Indian Elections 2004:
A Retrospective Analysis and Overview

LAWRENCE SURENDRA

ABSTRACT. Elections at best reflect three dimensions of formal democracy—representation in terms of representing the political will of the people; integration in terms of social classes and groups largely done through political parties, which represents the stabilising aspect of democracy; and decisions generated from stable majorities through coalitions or a single party to ensure "majorities" within parliaments and their governability. In many societies democracy can be and has been subverted in all three dimensions. Electoral results and their reflections on democracy, at best, can be tendential statements of what the results reveal.

KEYWORDS. India · elections · liberal democracy

> Democratic power is by nature temporary. It is dependent on electoral stability, ideological flux and class interests. It is a barometer that records the variation of political will in society. But it is obvious that there have been many apparently radical political upheavals resulting in changes of government that have not been followed by the fundamental social, economic and cultural transformations that regime change has led us to expect.
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> Jose Saramago, Portuguese novelist and 1998 Nobel Literature Laureate, writing in *Le Monde Diplomatique* August 2004, just before the elections in the US, Afghanistan, Iraq and Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Often when articles, scholarly or otherwise, are written on elections, there is a tendency to read far too many connections between the nature of a sociopolitical system and the changes reflected in the electoral results. Changes in government through elections may or may

not signal deeper political changes. To assume that elections and electoral results can mirror deeper political changes or alignments in the social and power structures of a society is reading too much into elections and electoral results. The article does not assume or attribute that periodic elections held in liberal democracies are full reflections of the changes happening in that particular society. They may represent some tendencies; some may have long-term implications and some may be purely circumstantial. To try and make statements of any large nature from electoral results is a hazard; to demand so is foolish. This is because liberal democracy is itself riddled with contradictions, and elections represent only a snapshot of a society. Formal democracy may tend generally to hide deeper ills in relation to substantive democracy. By substantive democracy, this means real participation of the people in the structures of power that govern their daily lives and in the democratic sharing of power as reflected in the actual functioning of society and its institutions.

Elections at best reflect three dimensions of formal democracy—representation in terms of representing the political will of the people; integration in terms of social classes and groups largely done through political parties, which represents the stabilising aspect of democracy; and decisions generated from stable majorities through coalitions or a single party to ensure "majorities" within parliaments and their governability. In many societies, democracy can be and has been subverted in all three dimensions. Electoral results and their reflections on democracy, at best, can be tendential statements of what the results reveal. What is needed is deeper empirical analysis of trends based on the election results especially from the perspective of political economy, which is a task of a different time span and depth that has to be done as a follow-up to the results. The weakness of many political analyses on elections is the attempt to look for more profound levels of analysis than are intellectually honestly possible. While elections and election results represent the form rather than the content of democracy, an intrinsic failure of scholarship is the absence of serious in-depth research based on electoral results and socioeconomic and demographic data to determine the nature and quality of changes in a deeper societal sense, as well as in long-term implications for democracy.

The manner in which elections are conducted and the degree to which all the three dimensions of democracy are fulfilled may indicate the strength of democratic institutions and their structures. To expect analysis that can make statements about multifaceted trends in society

is dishonest and representative of false consciousness on the understanding of democracy and the ability to relate to more serious concerns regarding the substantive nature of a democracy. Elections can be festivals in the truly celebratory nature of democracy, if they can approximate to the maximum all the three dimensions. On the other hand, elections can be circuses if they make a mockery of all these elements. In the case of India, elections are both festivals and circuses because they have to function in a large country with incredible diversity. It would be folly for social scientists, supposedly endowed with the intellectual and critical knowledge and skills to provide understandings of power, to dismiss these realities.

SOME PRELIMINARY STATEMENTS ON THE 2004 INDIAN ELECTIONS

The 2004 general elections in India, which resulted in the defeat of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led coalition government and victory of the Congress Party (see Table 1 for the full election results), have aroused some degree of surprise in India and renewed the curiosity and interest of outsiders on the Indian electoral process. It would be an overstatement to call it a "historic election" because Indira Gandhi's defeat in 1977 was also regarded as such. The use of "historic" as an adjective with reference to the results of an election is, of course, dependent on who uses it and which party or parties have lost or won. To many people in India, who are opposed to the BJP because it is perceived as a Hindu right-wing party backed by fascist groups and movements, there may be a desire to see the 2004 elections as historic. The term though cannot be used until the right wing fascist menace in India is completely eliminated and Indian democracy's secular constitutional fundamentals are fully secured from marauding attacks by the right-wing lumpen forces. The future of Indian democracy and survival of India as a nation may hinge on these huge tasks.

