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GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION

FORTHCOMING

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Appearance and Reality in Indian Politics: Making Sense of the 1999 General Election

IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT INDIA'S POLITICS ARE NEVER QUITE WHAT THEY seem. If ever there were a banal statement about the collective life of a people this would have to qualify. The politics of any country, almost by definition, fails to represent the daily lives and struggles of ordinary people, and in most cases even the strivings of politicians themselves. Democratic politics is at least as much about distortion as representation – the projection of images to appeal to electorates, for instance, or the softening of policy stances to accommodate seemingly incompatible coalition partners. But 'national' politics in India, by which I mean the competition among political elites for control or influence over the institutions of the central state, is currently less representative than in any other non-authoritarian country one could imagine. Paradoxically, this is the result of a deepening, rather than a withering, of India's democracy – in particular, the tendency for marginalized groups to seek power on their own terms, through parties explicitly established to represent them, and for elections to be fought not as massive national referendums, but at levels much closer to people's own experience.

India's general election of 1999, perhaps more than any of the country's previous exercises in democracy, presents to the outside world an image which betrays the bewildering complexity of the processes that produced it. The three main messages which will have reached the reasonably attentive news consumer in the West, or the social scientist with an interest in comparative cases of Third-

¹ The author would like to acknowledge his intellectual debt to all of the participants at the seminar on the Indian elections held at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London on 10 November 1999, as well as to various members of the National Election Study at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (Delhi), which has conducted India's most exhaustive election surveys over the last three general elections. Particularly helpful have been Sanjay Kumar and Yogendra Yadav.

World democracy, are that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was returned to office with a stronger mandate than the one that delivered him to power in 1998; that Vajpayee's assertive foreign policy, in the form of nuclear tests in May 1998 and a successfully conducted limited war with Pakistan in the summer of 1999, was instrumental in forging this enhanced popularity; and that the increased presence of 'secular' parties in the coalition government headed by Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will constrain the more extreme anti-minority elements within the BJP's ranks.

And yet all three of these messages are either wrong or severely distorted versions of the rather more complex reality. To see why, we shall need to sift through the electoral facts in order to glean some indication of what they say about this outcome as well as what they might portend for India's future. The most important trend to emerge from the 1999 election, if one can distil such a thing from a polity of such vast proportions and striking diversity, is that politics is becoming more localized. The electoral process produced not a national verdict, but an aggregation of local verdicts. This is of course true, by definition, of any non-presidential electoral system composed of constituency-level contests. But the critical point about this election is the extent to which localism prevailed, when compared to other democratic systems or to previous Indian elections. It was the BJP's regional allies, rooted in state-level politics, that won Vajpayee the election – not only providing a vast number of seats, but also delivering crucial votes to BJP candidates in those parliamentary constituencies where the regional allies stood down in favour of their larger 'national' partner. What is most important, as the authoritative election survey conducted by Delhi's Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) shows, the BJP's electoral base continues to be overwhelmingly upper class and upper caste. Yogendra Yadav of CSDS calls it a party of the 'haves'. Its alliance partners filled the gaps in the party's support among the middle (and sometimes lower) strata of the social and economic hierarchy.²

² Extended summaries of the CSDS analysis can be found in the Indian newsmagazine *Frontline* (issues dated 23 October and 5 November 1999). An internet version of *Frontline* can be located at www.the-hindu.com/fline.

THE MAIN PLAYERS

Table 1 provides an overview of the outcome. Before attempting to look beyond these aggregated figures, we must first introduce the main players. Vajpayee's previous coalition government, voted into office in a mid-term poll in 1998, was the BJP's first taste of power at the national level of India's federal political system. The party had ruled, from time to time, in several Indian states over the years. It had also participated in the broad-based alliances that ousted Indira Gandhi in 1977 and Rajiv Gandhi in 1989. But outside these rather extraordinary national moments, the BJP and its earlier incarnation, the Jan Sangh, were traditionally considered political pariahs with which no mainstream party would actively cooperate. (Its main electoral linkage prior to 1998 had been with the Shiv Sena, a rabidly anti-Muslim party whose electoral influence is confined to the state of Maharashtra.) This untouchability had prevented Vajpayee from attracting the parliamentary support required to form a government after the BJP emerged as the largest party following the 1996 general election, which ejected Congress(I) Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao from power.

