

Modi's Electoral Triumph

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The result of the recent Indian elections, which gave Narendra Modi's Hindu Supremacist Party a second five-year term, confirms the basic argument regarding the nature of fascism. There is a fundamental difference between the 2014 elections that brought Modi to power and the 2019 elections. In the 2014 elections Modi's victory was made possible by his slogan of "vikas" or "development". He did not spell out how he was going to bring about "development", which is typical of all fascism: his only "analysis" was that "development" had suffered because of the preceding Manmohan Singh government's weakness. He would overcome this weakness, while pursuing the same neo-liberal policies with greater vigour.

While he won those elections, his five years in power have brought little respite from the crisis; on the contrary the crisis has worsened. The real per capita income of the agriculture-dependent population has barely moved up after 2013-14; within it the peasants and agricultural labourers must have become worse off. Unemployment is reportedly at a 45-year high, prompting the government to suppress employment data altogether. In the 2019 elections therefore, there was no mention of "development" at all. This only shows that fascism has no economic programme and relies on a discourse shift, towards Hindutva "nationalism", to come to power, which it has done.

Looking at the election results, it is obvious that people were not voting for a flesh-and-blood character called Modi, seen objectively for what he was. Each voter rather saw in him an idea: a muscular leader, a "messiah". They voted for Modi the concept, not the man. Even when he had actually done nothing, he still got voted because he was seen as the only person capable of doing something! If there were no incidents on the border, then the credit went to him: the neighbouring country was afraid of taking liberties because he was at the helm! And if there were incidents then there were compelling reasons to vote for him, for he alone could stand up to the neighbour!

Thus, no matter what happened, he got the credit for it. No matter what he did, he was still applauded. Incidents which should have discredited the government brought him kudos. Modi had become a myth, a concept manufactured to fulfill people's needs which themselves had been largely created.

It is now clear that his first term in office was spent not in coping with the country's problems but in manufacturing this mythical image of himself. Helped with a pliant media, with an army of trolls employed to take on critics on the social media, and huge funds from the corporates, he has manufactured this mythical image of himself. His always referring to himself in the third person is symptomatic of this.

Myth-making must be distinguished from charisma. Charisma is based on some real achievements; it is not conjured out of thin air. But myth-making entails creating a persona that has no real counterpart. The Modi government has little to show by way of achievements in its first term. Its two big moves, demonetization and the GST, had disastrous consequences. Peasant distress, unemployment, recession, stalk the economy. Besides, there is the destruction of institutions, the attack on civil liberties, the terrorizing of minorities and dalits by vigilante groups, and the rampant atmosphere of hate-mongering.

It is this hate-mongering and the inculcation of a sense of insecurity among the people that helped in building the Modi myth. The need for a “messiah” got greatly exaggerated. Fascism and the “messiah” are inextricably linked.

From this perspective, the 2019 elections are completely different from the elections we have had in the past, which is why all predictions about the outcome, including most Exit Polls, were so completely wrong. All the usual calculations, based on attributing “normal” behavior to the people, based on assuming a degree of stability of preferences, but altered at the margin by unfolding new issues like peasant distress, were completely off the mark.

The 2019 elections lead irrevocably towards a fascist State; the 2014 elections were not so clear about where they would lead, but not the 2019 elections. They have been won by a non-existent person. Pointing to his non-existence will be deemed “sedition”.

Breaking myths is not easy, but eventually people must tire of myths when their stomachs are empty and when they remain jobless. The Modi administration will keep diverting attention from the discourse of material deprivation to one of national security which can be more easily nourished by tales, as the Balakot air-strike was. But, even this will wear thin after a time. And the spontaneous development of the crisis as it affects the Indian economy will force Modi willy-nilly to confront the discourse of material deprivation.

The Left has been virtually wiped out in these elections. But the Left’s strength must be judged not just by the number of parliamentary seats won. It still has substantial trade union bases; and it must resume the peasant mobilization that had got interrupted by the parliamentary elections. It must play a proactive role not just in mobilizing all the forces opposed to fascism, not just in defending the democratic institutions, not just in fighting for civil liberties, but also in shifting the political discourse towards bread-and-butter issues.

The 2019 elections were also fought by an opposition that was disunited, and lacked a credible leader who could take on Modi. This may not have mattered in normal times; but in 2019 when the electorate had been fed on a diet of hatred and insecurity, its consciousness was not what it would have been in normal times. In future it would not be enough simply to change the discourse, to make it more bread-and-butter-focussed; there must be a credible face to lead the opposition alliance who has much greater moral stature than Modi and can take him on. Even Parliamentary systems, and not just Presidential ones, require clear leaders with sufficient moral stature. Nothing should be left to chance when it comes to fighting fascism.