     While the defeat of the incumbent, as in the cases of Indira Gandhi in 1977 and the BJP in 2004, can be attributed to the form of government each administration has pursued (authoritarian leadership and emergency rule respectively), election results require an examination beyond statistical analyses of changing patterns or trends in voting preferences of the electorate in a single election. An electoral event should not be studied in isolation. Rather, a comparison of these variables should be made in the past and present results of the Indian

Table 1. Results of the 2004 national parliamentary elections in India

Registered voters	Votes cast	Valid votes	Invalid votes
671,524,934	387,779,784	387,453,223	326,561
	(57.70 percent of registered voters)	(99.99 percent of votes cast)	(0.01 percent of votes cast)

Results for the INC and its allies

Political Parties	Valid votes	Percent of total valid votes cast	Seats
India National Congress (INC)	103,405,272	26.69	145
Rashtriya Janata Dal (National People's Party [RJD])	8,613,302	2.22	21
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagham (Dravida Progressive Federation [DMK])	7,064,393	1.82	16
Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)	6,915,740	1.78	9
Pattali Maltltal Katchi (PMK)	2,169,020	0.56	6
Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM)	1,846,843	0.48	5
Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK)	1,679,870	0.43	4
Muslim League of Kerala (MUL)	770,098	0.20	2
Jammu and Kashmir People's Democratic Party (JKPDP)	267,457	0.07	1

Results for the BJP and its allies

Political Parties	Valid votes	Percent of total valid votes cast	Seats
Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party[BJP])	85,866,593	22.16	138
Shiv Sena Party	7,056,075	1.82	12
Biju Janata Dal (BJD)	5,084,428	1.31	11
Janata Dal Party-United (People's Party-United)	9,924,209	2.56	8
Shiromani Akali Dal Party (SAD)	3,056,681	0.91	8
Telugu Desam Party (Telugu Land Party [TDP])	11,844,811	3.06	5
All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	8,047,771	2.08	2
Nagaland People's Front (NPF)	715,366	0.18	1
Mizo National Front (MNF)	182,864	0.05	1

Source: Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) Project 2004.

Table 1 (continuation). Results of the 2004 national parliamentary elections in India

Results for the other parties

Political Parties	Valid votes	Percent of total valid votes cast	Seats
Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)	22,061,677	5.69	43
Samajwadi Party (Socialist Party [SP])	16,645,356	4.30	36
Bahujan Samaj Party (Majority Society Party [BSP])	20,713,468	5.35	19
Communist Party of India (CPI)	5,434,738	1.40	10
Janata Dal Party (Secular)	5,732,296	1.48	3
Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP)	1,717,228	0.44	3
All India Forward Bloc (AIFC)	1,367,280	0.35	3
Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)	2,069,610	0.53	2
Jammu and Kashmir National Congress (JKNC)	493,067	0.13	2
Kerala Congress (KEC)	353,529	0.09	1
Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF)	153,409	0.04	1
Others	45,750,772	11.82	25

Source: Administration and Cost of Elections (ACE) Project 2004.

elections. Elections are an integral part of the dynamism of democratic processes in India. The growth and evolution of democratic processes are linked to how political economy affects democratic institutions and determines the very survival and future of institutions, not just that of elections and electoral processes. The latter is a framework for understanding any democracy, which will be applied in this paper in its discussion of Indian democracy in the context of the 2004 elections. At the outset, it may be necessary, first, to make a quick tour of the institutions and constitutional mechanisms and then present some empirical information that are critical in understanding Indian elections. This is also crucial in appreciating the magnitude of the task in conducting general elections in India wherein the Indian electorate select 543 representatives to the lower house of India's parliament. The members of the lower house elect the government for a five-year term, provided, however, that the elected government retains its majority in parliament. Although not a constitutionally-mandated institution, media, particularly television, also has a role in influencing elections through the so-called new science of election forecasting or psephology. This article, however, deals with the 2004 Indian elections as a whole, particularly the dynamics among non-Left parties, and attempts only a limited analysis on the role of media.