For reasons which no one has yet been able fully to explain, between 1996 and 1998 the BJP somehow became an acceptable partner. This had something to do with the moderate face presented by the eloquent and respected Vajpayee, which contrasted strongly with the hardline image projected by his predecessor as party leader and with the often violent bigotry associated with the party's organizational base, a grassroots 'cultural' organization known as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), or National Volunteer Association. The BJP's increasing acceptability has also stemmed in part from a perception by leaders of regional parties that the Congress(I) was in serious decline, and thus was unlikely to provide the political locomotive to which they could hitch their ambitions as junior partners *en route* to power. More important, regional parties which viewed the Congress(I) as the main electoral enemy in their respective states were understandably reluctant to assist their rival in forming a national government. Based on the logic of local politics, then, the BJP was thus in many places the lesser of two evils. Besides, many regional parties calculated that they could moderate the BJP's hard edge: if the BJP seemed to be threatening India's tolerant democratic traditions, they could always take the

Table 1
Summary of the 1999 Indian General Election Result

| Name of Party/Alliance | No. of Seats Contested | No. Won |
|--|------------------------|------------|
| <i>BJP and Allies</i> | | |
| Bharatiya Janata Party | 340 | 182 |
| Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam | 19 | 12 |
| Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam | 5 | 4 |
| Pattali Makkal Katchi | 8 | 5 |
| Janata Dal (United) | 61 | 20 |
| Shiv Sena | 63 | 15 |
| Shiromani Akali Dal | 9 | 2 |
| Indian National League | 4 | 4 |
| Himachal Vikas Congress | 1 | 1 |
| Telugu Desam Party | 34 | 29 |
| Biju Janata Dal | 12 | 10 |
| All India Trinamool Congress | 29 | 8 |
| Arunachal Congress | 1 | - |
| Sikkim Democratic Front | 1 | 1 |
| Manipur State Congress Party | 2 | 1 |
| Jammu & Kashmir National Conference | 6 | 4 |
| Haryana Lok Dal (Rashtriya) | 1 | - |
| M.G.R. Anna D.M. Kazhagam | 1 | 1 |
| Total: BJP and Allies | 597 | 299 |
| <i>Congress(I) and Allies</i> | | |
| Indian National Congress(I) | 453 | 112 |
| Rashtriya Janata Dal | 60 | 7 |
| All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam | 29 | 10 |
| Republican Party Of India | 14 | - |
| Muslim League (Kerala State Committee) | 12 | 2 |
| Rashtriya Lok Dal | 15 | 2 |
| Kerala Congress (M) | 1 | 1 |
| Total: Congress and Allies | 584 | 134 |
| <i>Non-aligned Parties</i> | | |
| Bahujan Samaj Party | 224 | 14 |
| Communist Party Of India | 54 | 4 |
| Communist Party Of India (Marxist) | 72 | 32 |
| Samajwadi Party | 151 | 26 |
| Nationalist Congress Party | 130 | 7 |
| Revolutionary Socialist Party | 5 | 3 |
| Forward Bloc (Socialist) | - | - |
| Tamil Maanila Congress (Moopanar) | 28 | - |
| Asom Gana Parishad | 8 | 1 |
| Jharkhand Mukti Morcha | 23 | - |
| Peasants And Workers Party Of India | 2 | 1 |
| Haryana Vikas Party | 2 | - |
| Janata Dal (Secular) | 96 | 1 |
| Independent | 1,948 | 7 |
| Total: Others | 2,743 | 96 |

moral high ground and annul their marriage of convenience.

The main opposition party in the parliament which preceded these elections was the Congress(I), the party of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty. In the hands of Sonia Gandhi, the widow of slain former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, the Congress(I) had engineered the April 1999 no-confidence motion which deprived Vajpayee of his parliamentary majority, bringing his government to an end just thirteen months after it took office. Sonia managed to persuade some of Vajpayee's more mercurial coalition partners to bring down his government, but was herself unable to assemble an alternative government. Thus was India thrust into another round of elections, its third in little more than three years. Sonia's main accomplices in toppling Vajpayee were two of the most notorious institution-destroyers ever to serve as chief minister of an Indian state: Mr Laloo Prasad Yadav, amazingly still (indirectly) at the helm of affairs in the state of Bihar despite facing numerous charges of massive fraud, and Ms J. Jayalalitha, who was pushed out of office by voters in the southern state of Tamil Nadu in 1996.

