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# The Third Coming of Narendra Modi

The 18th Lok Sabha election was seen by the opposition parties and many political commentators as the most consequential election since the first Parliament election held in 1952. After ten years of BJP rule by a government headed by Narendra Modi, it was viewed as a watershed event. The outcome would determine whether India would transition into a full-fledged Hindutva-authoritarian State or remain a Constitutional parliamentary democracy, *albeit* with some authoritarian vestiges in the State structure. If Narendra Modi and the BJP were to get a brute majority, the transition would be hastened.

It is this existential threat to the secular-democratic principle of the State and the Constitution that impelled the opposition parties to come together to create a broad platform called INDIA. Though called an alliance, it was not so but a loose grouping of opposition parties who sought to arrive at electoral understandings, state-wise, to avoid splitting the anti-BJP vote and to maximize the pooling of these votes through electoral pacts or seat adjustments. Given the heterogeneity of the parties involved and the conflicting interests of the parties in certain states, this minimalist approach was the only practical way to take on the BJP, which had consolidated its power at the Centre through two successive terms with an absolute majority.

That this arrangement, though partial, achieved some success was seen in the fact that the BJP failed to get a majority for the first time since 2014. It got 240 seats, 63 fewer than the 303 seats it held in the outgoing Lok Sabha. The BJP was 32 seats short of a majority. The INDIA bloc parties got 234 seats, 38 seats short of a majority. While the NDA partners put together got 42.5 per cent of the vote, the constituents of the INDIA bloc got 40.6 per cent, a difference of less than 2 per cent (1.9 per cent) of the vote share between the two combinations.

#### POST-ELECTION SITUATION

The election results, therefore, constituted a setback for the BJP, which had gone to the polls with the slogan of 400 plus seats. However, it is necessary to have a sober estimate of what the setback entails in the post-election situation. Having to depend on its NDA allies like the Telugu Desam Party and the Janata Dal (United) for a majority in the Lok Sabha puts some restraints on the unchecked drive towards one-party authoritarian rule. Still, it is not a situation in which there is an obstruction in the path that the BJP-RSS wishes to follow. To put it in another way, the electoral setback that the BJP has suffered will not lead to a reversal of the Hindutva-corporate agenda, but it has opened the way for greater resistance and space for gathering resources to carry on the fight.

A deeper analysis of the election data and the voting pattern should caution one from arriving at over-optimistic conclusions. As far as the BJP's vote share is concerned, there is a small decline from 37.7 per cent in the 2019 election to 36.6 per cent in the current election, a drop of 1.1 per cent. This shows that the BJP's Hindutva-influenced bloc of voters is substantial and consolidated. It is this pan-Hindutva identity which it can rely upon to further sharpen polarization and intensify the pursuit of the Hindutva-communal agenda.

To properly assess the post-election situation and the potential

direction of the third term of the Modi government, we have to properly grasp the changes brought about in the socio-economic and cultural landscape of India in the past ten years of Modi rule. The two previous Modi governments have acted broadly on the blueprint set out by the RSS to reshape the Indian republic and the political order. The Hindutva-corporate alliance is a bedrock for this transformation, which involves restructuring the economy on rightwing lines; re-shaping the political system into an authoritarian regime by curtailing democracy and federalism; and, in the ideological-cultural sphere, a project to de-secularize the Indian State and mould the educational and cultural systems and institutions on Hindutva lines.

#### HINDUTVA-CORPORATE ALLIANCE

The last decade of BJP rule has seen the consolidation of the big bourgeois support for the government and the ruling party. What is unique about this support is the ideological embrace of Hindutva by big business. In fact, the contours of the Hindutva-corporate alliance began in the days of Modi's Chief Ministership in Gujarat. It was through the holding of successive 'Vibrant Gujarat' summits that a growing band of big business tycoons endorsed Modi to be the 'CEO of the country'. They included Mukesh and Anil Ambani, Gautam Adani, Ratan Tata, Sunil Mittal, Jamshyd Godrej, and others.

