

The Outcome of the Indian Elections 2004. Why the Congress Alliance and the Left has won or the BJHP-led NDA lost

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Of all the dramatic headings that greeted the astounding victory of the Congress, its allies and the Left, the most appropriate was coined by a weekly (Tehelka) whose journalists had been hounded by the previous regime. This heading congratulated the ‘foreign-born wife of the nation’ for performing **The Art of the Impossible**. That the BJP-led NDA was coming to power, albeit with a much-reduced majority, was predicted by all big newspapers, TV channels, well-paid psephologists and even exit polls which recorded the sample-verdict of the voters after they had cast their votes. But this drummed-up ‘Hegemonic Prophecy’ projecting the wish fulfilment of the vocal and the powerful and the rich proved to be, fortunately, wrong. The maximum this hegemonic voice conceded was a Hung Parliament where the NDA, in a more advantageous position, would be able to win over a few other parties and form the government.

Not even a Hung Parliament was the outcome. With the Congress emerging as the single-largest party (145 seats, 7 more than the BJP), with the Congress + allies winning 220 seats and the Left 63, they form a thin though stable majority in the 543-seat Parliament. In fact, the results would have been even more favourable - at least 10 to 15 seats more – if there would not have been a division of the anti-BJP votes among ‘secular contenders’ in some regions of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Bihar. Now, let us analyse the many causes which led to this result.

CAUSE 1 : LOPSIDED REFORM

By far, the most important cause had a nationwide application except in states like Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhatisgarh and Punjab where the BJP performed well. This cause is primarily economic. The BJP-led NDA stubbornly followed a blatantly one-sided reform policy which catered to the interests of the rich, high-grade urban professionals, upper middle class and upwardly mobile middle class who constitute no more than 30 to 35% (approximately) of the population. The remaining – struggling middle class, lower middle class, poor living in cities, small towns and villages in particular - were left unattended. The vast agricultural community which still constitutes the majority of the Indian population was hard-hit. It is this less vocal, even silent majority represented by the common Indian voter struggling in factories and fields everyday that taught the BJP a lesson.

CAUSE 2 : ARROGANT DELUSION

The BJP failed to discover this erosion of support because it nurtured a sense of aggressive self-confidence fanned by the mighty media. In other words, it regarded its vocal votebank and its smart media-spokesmen as the whole of India though it represented, in reality, only a flashy minority. The BJP and the media coined slogans like ‘India Shining’ and ‘Feed Good’ which created an aura of totally deceptive glory. Those

who felt good and shining, of course, voted for the BJP but their number was not enough. Hence, the lopsided reform and the false glitter it promoted triggered the crash. Moreover, the crash literally numbed the complacent BJP which believed that 'India was really shining'. In Antonio Gramsci's logic, this assertive complacency was the example of a stunning 'hegemonic blunder'. In a word, BJP was trapped in its own high-voltage myopia.

CAUSE 3 : RAINBOW COALITIONS (SONIA GANDHI)

The BJP, under Vajpayee, fed by its feeling of arrogant self-confidence allowed some dissatisfied, crucial allies to leave the coalition. That is, they failed to practise the proper art of coalition-politics in the pre-election phase though they had excelled in this after coming to power. The potentially powerful DMK, to offer the most striking example, left the NDA stable and Sonia Gandhi lost no time in wrapping up an alliance with it. Result – the Congress-DMK-Left rainbow alliance captured all the seats in Tamilnadu. Indeed, Sonia Gandhi, displaying remarkable political intelligence mixed with opportunism and compromise, struck up a network of fruitful alliances with smaller parties like National Congress Party (NCP) in Maharashtra, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM-Jharkhand Liberation Front in Jharkhand) as well as vote-sharing arrangements with the Left in states like Andhra to reap the maximum benefit possible. These ideal rainbow-coalitions and unsigned contracts (often five partners fought together, as in Bihar, against the NDA) worked wonders in Tamilnadu, Andhra and Bihar – three states – which gave Sonia around 100 seats. In short, the Congress led by Sonia excelled in the art of pre-election coalition construction.

