bound investigation and trail for rape*” (Bhasin, 2019). Since then, opposition parties have shared screenshots of this error on electronic platforms so as to sarcastically encapsulate the BJP's strategies for next five years. For example, Congress's official Twitter account posted that ‘At least one point in the BJP's manifesto reflects their true intentions’. The Aam Admi Party (AAP) on the other hand stated that the ruling party ‘encourages crime against women and their actual intentions have come under light’. In short, opposition parties did not miss the chance to use such grotesque mistakes so as to appeal to the electorate at the very same time as the BJP's circle was numbering its achievements under the guidance of Narendra Modi. Well, humour or Freudian slip never really takes a backseat during the dance of Democracy.

In addition to its manifesto, the BJP has greatly benefited from the release of the web series on ‘Modi’ and the urgency to launch NAMO TV. These are some soft-power tools used by political parties such as BJP so as to regain public trust and support by reinforcing PM Modi's image as an ordinary Indian

citizen. With such techniques of new age campaigning, the Indian democracy has offered various opportunities to exploit and capitalise by political parties across ideologies. For example, the Congress party released a rap song for the 2019 election – a song whose lyrics number the present government’s failures, scams and false promises.

Politics in India has always revolved around specific slogans and keywords such as ‘Social Welfare-Fight Against Poverty’; ‘Economic Leverage - Egalitarian Society’; ‘Eliminating Corruption - A Just Social Order’; ‘Communal Fervour - Temple Politics’; ‘Cow Politics - Mob Lynching’; ‘Caste Remarks - Identity Politics’; ‘Defeating Separatist Voices – Targeting Neighbouring Countries’ – here most importantly injecting the idea of patriotism (or hyper-ventilating nationalism). This leaves little scope for the deliberation and discussion of core ideas such as education, health, gender budgeting, ecological concerns, employment or even unemployment allowances and others. These issues are essential as they concern basic rights of every individual in a civilized society; yet they systematically fail to find a place in political manifestos by Indian parties. Academic circles interpret Indian politics as ‘muscle power’, but in reality we are dealing with ‘muscle and money power with a high degree of criminal credentials’ (S., 2016). The Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR), a civil society group, deems that every third MP in the 16th *Lok Sabha* has criminal charges - while 82 per cent of lawmakers have assets worth €127.868,10 or more. Although the EC categorically prohibits such candidates from contesting elections in India, due to their strong presence and power at local levels, many of these ‘promising candidates’ in fact hold important portfolios in the Cabinet also (Ghose, 2016).

In short, Indian politics is like a show wherein the audience vividly experiences contextualised (local) emotions while at the same time remaining oblivious to core interests and realities. It thus provides a platform for both national and regional parties to flourish with the intent of not contributing to social and economic progress but instead of building hierarchical networks of long-term loyalty among supporters and voters. With elections around the corner, parties such as the BJP, Congress, AAP, and the Grand Coalition Parties are speaking in different political tones yet offering nothing more than various political-economic sops. The election battle in India is often summed up in terms of binaries such as ‘soft politics’ versus ‘feeling secure’ - or between a ‘hyper-masculine’, ‘workaholic’, ‘made-in India’ famous Narendra Modi and a ‘naive’, ‘inexperienced’, ‘part-time politician’ Rahul Gandhi (Pathak, 2019).

Contextually speaking, this particular brand or image of an active Modi seems to have found a strong foothold in some of our youth's minds. These citizens - also known as the Keyboard Warriors - continuously harp on notions such as India First, Hindus First, Patriarchy is the Pillar of Strength and so on. Moreover, these five years of governance by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has produced demonetisation, goods and services taxes, surgical strikes, farmer protests, student agitation, killings of 40 Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) soldiers, fugitives such as Nirav Modi and Vijay Mallaya, scams, destruction of institutions - the list is endless. In spite of such drawbacks, this government has spent extensively on advertising and propaganda, which makes it difficult to draw a line between true and false promises. With regard to the Indian democracy, I presume that the Indian public has a very myopic understanding of politics and even less memory of political achievements and failures – past or present. This entails that in spite of all the hardships people had to face during the demonetisation process or late disbursal of welfare benefits, individuals exercising universal adult franchise are willing to give a second chance to the NDA government. Especially in India, casting a vote to a particular party or an ideology is like a family tradition. This political right in such cases is an imposition factor for both men and women belonging to traditionally allied families who have consistently supported a particular party (or leader) for time immemorial. The chances of voting for another candidate or else a party are very slim, as they do not want to harm the family's reputation or social statute. This is primarily because of two factors - because the party has associated itself with a self-proclaimed charismatic leader like Narendra Modi and because the media has destroyed the ability to think, argue or even criticise the Government. This media puts forward the highly fictional narrative that everything in India these days is good, better and best. As Mark Twain once said: *'there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics'*.