After a stunning reversal in the 1998 elections that placed her in control of 27 MPs, Jayalalitha became a crucial component of Vajpayee's ruling coalition. Though it was her defection that brought down his government, the final betrayal must have come as something of a relief to the beleaguered Vajpayee. Jayalalitha's constant tantrums during his thirteen month reign centred on two main demands. One of these was implicit – that Vajpayee intervene to prevent government lawyers from pressing corruption cases against her in the courts; the other, voiced openly and often, was that Vajpayee should use the power vested in him as prime minister to dismiss the ruling party in Tamil Nadu (Jayalalitha's arch enemy) for alleged misgovernance. One might have expected Jayalalitha's imperious and insulting behaviour towards the prime minister whom she allegedly supported to have persuaded Sonia Gandhi that she was an unsuitable ally, especially as a good number of Jayalalitha's state-level allies in Tamil Nadu had long since ditched her in favour of an independent alliance with Vajpayee's BJP.

In the end, however, Sonia joined forces with Jayalalitha, while failing to mend fences with Congress leaders in both Tamil Nadu and West Bengal who had broken away in recent years. And in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state (with 85 of the country's 543 parliamentary constituencies), Sonia tied-up with none of the other

main parties. Even at the rhetorical level the Congress(I) refused to countenance the idea of coalition governance, equating it with instability. Sonia wanted a return to the good old days of Congress pre-eminence. But things had irrevocably changed since the era of Gandhi family dominance under Indira and Rajiv. By 1999 the BJP had become the nucleus of party politics, the central mass towards which other parties gravitated or from which they were repelled. In its 1999 election manifesto, the BJP – the party which stood for a united India with a strong political centre – openly embraced coalition politics, alliances with regional parties and the need for devolution of power and resources to the state level and below.

The third main bloc in Indian party politics could simply be called 'the rest', were it not for the fact that even this indeterminate appellation conveys too strong a sense of coherence. Its constituent parts not only share little by way of ideology – which might be said for the BJP and Congress-led blocs as well – they also constantly rotate in and out of this amorphous category. The government that preceded Vajpayee's assumed office in 1996, and was constructed around a group of communist, socialist, regional and caste-based parties that went by the name of the United Front. It produced two prime ministers in its less than two years in power – both from the centre-left Janata Dal, a political party which since then has, in stages, dissolved and regrouped under the name Janata Dal(United). Despite the misleading suffix, the party now represents a smaller grouping than it once did. That a ruling party could go from power to oblivion to opportunistic fragment within two years of leaving office – and that a good portion of what remains of it could go from being the core of a centre-left government to a mere component of a rightist-led coalition – is a telling indication of the pace and unpredictability of Indian party politics in the run up to the 1999 elections.

Even during the 1998 election campaign – that is, before the corpse of the United Front government was yet cold – some factions of the Janata Dal broke away to form their own regional parties, clinging to their home turf as best they could. Crucially, however, they did not perceive this to imply abandoning their national political ambitions. Their aim, as in the case of the Biju Janata Dal in the eastern state of Orissa, was a share in the spoils of national office. In alliance with Vajpayee, some of these Janata Dal offshoots realized this ambition, securing cabinet berths and public-sector

jobs for their party members in Vajpayee's first coalition government. Other elements of the erstwhile Janata Dal shunned the BJP. As we have seen, Bihar's Laloo Prasad Yadav, who had placed his wife in the chief minister's chair while he sat in gaol pending alleged corruption investigations, reached an electoral agreement with the Congress(I). Others waited until the 1999 campaign was getting under way to jump ship and ally themselves with the BJP. So, contrary to the expectations of either Sonia Gandhi or her short-lived predecessor as party president, the centre-left element in Indian politics refused to regroup under the umbrella of the Congress(I), which had always been the natural meeting point for diverse forces in Indian politics. Contrary to what anyone would have predicted as recently as three years ago, they by and large have gone to the right – to the BJP – while allegedly not actually moving to the right ideologically, a question to which we shall return in the conclusion of this article.

