

REVENGE OF THE PEOPLE

The Indian electorate has told the wild ones that enough is enough

Ashok Mitra

A resolute coalition of opinion and exit polls have made asses of themselves. A sort of sheepish apologia could be on offer: they did, in fact, hint at the possibility of a hung Lok Sabha. That hardly matters. The prognostications by pollsters provided not a hint of the cataclysmic political changes thought up by India's electors.

Perhaps the fact that the principal news media are based in New Delhi and Mumbai, respectively the nation's political and financial capital, explains the haughty absentmindedness of the sample designs which do not bother to reach down to the humble and weak multitudes strewn across town and country. The latter, the implicit assumption has been, are of no consequence: as long as the nation's top decile shines, the rest of the countrymen should better get along. In that sense, the poll outcome is the response of the nation's base to the goings-on at the level of the superstructure.

The elections have rendered a near knock-out blow to the Information Technology lobby. The state chief minister whom India Incorporated had held up as role model for the globalization process - who used to take pride to describe himself as CEO of his state - has been sent packing. The other chief minister who was wont to remind all and sundry that the seat of his government was also the preferred habitat of the IT industry, has suffered an almost equal humiliation.

Appropriate lessons ought to be drawn for their own good by chief ministers elsewhere in the country. IT is glamour, IT is World-Bank-friendly, by embracing IT, one coaxes kudos from the US administration. But what about its other adverse effects? It diverts funds away from essential tasks for ameliorating the plight of poor, hapless people across the country to enable them to reach up to a marginally better existence. The poor know where their priorities lie. They want drinking water. They want irrigation water. They seek subsidized power. They want a going public distribution system to provide them with essential consumer goods at prices they can afford; they want protection on the crops they raise, such as wheat, cotton or sugarcane, posed by uncontrolled imports from rich foreign countries. They do not want plants and factories, built assiduously over the decades with the nation's own resources, to be closed down or sold off to shady operators. And all because an imported economic philosophy is trying to convince official minds that economic efficiency is coterminous with a labour-economizing technology.



It is necessary to be fair. The kind of national economy sought to be built in the recent period and which has immiserized a vast majority of the population had its genesis during the earlier Congress government. The argument that they are not the original sinners have not saved the Bharatiya Janata Party leadership. It has been a silent resolute coalition of ordinary men and women who have marched to the polling stations to express their wrath. They include, apart from the vast army of the unemployed and other scrounging for livelihood which the crumbs of outsourcing are unable to ensure, the hungry and emaciated peasant masses too. They also include a cross-section of old and middle-aged people who have experienced a shrinkage in their savings because domestic interest rates have been brought down since the Federal Reserve Board has also done so.

These millions have now taken their revenge. It is almost a Brechtian situation. Reforms-struck politicians, gloating over the several misdoings they have committed since 1991, were on the point of dissolving the people; the people, grabbing the opportunity that came their way, decided to dissolve their ruling politicians instead.

The share market is in a state of shock. India Incorporated too has been overtaken by panic. Perhaps as a variant of auto-suggestion, the tycoons have come out with a pompous statement. Like-minded citizens, take heart, notwithstanding the poll results, the economic reforms will continue. It is cheek they demonstrate, and they are not the only ones. As the share prices started to stumble, a note issued on behalf of the Congress sang the same tune: everything is under control, once the party of the Nehru-Gandhis returned to power, it would not deviate from the reforms agenda.

The Congress should have better sense. The Lok Sabha seats they have won are because they were the party in opposition to the ruling alliance, who got identified with the perpetrators of the misery countrymen have been experiencing. To have a viable majority for the new government they will have to depend very substantially on other parties and groups who are fiercely opposed to the insensate reforms that do not contribute to real growth, and shift income and job opportunities from the poorer classes to the rich. That apart, the nervousness over the convulsions in the share market is altogether misplaced. For consider the following possibility: if share prices decline, investors will move on a wide front away

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