

# Indian Parliamentary Elections: Electorate Got a Raw Deal

by Ramtanu Maitra

May 5—India's marathon five-phase 15th Parliamentary elections, which will conclude on May 13, span over a month (April 16, April 22-23, April 30, May 7, and May 13), but the overall impression one gets is that the Indian electorate, known for its keenness to exercise its voting rights, is mostly disinterested. The voting percentages in the first three phases confirm that. The principal reason behind this lack of interest, is that India's political parties have not addressed the issues that haunt the electorate, and instead, went on serving the old wine in the old bottle.

The primary culprits in disappointing the population are the two largest parties, the Indian National Congress (better known as the Congress Party) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The outgoing government was a coalition, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), forged under the leadership of the Congress Party. Its performance was mixed, in the sense it catered heavily to the middle class, in order to cash in on India's growing muscle in information technology and the financial institutions, to generate foreign exchange, mostly in U.S. dollars.

Having spent its energy in trying to accomplish these two objectives, the government ignored the vast rural areas, where most of the Indian people live and die. As a result, India's agricultural sector—the key to its emergence as a powerful nation—and the small- and medium-size industries, were allowed to stagnate and weaken. Meanwhile, the global collapse of a fraud-ridden financial system saw the dashing of the UPA's dream of showcasing the financial institutions and the export-oriented information technology sector.

## Politics of Zero Content

If the UPA faltered because of its bull-headed misunderstanding of what India needs, the BJP has done no better. Although not in power at the Center, the BJP, which has strong ties to both Washington and Tel Aviv, has remained focused on articulating why Hinduism should be given due importance in the political arena.

While few would argue that the Hindu religion deserves anything less, the BJP hacks away at it, without being able to make the point, about how India's 650 million people, or perhaps more, who live in dire poverty, would directly benefit from what the BJP is trying to drive home.

Moreover, in the present context, the BJP's close association with the United States and Israel, and its leaders' half-hearted (sometimes full-throated) promotion of the Hindu religion, makes it a party under suspicion, not only to the 150 million-plus Muslims, who have long made India their country of residence, but also to hundreds of millions of Hindus. Needless to say, the present election campaign did not indicate that the BJP leaders have shown any capability to rise above this controversy, and present to the majority of Indians a clear picture of what it would do to make their, and their children's, lives better.

Meanwhile, the Congress Party, which is top-heavy with septuagenarians and octogenarians, has also a young brigade, led by Rahul Gandhi, son of the assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Neither the young brigade nor the old brigade address the realities on the ground, and instead continue to harp on how much better the last five years were, compared to the BJP-led government between 1999-2004, and why the Indian people should reject the religion-centered BJP.

The other aim of the parties in this election campaign, is to convince the population that one or the other could provide a stable government. Whether they can or not, most of the people in India believe that neither party will be able to garner a sufficient number of parliamentary seats to form a government on its own. Each will have to depend upon support of regional parties, which have no vision for the nation and cater only to the state they belong to, and the caste or ethnic group they identify with.

Despite the shortcomings so blatantly exhibited by both the Congress Party and the BJP, simply because of their nationwide support, it is expected that, under ad-



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*India's two major parties have failed to address the most important issue in the current election campaign: the urgent need for economic development, to solve the appalling lack of electric power, health care, and education, for hundreds of millions of impoverished Indian households. Shown: a polling station in Chhattisgarh, April 16.*

equate leadership, which may emerge in the coming years, both these parties can be rejuvenated. The same, however, cannot be said of the regional parties. They will eventually die, or may emerge in a slightly different form. But, long before their death, they could turn downright dangerous, pandering to global criminal elements to sustain their political aspirations.

In the present context in South Asia, this is a threat to India and the Indians. Instability rules supreme all around India. Ethnic violence, conflicts brought on by religious zealots waving political banners, aided by opium money and opium money-backed gun runners, have made Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh—all neighbors of India—highly unstable.

### **What the Majority of Indians Want**

No matter how callous or irresponsible the present set of Indian politicians is, India must emerge as a power that plays a role in worldwide development. However, in order to get there, India will first have to set its own house in order. That means adopting policies which are not going to benefit 20 or 25% of its population, but which would enable every Indian to contribute to building up the nation.