It needs to be added that the other partners in South, North, East and West were also that much eager to teach the BJP a lesson. They all had their specific and common reasons which added up and created a strong emotion for 'CHANGE' in the majority of the states.

CAUSE 4 – REGIONAL ANTI-INCUMBENCY OR PRO-INCUMBENCY

In India, parliamentary elections are often influenced by serious regional considerations. This influence was active in the last election too, primarily to the advantage of the 'secular' bloc. Whereas the voters in the state or territory of Delhi voted overwhelmingly for the Congress because the Congress-governed state there had administered well, voters in Tamilnadu and Andhra rejected the BJP because they were simple fed up with their regional allies in power, Jayalalitha's AIADMK in Tamilnadu and Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party in Andhra. The pent-up anger against these two state regimes, close allies of the BJP, burnt the BJP as well in a decisive extension of electoral rejection reaching upto the Parliament.

CAUSE 5 : LINGERING GUJARAT

Though it would be a blatant exaggeration to claim that the genocide in Gujarat is primarily responsible for BJP's defeat, a belated and lingering impact was obviously in

operation. Otherwise, how can we explain the dramatic recovery of the Congress in that very state which was described as the impregnable laboratory of Hindutva. Congress won 12 seats out of 26 in Gujarat, narrowly missing victory in two other constituencies. The Gujarat-factor was sharpened by a few drastic statements of the Supreme Court just before the election which described Narendra Modi, the butcher-Chief Minister of Gujarat as ‘Nero’ who fiddled while his state burnt. Such condemnations were not only directed against Narendra Modi but also against the entire Hindutva brigade, BJP included. Not all Muslims voted against the NDA but that a decisive majority of the minority communities (Muslim and Christian) voted against the NDA is beyond doubt. In fact, the 3 per cent Christian community, represented by its Churches, welcomed the return of secular governance.

CAUSE 6 – ‘VAJPAYEE VERSUS SONIA’ DID NOT WORK

It is now abundantly clear that the carefully hyped Vajpayee magic failed to work in this scenario loaded against the NDA. In fact, Vajpayee’s victory margin was substantially reduced. To put it simply, ‘Shining India led by the charismatic and invincible, Vajpayee’ – strategy flaunted by BJP’s techno-savvy election managers crumbled. To that extent, we could easily claim that this defeat is the personal defeat of Vajpayee, the one and only BJP mascot. This also means that the voters were not interested in the question ‘We have Vajpayee, whom do you have? You are a cackling lot without a leader’. Not only that, they were not much impressed either by the slanderous campaign against Sonia Gandhi which often descended to the level of the vile and the scurrilous. Accordingly, in a stunning example to the world, the Indian voter backed a power led by a person of a foreign origin. A German diplomat rightly said, “We cannot imagine such an outcome in Germany. Indians have offered us a lesson in democracy.”

Along with these six major causes, there are many more region-specific reasons. But what deserves to be specially underlined is the collective, democratic protest of those classes and communities who form the majority and who are not privileged. This vast, non-vocal, perhaps not highly educated (even illiterate) conglomeration of common people has taught the ‘shining, feel-good’ privileged section a lesson that history will not forget. Whether we interpret this victory as the ‘progress of class struggle through the ballot box’ or not, depends on our political inclination.

NDA’s economic measures which boomeranged:

- (1) Lowering the rates of interest on savings deposits in banks and other small savings schemes. This severely affected the income-generation of the common people.
- (2) Formulating a new pension scheme contributory in nature. Employees themselves had to contribute to this Pension Fund.
- (3) Selling profit-earning, important public sector companies for a song to speed up privatization in those sectors where it was not at all needed.
- (4) Closing down industrial units right and left and thereby adding to the number of the urban unemployed.

(5) Increasing the cost of inputs given to agriculturists and reducing the subsidies granted to them.

(6) Allowing indiscriminate import of agro products which 'killed' the demand for indigenous produce causing acute misery to farmers.

There are several more. Only at Cancun, and nowhere else, the NDA defended genuine national interest. The violently hostile reaction of the stock market in Mumbai (our financial capital) following the defeat of the BJP-led NDA proved emphatically that the losers had their most ardent supporters in brokers, manipulators and share market agents who excel in disguised plunder in the name of selling and buying shares

Please note: NDA stands for National Democratic Alliance which was defeated. BJP stands for Bhartiya Janata Party or Indian People's Party. Hindutva refers to the theory, worldview and aspiration of the Sangh Family of which BJP is the political arm.