INDIA'S FOURTEENTH GENERAL ELECTIONS: SOME BASIC FACTS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The 2004 general elections were conducted in a period of over three weeks in four separate rounds in different areas comprising over 700,000 polling stations. The total number of candidates contesting the 543 seats was 5,398, almost half of which were independent candidates, while 220 political parties participated in the race. The total number of eligible registered voters was about 672 million; only 58 percent of which or about 388 million voted in the 2004 elections (see Table 1). This is slightly lower compared to a 59.99 percent voter participation in 1999.

A general election in India is not only a gigantic exercise but equally costly as well. According to a report from the National Commission on Electoral Reforms, the cost of conducting Indian elections is equivalent to the cost of conducting polls in Europe, the United States (US), Canada and Australia all at the same time. The 1999 election alone amounted to close to US$ 200 million, while activities prior to

the 2004 election were estimated by the government to cost approximately US$ 223 million. A large proportion of the money spent went to deployment of staff, including security personnel to prevent violence and malpractices, during the conduct of the elections. Furthermore, in the 2004 elections, one million electronic voting machines (EVMs) were used to shorten and expedite the tallying process to two hours, instead of several days spent through manual counting of votes. The use of EVMs also narrowed the chances of committing electoral fraud, and saved more than 8,000 metric tonnes of paper.

The conduct of Indian elections is dependent on constitutional provisions, supplemented by laws made by the parliament such as the Representation of the People Act of 1950, which mainly deals with the preparation and revision of electoral rolls, and the Representation of the People Act of 1951, which details all aspects of the conduct of elections and post-election disputes. Where enacted laws are silent or insufficient to deal with a given situation during elections, the Election Commission, the key institution in India, has residuary powers under the Constitution to act in an appropriate manner.

The Election Commission (hereafter the Commission) is tasked to ensure that elections are conducted in a fair and free manner with no interference from either the executive or the party in power through the executive. The Constitution of India has vested in the Commission the control of the entire electoral process of the two houses of Parliament—*Lok Sabha* (lower house) and *Rajya Sabha* (upper house); the legislatures of all the states; and, the offices of the President and Vice President of India. The President and Vice President are elected through an electoral college system, involving elected representatives from both the upper and lower houses and state legislators. The Commission also has power over matters regarding election schedules—general elections or bye-elections. This power seemed critical and it was a significant issue in the 2004 elections. Moreover, the Commission decides on issues regarding location of polling stations and counting centres; assignment of voters to polling stations; physical arrangements in and around polling centres and counting stations; and, all allied matters (see Indian Elections 2004).

The Commission leadership is composed of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners appointed by the President. They have tenure of six years, or up to the age of 65, whichever is earlier. They enjoy the same status, salary and perks

received by judges of the Supreme Court of India. The Chief Election Commissioner can be removed from office only through impeachment by parliament. Providing support to the Commission is a separate secretariat based in New Delhi consisting of almost 300 officials. The Secretariat has an independent budget, which is finalised directly through consultations between the Commission and the Finance Ministry of the Union Government. The latter generally accepts the recommendations of the Commission for its budgets.

Some Critical Events Prior to the Elections

Before getting into an analysis of the elections, it may be worthwhile to refer to events that had a bearing on the outcome. Prior to the 2004 elections, there was an interesting tussle between the Executive and the Election Commissioners. Such tussles, however, are often trivialised and reduced to the level of personal fights by sections of the Indian middle class— *chateratti*—especially in New Delhi. From the parlour rooms of the "leisure classes," these can become news for the *chatterati*, who run India's television networks.

The nature of the change of the public sphere in the sense of Habermas (1991), especially with the ubiquitousness of television in many societies in Asia and its dominance by the middle classes in terms of intellectual comment, needs urgent critical examination and understanding. In these societies, the elites who have become the "opinion makers" as chattering classes are endowed with such a degree of self-importance that any reference to them is taken personally and scholarly analysis is then characterised as "personalised" in the process, cleverly keeping them out as subjects in the analysis of "power" in many backward capitalist societies such as India.

While Indian institutional tussles take place at the levels of the individuals or personalities who represent these institutions, these are fundamentally struggles between the different constitutional centres, which are critical to the healthy functioning of a democracy. Despite such trivialisation, small events can have some bearing on the overall outcome of the elections.