ASPECTS OF THE OUTCOME

The return of Vajpayee's BJP to power notwithstanding, the electoral outcome does not represent a mandate for the tenets of Hindu nationalism. Nor does it signify a nationalistic upsurge of a more inclusive sort. To the astonishment of many, the CSDS poll found that only 46 per cent of the electorate was even *aware* of the nuclear tests which shook the geopolitical world. Neither did the government's ability to expel Pakistan-backed infiltrators from India-administered Kashmir figure in the electoral calculations of survey respondents. Their concerns were far more local. The conventional analysis terms this the 'regionalization' of Indian politics, associating it with the increased salience of state-level political alignments. There is, naturally, a large degree of truth in this. The electoral alliances of both the Congress(I) and the BJP varied widely from state to state. This has been going on in Indian politics for at least the last five years, and more recently has thrown up some particularly thorny contradictions. Parties which are friends in one state can be mortal enemies elsewhere. In Tamil Nadu, for instance, the Congress(I) not only linked-up with Jayalalitha's All-India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (AIADMK), which despite its name is confined almost entirely to one state; it also entered into an alliance with

India's main national communist parties, but (just to confuse things further) only in this one state.

The vagaries of political geography, however, stood in the way of whatever façade of unity among the Congress(I) and its new-found communist allies might have been raised. For in the neighbouring state of Kerala the Congress(I) is the sworn enemy of the communists, the two parties having alternated in government since the 1950s. The predictable result of their marriage of convenience in Tamil Nadu was confusion in the minds of many voters, lacklustre campaigning by Congress(I) activists in Kerala incensed that their party was supping with the devil (even if only in the state next door), and a heaven-sent opportunity for their opponents in Tamil Nadu to denounce both parties for rank opportunism. The politics of regional alliance-building, in other words, has its limits – imposed mainly by the need for some degree of consistency across states and between what goes on in Delhi and what takes place at the regional level.

But beyond mere regionalization – whatever its limits – it is possible to discern within the results an even more minute process of localization at work. It is in some ways typical of Indian politics, in which the bases of continuity and sources of change shift so rapidly, that, just as psephologists and political analysts have begun to develop an understanding of the significance of state-level alliance and voting patterns, these should themselves show signs of becoming less relevant. This can be seen most clearly in what Ian Duncan has termed the emergence of 'micro-political systems' within Uttar Pradesh (UP). These operate across a geographical cluster of parliamentary constituencies, or sometimes even just one or two. A good example is the electoral result in one zone of north-western UP, where an alliance between the Congress(I) and a local caste-based party managed to wrest a number of seats from the BJP. Indeed, it is only by disaggregating to the level of the individual constituency (or group of constituencies) that the massive setback for the BJP in UP, long the heartland of the party's electoral ambitions, can be understood.

The BJP's share of the popular vote in UP decreased by about 9 per cent between the 1998 and 1999 elections. In a two-party system, this kind of decline might be expected to exact a heavy price on the BJP (and its minor allies) in terms of seats. In fact, the BJP alliance did see its number of MPs from the state drop from 62

to 32, its lowest total this decade. But, puzzlingly, the state is nothing like a two-party system: quite the contrary. None of the four main parties was able to form an alliance with any of the others, which led to multi-cornered contests in the vast majority of constituencies. Andrew Wyatt's analysis of the 1998 UP election suggests that the failure of anti-BJP alliances to emerge worked to the BJP's advantage, and that it would do so again in any subsequent election.³ In 1999, however, despite the refusal of the Congress(I) to strike an alliance with either the Samajwadi Party (SP) or the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), or for the SP and BSP to revive their partnership of the early 1990s, all three parties increased their seat tallies at the expense of the BJP.

The main answer to this puzzling phenomenon is to be found in the tactical voting of social groups hostile to the BJP – particularly Muslim and lower-caste voters. In individual constituency contests such voters tended to opt for whichever party's candidate appeared most likely to defeat the BJP candidate. The result was that while the BSP improved on its 1998 vote share by a mere 1.3 per cent, it translated this into a nine-seat increase. The Congress(I) vote share went up by 10 per cent, taking the party from zero to twelve seats. The SP, which saw its percentage of the popular vote decline by 5.4 per cent, actually increased its seat tally, from 20 to 26. Very local factors were responsible for these counter-intuitive outcomes. Almost half (43 per cent) of the Samajwadi Party's decline in vote share was confined to just ten constituencies. The defection of a popular lower-caste holy man from the BJP just prior to the election, and his active campaigning against the party in his area of influence, led to BJP reversals in a number of constituencies. In some places, tacit understandings between non-BJP parties made the difference. So, in addition to the usual pattern of castes voting *en bloc* for particular parties, in these elections this took place at increasingly lower levels – all the way down to the individual constituency. This produced an outcome which belied both the state-wide alliance pattern (or lack thereof) and the aggregate voting trends.

