

India's 2009 general elections and beyond: Hope and hyperbole

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While the People's Republic of China celebrated 60 years of existence in 2009, neighbouring India, with an equally huge population, began its 62nd year as an independent country. Unremarkable though that is as a milestone, what distinguished the year for India was that the 15th parliamentary elections since the country became a republic in 1952 passed off almost peacefully, barring stray violent attacks by Maoist militia in a few parts of the vast country.

More importantly, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, who is generally perceived as one of the most honest politicians in India, not only completed a full five-year term but won reelection at the head of a stable coalition of parties, with the Congress party managing to garner enough seats to be able to negotiate from a position of slightly greater strength vis-à-vis smaller parties than it could five years earlier.

The Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which stresses the Hindutva or "Hinduness" of Indian society – thereby downplaying Muslim, Christian and other legacies – fared badly in the elections. One of its star campaigners was the chief minister of the western state, Gujarat, where an anti-Muslim pogrom in 2002 left 2,000 people dead. But neither he nor other strident votaries of "Hinduness" appeared to have succeeded in persuading the Hindus, who form 80% of the population, of the palatability of their recipe.

Steady growth

Despite a slight slowdown in the growth rate, India was among the developing countries whose economies kept expanding steadily despite the global recession that began late in 2008. Although Indian agriculture, on which 65% of the population depends for its livelihood, was affected by the failure of the monsoon rains, the mid-2009 overall economic growth rate was still a healthy 6%. That is because agriculture accounts for a mere 17% of the economy.

India's industrialists have seen their global profile burnished, firstly because of the steady success of the software industry, the exponential growth of the country's vibrant stock markets as well as the new found confidence among Indian businesses, which have gone about acquiring prominent western companies. Now that Indian businesses have weathered the global recession, they can look forward to charting a more ambitious path. India's middle class, estimated at about 300 million, is expected to grow further, fuelling the ambitions of not only domestic businesses but of companies worldwide seeking to tap the vast market.

Relations with neighbouring countries have on the whole been stable, albeit not without some underlying friction. Recent years have seen sporadic instability in Nepal, Myanmar and Bangladesh, a violent end to the two decades long civil war in Sri Lanka and large-scale violence and political squabbling in Pakistan. But India has managed to avoid getting dragged into the goings on in its neighbourhood. Relations with China too have been on an even keel, despite occasional reports of caustic exchanges and some hostile gestures from Beijing. Prime Minister Singh's government has thus managed to steer the ship of state steadily through choppy seas.

Problems lurk

However, myriad problems lurk round the corner. In the chaotic, open and noisy democracy that is India, some crises get magnified and cause bouts of extreme panic while others go unnoticed and keep gnawing away at the system. Violence among groups of people split along religious, caste and other lines can erupt at any time, or be stoked to serve political ends. Failure to prosecute perpetrators of massive violations of human rights such as those committed against

Sikhs in New Delhi in 1984 and Muslims in Gujarat state in 2002 remains a blot on India's claim to be a vibrant democracy with the rule of law. And vast sections of the people of India lead lives untouched by "development" or worse, as direct victims of exploitation of resources, mineral, material and human.

Insurgencies in states along the country's land borders sometimes grab headlines but have for the most part been festering for decades, far from the gaze of New Delhi. Economic reforms and liberalization, while lifting GDP growth out of the derided morass of the "Hindu rate of growth" (of about 3.5% to 4%) that India was stuck in until the early 1990s, have also led to rising inequality and heightened the sense of neglect and deprivation felt by large sections of the population.

The far from exhaustive set of problems facing India, are looked at in limited detail hereunder.

Messy cabinet formation

Immediately after the elections and despite the Congress party's improved tally of seats in the lower house of parliament, coalition partners from Tamil Nadu and West Bengal states held out for a much larger number of cabinet positions – and important ones at that – than their strength in terms of seats might have dictated. The prime minister ended up with a cabinet (including junior ministers) that is about 80 strong. While states such as Tamil Nadu and West Bengal have massive representation in the cabinet, other important ones especially in northern India got few ministerial berths. Ideally, this in itself need not be a source of anguish provided the prime minister were choosing the best available talents and seen to be doing so. In the event, there was an overwhelming perception that the cabinet had become unwieldy and the choice of ministers the result of compromise and "horse-trading": the smaller parties that formed part of the coalition wanted influential ministries or "lucrative" ones such as telecommunications and health, which are widely perceived as affording ministers the opportunity to grant licences and contracts worth billions of dollars.

