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DEMOCRACY AND DISCONTENT
INDIA ON THE EVE OF PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

The spectacular victory of the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) in the elections of 2014 under the leadership of Narendra Modi promised 'better days' (*achche din* in Hindi) to come. After five years, the agenda of the Modi government, based on a market-friendly economic policy, muscular Hinduism and global networking, will be put to test in the forthcoming general elections to be held in seven phases in April and May 2019. With the realignment of political parties and the emergence of opposition unity, the prospects for an outright victory for the BJP had started looking dim the past few months. However, the terrorist attack in Pulwama, Kashmir and some early signs of opposition unity fracturing might weigh in favour of the BJP. Despite such contingent factors, the next general election will still offer the Indian voter a choice between two competing visions of India – one based on *hindutva,* focused on the majority faith Hinduism – and the other, the multi-cultural, secular vision of India championed by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the Indian Republic. Regardless of the outcome, despite occasional outbreaks of local violence caused by unresolved structural issues discussed in this essay, India's electoral democracy will endure.

Few events quicken the pace of everyday politics in a democracy like the approach of a general election. India, a rare example of a successful post-colonial democracy, is no exception to this rule. A brief perusal of the Indian media today shows how the fast approaching polls, due in April and May 2019, have brought issues that lie dormant between elections to the surface. Under the stress of vigorous electoral campaigning, conflicts based on caste and class identity and other contradictions that underpin the political system of India have gained renewed prominence. Leaders across the whole spectrum of political parties are furiously engaged in making deals, short-term alliances and switching sides. The media and political commentators are deeply engaged in frenzied activity. All this is political 'business as usual'. However, one can discern a growing sense of unease that marks India's polarised political community. Indian politics today is at a crossroads.

Five years of the Modi government, which gave prominence to muscular nationalism, and the assertion of Hindu values in the public sphere, have polarised Indian society. The country has now reached a point where intense competition among political parties has gone beyond political issues and spread to the values and norms that underpin the political system. India's political discourse today revolves around some key questions. How conducive is the process of majoritarian democracy for the sustainability of economic development and the creation of a cohesive and inclusive political community? Does the fact that the country is per-

petually in campaign mode cause long-term development to be substituted by short-term thinking and strategizing? Finally, how secure is the social foundation of India's secularism? This makes the parliamentary elections of 2019 different from previous elections, held regularly, with an exception during the national Emergency of 1975–77.[1]

The political space of India today is crowded with salient issues such as the allegation of the centralisation of power under Prime Minister Modi, iniquitous economic development, corporate and market-led development to the detriment of agriculture, attacks on religious minorities and the conflict with Pakistan, linked to a violent secessionist movement in Kashmir, buttressed by cross-border terrorism from Pakistani soil.

The election pits two large coalitions – the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), currently in power, and the United Progressive Alliance – against one another. The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the main constituent of the NDA. The BJP has a pro-market stance, under which it seeks to combine *hindutva* and development to produce what Prime Minister Modi calls *vikashbad,* a vernacular expression in Hindi that conveys a sense of inclusive development. In his political rhetoric he presents the program of the government as *sabka saath, sabka vikash* – development of all. Those opposed to the BJP see this slogan merely as a veneer to conceal *hindutva,* the Hindu nationalist cultural, religious and political agenda that seeks to cast India in a Hindu mould. This is vigorously promoted by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak

Sangh (RSS), a social movement that is closely allied to the BJP and claims five million members.

The United Progressive Alliance (UPA), the main opposition grouping in the parliament, is led by the Indian National Congress. It includes an assortment of regional parties that have come together in their resolve to challenge the BJP. A loosely defined program of social justice and secularism that forms the leitmotif of Congress President Rahul Gandhi's election rallies gives a semblance of ideological coherence to this alliance.

India is a federal state where regional governments have considerable autonomy. Still, the election to the *Lok Sabha* (Lower House of Parliament) is of significant national importance. The winning party or coalition will constitute the central government, with a mandate to rule for five years. Under the federal division of powers, all subjects of national and international importance such as defence, finance, foreign policy and public order are under the jurisdiction of the Union (central) government. India uses the first-past-the-post electoral rule. This basically means that in each of the 543 constituencies of the country the candidate with the largest number of votes wins the seat. This can produce a discrepancy of percentage of votes and seats. As such, 'opposition unity' – referred to in current political parlance as *mahagathbandhan* (Hindi for 'grand alliance') whereby parties opposed to the Hindu nationalism desist from contesting one another and thus pool their votes in favour of one candidate pitted against the NDA – makes logical sense.