Personal attacks on high constitutional functionaries as a form of elite manipulation, was engaged into to erode the strength of the Indian bureaucracy. This was part of a larger strategy to demoralise the bureaucracy and to steadily weaken and undermine the constitutional structure of India. During the 2003 elections to the State Assembly in Gujarat, former Chief Election Commissioner J.M. Lyngdoh faced

personal attacks in his effort to directly supervise the elections in a state that had been witness to communal carnage, murder, rape and genocide known as the Gujarat Communal Carnage of 2002. Lyngdoh, known to be a very upright officer and man of principles, had to ensure that Muslims and others who were terrorised by hoodlums could vote without fear. But the State BJP in Gujarat and then-Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi were not pleased with Lyngdoh's supervision of the elections. Modi engaged in a campaign to tarnish Lyngdoh's reputation by associating him with Rajiv Gandhi's Italian widow, Sonia Gandhi, to insinuate that his Catholic religion would make him listen only to Sonia Gandhi. While all kinds of abuses and vile canards were hurled against Lyngdoh, the so-called towering leaders of the BJP, including Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, did not reprimand Modi for his personal attacks on Lyngdoh. The silence of the party and its leaders did not sit well, though, with sections of the middle class who were sympathetic to the elite interest of BJP.

While damage is being done to the person of Lyngdoh, the BJP also decided to fill the Commission with "friendly commissioners" in preparation for the October 2004 elections. Lyngdoh was set to retire in February 2004 and the government toyed with the idea of appointing a former bureaucrat whom they consider as "friendly" to replace Lyngdoh as Chief Commissioner. When these moves were leaked to the press, the public was suspicious of these attempts and antagonised the Commission. Under normal bureaucratic circumstances, the most senior member of the Commission will be replacing the retired Chief Election Commissioner. Ultimately this attempt to pack the Commission with "friendly commissioners" had to be given up and the next high ranking Commissioner became the Chief Commissioner (see also Khare 2004).

As a result of this faux pas, the BJP-led government then announced that it will remit office earlier than scheduled and go for early elections. In a subtropical country such as India, electioneering and the schedule of elections are very much related to the seasons and weather factors. When the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) announced the election eight months ahead of schedule and recommended to the President to dissolve parliament on February 6, the party hoped that elections would be held in March. The BJP preferred a March poll on two accounts. First, March was an ideal month to hold the elections for both the cold and hot areas of India; for the cold regions in India, it is a month of nice and pleasant weather while for the hotter areas in the country it was the last cool month before the unrelenting summer

months. The party wanted to bank on the "feel good weather" factor
that could clinch their way to victory. Second, the month of March
also made possible a recent recall of the normalisation of Indian-
Pakistani relations as a result of a visit made by Prime Minister Vajpayee
in January to India's archrival Pakistan, which the party wanted to
claim credit for. The premature announcement of the BJP backfired on
them as the actual election schedule can only be announced by the
Commission. The Commission announced an election schedule,
spread over three weeks that would go into May 2004. Apparently, the
BJP had hoped that once they had announced the dissolution of
parliament, elections would be held soon thereafter. In this way, it
could get the Congress underprepared, underfinanced and
undermotivated. The Commission's decision to take its own time to
announce the schedule of elections meant that another strategy of the
BJP's think-tank had backfired on the party.

