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## India's Saffron Capitalism

### *The Consolidation of the Right Under Hindutva Banners*

by RADHIKA DESAI

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It is clear that the new Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in New Delhi is unapologetically devoted to corporate interests and promises to bring the wonders of Modi's Gujarat 'model' to the rest of India. With a secure majority of its own in the Lok Sabha, the party can do so is unhampered by even the minimal resistance the stropic regional satraps that were its coalition partners offered between 1998 and 2004.

A graph of the Bombay Stock Exchange's Sensex index on counting day would have more fittingly conveyed the meaning of the electoral verdict than the footage of *hoi polloi* banging drums, lighting crackers, smearing gulal and eating laddoos that usually accompanied reportage of the election results. With a name that calls a condom to mind more readily than a stock market index, the Sensex hit an orgasmic high of 25364.71, crossing the 25,000 mark for the first time.

Never before has the county's corporate elite stood so solidly behind a single party. Never before has it contributed so massively to its campaign, and never before has any party in India spent more on its campaign than the ruling US President had on his. These facts were not unknown but it took the independent *Economic and Political Weekly* to call the BJP's victory 'the biggest corporate heist in history'.

Even so, India's capitalists had not secured the BJP victory on their own. The BJP is a member of the 'Sangh Parivar' around the fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The Parivar's hundreds of thousands of highly motivated workers campaign for the BJP: no other party has such organizational muscle at its command. The Parivar's Hindutva ideology targets India's significant Muslim minority in particular and Modi was Chief Minister of Gujarat during the 2002 genocide of Muslims there. He is widely considered responsible, at the very least, of not acting to prevent or mitigate it.

Reportage and commentary are unable to link Hindutva and the corporations satisfactorily. At best, they claim there is a tradeoff between the 'Hindutva' and 'development' (i.e. corporate) agendas. Development has been foregrounded and Hindutva pushed into the background. That, even on this account, it still lurks there is neither denied nor disinterested for consideration.

In reality, Hindutva was deployed extensively in this campaign – for instance, the BJP chose the 'Butcher of Gujarat' as its prime ministerial candidate, profited from the Muzaffarnagar riots and constantly harped on themes of terrorism and meat exports. Moreover, in Hindutva's long road to power, Hindutva and 'development' have always been inextricably intertwined.

There is no pure capitalism. Every actually existing capitalism wears the specific gender, 'race', ethnic and religious marks of the social groups its national historical development has required it to consolidate into its 'historic bloc'. And in India, neoliberal capitalism wears saffron.

Hindutva's quantum leap forward in the 16<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha elections was further favoured by the disarray among all its major opponents. The Congress proved a sitting duck for the relentless (and baseless) attacks on it for economic mismanagement from the BJP media machine. Coming on top of less deniable charges of corruption and dynastic succession, these charges seemed to immobilize a Congress already weakened by its debilitating political ambiguity: should it aim to be, as it so ardently desired, the party of the capitalist class or should it strive to accept the electoral base among the poor, the minorities and the lower castes that history had bequeathed it and learn to articulate its interests? Congress support dropped a whopping 10 percentage points from its 2009 level. The Left continued to lose ground largely because it was unable to evolve a coherent response to neoliberalism. And though as a group the regional parties lost only a couple of percentage points of support, many of them lost electoral ground on the fringes of their respective social bases.

Despite all these advantages, it is remarkable how thin the BJP's electoral achievement was. Its absolute majority in the Lok Sabha rested on a vote share which, despite going up 65 percent since 2009, stood at a mere 31 percent, a full 10 percentage points below the previous lowest share for a governing party.

Paltry though it may be, this is Hindutva's political achievement. It has united the more diverse propertied class produced by neoliberalism in recent decades. In their course, the propertied class expanded beyond the upper castes. The single most important addition came from the layer of prosperous middle-caste land-owners. Initially becoming capitalist farmers, they soon began investing in urban industry and services and came to share interests with the established upper

caste capitalist class of old. Needless to say, these shared interests also became more keenly opposed to those of the poorer middle castes, lower castes and other marginalized groups.