³ Andrew Wyatt, 'The Limitations on Coalition Politics in India: The Case of Electoral Alliances in Uttar Pradesh', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 37:2 (July 1999), pp. 1–21.

SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

Indeed, perhaps the dominant theme of this electoral verdict is the disjuncture between appearances and reality. Three examples may help to underscore the importance of this point. The first is the resounding triumph of Mr Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party (TDP), the ruling party in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. The contest in Andhra Pradesh, which pitted the TDP-BJP alliance against the Congress(I), had been viewed by many analysts within and outside India as a test of the political feasibility of economic liberalization.⁴ During his time in office Naidu became a high-profile reformer: the darling of the World Bank among India's chief ministers, a fixture at the World Economic Forum's summits in Switzerland, and a tireless champion of Andhra Pradesh in the foreign-investment sweepstakes, having lured splashy projects from multinational corporations such as Microsoft. If Naidu could govern with reformist zeal – not only attracting investment, but also taking unpopular decisions like reducing transport, electricity and water subsidies – and yet still perform well at the polls, then he would confound the conventional wisdom that liberalization necessarily imperils political survival. (Many analysts had mistakenly attributed the 1996 electoral defeat of former Congress(I) prime minister, Narasimha Rao, to his pursuit of economic reform during the first half of the decade.)

As it happened, Naidu emerged from the 1999 election with a larger parliamentary delegation than he had started it with, and even more significantly, managed to retain his majority in the state legislature, elections for which were held simultaneously with the parliamentary vote. According to James Manor, however, the reason Naidu was able to perform this feat – the vast majority of state governments in recent years have failed to get re-elected – had nothing to do with his skill as a liberalizer, for beneath the façade of Naidu's reformist credentials rested a record of gross fiscal profligacy. A populist spending spree in the two years preceding the elections had in effect bankrupted the state government. The Congress(I) opposition in the state legislature not only failed to

⁴ The political sustainability of economic liberalization is dealt with in much greater detail in Rob Jenkins, *Democratic Politics and Economic Reform in India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

detect this; it also proved incapable of highlighting the underhanded means by which Naidu's government diverted resources earmarked for targeted schemes to construct a patronage system in which the TDP machine distributed largesse to specific constituencies whose electoral support it sought.

The second deceptive appearance was the massive victory for the BJP-led front in Bihar, which sends the second-largest parliamentary delegation to New Delhi (54 MPs) after Uttar Pradesh. The BJP's ally in Bihar was the Janata Dal(United), most of whose members had drifted slowly away from the increasingly imperious Laloo over the previous three years. The BJP-JD(U) alliance won an astounding 41 seats (almost 80 per cent of the state's total), while Laloo's party – in alliance with the Congress(I) – could win only eleven. But if one moves below the surface, the constituency-level results paint a different picture. In these elections, almost half of the contests (24 constituencies) were decided by victory margins of less than 5 per cent of the popular vote. In the 1998 elections, only seventeen constituencies witnessed such keen contests, and in 1996, only ten did. Indeed Laloo's share of the state-wide vote increased by 3 per cent.⁵ Thus, this major element of the BJP's national 'mandate' turns out to rest on a rather precarious vote.

It is possible to perceive another downside to the BJP's triumph in Bihar as well. Its Janata Dal(U) allies in Bihar – eager to build as large a parliamentary bloc as possible – had pressured the BJP to ally with its sister party in Karnataka, a faction of the old Janata Dal which had recently linked up again with its erstwhile allies (both in Karnataka and elsewhere) – hence the 'United' tag. The BJP leadership in Delhi acquiesced in this ill-advised move, and paid the price at the polls. The Janata Dal had ruled Karnataka for the previous five years, and had become deeply unpopular. This rubbed off on the BJP. Thus, the marriage between the BJP and the Janata Dal(U), which in Bihar turned out to be a match made in heaven, unfortunately dragged into the electoral picture a range of less attractive in-laws elsewhere in India. India's fractured politics, in which rivalries and alliances in one state have sometimes unpredictable implications for political contests in other states (or in the national coalitional arena), will continue to produce anomalies such as this for the foreseeable future.

⁵ This analysis comes from Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies.