Another "critical event" or dimension in the lead-up to the 2004
elections was the "India Shining" advertisement campaign. Anticipating
a March election and the dissolution of parliament in February, the
BJP-led NDA government launched "India Shining" in January. The
campaign was an attempt to parade the accomplishments of the
government under the leadership of the BJP. It was supposed to
convince the citisenry and the electorate that India was booming under
BJP rule. The government spent approximately US$ 90 million for
such promotion. The ad strategy may have worked if it ran only for two
months. But with the elections being pushed back to April and not
March, the ad campaign either became a source of derision or a cruel
joke on the poor in a country which is ranked 127 [th] out of 177
countries in human development index (United Nations Development
Programme 2004). The ad campaign seemed also contemptuous of the
Indian poor, 400 million of which live in abject poverty and 75 percent
reside in poor villages. Close to 80 percent live on less than US$ 2 a
day. Ninety-five out of every 1,000 children die before they reach the
age of five. A big majority of poor village women have bladder and other
related diseases resulting from the lack of toilets. Ironically, thousands
of lives and millions of rupees have been lost in conflicts over temples.
The politics of temples, especially the agitation to build a temple for
the Indian god Rama, are the issues on which the BJP has tried to build
its politics of Hindu nationalism. For a party which cannot differentiate
the priorities of the people of India, it is not surprising that it decided
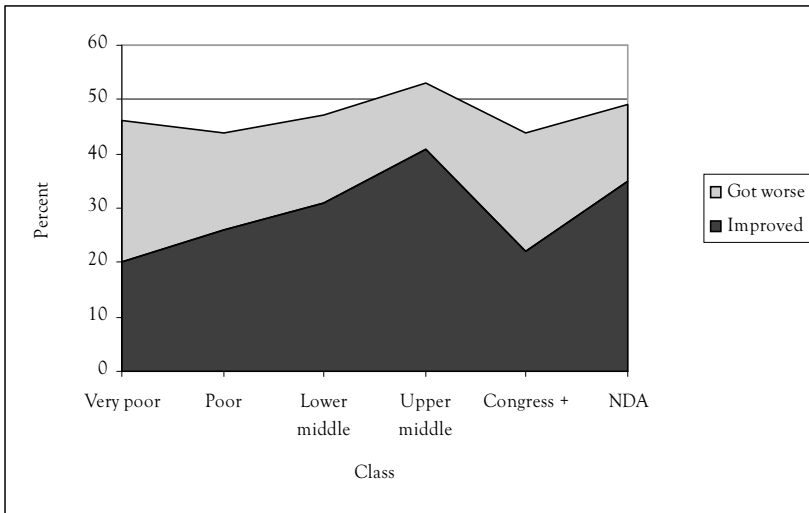to launch "India Shining" as part of its election campaign.

Figure 1. Perception of the Indian electorate of their socioeconomic condition under the BJP-led NDA government. (Data from National Election Study 2004 as cited in Suri 2004.)

The advertisement, betraying a "Freudian subconscious," showed pictures of pretty, smooth, ivory-skinned upper middle class women playing cricket with their well-groomed children. Somehow the "India Shining" campaign also told the truth about for whom India was shining for and whom the gains of neoliberal economic reforms went—to the rich and mainly urban upper middle classes, not the poor rural folk, lower caste and others. It is also possible that the ads were aimed at the middle classes. The BJP knew where its increasing support came from and perhaps hoped to use that as a core support base with which to swing the elections in its favour (see Figure 1). But the story was not that simple.

THE 2004 ELECTIONS: GROUND REALITIES OF POLITICAL ECONOMY AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF ELECTORAL POLITICS

One significant feature of Indian elections is the formation of electoral alliances. The BJP-led NDA government was already a coalition of 14 parties, most of them regional, with presence mostly in states to which they belonged. The phenomenon and growth of regional parties were directly related to the erosion of the power base of Congress which was the major national party. The BJP also claimed to be a national party, but was mainly strong in the northern states of India. In order to show

its presence all over India, it often joined elections in all the states. In some of the southern states, its candidates hardly won enough votes to retain their deposits. For all its attempts to project itself as a national party and an alternative to Congress, BJP never managed to better its voting percentage beyond 21 to 22 percent. Even when it pushed very hard its divisive Hindu nationalist politics, it was only able to increase its percentage share at best by a point or so. This is mainly due to the increase in votes mostly from the northern states, particularly Uttar Pradesh, which has the largest number of parliamentarians. Parliamentarians from Uttar Pradesh occupy 80 seats.

Congress, on the other hand, managed to maintain a vote share of close to 27 percent despite its rapid decline in prominence. Congress's share has a higher percentage than the BJP. But in the past post-electoral system in India, higher percentage share of votes do not necessarily mean higher number of seats. For all these reasons, formation of poll alliances especially with regional parties was critical. It is important however to mention that other than the BJP and Congress as national parties, the Left parties—Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) were also national in character. They managed to win seats in more than one state. In the case of CPI-M, most of its seats came from West Bengal where it has been in power uninterrupted for over a quarter of a century. It has also been in power in the two states of Kerala and the northeastern state of Tripura. The CPI did manage to win in some states scattered across the country. Mostly, victory was enjoyed in Kerala, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

