

from speculative activity and concentrate on direct physical investment, thereby adding to productive capacity. The current stock exchange mess is therefore a good omen for the economy; the new government that is about to be installed must, for dear life, comprehend this home truth.

The Bharatiya Janata Party will enter a season for ruing in leisure. Its leaders should also have the humility to reflect on the officiousness of their vicious bigotry. Merely because their party makes the assertion, Hindutva does not become identical with Bharatiyatva. The vulgar racket that the party had created in the country in order to construct a Ram temple on the ground where the demolished Babri mosque had once stood has done immense damage to India's international credibility, even as it has engineered medieval savagery within the land. The Indian electorate has over this past fortnight told the wild ones that enough is enough.

Perhaps the biggest significance of the 2004 Lok Sabha polls lies elsewhere. Neither of the two major political parties will be very keen to point out the fact, but the total number of members elected to the 14th Lok Sabha do not add up to even one-half of its aggregate strength. It is the assorted regional parties, into which belong a handful of recognized "national" parties too, who now command a majority in the lower house of parliament.

The relevance of these regional parties is going to increase henceforth to an inordinate degree. They will be increasingly more assertive and claim their pound of flesh from the system. That need not be regarded as catastrophe. Who knows, with growing pressure

mounted by the regional parties, the Indian polity could well turn into a genuinely federal arrangement with progressively greater devolution of power and resources.

A cluster of regional parties will control state administrations across the country; without their support, no government will survive in New Delhi. The Centre will therefore be forced to cede to these regional entities more and more funds and administrative prerogatives. The political centre of gravity will, as a result, shift gradually from New Delhi to the state capitals. It is worth speculating what other developments might eventuate. For example, a drastic reordering of national priorities could be on the cards, fulfilment of the basic needs of the people in such arenas as health, housing, education, employment and food security could eclipse concern - false or genuine - over such issues as national security and defence.

While machine politicians engage in New Delhi over the next few days in their government-formation pastime, should not political analysts too do some introspection? Given their specific location, they think in a lazy mould and endeavour to explain all electoral shifts in terms of either the "honeymoon effect" or "anti-incumbency". They owe it to themselves to do a deeper exercise, otherwise they run the risk of committing more faux pas in the manner of the exit and opinion polls. Or is it their argument that, in the case of West Bengal, the anti-incumbency factor still holds; the revolt of the voters is against the incumbency in the state over long years of a thoroughly worthless opposition. ■

LET US HOPE THE DARKNESS HAS PASSED

India's real and virtual worlds have collided in a humiliation of power

Arundhati Roy

For many of us who feel estranged from mainstream politics, there are rare, ephemeral moments of celebration. Today is one of them. When India went to the polls, we were negotiating the dangerous cross-currents of neo-liberalism and neo-fascism - an assault on the poor and minority communities.

None of the pundits and psephologists predicted the results. The rightwing BJP-led coalition has not just been voted out of power, it has been humiliated. It cannot but be seen as a decisive vote against communalism, and neo-liberalism's economic "reforms". The Congress has become the largest party. The left parties, the only parties to be overtly (but ineffectively) critical of the reforms, have been given an unprecedented mandate. But even as we celebrate, we know that on every major issue besides overt Hindu nationalism (nuclear bombs, big dams and privatisation), the Congress and the BJP have no major ideological differences. We

know the legacy of the Congress led us to the horror of the BJP. Still, we celebrate because surely a darkness has passed. Or has it? Recently, a young friend was talking to me about Kashmir. About the morass of political venality, the brutality of the security forces, the inchoate edges of a society saturated in violence, where militants, police, intelligence officers, government servants, businessmen and even journalists encounter each other, and gradually, over time, become each other. About having to live with the endless killing, the mounting "disappearances", the whispering, the fear, the rumours, the insane disconnection between what Kashmiris know is happening and what the rest of us are told is happening in Kashmir.

