

## **Election Results 2024: Economic justice has to come back on the policy agenda\***

**Jayati Ghosh**

The results of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections have come as a shock to those who had mistakenly believed in the problematic exit polls, which continued the narrative so assiduously cultivated by the previous Modi government. Many pundits who had confidently justified those false predictions have already jumped to explain the actual results. One main explanation is that the INDIA alliance emphasised social justice and the caste census, stitched up more astute coalitions, and made sharper candidate choices in terms of caste.

### **A Clear Message**

There is no doubt that the recognition of the need for social justice as well as the fears about the survival of the Constitution were significant factors. Local factors in different States also would have played a role. But whoever forms the next government must recognise a clear message from the electorate: the importance of economic issues. The major crises of unemployment and persisting low wages, inadequate livelihoods from self-employment, and rising prices of essentials were all effectively ignored by the Modi government, both in its policy actions and in the electoral campaign. Yet these bread-and-butter issues continue to define the lives of the majority of people in the country.

This is where the promises made by the Opposition INDIA alliance, especially the Congress, may well have been significant, especially in parts of the Hindi heartland such as Uttar Pradesh. Unlike the Modi regime, and sections of the mainstream media that faithfully reproduced the BJP's voice, these parties focused on issues of livelihood and employment, along with social justice. Their promises undoubtedly found resonance with much of the electorate.

### **A Fundamental Transformation**

The focus on justice for youth, women, farmers, and workers, as well as dignity through social justice, which was strongly highlighted in the Congress manifesto for example, necessarily implies a major shift in economic policy. In fact, what is required is nothing short of a fundamental transformation. The most important shift is to move back to a framework of human rights, especially social and economic rights, rather than seeing public goods and services delivery as "gifts" from the state or a supreme leader.

This requires two immediate changes in the economic policy framework. The first is ensuring basic social and economic rights for everyone by expanding the right to work (through a better funded and more flexible MGNREGA as well as the introduction of an urban employment guarantee scheme); the right to food, which is still inadequate and denied to at least 100 million Indians; the right to education, based on public delivery rather than expensive and exclusionary private education; the right to social security, especially through universal pensions provided at half the minimum wage to the elderly and those unable to work for other reasons; and the right to health, once again through public delivery.

The second is to create jobs to address the frustrated aspirations of hundreds of millions of young people. This must become the primary economic goal. This requires expansion of public employment. First, vacancies need to be filled and all public workers, including “scheme” workers, need to be regularised. The needs of micro, small and medium enterprises, which have been truly battered by the policy mistakes of the past decade, need to be delivered through a comprehensive package covering credit, access to new technologies and training, infrastructure provision, and marketing assistance. Farming continues to be in crisis. The valid demands of the farmers’ movement need to be taken on board, ideally after a special session of Parliament devoted to discussing them in detail. Special attention needs to be paid to the ongoing impact of climate change and higher temperatures.

Much has been made of the “new welfarism” of the Modi government. But it is more accurately described as “the new branding around welfarism”, with not much change in level or content. Successive governments at the Centre and State have been oriented to the provision of welfare schemes, which are obviously necessary given continuing poverty and poor human development indicators across much of the country. The Modi government advertised its interventions as completely new when they are, in fact, merely continuations or expansions of old schemes; or as gifts from the Prime Minister. Instead, they need to be advertised as ways of fulfilling citizens’ rights. For example, the free food ration has been touted as a major gift to around 800 million people. But in effect, the food being offered under the Public Distribution System under the National Food Security Act brought in by the previous United Progressive Alliance government was already heavily subsidised – at only ₹2 per kg of wheat and ₹3 per kg of rice. So, this was not such a big difference. We need a shift from promises of welfare as “gifts” to a reaffirmation of the discourse on rights.

### **Revival of Federalism**

An important shift that is likely to result from this election is the revival of genuine federalism, away from the undemocratic centralisation evident over the past decade. State governments are responsible for most of the public service delivery that affects ordinary people: it is critical for them to be able to provide these without interference, control and partisanship from the Centre.

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