It is time that the new generation of Indian political leaders understood how India survived the ordeal it

faced in the aftermath of 1947 when the country was born, following 200 years of British looting in the name of free trade; and the Empire's parting shot—the partition of India—dividing the country on the basis of religion. Those who took power at the time in New Delhi, made clear their intent that India should become a technologically first-rate nation, and that the massive population not fall victim to outside manipulation due to the shortage of the basic essential—food.

Since then, Indian leaders have added a few other important elements to safeguard the nation. However, the spirit to build the nation ebbed steadily, and evaporated altogether, beginning in the 1990s, with the beginning of globalization and privatization.

What the majority of Indians want, is a better and more productive life for their children and grandchildren. But they cannot convert this “dream” into reality, unless the powers-that-be realize that the order of the day is to develop India's physical economy to provide the majority of the people the power to improve their lot. It means a total commitment to enhance India's power generation, making drinking water available to all, railroads and waterways to move large quantities of bulk items, and education and health care to one and all. These are the goals to make India the nation it deserves to be. It cannot be done in a year, or even a decade, but it must start now. Or else, all the politicians who are vying for power in the coming years will be unceremoniously dumped in the garbage can of history.

### **Develop, or Perish**

To make the case, it is enough to cite the Indian leadership's failure to provide electrical power to all the people, as can be seen abundantly in the lack of drinking water, quality education, railroads, etc.

India, which has mastered and developed the capability to produce indigenously all available power technologies, still keeps almost 400 million people without electricity. This shameful fact cannot be hidden; India's most widely read business magazine,



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*Nearly 400 million Indians are without electricity, and power shortages are increasing for millions more. Nuclear energy for electric power and desalination must be rapidly expanded. Here, the Tarapur Atomic Power Project 3 & 4.*

*Business India*, reported on July 29, 2008, that over 78 million Indian households, or roughly 390 million people, lack access to electricity. On Aug. 13, 2008, the news daily *The Hindu* carried an article by S.K.N. Nair, a former member of the Central Electricity Authority and a former consultant to the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi, pointing out that “power shortages are worsening, hardly an encouraging sign for a country aiming to take electricity within reach of over 80 million more households (40 per cent of total) within the next four years. The all-India energy and ‘peak power’ shortages increased by a percentage point each in April-May this year compared to the corresponding period in 2007.”

To sum it up: To remove its poverty, India has to divert its developmental strength in power generation and distribution, and the development of sources of potable water, by building nuclear-powered desalination plants all along the coasts. It needs the development of a large network of telecommunication systems; it needs to build faster railroads, and to open up channels in major rivers to be used for barge traffic; and it needs to build roads to connect the myriad villages that dot the countryside. In some of these areas, particularly with the railroads and telecommunication system, this would simply entail broadening the networks and enabling them to operate at a faster speed.

Once the basic infrastructure begins to make a dent

in the rural areas, and quality education and health-care facilities are in place, the entrepreneurs will move in to set up large-scale industrial and agro-industrial facilities. Simultaneous broadening of India’s most productive employment base, the small and medium-scale sector, must be rejuvenated through technological upgrades. As demand increases, larger and more capital-intensive industrial facilities, such as steel, cement, petrochemical, engineering, auto, locomotive, and so on, would start attracting investments.

In other words, instead of catering to the world’s consumer demand—which, in any case, is now collapsing—by using India’s skilled manpower, such a policy would develop India’s domestic agro-industrial sectors, while meeting the basic needs of the people and empowering them by creating meaningful employment.

### **Regional Fiefdoms**

According to all available poll analyses, the outcome of the elections will be fractious. The Congress Party and BJP will emerge as the two largest parties; but analysts say that neither party will be able to garner more than 180-200 seats—leaving both at least 70 seats short of securing an absolute majority in the 543-member Parliament. In the worst-case scenario, neither party will be able to win more than 150 seats—leaving an extremely wide gap to be filled to form the government.