However, shared interests must be ideologically articulated. Originally forming the base of the Congress in India's villages, the propertied middle castes began to leave the party in a complex process of advances and retreats that lasted decades. They first formed farmers' movements and then regional parties as their political needs diversified away from simple demands for more government support for agriculture. However, their middle caste status separated them from the largely upper caste constituency of the BJP.

Hindutva filled this gap between the upper and middle caste propertied and overcame the regional divisions among the regionally rooted middle castes.

Hindutva also defined the terms of this expanded capitalist class's relationship with India's working population and minorities. They can choose between accepting the superiority of Hindu culture and the economic and political dominance of Hindu upper and middle class/caste capitalist classes in return for, at most, a miserly set of material concessions or suffering justified by carefully cultivated ideological othering of a range of groups among whom Muslims are the most prominent.

Hindutva others Muslims as malcontent, violent, lascivious, disloyal, repressive toward women and terrorists (here, the West's Islamophobia provides invaluable aid). The only good Muslim is a 'Hindu' Muslim, one who is prepared to accept Hindu economic, political and cultural supremacy and agree to mend his ways. Hindu violence against Muslims can then be justified, as Modi did in 2002 in Gujarat, as legitimate anger against Muslim transgressions. The same model can apply to other recalcitrant groups: women can be othered as (western) feminists or harlots who do not know their limits, workers as lazy and greedy, if not communists, environmental and information activists as meddlers smearing the achievements of Hindutva and Hindu society.

The much-touted Gujarat model is revealing. Critics have already pointed out that Gujarat's growth record is unexceptional among India's prosperous states while its human development indices compete with some of the worst in India. In terms of governance, the Gujarat model has no developmental strategy, only a fawning subservience to corporations. Modi's fabled 'decisiveness' refers chiefly to the speedy provision of clearance, complete with government giveaways in cash or in kind (such as land and infrastructure development), for corporate investment. It is ironic that Congress's attempts to do the corporate sector's bidding, only slightly less eagerly, have been exposed for their shady practices because Congress passed and implemented Right to Information legislation. Modi's Gujarat escaped such unflattering scrutiny simply by resisting RTI implementation and actively repressing RTI activists. Clearly, corporate India's preference for Modi ultimately boils down to his ability to silence opposition. It only remains to note that despite its heavily repressive administration and culture, Gujarat experiences an exceptionally high incidence of strikes, testimony to courage as well as desperation of its workers.

Modi has a secure majority in the Lok Sabha and appears set to complete a his five year term. Whether he can repeat or improve upon his 2014 performance depends on how things unfold economically and politically.

It is possible that corporate India has achieved its great electoral victory a few years too late. Before the 2007-8 economic and financial crises, the Indian economy's high growth was fuelled by the rising incomes and expanding consumer debt of middle classes at home and reliance on exports, especially service exports, to the west. However, with western economics gripped by stagnation, this inegalitarian strategy can no longer work. While corporate India and the BJP appear to have only the faintest inkling of this – for example they are seeking to explore alternative international economic links, particularly with China. However, exports will likely never provide the scale of stimulus they once did. The stimulus for further growth must be domestic and expanding the domestic market will require relieving poverty and increasing equality. However, corporate India and the BJP appear to imagine that just having a more 'decisive' prime minister in office, energetically clearing their investment projects and lifting remaining restrictions on the international integration of Indian capital will restore India's growth rates.

On the political front, there are two open questions. One is when and in what form the Sangh Parivar will demand its due for the BJP's victory? Moves to implement the divisive core demands of Hindutva – building a Ram temple on the site of Babri Mosque infamously destroyed by the Parivar in 1992, the abrogation of Article 376 of the constitution granting special status to Jammu and Kashmir and the implementing a Uniform Civil Code to replace the religious community-specific laws governing personal law – are certain to cause mayhem and cannot but affect both India's people and the BJP's record as a party of capital adversely.

More importantly, how well will the BJP's political opponents, who, after all did win 61 percent of the vote between them, read the writing on the electoral wall and take up the task of organising those who have lost so much from neoliberal policies? Given the consolidation of the right under Hindutva banners, only that, not pious invocations of 'secularism' detached from wider socio-economic issues, can truly move India toward both a sustainable growth path and a society in which its religious minorities, women and lower castes can prosper.