Thus Prime Minister Singh ended up appearing rather weaker than he need have. Mr. Singh himself occupies an upper house seat to which he has been indirectly elected, not a lower house constituency, meaning that he has not won a direct popular election, testifying to his lack of mass base. Ultimate power in the Congress party rests with its president, the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi, widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Her son Rahul was being projected by some party bosses as a prime ministerial candidate but he resisted such calls. Mr. Singh is limited in the power and influence he has over personnel and policies as he has to look over his shoulder at his party's leadership and with little control over the activities of his vast army of ministers. This was the situation in the previous five years and now, despite the improved showing for the Congress in the 2009 elections, the same state of affairs prevails.

"Welfarist measures"

What contributed to the Congress party's victory, beating the notorious "anti-incumbency" factor, i.e. the tendency among voters to turf out a party after just one term in power? More than the disarray in the main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party's strategy, it was perhaps the Congress leaders' success in persuading voters that they had done a reasonable job of managing the economy (such as it is, with all the underlying problems which will be dealt with presently). Moreover in rural areas, where 70% of the population lives, the government had curried voters' favour through loan waivers and a scheme guaranteeing 100 days of employment to adult members of households. While this policy benefited the Congress party in the parliamentary elections, state-level parties too reaped rich dividends in simultaneous elections held for state

legislatures. “Welfarist measures” such as the provision of cheap rice and employment, paid off irrespective of which party it was that undertook such a strategy to gain voters’ goodwill.¹

At the same time, politicians who neglected people’s concerns or were brazen enough to pursue unpopular measures such as the takeover of farmers’ land for industrial projects, suffered badly despite their populist slogans. On the one hand this can be seen as an assertion of voters’ strength. But on the other, the fact that numerous punishments meted out by the voters have failed to make a dent in the cynicism and corruption that has pervaded the body politic thus far or to sensitize politicians and bureaucrats to the long overdue task of earnestly addressing poverty, illiteracy, environmental depredation and other problems, does not point to a more hopeful future.

Dismal standing

According to one estimate, the proportion of Indians living in extreme poverty, i.e. those living on \$1.25 a day, remained above 40% by 2005 whereas the figure had fallen to 16% in China that year. Two out of every five Indian children under five years of age are malnourished while in China, just 7% of children find themselves in that sorry state.²

In the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Index rankings of 182 countries, India stands at a dismal 134th.³ In other words, despite its headline-making economic achievements, the country has failed miserably to ensure that the mass of its people share in the improvements. China is ranked 92nd, having vastly improved the overall condition of its population steadily and significantly over the past three decades.

One of India’s foremost writers in English, Vikram Seth, who lived and travelled in China three decades ago, considered this question: “If you were to be born tomorrow, would you prefer to be born in China or India?” Seth had come to a withering conclusion then: “If I could be guaranteed the lucky place in the Indian sweepstakes that I at present occupy, there is no question as to what my answer would be; even if I were poorer than the average Chinese child, I would prefer to be born in India. But if I were born to the inhuman, dehumanizing misery in which the poorest third of our people live, to the squalor and despair and debility that is their life, my answer would not be the same.”⁴

Sadly, this verdict was reconfirmed by a writer from a newer generation recently: “If you were a poor man you’d have to pick China over India any day because your kids have a better chance of being nourished if you’re poor. Your wife is more likely to survive childbirth. You’re likely to live longer. There are so many ways in which India’s system fails horribly.”⁵

Elitist apathy

A few welfare schemes such as the one that guarantees 100 days of paid employment per year on civil projects in rural areas or mid-day meals for children of the poorest families in order to enable them to attend schools have sought to ameliorate India’s abject disregard for people living in rural, forested or remote areas or those living in debilitating poverty, even in urban areas. But amazingly these paltry welfare measures have come under fire from pro-market commentators in a country where some powerful corporate entities squeeze massive concessions from the state, on top of the already lucrative contracts they have lobbied for themselves.

¹ P. Sainath, “Price of rice, price of power”, *The Hindu*, 10 June 2009

<http://www.hindu.com/2009/06/10/stories/2009061059450800.htm>

² Shankar Acharya, “Rising India labours in the shadow of Asia’s real giant”, *Financial Times*, 29 July 2009.

³ “India at No 134 in UN Human Development Index”, *Economic Times*, 6 October 2009.