Two features of India's partyscape need special attention. With the exception of the BJP and Communist parties, unlike European political parties, most Indian parties do not have deep roots in society, cadre-based organisations or a deep sense of identification with a stable social base. Though party manifestoes seek to give a sense of ideological coherence to electoral campaigns, it is short-term alliances, tapping into caste loyalties, and a floating population of fixers that mark the electoral strategies of most politicians. Local and regional leaders such as Mayawati, the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh and Mamata Banerji of West Bengal who leads the Trinamool Congress are examples of charismatic women leaders at the regional level who have held high office and are a force to be reckoned with.

Several regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party, BSP (both from Uttar Pradesh), AIADMK (Tamil Nadu), Trinamool Congress (West Bengal) or Aam Aadmi Party (Delhi) might play a pivotal role in case neither the NDA nor the UPA succeed in going past the magic figure of 272 seats in the elections. However, which particular constellation comes together and coheres is contingent on multiple factors such as locality and region, the leaders' social base and their estimate of vote transfers as a result of the alliance, and the political conjuncture.[2]

INDIA'S CROWDED POLITICAL SPACE
The resounding victory of the NDA in the parliamentary elections of 2014 was a personal triumph for Prime Minister Modi, whose party won a majority of seats on its own. This resounding victory had created the impression of a critical realignment of forces in Indian politics.[3] Spectacular victories in assembly elections in some key States of India including Uttar Pradesh that followed had reinforced this impression. However, a string of electoral losses for the NDA and the emergence of popular discontent have eroded the image

of invincibility of the BJP-led NDA. The electoral defeats of the BJP in the Delhi, Bihar and more recently in the Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Karnataka assembly elections show the potential power of anti-BJP coalitions to force the Hindu nationalist party into a corner of the playing field and to use the logic of the first-past-the-post electoral system to defeat the ruling party. This was the case in the general elections of 1967, 1977 and 1989, as one can see how the ruling party lost seats disproportionately to the loss of votes. This spectre haunts the strategists of the ruling party which faces a similar mobilisation by opposition parties. The NDA continues to fare better in proportion of votes but loses out in proportion of seats.

The issues that have emerged since the last election are wide-ranging. Top of the list is what goes under the name of 'jobless growth' in India. Even as the economy has kept pace in terms of growth, the economic success has taken place in parts of the economy such as software where few jobs exist. Agriculture is one of the main areas of concern. The overall contribution of agriculture to the national GDP has shrunk to barely less than a quarter but the sector still has more than half of the working population engaged in it. The low growth rate of the agricultural sector has created massive agrarian distress and farmers' suicides, resulting in a large number of farmer protests across country.

Major initiatives of the Modi government such as demonetisation in 2016 and the Goods and Services Tax are alleged to have led to joblessness. The Pew survey from spring 2018 reports that there has been a 27 per cent – from 83 to 56 per cent – decline in the Indians who believe that the current economic situation is good. The greatest challenge for the BJP in the upcoming years will be to convince the electorate that it is the party that can deliver growth with redistribution, protect social harmony, national security and political unity. Having waged a campaign that promised to fight corruption, improve governance and ensure development, the focus will be on showing tangible results because the Indian media and critics of Mr Modi do not miss an opportunity to expose empty or failed promises.

The challenge faced by the BJP goes beyond the economic. Opposition parties and India's articulate civil society claim that the BJP and the RSS have systematically reduced the autonomy of major institutions of the state such as the judiciary, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Also at the fore is the deeply polarising issue of building a grand Ram temple to mark the spot where the Babri mosque of Ayodhya once stood, destroyed by Hindu fanatics in 1992. The attempt to bring this issue back again as an electoral ploy has gained in credibility because of extenuating factors such as the appointment of Yogi Adityanath, the religious head of a Hindu monastery, as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, the appointment of members of the RSS to key positions in the political system such as the President of the country and the appointment of members of the RSS as Governors of several Indian States, Union Cabinet and Chief Ministers. This gives credence to the allegation of a systematic attempt to endow the country with a Hindu political complexion.[4]

On the issue of probity in public life, the charge of corruption and scandals that had contributed to the defeat of the UPA government in 2014 is back as the parties of the opposition claim corporate favouritism, particularly concerning the controversial Rafale deal with Dassault of France to purchase

36 fighter aircrafts. Rahul Gandhi, the President of the Congress party, has focused on this issue as the cutting edge of his attacks on Prime Minister Modi.