II

COMMON MINIMUM PROGRAMME (CMP)

No fewer than five drafts had to be prepared and revised before all the allies, Congress itself and the Left agreed on the final text of the CMP which embodies the aims and aspirations of the secular bloc. Different attitudes, varying emphases, conflicting ideological thrusts were refined, at times softened, and accommodated in this manifesto which reads like the blueprint of a welfare state. The Left which chose to remain outside the Congress-led governing alliance (United Progressive Alliance – UPA) played a crucial role in moulding the content of the document at every stage. In fact, to quote a Congress leader, "Most of the significant changes from the first to the final draft were made to accommodate the views of the two Left parties". While the Congress and its allies were signatories to the CMP, the Left endorsed it as the guiding principle of governance.

The CMP has attempted to draw a balance between the advantages of market-driven economic reform and benefits of social economy which carry a clear leftist thrust. This balance is by nature delicate; hence conflicting attitudes, interpretations and policies will be tabled often to resolve contentious economic issues. Indeed, the tug of war has already begun. But no matter how intense the friction is between the Left and the not-so-Left, acceptable compromises will be found. Evidently, there will be hard bargaining and even disputes but nothing more. It needs to be mentioned in this context that the Left itself, while governing a state like West Bengal, is displaying remarkable flexibility in the economic sphere.

Let us now list what has been incorporated in the CMP under pressure from the Left :

- (1) No privatization of any profit-making public sector unit
- (2) Consider privatization on a case-by-case basis

- (3) Sell-off loss-making companies only after obtaining workers' assent and clearing their dues
- (4) Abolish disinvestment ministry (this has already been done)
- (5) No hire and fire. Change labour laws only to safeguard workers' interests.
- (6) Protect the right to strike
- (7) Commitment to the Palestinian cause
- (8) No special allegiance to or favoured relationship with the USA

At the same time, the not-so-Left or non-Left has included, with the assent of the Left:

- (1) Encourage Foreign portfolio investment
- (2) Allow public sector units and state-run banks to tap the capital market
- (3) Target subsidies at the 'poor and the needy'
- (4) Give managerial autonomy to state-run banks
- (5) Help increase private power generation and distribution
- (6) Keep tax rates stable, and conducive to growth and investment

It is clear from these two lists that the Left and the 'Non-Left' positions are not irreconcilable. What is however crucial to note is that the former regime did not have any 'Left' component in its prescription and praxis. To that extent, a seachange has taken place with the Left-supported UPA coming to power. It follows therefrom that those who are harping on the belief that the bourgeois Congress will merely follow the BJP-road in the sphere of economy are mischievously wrong. They refuse to see the 'social and people's content' in the CMP. For example, the previous regime in its own CMP had no space for the following:

- 1) Act to provide legal guarantee for at least 100 days of employment to each rural household in a year
- 2) Full implementation of minimum wage laws for farm labour
- 3) Protective law for all farm workers
- 4) Controls that depress farm income to be removed
- 5) Medium-term strategy for food and nutrition, stronger Public Distribution System for the poorest

It is taken for granted that in a country like India all these prescriptions will never be fully implemented. But the very act of striving will help the weaker sections, at least partially.

Simultaneously, the CMP attaches a lot of importance to the secularization of the society. In order to erase the religio-fundamentalist thrust of the previous regime, the CMP declares under the category 'Minorities':

- 1) Implementation of Protection of Places of Worship Act, 1992
- 2) Law on communal violence providing for investigation by central agency, prosecution by special courts and payment of uniform compensation
- 3) Promote modern education among minority communities

If even half of the CMP is implemented by the UPA with the support of the Left, India will be a much better place to live in, especially for those who are the victims of shocking deprivation.