The changes in Indian politics and status quo since 2014

During the last five years, India has moved away from the iconic words inscribed in the National Constitution's Preamble – describing a Sovereign, Socialist, Secular, and Democratic Republic - to puncturing the fabric of India's society and germinating ideas of masculinity, sectarian strife, instability, and rivalry of age-old customs and norms as per revered texts (Vedas). The BJP is what may be called a cadre-based party: a group of trained or otherwise qualified personnel capable of forming, training, or leading an expanded organisation. The party's rank and file is largely drawn from the Rashtriya Swayamsvak Sangh (RSS), an Indian right-wing, Hindu nationalist, paramilitary volunteer structure, which is in fact widely regarded as the parent organisation of India's ruling party. For many years under Indira Gandhi's Prime Minister-ship, the RSS was a banned organisation due

to its constant fuelling of communal tensions in the country. This organisation, however, is currently in power as the NDA in coalition with smaller parties, and aims to sweep the upcoming elections with a high majority of votes and running on a by now established platform of ardent followers and believers. The party and its followers ardently believe in the aforementioned premises to drive home the point that India is primarily a ‘Hindu State, A Hindu Nation and a country of Aryans’ (Golwalkar, 2005) (Savarkar, 1942). The activities of groups dedicated to ‘cow vigil’ are a product of the Indian political system which continues to oppress those belonging to lower sections of the society for the benefit of vested interests. As per Indian Hindu traditions, killing of cows are considered to be a bad omen - as large sections of Hindus consider cows as equivalents to Divinities. And, as any assault on this divine is an assault on wider religious beliefs, these issues become extremely emotionally-laden and thus politically-charged, most of all during elections - and riots. The government in place since 2014 has never engaged in the fight and prevention of the merciless killings or lynching affecting those Indian citizens either proclaimed to be ‘illegal suppliers of cow-meat’ or belonging to lower caste of the society (Daniyal, 2019). More generally, none of the members of any of these groups has ever been tried by the judiciary branch, rather they remain immune and are in fact often applauded by the Government through rewards and perks. Similar informal activist groups pressure both the government and the public at large and create an apparatus of shallow intellectualism which ensures that individual citizens remain as consumers of populism instead of developing opinions of their own.

This shift from coalition politics to a majoritarian government has been a cause of concern as regards institutions which are both supposedly apolitical and non-partisan such as universities, think tanks, government organisations, Non-Government Organisations and others. These institutions have consistently attempted to exercise their freedom of speech and expression; in this endeavour they have faced many obstacles. For example institutions such as Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi and Jadavpur University in Kolkata have raised voices against the Government practices and policies such as mining academic endeavours with forceful injunction of patriotism, nationalism, and so on and so forth. There were also issues related to fudging or hiding important data or statistics on social welfare from the public. Institutions such as the National Sample Survey of India and the think tank NITI Ayog have strongly disputed data relating to economic growth rates, employment records and other such indicators. All of this is absolutely contrary to Democratic practices – and has been implemented in India, the largest democracy in the world. In short, the last five years can be summed up as theatrical – characterised by high voltage acting, drama, awful strategies and a consistent need to turn all eyes away from governmental wrongdoings through truncated facts and out-of-box ideas

such as demonetisation, depreciation of the Indian Currency (INR), rising fuel prices, unemployment records, ambiguous healthcare schemes and more.

The other political parties such as the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the All India Trinamool Congress, the *Rashtriya Janata Dal* (National People's Party), the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (People in Majority), the *Samjawadi Party*, the *Telugu Desam Party* (Party of the Telugu Land) and others who form important segments of the Grand Coalition for 2019 live in constant conflict between 'politicisation of caste' (Jafferlot, 2010) and restoring and protecting the social order. Indian citizens face a variety of dilemmas, perhaps the most poignant of which relates to the contradiction between caste- (religion-, culture-) based politics and purely socio-economic interests. In the run up to the elections, parties have strongly considered caste and communal factors when selecting their candidates. As a result, the Congress Party – which draws its relevance not because of such considerations but because of historical factors - has lost important seats to regional leaders of other political parties. Congress lacks support in regions wherein caste-related social stereotypes are extremely important. This has happened in rural areas of Bihar, and in Uttar Pradesh – in fact the Congress Party President Rahul Gandhi was forced to contest his *Lok Sabha* seat from Wayanad in Karnataka and Amethi in Uttar Pradesh.