As a result, almost all analysts point out that both of the major parties will have to form a post-election alliance with state-based regional parties, including various Communist parties. A handful of regional parties could come to post-election alliance talks, holding anywhere from 25 to 40 seats each. Under such circumstances, any regional party that could win more than 25 seats can be expected to have a strong voice in post-election alliance talks.

During formation of the government, both major parties will be confronted with a decision to seek the support of one, or all, major regional parties. Some of these regional parties have been in existence for years; the Samajwadi Party (SP), headed by Mulayam Singh Yadav of Uttar Pradesh; the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), headed by Laloo Prasad Yadav of Bihar; the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), headed by Ram Vilas Paswan of Bihar; the National Congress Party (NCP), headed by Sharad Pawar of Maharashtra; the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), headed by Mayawati of Uttar Pradesh; the AIADMK of Tamil Nadu, headed by Jayalalithaa Jayaram; and the Telegu Desam (TD) of Andhra Pradesh, headed by Chandrababu Naidu; among others, have remained confined to their respective states. None have grown over the years; nor do they show any sign of breaking out of the caste or state confinement into which they were built.

### **Dirty-Money Crowd Masquerading as Political Leaders**

During the recent years of political stagnation, many of the regional party leaders have become corrupt, and some have become downright dangerous because of their links to questionable individuals and groups who provide them with the funds to run the party and contest elections. The funds come with strings attached, and this is where the danger lies. It is also evident that the Indian electorate is not unaware of this, and in the ongoing elections, some of these leaders may get the heave-ho from the voters. But that itself is not enough, particularly in light of the inability of the national parties to provide the electorate with an alternative which is not mere semantics.

Looking at the field, some of the regional party leaders, particularly the four mentioned below, seem like everyday opportunists, along with the socialists and communists. But, behind this facade lies something which could be more sinister. The four regional party leaders who are controlled by outside (international)

dirty money are: **Sharad Pawar, Mulayam Singh Yadav, Laloo Prasad Yadav, and Ram Vilas Paswan.** While Sharad Pawar and Mulayam Singh Yadav could be in a position, following the elections, to stake claims for top Cabinet posts, including the job of Prime Minister, Laloo Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan would have to depend on Pawar's and Mulayam Singh's clout to secure ministerial berths.

The most dangerous of the lot is Pawar. Pawar, who had been a Congressman and Defense Minister in the Congress-led P.V. Narasimha Rao government in the 1990s, is a darling of Israel's Mossad, and has a close relationship with the Dubai- and Karachi-based drug- and gun-running mafia of **Dawood Ibrahim.** A Mumbai politician, Pawar was a beneficiary of Dawood's rise as the Mumbai mafia don in the 1980s. By providing protection to Dawood, Pawar staked a claim to piles of his dirty money.

In addition, Pawar's close relations with the Israeli defense and intelligence communities are also well known and of concern. They came to the fore suddenly on Feb. 23, 1992, when then-Defense Minister Sharad Pawar declared that normalization of relations with Israel had paved the way for "drawing on Israel's successful experience to curb terrorism." (But Israel's chargé d'affaires, Giora Becher, who had then moved to New Delhi from Bombay, and was holding the fort till the nomination of the first Israeli ambassador, clarified that "it [was] not the right time" to discuss defense cooperation between India and Israel.) It is to be noted that the Israeli drug- and gun-running mafia has developed a conspicuous presence inside India, and there is little doubt that Pawar has played a significant role in this development.

Next to Pawar, surely the most dangerous political leader in India is Mulayam Singh Yadav. While he feeds on caste politics, he is avowedly anti-U.S. and protects the drug and smuggling mafia inside Uttar Pradesh run from Mumbai by Dawood's extended empire. This operation is run through Nepal, as well. One such drug kingpin was a Nepali legislator, **Mirza Dilshad Beg,** who was eventually gunned down by the anti-Dawood mafia network. It is said that Beg was involved in helping the Pakistani ISI (Interservices Intelligence) to set up the hijacking of Indian Airlines flight IC 814 in December 1999. The hijacked plane was taken to Taliban-controlled Kandahar, Afghanistan, paving the way for the release of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, who, in 2001, killed the American journalist Daniel Pearl.