Their faith in Modi was not misplaced. The two terms of the Modi government saw an unprecedented array of policies and concessions to promote the interests of big capital. They included the tax concessions, reduction of the corporate tax rate from 30 per cent to 22 per cent, write-off of bank loans from 2014 to 2023 amounting to Rs 17.46 lakh crores, privatization and disinvestment in public sector units and the selling off of public assets worth Rs 6 lakh crore through the National Monetisation Pipeline, dilution of

environmental regulations for mining and infrastructure projects, and so on.

That is why the Lok Sabha election result does not show any dilution of support of the big bourgeoisie or any section of them hiving off, like it happened in the 1991 Lok Sabha election, when a section of the big bourgeoisie, for the first time, supported the BJP, abandoning their traditional support for the Congress party.

The third term of the Modi government can, therefore, be expected to see more policies and facilities for the expansion of big business in every sphere of the economy and the services sector. A little-known expansion of the big corporates is into defence production. In October this year, a joint venture plant of Tata Airbus through its subsidiary Spanish company was inaugurated at Vadodara, which will assemble the C-295 military cargo plane. Many such joint ventures with American and other Western arms manufacturing companies are in the offing. Some of the top corporates like the Tatas, Adanis, Larsen & Toubro, Mahindras, and Ambanis have entered this field, which will develop into a military-industrial complex.

The third term will, thus, see a renewed thrust to promote favoured corporate houses as so-called national champions. Already in the past ten years, five business conglomerates in the non-financial sector have grown. As per the analysis done by Viral Acharya, former Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, these five big conglomerates who are concentrating assets in their hands are: Reliance (Mukesh Ambani group), Tata group, Aditya Birla group, Adani group, and Bharti Telecom. Their share in total assets of the non-financial sector rose from 10 per cent in 1991 to nearly 18 per cent in 2021.

The private sector share in defence production is rising steadily, and in 2023-24, the private sector share was 22 per cent (Rs 16,411 crore) of the total defence production. The Modi government is also out to protect the big business houses from any regulatory or

legal action. This was glaringly seen in the case of the Adani group, whose numerous violations of the law, including stock market price manipulation, was exposed through the Hindenburg report.

The nexus between Hindutva and corporates is stable and will continue to be so in the coming days. This must be properly considered when weighing the tactics to take on the Hindutva-corporate alliance.

#### PURSUIT OF HINDUTVA

The ten years of Modi rule have seen Hindutva becoming the hegemonic idea of the ruling classes. It would be a mistake to see Hindutva as a common variety of communal politics. Till the 1980s, the ruling class utilized the communal forces in an opportunistic manner to divide the working people to consolidate their class rule. The rise of the Hindutva forces, which was marked by the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the 1990s, led to the RSS and the Hindutva forces beginning their ascent to capture State power. Hindutva is a political project to utilize State power to re-make and re-shape the Indian State.

In the ten years of the Modi government, of the core agenda of the BJP-RSS — abrogation of Article 370, Ram temple at Ayodhya, and Uniform Civil Code — two came to be fulfilled. Article 370 was nullified, and the Ram temple was built at the disputed site through a judicial verdict. As far as the third issue is concerned, steps are underway to enforce the Uniform Civil Code, beginning with its introduction in states like Uttarakhand. But the Hindutva project is far wider and deeper. State power is to be utilized to re-shape the educational system, cultural values, and social norms. For this, the ten years of Modi rule saw the new education policy and interventions by State-sponsored cultural institutions to advance the majoritarian ideology.

The Hindutva project is being implemented at two levels. At the State level, incremental steps have been taken to de-secularize

the State. This is also being accomplished through systematic infiltration of the institutions of the State and Constitutional bodies. Neither the higher judiciary nor the armed forces are immune from this subversion. There are judges in the Supreme Court, who believe in the Hindutva ideology. Recently, in the Calcutta High Court, a judge on his retirement announced his lifelong connection with the RSS. Another sitting judge resigned from his judgeship and joined the BJP within days, and fought the Lok Sabha election as a BJP candidate and has become a Member of Parliament. As long as there is a BJP-led government at the Centre, there will be no let-up in the process of infiltration and subversion of the institutions of the State.