Moreover, Delhi - which is a Union Territory as per the Indian Constitution - is also the object of strong contestation among the BJP, the Congress and the AAP. So far, the AAP has declared its six *Lok Sabha* candidates in Delhi, although there have been backdoor discussions with regard to the hypothesis of seat sharing with the Congress – which could entirely deter the BJP's ride towards victory. Similarly, in West Bengal Mamta Banerjee (also Chief Minister of West Bengal) is organising popular rallies and ambitions to prevent the BJP from winning a single seat in her state. Her political speeches revolve around Modi's powerful crusade to crush political opponents, questioning the timing of the surgical strikes in Pakistan and the announcement of testing anti-satellite missiles.

Time and again, opposition parties - along with the Congress - from South, East, West and North India are constantly developing a rational political discourse which questions the BJP's political strategies. These political parties (the Congress and others) have supported demonstrations and movements by farmers who have revolted against the current regime because of the minimum support prices, the waiver of loans and others. Among such developments, one can also see political defections by politicians who switch parties. Previously elected independent candidates, prominent

faces of regional parties, movie and cricket celebrities have either been given tickets to contest or asked to be star campaigners in the upcoming elections. The ruling party has left no stone unturned in terms imposing its identity and consolidating their position in sartorial practices such as Sarees, Modi jackets, Lotus Memorabilia and others. Interestingly, the Congress Party - often referred as 'Congress System' (Kothari, 1161- 1173, 2016) - is currently struggling to voice out an independent opinion and is instead aligning with regional parties so as to form a government in the centre. The battery of star campaigners and spokespersons of the BJP are always more than ready to do press conferences with one-sided rebuttals and war-mongering speeches. Incidentally, during the past five years, our Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi has never been a part of any press conferences and prefers to send 'trusted men' to answer queries from the Democracy's fourth estate.

Final Thoughts

Although the battle of 2019 is extremely exciting to witness, one cannot help but wonder whether the country as imagined by Nehru and Gandhi continues to exist - or else if the nation imagined by Golwalkar and Savarkar now prevails over the Indian Constitution's preamble ideals. In short, the elections are a battleground between a united India and a divided India. The various parties' political manifestos are a reflection of the ideological mindset supported by the party and paints a symbolic new rainbow of good days. It looks like Indian voters have become mass consumers of hate politics thanks to the electronic media and their one-sided debates. Fake rumours or messages circulated on mobile networks and other platforms have transformed the Indian citizenry into nothing but a mass of irrational, immobile, insane couch potatoes. Consequently, Indian politics has been deduced to the association with a particular face (dynastic politics) and personalised campaigns. For example, Indian voters have associated the BJP with Modi and the Congress with Rahul Gandhi and war of words are reduced to 'Merchant of Death' in the context of Gujarat Riots or religious intolerance and 'Naive' in the context of irrational political arguments, and as a result, votes are now always identified with a personality and in complete ignorance of party manifesto's content. Especially in India, elections are always fought on the basis of the 'incumbency' factor, (a term originated in India and which relates to period of office tenure). For the 2019 elections, incumbency is working to the advantage of the present government, and this is primarily for two reasons: the concentrated nature of the BJP's victory and the historic unpopularity of the Congress. Similarly, renowned economic analyst Ruchir Sharma categorically states that '*India has the highest rate of anti-incumbency in the world, ... there is limited connection between economic development and election results in the country*' (India, 2018). Come this 23rd May, most Indians would like to give a second chance to the present

government on the basis of promises listed out in the manifestos and public rallies. Unfortunately, most of these are not grounded in reality. Let the good sense prevail and the dance of democracy in India continue.

“You believe things that are incomprehensible, inconsistent, impossible because we have commanded you to believe them; go then and do what is unjust because we command it. Such people show admirable reasoning. Truly, whoever is able to make you absurd is able to make you unjust. If the God-given understanding of your mind does not resist a demand to believe what is impossible, then you will not resist a demand to do wrong to that God-given sense of justice in your heart. As soon as one faculty of your soul has been dominated, other faculties will follow as well. And from this derives all those crimes of religion which have overrun the world “- Voltaire

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