⁴ Vikram Seth, *From Heaven Lake: Journeys Through Sinkiang and Tibet*, 1983, page 104

⁵ Aravind Adiga in an interview published on the following website:

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/09/express/india-a-view-from-below>

(Website last consulted on 19 October 2009)

Thus there is paltry allocation for the promotion of primary education and literacy in a country where every two in five people are illiterate, for the extension of basic health facilities to rural areas where the majority of the population lives or to waive the debts incurred by indigent people. But the vocal urban elite manage to garner the bulk of budgetary allocations as they have the ear of the politicians and bureaucrats who control the purse strings.

Indian newspapers periodically report instances of farmers killing themselves because their crops have failed and they are burdened with massive debts. In fact, the total number of farmers who have committed suicide over the past several years runs into tens of thousands. The attitude of India's media, politicians and society at large thus far has been either to express a certain amount of alarm over the phenomenon or to dismiss the reports as exaggerations or the actions of a few individuals, not worthy of any systemic response.

At any rate, much of the Indian media's – and thus the intelligentsia's – preoccupation is with trivia such as the doings of film stars and sportspersons. The typical Indian newspaper front page as well as many of the inside pages, is taken up with reports and glossy photographs of film stars and cricketers. (The game of cricket, played in Britain and its former colonies, enjoys cult status in South Asia.) Glowing reports of the exploits of a few Indian businesses at home and abroad hog headlines as do the shenanigans or personality clashes of politicians. Little space remains for examining the real issues and problems that touch on the life of the majority of Indian people.

Backlash of the exploited

Given such neglect of vast sections of the Indian population, it was inevitable that there had to be a revolt. Extremist groups such as Maoists have mushroomed and proliferated in large swathes of the country, especially in some eastern, central and southern states. About one-third of India's territory is deemed “disturbed”, meaning that the writ of the government does not run there. Rather it is the Maoists who control them. And the Maoists got a foothold there thanks to decades of neglect by the politicians and the bureaucracy. Worse, many of the areas under Maoist control happen to be rich in mineral and forest resources which attract businesses and contractors from urban areas. These businesses pay no heed whatsoever to the negative effect of their activities on those living there – tribal or indigenous peoples of India, who have been victims of massive exploitation.

Prime Minister Singh has acknowledged the gravity of the Maoist insurgency but the Indian establishment's dominant approach thus far has been to regard it as an internal security issue and a law and order problem. Because the Indian state has prevailed over numerous insurgencies, including that from Maoists in the past six decades, there seems to be a belief among the elite that the current Maoist activity too can be put down with the help of security forces. There is insufficient consideration of the causes behind Maoism's rise.

Historian Sunil Khilnani, whose 1997 book *The Idea of India* (reissued in 2003) came as a cautious celebration of the country's democracy, tolerance and open-mindedness, has warned against what he called “market optimism” and the pursuit of growth without paying heed to the need to fix the rich-poor and rural-urban divides. Those in the slow lane could lose patience and violence would be the result. It is not brand managers and economists, but politicians who have to address the deficiencies, he has suggested.⁶

Massive rights violations

Instead of addressing the causes of the Maoist insurgency, politicians have allowed security agencies to respond to Maoist violence with even greater repression and violation of human

⁶ “Stop marketing India as a brand, says historian”, *The Hindu*, 24 September 2009
<http://www.hindu.com/2009/09/24/stories/2009092455360900.htm>
(Website last consulted on 19 October 2009)

rights on a massive scale. A militia group named Salwa Judum, which is widely believed to be state-sponsored, has clashed with Maoists in central India but has in the process committed large-scale atrocities against civilians too. Rather than ending Maoist violations of law and order and of human rights, state agencies have greatly added to the abuses and violations.

This is of a piece with Indian security agencies' response to insurgencies elsewhere too. Be it in dealing with Sikh militancy in Punjab state in the 1980s, separatist militancy in Jammu & Kashmir state since the late 1980s or the restive northeastern states of India through the decades, the authorities have responded to demands for greater autonomy (albeit violent in many instances), with massive use of force against not only the insurgents but civilian populations as well.

