

General Elections In India 2024

India is witnessing another round of General Elections to the national parliament and the ruling party, the Bharatiya Janta Party and its crony press are assuming that its victory is already sealed by the enactment of the installation a few weeks ago of Rama's idol in a temple built over the Babri Mosque which was demolished by the Party's activists. This event signalled through a carefully planned spectacle and media campaign, the ending of the old style secular and democratic governance. For one the elected Prime Minister of the country performed the temple rituals announcing the integration of state and religion. In projecting Mr. Modi as the builder and officiant of the temple, the party and its crony media took the country back to medieval times when kings built and consecrated temples to their choice gods as an integral part of their theistic politics. This act has been proclaimed as the culmination of welding all 'Hindus' into one majoritarian national community which would solidly stand by Mr Modi and his brand of politics. It is this consolidated 'Hindu vote' which the BJP is hoping to reap in the coming elections across the country.

We have discussed in this journal other dimensions of the consolidation of the Hindu identity, the amending of citizenship laws to accommodate religion as a criterion of acquiring citizenship and threatening all Muslims with having to prove with documents their citizenship, the sustained anti Muslim rhetoric and provocative campaigns around places of worship, lynching of poor Muslim workers, exclusion and discrimination against minorities across the country are cases in point.

What is even more significant is the assertion of a particularly virulent form of Hinduism as the real Hinduism. Hinduism is by its very nature a pluralist religion which allows for multiple interpretations and practices. These are being eroded and a singularly defined religious belief and practice is being promoted as a part of the building of a unified Hindu Identity.

The readers should not assume that it is this supposed creation of a unified Hindu identity is the real reason for the BJP's optimism. The spectacle was a mere icing that hides the dagger and cloak strategy used to undermine the opposition parties, relentlessly breaking them up by buying over or threatening to institute investigation by central investigative agencies (whose power were augmented by recent legislation) into real or imagined corruption by the leaders of the opposition parties. The entire opposition thus stands weakened by either mass desertions or legal action and imprisonment. Added to this is the fact that the corporate houses and smaller business enterprises have been forced to fund the ruling party on a massive scale and deny funding to the opposition parties. A part of this was exposed even as the elections were announced, due to the intervention of the Supreme Court (whose own autonomy is under serious attack).

During its tenure of the last ten years in power, the BJP has pursued a policy of undermining all liberal and democratic institutions and bringing them under its control – from the press, the social media, the universities, schools, scientific institutions, election commission, and even the armed forces. In fact, even the once robust BJP party has been tamed and brought under the complete control of Mr Modi and his Home Minister, Mr Amit Shah, reducing the erstwhile leaders of the party into non-entities or force them into abject servitude.

The fact of the matter is that Mr Modi and his corporate friends are in a hurry and despite all their efforts resistance to their power and policies is widespread and unrelenting. Most of the southern states still stand outside the line of obedience and conformism and so do the states in the north east, East and the far north. As luck would have it, even the National Capital Region, Delhi has returned an opposition party with overwhelming majority. And it is this the Modi combine is desperate to break into. The narrative of the consolidation of the 'Hindu vote' is thus merely a ploy to break into these territories.

The question is why does the ruling combine need such absolute control and power when previous regimes managed with far less and put up with a lot of opposition and diversity of political pulls and pressures? It is this central question that the working people need to ask to understand the underlying processes.

It was the Congress which initiated the neo liberal restructuring of Indian polity and economy. However given its history and social equations and alliances with regional powers, it couldn't wholeheartedly push the neo liberal policies and often had to balance these policies with some concessions to mass of the people adversely affected – farmers who were dispossessed, workers who were rendered jobless, tribal people faced with eviction from forest lands, middle classes faced with prospects of unemployment, etc. Often this took the form of enactment of laws to protect 'rights' – of farmers, adivasis, women, and also rights to health, education and information regarding the functioning of the government. These understandably were never meant to be implemented seriously. Nevertheless they acted as bulwarks against arbitrary dispossession and injustice at a time when the neo liberal policies resulted in mass distress. Also the distressed sections of the population could appeal to the diverse political formations for advocating their concerns. All this understandably stalled the relentless march of neoliberal 'reform' and restructuring of Indian economy. The Modi dispensation won over the corporate houses and the multinational corporations with the promise of pushing the reforms to their logical conclusion. The crises of confidence of the 'investors' is an ample proof of the inability of the Modi government to deliver its promise to the corporate houses. As is evident the current Indian Economy is being propelled not so much by private investment, but by extensive investment by the government in public works. The need to silence all opposition and eliminate all alternative social narratives thus springs from this urgent need to push neo liberal restructuring of the economy in the shortest possible time frame.