(III)

PARTNERS OF THE CONGRESS (THUMBNAIL SKETCHES OF THE MAJOR THREE

LEFT BLOC : Though the Left is not a formal member of the Congress-led alliance directly governing the country and though it has not joined the ministry, it is by far the most important supporter of the new regime. With its 63 MPs, it is the third largest political force in the country and the present regime simply cannot function without its 'outside' support. In fact, the Left, for the first time, chose to be more active at the Centre than it has ever been in the past by permitting its MP, Somnath Chatterjee, to be the Speaker in the Parliament and by cooperating in the act of drawing up the crucial.

Common Minimum Programme

Has the Left done the right thing by choosing to 'support from the outside'? This question was hotly debated within the Left itself and the media. Without going into the details of this exciting debate, this analyst feels that the Left took the right decision.

Why? Because –

- i) the Left would be able to preserve its autonomy and adopt a critical-corrective role.
- ii) it will be able to safeguard its base and politics in the three states West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala where it is strong and where, ironically, the Congress is its adversary.
- iii) it will not be accused of the failures and drawbacks which the people will associate with the government.
- iv) most importantly, this form of 'outside support' will in no way undermine the stability of the government because the Left will do whatever is possible to keep the neo-fascist BJP out of power. For example, even if the Left has to accept a compromise (which all partners have to in such a political arrangement), it will opt for it rather than wreck the regime. Indeed, every partner knows that wrecking this regime means the return of the BJP, an outcome they will prevent at all cost.

RASHTRIYA JANATA DAL (RJD) – NATIONAL PEOPLE'S PARTY

Led by its mercurial realpolitiker, Laloo Prasad Yadav, the RJD with 24 MPs, is the second strongest supporter of the Congress. Laloo trounced the BJP in his home state Bihar with the help of the Congress and other allies. This victory has made him so powerful that he could force four 'tainted' ministers (MPs of his party, including himself) on the Cabinet. Deeply entrenched in many financial scandals himself, Laloo and his cohorts embody the criminalisation of politics in India. But, at the same time, he deserves genuine praise on two counts : (i) he has encouraged the lower castes to speak out against atrocious caste oppression and (ii) he is secular to his bones and to that extent he will do

nothing that will help the BJP. Muslims and lower castes salute him as their 'Messiah' in Bihar.

DRAVIDA MUNNETRA KAZHAGAM (DMK)

This regional party which represents the Dravidian people of Tamil Nadu is the third largest supporter of the Congress with its 16 MPs. The Congress has rewarded DMK adequately by giving it 9 ministerial berths. Indeed, the DMK, its other southern allies, Congress and the Left formed a dream alliance and won each and every seat in this state (total 39). Along with Andhra Pradesh, where the Congress-Left alliance dealt a massive blow to Chandrababu Naidu and his party Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Tamil Nadu doubly ensured the downfall of the NDA. A much more refined and responsible party than the RJD, DMK does not embody the criminalisation of Indian Politics. There is also no reason why it should stop supporting the Congress.

N.B.: Profiles of other smaller alliance partners like National Congress Party (NCP) and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) who have won less than 10 seats can be given on request. But, I think, these three are sufficient for the present. The tension and tussle between the Congress Party and Samajvadi Party (SP - Socialist Party) of Uttar Pradesh is extremely complex. The Samajvadi Party won 36 seats in Uttar Pradesh and a power struggle between the two has already begun in the Indian heartland. More on this complex battle, if you need. I do not want to intimidate you with the baffling intricacies of Indian politics.

(IV)

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE NEW REGIME

During its full tenure, the BJP-led NDA introduced two new elements in its foreign policy. These were: (i) developing close ties with Ariel Sharon's Israel and (ii) coming close as much as possible to the USA. Both these relations included cooperation in matters of defence, security and exchange of intelligence. In fact, the Arab world and the PLO in particular were taken aback by this 'pro-Israeli' shift which was an entirely new element in India's foreign policy. At the same time, India's inability to sharply criticize USA's imperialist designs (the NDA did not cross the limits of mild disapproval) provoked many to say that perhaps a new New Delhi – Tel Aviv - Washington axis was developing.