Prior to the elections, the BJP-led ruling coalition had 14 parties, three of which are regional parties from Tamil Nadu. The reconfiguration of the membership of the alliance from 14 to seven started after the BJP-led government's announcement of the elections. The decline in the number of member parties of BJP has been attributed to a number of splinter parties, first, of the Dravidian movement in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and, second, the Left parties in the same state. It was not a matter of losing confidence in the ability of the party to win but more related to an unfortunate electoral miscalculation on the part of BJP when it chose to ally with Chief Minister Selvi J. Jayalalitha, a former actress, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Jayalalitha was opposed by all other political parties in Tamil Nadu. Some of those who opposed Jayalalitha were even in the ruling coalition government led by BJP. This BJP-Jayalalitha alliance has led some coalition

members to join the Congress and in the end led to the defeat of the BJP-led alliance in Tamil Nadu.

The formation of alliances between the two lead parties, BJP and Congress, played a major role in the final outcome of the elections. On hindsight, the alliances did the trick for Congress. Though there was a rout among BJP and its alliance partners in Tamil Nadu, giving Congress and its allies an unexpected bonanza of seats, it was intimately connected with the way Jayalalitha ran the government in Tamil Nadu (McMillan 2004).

The campaigns of both major parties were lacklustre and centred around the personalities of Vajpayee for BJP and by default on Sonia Gandhi given the vicious attacks on her. This is partly because there was little to distinguish the two major parties from their election manifestoes—they were almost identical. BJP tried to whip up the campaign by attacking Sonia's foreign origins while avowing earlier that no foreigner can hold office in India. It declared that it will bring appropriate legislation to ensure this. Since Sonia had taken on an Indian citisenship, the BJP started saying that only a person of Indian origin can hold high office. The BJP, a party that has to depend on its fascist and semi-fascist moorings, has many faces. While Vajpayee, himself accused by his own party as a man of masks, could pretend to be above the fray, his party men and various fascist and semi-fascist gangs continue their vicious personal attacks not only on Sonia but also her children.

The BJP's fascist links include the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS), a right-wing group that avows Hindu nationalism. Veer Savarakar, one of its leaders and a supporter of the two-nation theory of Jinnah, has a chequered history from pre-independence times. Nathu Ram Godse, an RSS member, was the one who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. For BJP and its supporting organizations, which hold the view that all fascist and semi-fascist groups are not political parties but extra-parliamentary groups, Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins seemed a good issue in trying to keep the Hindu chauvinist, cultural nationalism politics. This was an alternative campaign to boost its electoral percentage when the "temple politics" in Ayodhya was flagging. The "temple politics" managed to inch its way towards power in the centre especially in the northern states in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This campaign, which resulted in the destruction of a mosque built during the Moghul period, was one of India's bloodiest communal mobilisations that involved the death of thousands of people. It also

tore the secular fabric of the country, apart from millions of dollars spent on policing and security. Prior to the 1998-2004 spell of governance, the BJP party had actually held power for a day and was voted out in a no-confidence motion. It was then spoken of as a political party that was "untouchable." It was only later that BJP was able to rule as the head of the coalition for five years by making clever alliances with mostly smaller regional parties and extremist right-wing groups like the *Shiv Sena*, a group that started as a union buster in Bombay. Having tasted power, the BJP felt that it could make another claim to power with a majority of its own. Herein lay the contradictions of the BJP as a political party, which unravelled itself during the campaign.

In the election campaign, BJP hoped that it could maintain its cultural nationalist politics of hateful communal mobilisation on one hand while keeping its development agenda to lure votes from the masses on the other hand. The party realised that temples and cultural nationalism alone will not buy votes. It banked on its cultural nationalism agenda to deflect the real issues on its right-wing free market economic policy as its ticket to electoral victory. But winning the elections would not have been enough for the party to implement its neoliberal economic agenda. An authoritarian rule would have been required for the right-wing economic agenda to be implemented.