A quick look at the BJP's Election Manifesto will make it evident that it rests on two main planks. On the one hand it pushes the image of Mr Modi as the sole saviour and face of progress, underlining at the same time his position now as the principal defender of the 'Hindu' religion. Its second plank is neo liberal progress in all fronts which alone is now to be seen as path ahead. It offers none of the old protections (at best there are lip service statements) to the farmers or the workers. Indeed the working people are offered pitiful nothing except extension of neo liberal insurance schemes backed by the state. No offer of 'decent employment' no promise of pro worker changes in labour laws or their implementation, no labour protection or restrictions on employers, no regulation of contract labour or undocumented labour or bonded labour or restriction of child labour There are no offers even for the so called self employed workers. As millions of poor peasants, adivasis and crafts-persons and middle class join the ranks of workers and rapid expansion of

urbanisation, these workers are left with no support but neo liberal insurance agencies and banks.

Among the significant electoral promises is the bringing in of a 'common civil code' which is mainly meant to target minority personal laws in the name of ensuring the rights of women. The early versions of such a code are being tried out in some BJP ruled states like Uttarakhand and they not only target minority communities but also 'deviant' practices like 'live in relationships' and inter community marriages.

Several slogans of the BJP emphasise the idea of "One Bharat" – which foregrounds a highly centralised and uniform policy regime which will undermine regional and state autonomy. The BJP manifesto proposes among other such measures 'One Bharat one Election' which will seriously erode the federal foundations of the constitution. This administrative centralisation combined with the Hindutva agenda of homogenising culture will have far reaching consequences for the cultural and political diversity of the country.

The Congress manifesto offers an interesting contrast to the very clear BJP push for neo liberal development and homogenisation. It focusses on equity, social justice, pluralism, defence of the liberal democratic constitution and safeguarding rights the marginalised communities and workers, even while assuring industrial and economic growth. As an organisation it has suffered much decay and disintegration due to sustained poaching and attack by the BJP and the right-wing sympathies of the upper caste grass root leadership. Given this situation, it depends heavily upon the allied parties which have retained some amount of cadre base in the states. This dependence upon allies is its strength and its critical weakness in that it has a fair chance of turning the tide. At the same time the need to accommodate the allies with their complex local alignment will undermine its ability to deliver. Given this situation the corporate houses which ultimately control the outcomes of elections are unlikely to extend support to the Congress which then has the only option of relying on a large-scale mobilisation of the masses. Whether it has the capacity to do this remains to be seen.

The working people of the country are thus faced with a choice between a BJP which is mobilising them under the larger identity of religion to push a neo liberal development which will undermine their hard won rights and legal securities and a pluralist cultural ethos on the one hand and resolutely fighting it by not only electorally defeating it but spear heading mass movements that emphasise the diverse and plural interests of different sections of the population. Succumbing to the propaganda machine of the BJP will mean resolute and unrestrained neo liberal development that will ride roughshod over the interests of the peasants, workers, adivasis, women and minorities and regional cultures, with a promise of distant 'trickle down' effect of such development. The experience world over has shown that this is a mirage which world capitalism is using to tide over its endemic crises, crises which are more and more resulting in war and genocide of the poor and vulnerable. The victory of the BJP not only signals what is rather apparent but also what has been left unsaid so far: it is likely to engulf the subcontinent in fratricidal warfare egged on by religious jingoism.

As never before, it has become the bounden duty of the labouring masses of the country to extricate the country from this quagmire and prospect of war and destruction by electorally defeating the BJP by voting a candidate who is likely to pose the most concerted challenge to

it. And it cannot rest with this task but follow it up by organising multifarious struggles that will put an end to the homogenising politics of the BJP.

VOTE TO DEFEAT THE BJP TO SAFEGUARD DEMOCRACY, RIGHTS OF THE WORKING AND THE MARGINALISED PEOPLE AND TO SUSTAIN OUR IDENTITY AS LABOURING PEOPLE!