If one goes by what has been promised in the Common Minimum Programme (CMP), this marked pro-Israeli shift will be corrected and, more importantly, the new regime will not cuddle upto the USA. It goes without saying that the Left exerted quite some pressure to incorporate these corrective changes. No wonder, the PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat sent a congratulatory message to the CPI-M hailing its shining performance in the election. Policy-makers and diplomats, however, know that radical shifts in foreign policy cannot be undertaken overnight with changes in government. For example, intelligence-sharing between India and Israel has proceeded to such an extent, that even

the new regime cannot afford to snap the bonds suddenly or unilaterally. Hence, cooperation will have to continue though the depth and extent will be diluted gradually.

Before becoming the Foreign Minister, Sonia Gandhi's protégé, Natwar Singh, indulged in a sustained act of Bush-bashing in his column which appeared regularly in the media. Obviously, this bothered the Yankees who were also not happy to see the Indian Left in a commanding position in New Delhi. But in this sphere too, Natwar Singh as Foreign Minister cannot behave like Natwar Singh, the freelance columnist, because New Delhi is in no position to either antagonise or alienate the USA. None the less, it will certainly change the tone and tenor of its conduct and try to convey the impression that it cannot be taken for granted. In fact, the new regime's stand on the process of government-formation in Iraq appears more resolute and firm compared to the stand taken by the Vajpayee-regime. But, at the same time, cooperation at all possible levels including joint military exercises will continue. Indeed, Indian and American space scientists are planning a number of joint ventures ranging from planetary explorations to low cost journeys into space.

Manmohan Singh's government is determined to improve the quality of relationships with its SAARC neighbours – Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal in particular. Foreign Ministers of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have already visited New Delhi and Foreign Minister Natwar Singh himself has visited Nepal. In other words, a stable South Asia appears to be the major objective of the new government. The process of warming up to China which was begun by Rajiv Gandhi and then strengthened by Vajpayee will also not encounter any change. Natwar Singh has proposed a vast nuclear-free zone and common nuclear doctrine for China, India and Pakistan.

What is however crucial is the future shaping of India-Pakistan relation. The present rulers, especially National Security Advisor, J N Dixit, thinks that the Vajpayee regime was a bit too soft towards Pakistan, to its crafty General Pervez Musharraf in particular. But even if India wants to keep Pakistan under some pressure, it is keen to continue the dialogue of reconciliation. Pakistan, on its part, has tried to exert some counter-pressure on India by test-firing its long range ballistic missile last week. Obviously, India is going to respond soon by testing its own.

Such test-firings will continue until and unless the Kashmir problem is resolved. New Delhi has sent a positive signal by saying that isolated acts of insurgency by militants in Kashmir will not derail the process of dialogue. This dialogue, however, can only bear fruit if the USA exerts a positive influence from behind the curtain, specially on its comrade, General Musharraf. In return, USA will demand greater allegiance from New Delhi. Will New Delhi accept this demand even after seeing that Vajpayee's allegiance to USA failed to bear fruit as far as Kashmir was concerned? This is the crucial question that has to be answered by the new regime.

V

BACK TO THE SECULARISATION OF HISTORY AND CULTURE

Who was the most successful minister in Vajpayee's cabinet? Undoubtedly Murli Manohar Joshi, Minister of Human Resources Development (HRD), because this Professor of Physics, blue-eyed boy of the RSS, ardent devotee of Hindutva left no stone unturned to 'saffronize' history, culture and education. He used the enormous weight of his ministry and huge financial resources to corrupt the long legacy of Leftist-liberal-secular education in our country and performed his insidious job with calculated gusto. What did he do: (i) pack all possible centers of higher learning, research institutes and apex bodies like the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) with his yes-men, who are all second-rate academics but, like their boss, worshippers of Hindutva. (ii) he changed the syllabus of history text books thoroughly to brainwash the school students who learnt that the Aryans were natives of India and the Muslim period of our history was the pitch-dark period. (iii) he introduced thoroughly obscurantist courses and subjects like priestcraft and astrology to thwart the progress of a liberal-rational attitude. In short, he attempted the worst like Goebbels – he tried to corrupt and change the mental ethos of the country as the Minister of HRD.