The other level at which the RSS and the Hindutva forces operate is at the ground level among the masses and in society. It is this work of the RSS and its various outfits that creates the basis for the Hindutva consciousness among the people. By systematically targeting the Muslims as the 'other', fanning Hindutva sentiments under the guise of nationalism, and harnessing caste and sub-caste identities under the rubric of a pan-Hindu identity have all been implemented with State support in the past decade.

In the post-election situation and the beginning of the third term of the Modi government, the fact that it is a coalition government has not proved to be a hindrance for the Hindutva project operating at both levels. The weeks after the Lok Sabha election results saw stepped-up attacks on Muslim minorities and, in some places, Christians in the BJP-ruled states. The same pattern of using religious festivals like *Ram Navami* processions, *Ganesh Puja* or *Durga Puja* activities to provoke clashes with minorities was repeated. The BJP state governments in Assam, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Maharashtra brought in new laws and measures to target the Muslim community on issues such as interfaith marriages, forcible conversions or restrictions on the meat and cattle trade.

At the Central level, the government has introduced a Waqf

(Amendment) Bill in the Parliament, which seeks to rob the essence of Muslim rights on Waqf property. Here again, the push for the Hindutva agenda, both at the state level or at the grassroots, would not be hampered. Neither the TDP nor the JD(U) are showing any resistance or reservation to the pursuance of this agenda. On the contrary, the ‘Tirupati laddu controversy’ shows how the TDP has jumped into the fray opportunistically to communalize the issue.

To conclude this section, in the context of the electoral verdict, while the more ambitious project to amend the Constitution to reshape the Republic has to be put on hold, the other dimensions of the Hindutva project will continue unabated. Using the levers of the Central government policy changes and placing of key personnel in various organs of the State will continue. Alongside, the activities of the RSS and Hindutva outfits to sharpen polarization and consolidate majoritarian Hindu sentiments will be relentlessly pursued.

#### AUTHORITARIAN ARCHITECTURE INTACT

One of the marked features of the ten-year rule of the Modi government was the authoritarian drive, which was accompanied by curtailment of democratic rights and the use of draconian laws to target the opposition and dissenters. This authoritarianism was consolidated in the second term of the government. The misuse of Central agencies like the Enforcement Directorate, CBI, and Income Tax Department became rampant — with many opposition leaders being targeted, two Chief Ministers were arrested under the draconian money laundering law, and hundreds of others were arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

The other aspect of authoritarianism is the attack on federalism and the rights of states. This reached a height with the nullification of Article 370 and dismantling the state of Jammu and Kashmir into two Union Territories in August 2019. Opposition-ruled states were denied access to financial resources, and Governors were



used to interfere in the affairs of the state government blatantly. Governors of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal, and Punjab were utilized to disrupt the functioning of the state governments and the powers of the state legislatures. The Lt. Governor of Delhi has taken complete control of the Delhi government.

The architecture of authoritarianism remains intact, and the first days of Modi's third term show no relaxation in the use of central agencies and draconian laws to curb dissent.

In the second term, Narendra Modi announced the intention to bring in a 'One Nation, One Election' system, whereby elections to the Lok Sabha, state legislatures and local bodies could be held simultaneously. A committee, led by Ram Nath Kovind, former President of India, was appointed for this purpose. One of the first acts of the Union Government in the third term has been to accept the recommendations of the Kovind Committee. The 'One Nation, One Election' scheme would usher in a highly centralized, unitary political system. Implementing such a concept would involve a number of Constitutional amendments, which would truncate the tenure of state legislatures and enhance the intervention of the Central government.

At present, the ruling alliance has not got a two-thirds majority in either the Lok Sabha or the Rajya Sabha to bring in the necessary Constitutional amendments. But the BJP is propagating the 'One Nation, One Election' model to mobilize public opinion for its goal of an authoritarian, centralized political system.