Had the BJP won in the elections, it would have continued with its tendencies of leaning towards authoritarianism, implementing extremely harsh security laws that were promulgated during its rule under the guise of fighting terrorism and riding on the US post-September 11 rhetoric. While no one can justify armed groups and the use of violence on innocent people, people will organise themselves as political groups if denied their right to a life of dignity and basic existence. Armed violence will be their option to seek justice from elites. This is especially true in India where many armed groups are demanding for self-determination in poor and oppressed areas of the northeast. People from these areas are subject to all kinds of human rights violations and horrors committed by security forces. Areas where upper caste, large feudal landlords hold sway and terrorise the poor, lower caste peasants and landless labourers have given rise to armed Maoist movements. Instead of addressing the deeper socioeconomic issues, BJP, like all right-wing formations, was part of a mindset that saw the hard state, armed with repressive anti-terrorist laws, as the only way to deal with such movements. BJP in power was akin to the Indian

emergency rule period. Learning from Congress's experience, it did not tinker openly with the law and democratic processes but created a climate of fear and intolerance to push its agenda. It is in this sense that it was knuckle-rapped like Indira Gandhi in 1977.

In the Congress front, it had to campaign on the same economic agenda excluding the Hindu chauvinist schema, which it had not necessarily been averse to in the past. It was more of a gradual realisation that it needed to distinguish itself from BJP. It tried to be more aggressive against Hindu chauvinism but overall it was a defensive campaign given that BJP had started off as the favourite and was expected to "sweep" the elections. Congress's eventual victory was really due to the alliances it was able to build as well as Sonia Gandhi's role as an indefatigable campaigner. While the old Congress party leaders largely confined themselves to New Delhi and to television appearances, Sonia Gandhi criss-crossed the country and went to remote villages. Even the BJP realised that she was building an image and an audience. Media and its pundits, as well as the pollsters, were however still predicting a defeat for Congress and its allies. While media predicted a loss for Congress, this actually reflected how Indian elites had become so cut-off from mainstream India and ordinary Indians. The political parties also manifest this indifference but political compulsions often made them to at least try to make a pretence of understanding the problems of ordinary Indians. Media, television in particular, had no such compulsions and knowing its power, it even felt that it could sway the election results and press the elitist agenda of reform.

But it was precisely this elitist agenda of economic reform that the people rejected along with the BJP and its allies. The best example is BJP's ally in Tamil Nadu. The state was led by an imperious female chief minister from the upper caste that has stayed in power using populist rhetoric while trying to pursue elitist reform agenda under the guidance of economic liberalisation gurus, such as Jeffrey Sachs and the Harvard Institute of Development. Just prior to the elections she ruthlessly crushed a strike by government employees including school teachers who were economically affected by the reforms. Most teachers from lower economic backgrounds with little or no savings were affected by the decrease in their pensions, supposedly to be paid in government bonds. Her other disliked measures are those relating to rural electricity and the public distribution system of food, which made her one of the most unpopular chief ministers.

It was not only in the economic sphere but also in the cultural sphere that she was seen carrying an elitist agenda. She banned the practice of animal sacrifices, which were performed mostly by rural lower caste folk. In most cases, these animal sacrifices were also occasions of mass feeding of poor people. But as a Brahmin ally who could serve the BJP's long term Hindutva agenda, she was sought after as a BJP supporter. This alienated the other regional parties who had by then realised that their alliance with the BJP was eroding their non-Brahmin lower caste base. Her imperious and authoritarian type of governance had also caused all the political parties in the state, especially the Left parties, to line up against her. Once the elections were announced she took recourse to a whole set of populist measures and reversed many of her unpopular decisions and resorted to populist stances. By then it was too late.

CONCLUSION

The Indian election is a vast subject but this article has attempted to provide the different aspects of electoral politics in India. Focus was particularly given to electioneering and the mass politics of manipulation that is so intimately tied with electoral democracy be it in India, the US or the Philippines. The contradictions of "liberal democracy," as illustrated in the article can work both ways. In this manner, one can see the "beauty of democracy and democratic politics." As illustrated by the Indian 2004 elections, when elite manipulation does not entirely work, it backfires on the party as it happened to the BJP and its ambitions to rule India for another five years. Herein lies the possibilities for "bourgeois democracy" to advance democratic politics in poor societies such as India. Further study of this aspect needs to be examined in depth and would require a scrutiny of the results, how people voted, the role of the Left, and how political economy and its reflections on the state play a role. ❁

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LAWRENCE SURENDRA is Senior Fellow at the Centre for Research in Environment,
Development Innovations, Technology and Trade(CREDITTe), Bangalore, India, and was
Acting Deputy Director of Asia-Pacific Centre of Education for International Understanding
(APCEIU) in 2004.