Regrettably, he achieved quite a bit and that is why the Congress Minister of HRD, the old secular warhorse, Arjun Singh, has his hands full. Arjun Singh who is close to the Left, is being helped by Leftist historians, liberal academics, progressive writers but their cooperative effort will have to be longdrawn to wipe out the accumulated mess. Arjun Singh has said, "My predecessor was so thoroughgoing that I have to remove the stain one by one. For example, it is not possible to change the history textbooks overnight, because thousands of these have already reached thousands of schools and thousands are studying them." Nevertheless, even the slightest chance of rectification is being fully utilized. For example, the Congress government in the state of Delhi has introduced a new 'secular' text book which can be held up as a model for other states.

The massive cleaning-up operation has also begun. Arjun Singh is showing Joshi-loyalists the door to exit. This will be followed by new placements in the apex institutions like ICHR and Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) where liberal and left academics will again direct the course of affairs. What is encouraging to note is that this 'secular' academic community opposed Joshi's aggression tooth and nail during the last five years. They publicized the falsification of history, prepared alternative curriculum and waited for the day when the BJP would be voted out of power. At present, they are trying to delete the most objectionable 'lies' from the text books already in circulation and then these will be replaced gradually within a specific timeframe.

What is really tragic is that historians of international renown like Irfan Habib, Romila Thapar, Sumit Sarkar, K N Panikkar, Tanika Sarkar were rubbished by Murli Manohar Joshi as 'intellectual terrorists'. Their texts were replaced by those written by third rate adherents of the Saffron cause. In this context, it is heartening to note that in this crucial sphere which is concerned with the mind and Geist of the nation, there is almost an absolute convergence of views between the Left and the Congress. Indeed, the Congress,

since the days of Nehru, utilized the Left academia to disseminate the message of progressive secularism. A reenactment of that old, time-tested script has begun. For the reaping of fruits we have to wait because Joshi had followed a scorched earth policy in the terrain of education.

N. B. : The Hindu Right Brigade is also known as the Saffron Brigade because the saffron is the colour of their Flag. Hence, 'saffronization' in the Indian context means the impact of obscurantist, religious sectarianism favoured by the proponents of Hindutva.

VI

WEAK SPOTS OF THE NEW REGIME

Even the most ardent supporter of the new regime will have to accept that quite a few weak spots simply cannot be wished away. By 'weak spots', I am not referring to the several 'contradictions' evident at the levels of ideology, policy-making and functioning – such 'contradictions' are found in the structure of any political formation, coalitions in particular. Rather, I am pointing to the palpable flaws on which the Opposition will harp relentlessly.

SPOT NO 1: The largest ally of the Congress, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD – National People's Party) which flaunts 24 MPs, has compelled the Congress to give ministerial berths to no fewer than four 'tainted' MPs against whom the courts are investigating specific charges ranging from murder to kidnapping. The Left and the Congress were not at all keen to make them ministers, but the immensely powerful leader of the RJD, Laloo Prasad Yadav, who is also known as the uncrowned king of Bihar, used his enormous clout to favour his criminal cronies. The secular coalition led by Laloo in Bihar trounced the NDA in that state and this victory gave him the clout. Of course, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) can rightly claim that the NDA had also allowed its own 'tainted' MPs to become ministers, but one wrong does not exonerate another. Moreover, the very presence of these 'tainted' ministers has tarnished somewhat the otherwise spotless record of Manmohan Singh. In fact, a 13-member NDA team met the President, A P J Abdul Kalam and submitted a memorandum detailing the criminal cases pending against Laloo Prasad himself who is the Railway Minister and five others. Of these five, one is Shibu Soren, tribal leader and MP from the state of Jharkhand, whose party the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM – Jharkhand Liberation Group) is also an ally of the Congress. As in Bihar, in Jharkhand too, the Congress-JMM-Left coalition trounced the NDA and this victory strengthened the position of Shibu Soren who stands accused of several crimes including abetment to murder.

I would have felt greatly relieved if the 'tainted' were not included in the Cabinet. It is a real spot which cannot be washed away. But, unfortunately, such are the compromises and compulsions of coalition politics in India.