This makes predictions of increased governmental stability extremely dubious. These are usually premised on the notion that Vajpayee's BJP has become the centre of gravity in Indian politics and has learned the art of coalition-building. It now attracts parties from across the political spectrum, with the exception of the communist parties, and has a working majority large enough to prohibit any one party (even the Telugu Desam) from dethroning it. But the logic which brought the BJP and at least some of its allies together is open to change at very short notice. The TDP, for instance, backed Vajpayee's first government (though it did not participate in the ruling coalition), and then allied with the BJP in the 1999 elections because Naidu knew that the Congress(I) was his main enemy at the state level. I argued after the 1998 elections that Naidu would be likely one day to view the BJP as an encroacher on the TDP's home turf.⁶ His statements following the electoral outcome indicate that this perception of a possible threat is slowly changing his alliance calculations. He is again refusing to join the national coalition in government, and claims that he will keep the BJP at arm's length. If the Congress(I) in Andhra Pradesh continues to weaken – a distinct possibility – then Naidu may begin to see the BJP as his party's primary electoral rival.

The third example of the electoral result not being quite what it seems is the performance of the Congress(I). There is of course no denying that it won the fewest seats in its history. Heads will roll, possibly even Sonia Gandhi's eventually. Moreover, the Congress(I)'s main alliance partners appear not to have derived much of a boost from their association with the 114-year-old party. The CSDS survey data also show a weakening of the party's hold over some of its traditional 'vote banks', especially members of India's 'tribal' communities. And yet some of these and other causes of the Congress(I)'s electoral débâcle are contingent, and as such are not irreversible. There will never be a return to the type of dominance that Congress once enjoyed, but the party is not beyond redemption. Five years ago, for instance, the Congress(I) in Karnataka appeared hopeless, and the BJP (once a minor force in the state) on the ascendant. In the 1994 state legislative elections, the party was

⁶ Rob Jenkins, 'India's Electoral Result: An Unholy Alliance Between Nationalism and Regionalism', *Briefing Paper no. 42*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs, March 1998.

pushed from power into third position in the state, relinquishing to the BJP even its claim to be the main opposition party. Some determined organizational rebuilding – and, to be sure, plenty of blunders by the Janata Dal state government which succeeded it – allowed the Congress(I) to return to power in Karnataka in the state assembly elections of 1999. It also put in a remarkable showing in the concurrently conducted parliamentary polls.

Another potentially remediable contingency which hurt the Congress(I) in these elections was an eleventh-hour split. The creation of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) just months before polling cost the Congress(I) perhaps twenty parliamentary seats in the state of Maharashtra, the NCP's main area of strength, and maybe three or four elsewhere. The mastermind of the split was Mr Sharad Pawar, who has had his eye on the prime ministership (or at least the Congress(I) presidency) for most of this decade, and had expected a much better deal from Sonia Gandhi's clique as a reward for his role in securing 33 of Maharashtra's parliamentary seats for the Congress(I) in the 1998 elections. Instead he was sidelined, his followers undermined by Sonia's people at every opportunity. In the eyes of the party's national leadership, Pawar's ability to forge alliances between the Congress(I) and smaller parties representing Dalits (the outcastes of the Hindu social hierarchy) made him not an asset but a threat. So in the tradition of her husband and mother-in-law, who dealt ruthlessly with up-and-coming regional satraps in the party, Sonia made sure the Maharashtrian leader's influence was curtailed. Pawar then used the excuse of Sonia's Italian origins to lead a revolt within the party. He took only a few MPs with him, but he spoiled the Congress(I)'s chances of reaping rich rewards from among the 48 parliamentary constituencies in Maharashtra.

If and when Sonia exits the political scene, a 'homecoming' for Pawar is not beyond imagination. His NCP has in fact joined forces with the Congress(I) to form the state government in Maharashtra. But beyond whatever Pawar himself can deliver, the real benefits to the Congress(I)'s fortunes will be a seismic shift in the way in which it treats strong regional leaders, whether within or outside the party. The inability of party managers in Delhi to give free reign to its most popular leaders at the state level has cost the Congress(I) dearly in recent years. Fed up with such interference, Ms Mamata Banerjee, a firebrand from West Bengal, broke away from the Congress(I) prior to the 1998 elections. She later formed an electoral alliance