Another issue about which the government has faced criticism is the citizenship amendment bill of 2016 which planned to extend Indian citizenship to Hindu immigrants from neighbouring countries. The resistance united ethnic communities in the border states of the North-East which fear they will be swamped by outsiders in their own homeland, as indeed has been the case with Tripura. In contrast to previous elections, the political mood in India is marked by a sense of anxiety on the part both of the supporters of the regime as well as its opponents. Scenes such as the rejection of national honours by recipients, questioning the veracity of claims by the government in operations against Pakistan, are unprecedented. There is an almost united front by civil society and academics against the lynching of minorities on the issue of cow slaughter and the violent street protests against legitimate army operations pursuing terrorists indicate a sense of crisis whose depth goes beyond the merely electoral.

IS INDIAN DEMOCRACY AT RISK?
Prime Minister Modi as the most visible face of India's aspirations in the twenty-first century polarises opinion at home and abroad. The polarity of attitudes – the confidence, buoyance of a resurgent India – and the voice of caution and moderation advocated by Indian 'secularists' is palpable.[5] Except for the national Emergency of 1975–77 and the authoritarian leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, this scale and intensity has been rare. Looking at the deep anxiety and strife that mark Indian politics today, one may ask: will India emerge from the elections as a functioning democracy as it has been over the past seventy years since independence?

I argue that despite the deep polarisation that marks Indian politics today a democratic political order will continue to prevail, though the post-election political landscape might take on a radically different configuration. This conjecture is supported by a number of factors including the deep sense of citizen efficacy and legitimacy and trust in institutions that has spread through the entire society, thanks to seven decades of vigorous democratic competition for power. Thanks to the availability of good and reliable public opinion data, we are in a position to observe the sense of efficacy within different subsections of the Indian population. In response to the question 'Do you think your vote has an effect?' one may note the steady rise in the sense of efficacy in the population as a whole, going up from 48.5 per cent of the entire population in 1971 to 59.5 per cent in 2009.

The further details we get when one looks at sub-sections of the population are very interesting. Thus, in 1996 as well as in 2004, those with a higher level of efficacy tended to be male, upper class, upper caste and highly educated. However, Scheduled Castes (former untouchable groups of Indian society who are entitled to a quota in national and state legislatures, administration and educational institutions), Muslims and Christians also appear in the higher levels of efficacy. This is the consequence of political mobilisation, driven by ambitious leaders working out of special interest constituencies within the electorate. A pattern similar to efficacy's prevails in the case of legitimacy. Impressively, the percentage of those who see the political system

as legitimate has gone up from 43.4 per cent in 1971 to 56.4 per cent in 2009.

Electoral articulation of discontentment is a sign of a healthy democracy where people feel a sense of entitlement, enfranchisement and empowerment to express their grievances. What matters for the resilience of democracy is a capacity for the political system to be able to process these grievances through institutional arrangements and to contain discontent. India is well endowed with mechanisms such as a free press, the judiciary and new legislative measures such as the Right to Information Act that make it obligatory on the part of the civil service to provide information on acts of government. Besides, the electoral system itself acts to reinforce the power of elections to act as the midwife of political change. Each election becomes a method of public consultation and we can see from the past five years how elections have led to regime change at the regional level.

The Indian method of countervailing forces is built into the political system whereby powers are separated among the executive, legislative and the judiciary and divided vertically between the Union government, the states and about 600,000 elected village councils, with the obligatory share of women, former untouchables and tribal communities, who have significant political autonomy and cash, which they get directly from the government. The civil service and army remain neutral and highly professional, and all of this is closely watched by independent bodies like the Election Commission and the judiciary.

AN INDIAN CONUNDRUM: DEMOCRACY AGAINST DEVELOPMENT?
Though the continuity of India's electoral democracy is not in any doubt, the transformation of the electoral to a liberal democracy is fraught with deep uncertainty. The main issue here consists of the problematic relationship between democracy and development. The transformation of a still largely agrarian economy into a modern industrial economy, the creation of a cohesive nation and uprooting people from their traditional lifestyles has involved coercion and, in some cases, great violence.

Talking of structural change, Barrington Moore warned us four decades ago that in India, which chose the democratic path of social change, 'a strong element of coercion remains necessary if a change is to be made. Barring some technical miracle that will enable every Indian peasant to grow abundant food in a glass of water or a bowl of sand, labour will have to be applied much more effectively, technical advances introduced, and means found to get food to the dwellers of in the cities. Either masked coercion on a massive scale, as in the capitalist model including Japan, or more open coercion approaching the socialist model will remain necessary'.[6] The tragic fact of the matter is that the poor bear the heaviest costs of modernisation under both socialist and capitalist auspices.