SPOT NO 2 : There is nothing much to say against the politicians who are holding the major portfolios of Home, Defence, Finance, Agriculture. But our Foreign Minister,

Natwar Singh, has already turned out to be quite a problem. I fear that he will create more problems in the future. In his zeal to erase the 'constructive' work done by Vajpayee, he made irresponsible comments on the most sensitive issue – Indo-Pak relations. In fact, he had to be snubbed by Sonia Gandhi, the supreme leader of the Congress. No matter how much one is posed against the NDA, one has to accept that under Vajpayee's leadership, India's relations with Pakistan and China improved considerably. Hence, any China and Pakistan policy has to incorporate and recognize these gains attained in the immediate past.

That my question regarding Natwar Singh's ability is not unfounded has been proved by his gaffe which he committed in the USA. After talking with Colin Powell, he went out of his way to tell the media that India could 'rethink the issue of sending troops to Iraq in the new situation.' This created an uproar in New Delhi provoking the Left to demand a clarification from the Congress and the Congress had to do some damage-control exercise. Its spokesman said that there was no question of sending troops to Iraq even in the changed situation because it wanted to limit itself to economic assistance and reconstruction.

VII

REACTION OF THE VANQUISHED

'Stunning disbelief', 'Shattering Shock' and other similar expressions may be used to describe the response of the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) led by the BJP. For almost ten days, the top leaders of the BJP – Atalbihari Vajpayee, Lalkrishna Advani, Murli Manohar Joshi (he lost the election) – did not say a word. They locked themselves in and were beyond the reach of the media. But even during this phase of scorching agony they plotted the downfall of the secular combine by provoking second-rung leaders to open a malicious front against Sonia Gandhi. Goaded by the leaders, lieutenants like Govindacharya, Sushma Swaraj, Uma Bharati thundered that they will not accept the 'foreign-born' Sonia Gandhi as India's Prime Minister.

This was a carefully constructed plot. The BJP thought that: (i) Sonia Gandhi will not sacrifice her Prime Ministerial ambition. In that case, they will launch a fierce agitation on this very sensitive issue and paralyse the process of government-formation. They even appealed to the President of the country to reject her claim. (ii) And in case Sonia decided to withdraw, there will be such a bitter and suicidal fight among the other PM aspirants within the Congress Party, that the coalition itself will crumble. While highstrung commotion continued for three days around this issue, the BJP sharpened its knives. Then came the second 'Shattering Shock'. Displaying exemplary political courage and sagacity, Sonia declared that she was not in the crucial race. Moreover, she nominated the clean, erudite, revered-by-all Professor of Economics, Dr Manmohan Singh, as Prime Minister. When the other Congress leaders and the coalition partners as well as the Left accepted him as the would-be-PM, the BJP looked woebegone and miserable. The Saffron leaders licked their wounds as the entire media began heaping lavish praise on the 'noble Sonia' whose sacrifice, they compared to that of Mahatma Gandhi.

At another level, the defeat was followed, expectedly, by vicious inner-party squabbles, dirty accusations thrown against one another, piling up of possible and probable causes and expressions of lament and remorse. Each leader singled out a different reason: Lalkrishna Advani conceded that the much-hyped 'Feel Good Factor' and 'Shining India' brand had boomeranged; Vajpayee, always a bit pseudo-philosophical, stressed that the BJP had failed to identify the 'real enemy' in the battlefield; Murli Manohar Joshi said that Narendra Modi's abrasive language and conduct was primarily responsible. The plain truth is, a number of potent factors worked together to ensure the downfall of the neo-Fascists. Of these the 'economic' factor, on the one side, and the butchery in Gujarat, on the other, were perhaps more important. What is most significant to note is the sharp reaction of the Swadeshi Jagaran Mancha (SJM-- National Reawakening Platform), which is an affiliate of the RSS, the organization that is the supreme guide of the BJP and nerve-centre of the Sangh Parivar. The SJM not only welcomed the 'people's oriented' economic programme of the new government but also lambasted its political arm, the BJP, for its 'criminal lapses'. It said, "The NDA's economic policies were by and large rejected by the electorate. Its policies were anti-employment, anti-agriculture, anti-village, anti-unorganised sector and anti small scale sector".