This culture of impunity among the police and security forces is not restricted to dealing with major insurgencies but is manifested daily throughout the country. Indian police and paramilitary forces have acquired a reputation for acting as prosecutor, judge and executioner, meting out instant extra-judicial punishment on a large scale. In India, the term used for such murders by state authorities is "encounter killings". According to information gathered by the National Human Rights Commission, 346 people have been killed since 2006 in what seem to have been extrajudicial police killings.⁷ But obviously, this figure is highly conservative as information from the police and security agencies on such "encounter killings" can hardly be expected to be exhaustive or accurate. A much higher figure is indicated in a report of the Asian Human Rights Commission which said in August 2009: "In the past eight months alone an estimated 463 persons have lost their life to state agencies in 'encounter killings'."⁸

A popular Indian newspaper columnist said recently: "The reality is that India has always fought political violence, terrorism and militancy by trusting the police force's discretion in finding the guilty and then bumping them off quietly. It's a shocking position for a liberal society to take. But for better or worse, this has been India's position for several decades now."⁹

Indian security forces' addiction to extra-judicial killings is akin to China's reliance on the death penalty, which provokes periodic criticism from international human rights organizations. In Chinese courts, the police and prosecutors call the shots and judges are relatively weak whereas India's judges can be dismissive of the kind of evidence put before them by the police. As a result the police take the law into their own hands and short-circuit the system.

No relief for victims

Alacrity to pursue "wrongdoers", however, rarely extends to members of the dominant Hindu community who are alleged to have perpetrated massive violations of human rights, such as in 1984 following the assassination of prime minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards, in 1992 after the destruction of an ancient mosque in northern India by militant Hindu mobs and the anti-Muslim pogrom in the western state of Gujarat in 2002.

Thousands of Muslims were killed or injured in 1992 and 2002 at the hands of Hindu fanatics. In 2002, authorities in Gujarat state were alleged to have aided and abetted Hindu mobs targeting Muslim residents. That atrocity was sparked by a fire in a train in which some 50 Hindus died. Muslims were blamed for the fire but the truth has never been established. Some 3,000 Sikhs

⁷ Lydia Polgreen, "Questions on Executions Mount in India", *The New York Times*, 4 October 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/04/world/asia/04ahmedabad.html?em> (Website last consulted on 20 October 2009)

⁸ "India: Encounter killing and custodial torture, a disgrace for the nation", Asian Human Rights Commission, 14 August 2009. <http://www.ahrchk.net/statements/mainfile.php/2009statements/2178/> (Website last consulted on 20 October 2009)

⁹ Vir Sanghvi, "Encounters have our sanction too", *Hindustan Times*, 12 September 2009 <http://www.hindustantimes.com/Encounters-have-our-sanction-too/H1-Article1-453242.aspx#hide> (Website last consulted on 20 October 2009)

were killed by mobs of Hindus in New Delhi in 1984 allegedly at the behest of prominent Congress politicians but 25 years later, there has been no justice for the victims.

In fact, alleged masterminds of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots were deleted from the Congress party's list of candidates for parliamentary seats in the 2009 elections only after a groundswell of opposition from Sikhs and human rights activists. Meanwhile, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi had begun to be projected as a dynamic leader but only the Bharatiya Janata Party's poor showing in the general elections appears to have dented his image, if only slightly.

Such disdain for human rights at home becomes translated into the positions India takes in the international arena. Thus, India routinely votes with China, Russia and other authoritarian regimes in opposing pro-human rights initiatives be it in the Human Rights Council in Geneva or at the United Nations. Fear of China's expanding influence is blamed for India's backing of the military regime in Myanmar (Burma). But in many other instances too, such as on the issue of the Sudanese regime's abuses in Darfur, India has been firmly in the Sino-Russian camp. Even a resolution that merely calls for a moratorium on the death penalty attracts a negative vote from India.¹⁰

Conclusion: Some hope, much despair

Despite this sorry record on the human rights front, a few positives nevertheless need to be acknowledged. Thus far, India remains a noisy, open society where complaints about human rights abuses do get aired, although they have difficulty in being heard above the din. The courts assert their independence and often hand down astounding judgments upholding human rights, the rights of the poor, the disadvantaged or the oppressed. However, the judges lack the power to ensure that their orders are followed through.

Sections of the Indian press too focus on the plight of the neglected masses and unearth instances of human rights abuses and of corruption. Civil society organizations and human rights activists keep up a modicum of pressure for positive change.

But ultimately, the press, the judiciary, the bureaucracy and the parliament operate at a remove from the neglected poor. It is hardly surprising therefore, that Maoist and other insurgencies have been proliferating across India. While the establishment focuses on growth and economic reforms, societal problems have become neglected. Including Prime Minister Singh downwards, there are any number of leaders and officials who seem to care about these problems and raise the hope that they will be tackled. But unless they do indeed get down to tackling them in real earnest, despair and despondency will gain sway and the Indian scenario by the time the next general elections come round could be a great deal darker.

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¹⁰ Amnesty International, "Human Rights in Republic of India"

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/india/report-2009> (Website last consulted on 20 October 2009)