

# IDEAS AND ELECTIONS IN INDIA

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*Indian electoral politics may be animated by populism, caste-based politics and curious coalitions, but ultimately the process is still driven by notions of 'democracy' and other big ideas.*

As a consumer of news, you could be forgiven for thinking that this year's Indian elections were ideology-free. Pundits in the press and on the television news channels were always saying that votes were bought and that coalitions were constructed out of caste fractions; politicians defected, political parties switched sides with frictionless ease and the policies contained in party manifestoes were irrelevant to the democratic process because they were never seriously discussed. Add up these defects and what India seems to have by way of elections is the mechanism of representative government without the large ideological contestation that is, or ought to be, a democracy's reason for being.

This is wrong in so many separate ways that you would need a scroll the length of a toilet roll just to list them, but let me try. Let's start at the top, with the great political coalitions that have ruled India in recent times. The received wisdom about coalitions is that ideology matters less than pragmatic accommodation and it's true that the Hindu majoritarian Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has cohabited with

parties that aren't hectoringly 'Hindu' to cobble together governing majorities both at the Centre and in the provinces.

But if you, as a voter, were to examine the composition of the National Democratic Alliance led by the BJP, its ideological coherence would become apparent. Its main constituents are the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Shiv Sena, the Shiromani Akali Dal, the Asom Gana Parishad and the Janata Dal (U). The first four of these five parties are natural ideological allies because their politics are founded on a common premise: the belief that religious majorities should be hegemonic in their home territories.

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The Akalis think it's proper for Sikhs to dominate Punjab; the AGP, which champions the cause of Assam's Hindu majority, was born out of the massacre of Muslims in Nellie in 1983; the Shiv Sena specialises in stoking the anxieties of Marathi-speaking Hindus in Maharashtra, and the BJP performs the same service for Hindus in general at an all-India level. Ideologically these parties are made for each other; the negative proof of this is that it's impossible to see any of them switching sides to join the United Progressive Alliance led by the Indian National Congress.

The reason the fifth party, Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (U), was in the news is precisely because it's obvious that it is ideologically distinct from its allies in the NDA. The alliance between the BJP and the JD (U) has been a durable marriage of convenience: it gives the JD (U) a governing majority in the impor-



India voters at a BJP rally

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tant Gangetic province of Bihar and it gives the BJP an ally in a state that sends a large number of members of parliament to the Lok Sabha. However, given Nitish's secular, socialist pedigree (he comes out of a tradition of home-brewed socialism pioneered by Dr Ram Manohar Lohia), it wasn't surprising that both the Congress and the JD (U) indicated in coded ways their openness to post-election negotiations, should the need for those arise.

It's worth noting in this context that the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), a party with a longstanding alliance with the BJP in the south-eastern state of Orissa, opted out of the NDA before the elections citing the involvement of militant Hindu cadres connected to the BJP, in the violence against Christians in Kandhamal district last year. Since we're trying to measure presence or absence of ideological scruple in Indian electoral politics, it's worth remembering that Orissa is an overwhelmingly Hindu state, so the alienation of a Christian minority wouldn't have done significant electoral damage to the Biju Janata

Dal's prospects. Breaking with BJP, though, carried a real electoral cost because dividing the erstwhile alliance's votes benefited the BJD's main electoral enemy in Orissa, the Congress. The BJD might have reckoned that its success in local elections was a sign that it could go it alone but it's clear that Chief Minister Navin Patnaik's ideological distaste for ethnic cleansing in his backyard played a role in his break with the NDA.

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Similarly, the idea that caste-based politics diminishes India's democracy, that it represents a narrow self-interest that is antithetical to the great universal ideas that ought to animate a democratic republic, is silly. Whether you think caste quotas or reserved constituencies for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are right or wrong will depend upon your reading of Indian society. If, like the Left parties, you think that the fault lines in Indian society correspond to class, you're likely to take one view; if, like the great ideologues of plebeian castes in colonial and post-colonial India (Jotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram and Kumari Mayavati) you think that India's social contradictions are based on caste, you'll take another. Both are ideological positions that deserve to be taken seriously.

Led by Mayavati, the Bahujan Samaj Party's ambition of assembling a coalition of plebeian castes and communities, opportunistically allied to select upper caste groups, to capture political power is as respectable a part of democratic politics as the strategy of social democratic parties in Europe to merge organized labour and sections of the middle class to

produce a governing majority.

A staple indictment of electoral politics in India is that it is vitiated by an unseemly populism. Populism in this usage denotes a politics that panders to public need without rationally counting the costs of the promises made. So promises to sell rice at one or two rupees per kilo are routinely derided as populist. M.G. Ramachandran, the late chief minister of Tamil Nadu, was accused of populism when he instituted free mid-day meals in government schools in his province. The mid-day meal scheme has since come to be seen not just as a nutritional supplement but as an enabling measure that helps draw children, specially the girl child, into the educational system. Some would argue that using populism as a pejorative description of subsidy is itself an elitist feint intended to close off ideological debate about the proper role of the state in shoring up the livelihoods of the poor.

The simplest way of illustrating the viscerally ideological nature of Indian democracy is to look at the two issues that have remade electoral politics over the past twenty years: (a) the BJP's campaign to build the Ram temple on the ruins of the Babri mosque destroyed by politically incited Hindu vandals in 1992, and (b) the extension of reserved quotas to Other Backward Classes on the strength of the recommendation made earlier by the Mandal Commission.

It's legitimate to disapprove of both affirmative action quotas as well as communal mass mobilization as political projects but both were born out of powerful, long-mulled ideological positions. No one who has lived through the last two decades in India as a politically aware adult can seriously argue that factional self-interest has replaced ideological



BJP and Shiv Sena flags

Photo: Flickr/Al Jazeera English/India Election 2009

contestation as the engine of democratic politics. Individual and factional ambition, and the greed and calculated fickleness that it engenders, has played its part in colouring electoral politics in India, but the context for this ambition, the arena itself, has been landscaped by large political ideas.