He said: "Kashmir used to be a business. Now it's a mental asylum." Admittedly, the conflicts in Kashmir and the north-eastern states make them separate wings that house the more perilous wards in

the asylum. But in the heartland too, the schism between knowledge and information, between fact and conjecture, between the "real" world and the virtual world, has become a place of endless speculation and potential insanity.

Each time there is a so-called terrorist strike, the BJP government has rushed in, eager to assign culpability with little or no investigation. The attack on the parliament building, on December 13, 2001, and the burning of the Sabarmati Express, in Godhra, the following year are fine examples. In both cases, the evidence that surfaced raised disturbing questions and so was put into cold storage. Everybody believed what they wanted to, but the incidents were used to whip up communal bigotry in a haze of heightened Hindu nationalism.

Many governments - state as well as centre; Congress, BJP, as well as regional parties - have used this climate of manufactured frenzy to mount an assault on human rights on a scale that would shame the world's better known despotic regimes.

In recent years, the number of people killed by the police and security forces runs into tens of thousands. Andhra Pradesh (neoliberalism's poster state) chalks up an average of about 200 deaths of "extremists" in "encounters" every year. In Kashmir an estimated 80,000 people have been killed since 1989. Thousands have simply "disappeared".

According to the Association of Parents of Disappeared People in Kashmir, more than 2,500 people were killed in 2003. In the last 18 months there have been 54 deaths in custody. The Indian state's proclivity to harass and terrorise has been institutionalised by the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA). In Tamil Nadu, the act has been used to stifle criticism of the state government. In Jharkhand, 3,200 people, mostly poor adivasis (indigenous people) accused of being Maoists, have been named in POTA cases. In eastern Uttar Pradesh, the act is used to clamp down on those who protest about the dispossession of their land. In Gujarat and Mumbai, it is used almost exclusively against Muslims. In Gujarat, after the 2002 pogrom in which an estimated 2,000 Muslims were killed, 287 people were accused under POTA: 286 were Muslim and one a Sikh. POTA allows confessions extracted in police custody to be admitted as evidence. Under the POTA regime, torture tends to replace investigation in our police stations: that's everything

from people being forced to drink urine, to being stripped, humiliated, given electric shocks, burned with cigarette butts and having iron rods put up their anuses, to being beaten to death.

Under POTA you cannot get bail unless you can prove that you are innocent - of a crime that you have not been formally charged with. It would be naive to imagine that POTA is being "misused". It is being used for precisely the reasons it was enacted. This year in the UN, 181 countries voted for increased protection of human rights. Even the US voted in favour. India abstained.

Meanwhile, economists cheering from the pages of corporate newspapers inform us that the GDP growth rate is phenomenal, unprecedented. Shops are overflowing with consumer goods. Government storehouses are overflowing with grain. Outside this circle of light, the past five years have seen the most violent increase in rural-urban income inequalities since independence. Farmers steeped in debt are committing suicide in hundreds; 40% of the rural population in India has the same foodgrain absorption level as sub-Saharan Africa, and 47% of Indian children under three suffer from malnutrition.

But in urban India, shops, restaurants, railway stations, airports, gymnasiums, hospitals have TV monitors in which India's Shining, Feeling Good. You only have to close your ears to the sickening crunch of the policeman's boot on someone's ribs, you only have to raise your eyes from the squalor, the slums, the ragged broken people on the streets and seek a friendly TV monitor, and you will be in that other beautiful world. The singing, dancing world of Bollywood's permanent pelvic thrusts, of permanently privileged, happy Indians waving the tricolour and Feeling Good. Laws like POTA are like buttons on a TV. You can use it to switch off the poor, the troublesome, the unwanted.

When POTA was passed, the Congress staged a noisy opposition in Parliament. However, repealing POTA never figured in its election campaign. Even before it has formed a government, there have been overt reassurances that "reforms" will continue. Exactly what kind of reforms, we'll have to wait and see. Fortunately the Congress will be hobbled by the fact that it needs the support of left parties to form a government. Hopefully, things will change. A little. It's been a pretty hellish six years. ■

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