Elections, India's chosen method of political and social change, are vehicles of resistance for those engendered by development. Small land-holders, workers facing redundancy as modernisation marches in or, for that matter, minority communities facing the pressure of national 'integration' are easily mobilised against policies such as land acquisition and the inroads made by the market into traditional lifestyles and living spaces.[7] India has successfully solved the issue of a national language that split Pakistan and pushed Sri Lanka

into a civil war through the three-language formula whereby regions can transact their official business in the regional language, and Hindi and English function act as link languages. However, the same success has not been achieved when it comes to religion. This is where the contradiction between Prime Minister Modi's agenda of inclusive development and the shrill voice of the RSS asking the party in power to protect Hindu symbols such as cow protection that endanger the livelihood of sections of the Indian population, including in particular Muslims and former untouchables, have emerged as crucial problems for the government.

One can identify other unresolved issues that generate considerable political passion. Foreign policy and security issues have not been major factors in India's electoral politics in the past except the 1971 Indo-Pakistani war which had helped the massive victory of Indira Gandhi in the 1972 elections. However, the current strife in Kashmir, the Pulwama terrorist attack that killed forty Indian paramilitary forces and the Indian incursion into Pakistani territory to bomb a terrorist camp, followed by a Pakistani air attack, might affect the electoral outcome. This is relevant to the campaign of the BJP which has positioned itself as a staunch defender of the territorial integrity of the Indian state. Whether or not the latest crisis benefits the party electorally depends on the unfolding events and the capacity of the party to persuade the electorate that terrorism is an important issue and the strategy of the government has yielded concrete results. This may win over the urban voters who are exposed to the media more than the rural voter where agrarian distress has already cut into the BJP support base as one can see from the recent assembly elections in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh that the BJP lost in 2018.

CONCLUSION: INDIA RISING, BUT WHERE TO?
The most salient achievement of India's political system has been to induce a sense of dynamic equilibrium where the state and market balance one another and, in the process, generate both the incentives for growth and redistribution. A similar process of ideological convergence of India's mainstream political parties has not taken place with regard to basic components of national identity. Two conflicting formulations of the idea of India, based on a multi-cultural secularism as opposed to muscular Hinduism, define an ideological chasm that separates the two main competing coalitions.

As things stand, India today is at a turning point. The state of intense mobilisation in which political forces and social groups find themselves on the eve of the parliamentary election of 2019 constitutes a critical juncture. The outcome remains uncertain. The results of this critical election will continue to affect the structure of the Indian state, political culture and economic and foreign policy in the near future.

Regardless of the uncertainty of the electoral outcome, the institutional basis of the Indian state and the process of electoral democracy remain solidly entrenched. One can safely predict that regardless of the results, the country will stay the democratic course. However, the unresolved structural issues of agriculture, territorial integration in Kashmir and India's North-East, rights of forest-dwellers threatened by encroaching markets and the emotive issue of cow protection will continue to haunt democratic India in the form of sporadic violence and local conflict, despite the overall stability of the political system.

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1 Elections in India are supervised by the independent Election Commission. The vast electorate, spread out over the continental dimensions of the country, votes in several phases. This is necessary because of the deployment of troops, necessary to ensure the orderly conduct of polls. The introduction of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and the power of the Election Commission to countermand the results in polling stations where force or fraud had affected voting has helped conduct free and fair elections. **2** It thus comes as no surprise that in the wake of developments following the terrorist attack in Pulwama and the Indian bombing of the training camp in Balakot, a new wave of negotiations has started all over the country. The media report that the SP-BSP alliance in Uttar Pradesh that had specifically excluded the Congress party but had left two seats for Rahul and Sonia Gandhi is being renegotiated by the alliance partners who sense a surge in support for the BJP. **3** See Subrata Mitra and Jivanta Schoettli (2016) 'The 2014 General Elections: A Critical Realignment in Indian Politics?', in *Asian Survey,* Nr. 56 (4), July. **4** For concrete data on RSS members in high public offices in India, see 'Hindu Nationalism: Orange Revolution', in *The Economist,* 2 March 2019, p. 18. **5** Thus, while the Prime Minister claims that 'The world now accepts that the 21st century is India's century' (P.M. Modi, in *The Times of India,* 28 September 2015), we have the contrasting view from Ravi Veloor: 'In a perverse way, in Modi's strengths also lies India's fragility' (*India Rising: Fresh Hope, New Fears,* Straits Times Press Singapore, 2016, p. 358). **6** Moore, Barrington (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World,* Beacon Press Boston, p. 410. **7** The transition from feudalism to the modern world and the creation of nation states from fragments of territory was achieved through considerable bloodshed in Europe and, closer home, in China. Indian democracy which empowers those most vulnerable to reform, Moore argued, would face the prospect of a peaceful paralysis. See Moore, Barrington (1966) *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World,* Beacon Press Boston, p. 385.