

## On the Indian General Election 2014 Results

Jayati Ghosh

This general election in India was almost a test case: just as advertising can make people want a particular brand of soft drink or breakfast cereal, can a massively funded and aggressive media campaign make people choose a particular leader? The answer, sadly, seems to be yes.

It is hard to speak of "one" Indian electorate - there is so much variation across states with very different factors operating in different places. Both local/regional and national issues and forces have always been significant. But the BJP's campaign this time was different; seeking to present one man as the national leader and creating an unprecedented media blitz around him for nearly a year, so that voters simply got used to the idea and even started believing the hype, through sheer repetition of the images and slogans.

We do not have data on the amount that was spent on the Modi campaign, and unfortunately there is no limit on the spending by political parties as opposed to individual candidates. But the rough estimates of the expenditure on the [BJP's media campaign alone are in excess of Rs 5000 crore](#) (around GBP 50 million), putting it on par with Obama Presidential campaign in the US, but in a much poorer country. This was possible because some large corporate entities threw their full weight behind Modi, seeing in him a strong leader who would deliver all the benefits and incentives they have got used to. And their investment in him seems to have paid off for now, as the clear majority achieved by his party alone, not to mention the strong showing by the NDA allies, seems to have given Mr. Modi a free hand to do whatever he wants at the national level for the time being.

The first-past-the-post system makes this victory seem bigger than it is. The BJP received only 31 per cent of votes across India, with a total turnout of 66 per cent of the electorate, which means that around 80 per cent of the electorate did NOT vote for Mr Modi or his party. The fragmentation of the vote still enabled the BJP to win 280 seats, above half the total. Indeed, this is the first time in independent India that a party has managed to get a clear majority in Parliament on its own with such a low proportion of the popular vote. Fragmentation also meant that no party – not even the previously ruling Congress Party – managed to get the required ten per cent of seats that would enable it to become the official Opposition.

This huge mandate does provide so-called political stability, but it is at the same time a concern for Indian democracy for several reasons, largely because of the nature of the winning leader and his party. The underlying association with the rightwing RSS that pulls many of the strings in the party has always been an issue, but now personality cult around an authoritarian leader may even be the bigger problem.

Until relatively recently, Narendra Modi was widely seen as a polarising and distrusted figure, even within his own party and certainly outside of it. His role in the pogrom against Muslims in Gujarat may not yet have been punished by the Indian courts (and now looks like it will never be) but his culpability in terms of presiding as Chief Minister over the state in which they occurred and not punishing the guilty is

still evident. But more than that, the "communal peace" that has supposedly prevailed in Gujarat since then has been achieved at a tremendous cost to the minorities, essentially by terrorising them into submission. Muslim families and individuals are increasingly ghettoised, finding it impossible to buy or rent accommodation in dominantly "Hindu" areas. Muslim youth are not only discriminated in employment but much more exposed to being picked up, interrogated and even imprisoned on mere suspicion of being "terrorists". Bank loans are hard to come by for people from minorities, and intercommunity social mingling (particularly between young men and women) is frowned upon and discouraged on campuses.

That this "peace of the graveyard" may be extended across India is a frightening prospect. But already during the election campaign the signs of things to come were evident. In the early stages of the campaign, the focus was more on the defects of the current UPA government and the supposed material progress of Gujarat under Modi (however illusory such progress may have been for most of its citizens). The attempt was to show him not as divisive but decisive. But in the later stages the gloves were off, and an increasingly strident Modi and his team exposed their real attitudes. Thus, in a speech in West Bengal, Modi declared that only Hindu migrants from Bangladesh were welcome; the others would be repatriated. His henchman declared in Uttar Pradesh that anyone who did not support Modi should go back to Pakistan where they belonged. That all this belligerence only seems to have helped them at the polls is alarming.

[Modi even took on the Election Commission](#), threatening them with dire consequences for preventing his rally in Varanasi. And this brings up the second major concern: that such bullying tactics can succeed. Far too many of India's democratic institutions are weak and even those holding Constitutional positions can often be bribed or cowed into subservience. The increasingly corporatised media has displayed its supine character already, avoiding asking the BJP candidate difficult questions or pointing to some of the clear dishonesty in the claims made about his success in Gujarat, etc.

The third concern relates to the reason being trumpeted for his electoral success: the so-called Gujarat development model that is supposed to have delivered high growth and better material conditions for the people. In actual fact, Gujarat is only among the middle performers among states in India, and what is worse is that [wages in Gujarat are among the lowest in the country](#), despite relatively high per capita income. The success is primarily the ability to attract corporate investment based on existing mineral resources, access to port, and large fiscal and other incentives that cost the state government tens of billions of rupees every year.

The BJP's economic programme for India has thus far been short of specifics. But if the experience of Modi's rule in Gujarat is anything to go by, it will involve crony capitalism that promotes and incentivises big business through all sorts of explicit and implicit subsidies, keeping wages low and suppressing any workers' action, repression of popular movements and cracking down on dissent. The human costs of this kind of growth are enormous, as are the human costs of achieving communal "peace" through fear.

Corporate India and Hindu majoritarianism have won this particular round. But can they also reshape Indian politics, economy and society in this unpleasant image?

\* The article was originally published in the Guardian on 16 May,  
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/16/narendra-modi-bjp-election-victory-aggression-campaign-india>