Though the BJP-RSS cannot bring about changes in the Constitution to deny the federal principle, there will be no let-up in the Centre's drive to dilute the rights of states and erode the federal content, whether it be in the fiscal, economic, or political spheres. The struggle to defend states' rights and assault on the federal principle will be an essential part of the ongoing fight against the Hindutva-corporate alliance.

The struggle against authoritarianism and the defence of democracy are integrally connected to the struggle against the

Hindutva-corporate alliance because this axis between neo-liberalism and communalism is the most portend stimulant for authoritarianism.

#### ALLIANCE WITH THE UNITED STATES

The Modi government had, in the second term, further cemented strategic and military ties with the United States. The Quadrilateral Alliance (Quad) was upgraded to the level of leadership summits, and India, step by step, acquiesced in the United States' efforts to convert the Quad into a security and strategic alliance in the Indo-Pacific region against China. The third and final agreement — the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) — among the three foundational agreements of strategic military cooperation was signed in October 2020. The process of assigning military liaison officers in the US Central and Indo-Pacific Command headquarters proceeded.

There has been the burgeoning purchase of US military equipment. Over the past seven years, India has bought arms worth \$15 billion from the US, including the latest \$2.99 billion deal to procure thirty-one Predator drones. The consequences of these ties can be seen in the way India supported Israel in the ongoing Gaza conflict and exported arms and ammunition to aid its genocidal war.

The Hindutva forces, despite their vaunted ultra-nationalism, have always been pro-imperialist and will continue to pursue this alliance in the coming days.

#### STRENGTHEN CPI (M) AND THE LEFT

Some lessons should be drawn from the experience of the struggle against the Modi government's Hindutva and neo-liberal agenda. It is important to recognize that, in the current conjuncture, the fight against the Hindutva threat is integrally connected to the

fight against the pro-corporate neo-liberal policies. The struggle to isolate the BJP and Hindutva forces is linked to the advance of the CPI(M) and Left forces.

The struggle against the Modi government's economic policies intensified in the last few years and gained ground. The year 2020-21 saw the year-long historic farmers' struggle against the three farm laws, which were meant to facilitate corporate entry and exploitation of the agricultural market. This struggle ended with the first notable success against the government's basic policies when it was forced to withdraw the three farm laws.

The struggles of the working class, as exemplified by the joint Central Trade Union's opposition to the four labour codes, have also delayed the implementation of these laws. The recent period has seen the united platform of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha and the Central Trade Unions emerging. There have been a number of sectoral struggles and strikes against privatization and disinvestment of public sector units. The struggle of the scheme workers, MNREGA workers, and different sections of informal sector workers has also advanced.

If these struggles have to make a political impact, they must be combined with anti-Hindutva and anti-communal campaigns and mobilizations. The working people have to be imbued with class consciousness, which will expose the reactionary and divisive role of Hindutva communalism and other varieties of communalism. Only then can the struggle against the BJP-RSS and the Hindutva-corporate alliance advance politically.

To accomplish this task, it is first and foremost essential to develop the independent strength of the CPI(M), which is the leading contingent of the Left. The independent strength of the Party can be developed through class and mass struggles. This requires the mobilization of the rural poor to wage struggles against exploitation by the rural rich nexus. This is the crux of the class struggle in the countryside. A weakness that has to be overcome is the lack of local struggles on a sustained basis on class and mass

issues. It is when the Party leads such struggles and achieves some partial gains that it can acquire a mass base. The third important area is political and ideological work to consolidate this base.

Only the Left can be the nucleus of an alternative to the ruling classes, who have embraced Hindutva as an ideology. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen the Left as a whole and for this, the first step is to strengthen Left united actions and joint political interventions. The Left alone can spearhead the fight against neo-liberal policies, unlike the other secular opposition parties. It is also the Left, which can unitedly rally other democratic forces to present the Left and democratic alternative, which alone is the real alternative to the bourgeois-landlord and pro-imperialist policies.

The INDIA bloc must utilize the strengthened position of the opposition in the Parliament to assert itself on issues of defence of democracy, secularism, and federalism. Along with this, the broad unity of the secular-democratic forces must be nurtured to primarily take on the electoral battles against the BJP.