with the BJP, and despite having a large Muslim following, has done rather well from this arrangement. In 1996, Mr G. K. Moopanar was effectively forced out of the Congress(I)'s Tamil Nadu unit, thanks to the party leadership's unstinting support to his rivals in the local party (who were far less popular than he), and to its suicidal decision to ally with Jayalalitha, who at the time was heading one of India's most despised state governments. Whether the Congress(I) comes upon future national leadership that is less prone to self-destructive paranoia remains to be seen. But it is not beyond the realm of possibility. The party's disastrous performance in these elections might (just possibly) awaken it to the need for a more accommodating stance towards rising regional stars. If the BJP can remake its image – within the space of two years transforming itself from a go-it-alone nationalist pariah to an umbrella under which all manner of regionalists, Congress runaways and former socialists can be accommodated – then it would be foolish to discount the prospects for the Congress(I) to reform itself in ways that would allow it to play a similar role.

DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions about the future of Indian democracy can be drawn from the complicated conditions lurking beneath the surface of the BJP's apparent triumph in these elections? The safe answer would be 'none', given the pace of change and the diversity of factors which seem capable of propelling it. And yet there is such a proliferation of speculation in the popular press – which finds its way into attitudes among Western publics, business leaders and the political establishment – that it is worth while to take issue with some of the more misleading currents of opinion. Let us consider three of these.

The first concerns the nature of regionalization. What goes by this name in India is often miscast in foreign reporting as a force tending towards the disintegration of the Indian union, or at the very least is associated with threats to India's tradition of open democratic politics. Nothing could be further from the truth. Not all regional parties are even regionalist, in the sense of representing demands for cultural autonomy or grievances against the central state. Many, as we have seen in the foregoing analysis, are merely

personality-driven offshoots of parties that were once nominally national in scope. Many tend to represent a particular set of social groups, usually built around caste loyalties. The Samajwadi Party, in effect a regional party confined to Uttar Pradesh, is avowedly a party of the state's 'backward castes'. These are occupational/status groups which are looked down upon by members of elite, so-called 'twice born', Hindu castes. They do not, however, share the same history of brutal exploitation as India's Dalits, for whom the BSP represents the most articulate political force in Uttar Pradesh. Strikingly, the BSP's efforts to break into other North Indian states have been repelled in recent years, suggesting that not only are some regional parties little more than caste parties in disguise, but that explicitly caste-based parties can have their expansionist aims thwarted by state boundaries. To a significant degree, state boundaries also represent cultural (particularly linguistic) boundaries.

But this points to the importance of another trend with implications, however uncertain, for the capacity of Indian democracy to arrange broad-based coalitions in support of public action. Caste-based parties such as the SP and BSP, which seek to represent a broad array of individual castes within broader social categories, such as Dalits or 'backward castes', find their social bases fragmenting to a significant degree. Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Party (RJP) had pretensions to representing the backward castes as a whole, but the voter surveys carried out by CSDS indicate that the RJP's base of support appears to be narrowing to mainly the Yadav caste within the backward-caste category. The same holds true to a lesser extent for the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh. An analysis of BSP voters' social backgrounds reveals the party's overwhelming reliance on just one Dalit group, the Jatavas, with very low levels of support among other Dalits. Various parties in the state of Maharashtra have been subjected to a similar paring down of their social bases, mostly along lines of caste and sub-caste. In short, while caste-based parties have, for reasons discussed earlier, been subsumed within the conceptual rubric of regionalism, they are increasingly vehicles for attracting narrower and narrower slices of the electorate. These slices also tend to have geographical zones of concentration within a given state, a fact which then fuels the process by which local politics takes centre stage. The need for party alliances is therefore driven by a complicated interaction between

regionalization, community awakening, social fragmentation and localization. This process, as well as being driven by democratic politics, is also an influence over democratic electoral outcomes. Identities, and the level of aggregation at which they are expressed, respond to the mobilizational strategies of political elites.

The second question that must be addressed is closely related to the first: what are the implications of this form of localization, of the tendency for parties and factions to represent narrower and narrower slices of society, expressed mainly in terms of caste and community, and to do so at lower and lower levels of political aggregation, corresponding to more localized political arenas? One consequence which has been given short shrift in discussions of Indian democracy is the prospect for such changes to create political space for those forces in Indian politics which have remained aloof from *electoral* politics. India has a great tradition of 'non-party political formations' — activists, often concerned with a single issue, able to mobilize large numbers of people in opposition to various forms of state action. But, in general, practitioners of 'movement politics' have either shunned the electoral arena, considering it either too unsavoury and therefore in a sense polluting of their cause, or else so tainted as not to offer any scope for promoting substantial change. Those groups which have contested elections — mainly farmers' organizations which have floated parties or quasi-parties — have on the whole fared extremely badly.