After the almost month-long despair and sorrow, the NDA is now reconciled to the reality of functioning as the Opposition in Parliament. It is concentrating its assault on another sensitive issue – the induction of 'tainted' politicians in the ministry. By 'tainted' is meant those members of Parliament who have been charge-sheeted for various crimes. However, the NDA itself had its own fair share of such 'tainted' ministers who spearheaded the destruction of the Babri Mosque – a despicable act followed by bloody, communal riots.

The NDA - BJP in particular – also thinks, or loves to think, that the Congress-led UPA supported by the Left will not last the full term of five years. Basic contradictions between the Left and the Congress in the sphere of economic policy, ever-increasing demands of regional allies, contradictions between the allies themselves and rivals of Manmohan Singh within the Congress itself should precipitate the downfall of the UPA. That is what the BJP dreams. Indeed, Vajpayee has already predicted, "We shall not sit in the Opposition bench for long." If you ask me – an inveterate opponent of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar – I shall love to say that these dreams will turn sour gradually. That will be the third shock, though its nature will not be sudden and shattering. The BJP will have to stomach it slowly in the coming days.

N.B.: RSS - Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (National Volunteer Force) which is the core unit in the Sangh Family. Sangh Parivar means the Sangh Family.

VIII

ANDHRA – EXIT OF THE CEO

The big, stunning success of the Congress, its allies and the Left at the national level was repeated at the state level in Andhra Pradesh, where the Congress-led alliance inflicted a humiliating defeat on the ruling Telugu Desam Party and its ally, the BJP. The outcome of this battle is particularly important because the Chief Minister of Andhra, Chandrababu Naidu, (who preferred to call himself the Chief Executive Officer – CEO of the state) represented a specific ‘model of development’ which endeared him to the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, Bill Gates, Clinton-Bush-Blair and even Germany. He was flaunted as the ‘shining boy of globalisation’ who had worked wonders in his state with computer network, information technology, structural adjustment, privatization and fast paced liberalization. From Bill Gates to Johannes Rau – all made a beeline for the state capital Hyderabad to applaud the IT whizkid and market avatar, ‘Laptop Naidu’.

But in the very same state, just 20 kms away from glittering Hyderabad, farmers committed suicides in tragic regularity. In fact, 4 to 5000 debt-ridden farmers ended their lives in the last six years in the state. Their age profile was between 35-45 and they opted for this ghastly end because of the following reasons : rise in the cost of agricultural inputs; fall in the prices of agricultural produce; floods and droughts; supply of spurious seeds and pesticides; manipulation of prices by traders and absence of any worthwhile initiative on the part of the state government to lessen the stifling burden. Indeed, the special allocation of rice granted to Naidu’s government by the Centre to feed the desperately poor never reached the latter – it was sold in the market by the trader-politician nexus. Since 1947, no state government which boasted everyday of being the ‘model developer’ exhibited such killing indifference towards its rural people. Incidentally, 60 per cent of Andhra’s 76 million people depend on agriculture, and not on information technology!

Naidu’s Andhra is not only a classic example of shocking urban / rural disparity but also of a ‘model of development’ that should not be followed in any developing country. The false aura and dazzle that envelop this model has been ripped apart by the voters who want to have two square meals a day, who want to live. They voted 34 Congress-led alliance MPs’ back to power in a state which has 42 seats. In point of fact, the Andhra tragedy is so severe that even after the exit of the TDP, suicides are continuing. As for the Congress, it has announced a number of radical measures like: providing free power to the farmers; writing off all old loans to farmers; monetary grants for the liquidation of loans of farmers who committed suicides etc.

What is a strange to note is that the defeated TDP in its post mortem has highlighted all possible causes to explain their stunning defeat except their ‘suicidal model of development’. It is true that the Muslim voters turned against them because of what their ally BJP had done in Gujarat; it is true that the alliance with the separatist movement in the Telengana region of the state reaped rich dividends for the Congress. But all these causes merely added to the prime cause which has been described appropriately by an analyst: “Chandrababu Naidu, friend of Bill Gates, fiddled with the high-tech key while farmers committed suicides everyday.” Hence, the election in Andhra Pradesh which

unseated Naidu and sent 34 MPs belonging to the Congress-led alliance is a vote against predatory globalisation.

(Words 2,833)

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