One of the constraints facing political movements has been their local character, their isolation from networks of influence that could provide support in the electoral arena. But with politics becoming more localized, this constraint becomes less onerous. Even if this process is being driven primarily by the politicization of ascriptive identities, the prospects for issue-based movements to turn this situation to their advantage are not inconsiderable. This is especially true in the light of the substantial degree of institutional decentralization which has taken place in India this decade. More resources than ever are flowing to elected district and village councils. Activist groups and non-governmental organizations have in some cases successfully put up candidates in these local-level elections. They engage, to the degree they must, in the political calculus of caste and community in order to win votes. But the agenda of each is far more attuned to local developmental concerns than are those of mainstream parties.

Our third and final concern must be to assess whether the BJP's reliance on regional parties — out of necessity rather than choice — will indeed serve to moderate the party's efforts to transform the Indian state into the political arm of a Hindu nation, in which citizenship is reducible to one's faith. This involves two somewhat distinct questions: whether such parties will be *willing* to moderate the BJP's policies, and whether they will be *able* to do so. Their willingness to do so will largely be determined by the increasingly local considerations which inform their political cost-benefit analyses. Parties with little interest in securing the votes of minorities — either because minorities are not prevalent in their limited geographical spheres of influence, or because other communally-oriented parties have a lock on those votes — might well decide that they have more to lose (for instance, the spoils of office which come from partnership with the ruling BJP) than they have to gain from taking a principled stand against whatever egregious decisions a BJP-led government might wish to take. Other calculations might similarly deter the BJP's regional allies from defending the abstract values of secularism. The attacks on Christians and their places of worship throughout 1999, clearly spearheaded by organizations connected with the BJP, may have caused its coalition partners some discomfort, but certainly not enough to walk out of the alliance. Were Christians more than 3 per cent of the population — and were they more numerous in states in which the BJP's allies are located — a greater tendency towards 'taming' the BJP may have been in evidence. Some of the BJP's alliance partners, fearing that the BJP might be poaching on their local turf, might even decide that they have more to gain from stoking Hindu majoritarian sentiment in order to blunt the edge of the BJP's unique selling point. As I pointed out after the 1998 elections,⁷ when the BJP-led alliance was still a novelty, it may be as easy for the BJP to infect its regional partners with communalism as it is for the allies to rein in the far larger BJP. At least one of India's current 'regional' parties — the Shiv Sena — went from being a regionalist party (its slogan being 'Maharashtra for the Maharashtrians') to one in which its anti-Muslim ideology became dominant.

Whether or not it is their intention, the ability of the BJP's allies to exert a moderating influence on the government must remain

⁷ Jenkins, 'India's Electoral Result', op. cit.

in question. This is especially true now that, unlike in the last BJP-led coalition, no single ally is in a position to bring down the government. Problems over collective action among the allies will make it difficult to oppose decisions taken at the behest of the notoriously intolerant RSS. Indeed, the ability of the BJP's pragmatic leaders to keep the hardcore leadership and increasingly frustrated activists of the RSS at bay is perhaps the most important question of all. The former BJP chief minister of UP, sacked following the party's poor showing in the general election, immediately put the blame on the party's failure to publicize its commitment to destroying centuries-old mosques, the continued existence of which extreme elements in the RSS family of organizations consider an offence to Hindu sensitivities. During the first half of his last government, Vajpayee was also constantly under attack by economic nationalists in the party who viewed the government's efforts to continue liberalizing the economy as a betrayal of the party's commitment to *Swadeshi*, or economic self-reliance. BJP-affiliated (or, rather, RSS-controlled) unions took to the streets, unleashing harsh invective against the prime minister. The nuclear tests and the war against Pakistan diverted the attention of the hardliners to other nationalistic issues. Such tactics – hopefully – cannot be repeated forever. Indeed, it is in the longer run that the BJP's fortunes look rather less gleaming than they do in the post-election euphoria. If we are not digesting the results of another general election before Vajpayee reaches the half-way mark of his five-year term, then no one will be more surprised than this writer.

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