

# India: General Elections 2009 and the Neoliberal Consensus

February 16, 2010

THE GENERAL ELECTIONS 2009 HAVE further entrenched the rule of neoliberal capital.[1] This entrenchment has happened due to certain factors, two discussed here in detail. These two factors include the distancing of the Left from working class politics towards electoralism, which resulted in absence of a long term mobilizational politics along class lines; and the role played by identity politics in the consolidation of the neoliberal regime. The electoral decimation of the Left Front, the "unexpected" results for the Bahujan Samaj Party[2] in Uttar Pradesh and the electoral triumph of Janata Dal (United)[3] in Bihar or the outstanding performance of Congress Party in decades have been the headlines that the media has delivered us. The most vocal representatives of the neoliberal order — the Indian media across the spectrum — have exulted at the defeat of the Left and celebrated the possibility of an unhindered march of neoliberalism. No doubt these developments are significant. And their significance becomes more apparent if one locates them as moments in the long political trajectory that started with Independence. The desperate support expressed by different political formations to the Congress Party are not merely salutes to its triumph or tactical moves, but reveal how political homogeneity has come to characterize the ostensibly heterogeneous political atmosphere in the country. The current political atmosphere in India represents the neoliberal consensus, which demonstrates the fear of the Left (howsoever social democratic it has become) and the effective use of different identities, ranging from caste to tribe, in consolidation of the rule of capital.

The General Elections 2009 should have compelled the Left to ponder over its debacle but, alas, they again seem to be thinking more in terms of calculating how to muster more votes, asking West Bengal Ministries to implement the different programs to be implemented by the State machinery (as it has been pointed out by many that even the government-run welfare programs are in bad shape despite the fact that it has been the Communist Party provincial government for last thirty years or so) so that the electoral defeat is not repeated in 2011 elections to the state assembly. Going a step further, arguments are being put forward within a section of the Left about how the Left should have gone with the Congress to win maximum possible seats and should not have withdrawn from the government. It is rather the time to think how a politics of coalition that has put class politics on the backburner has led to the pauperization of the working class during neoliberalism's rampage of privatizing and informalizing the economy. The health and education sectors continue to be under heavy pressure to privatize themselves, creating stark discrimination in health care and access to education. The neoliberal consensus has played on the religious- and caste- based identities in India with the National Rural Health Mission, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan,[4] the pending Right to Education Bill, and making workers' safety/security and rights prey to the ravaging hunger of private capital. There was a fear of an emergence of the right-wing created consensus, so that all the political formations decided to work for a "secular" government (which unabashedly pushed forward the neoliberal agenda of the capital) under the guardianship of Manmohan Singh. By the time the Left decided to quit the government, consolidation of neoliberalism's political army had occurred, a situation encouraged by the failure of the Left to take up the working class politics or to put forth an agenda which would consider paramount the interests of the working class. The flaw on the Left has persisted: since 1989 they thought that forming short term opportunistic alliances would work wonders for them to settle scores with the Congress Party. The agenda or a program that would mobilize people on lines of building an anti-neoliberal capitalist force has been lacking.

The idea of Frontal politics[5] in fact has only strengthened capital vis-à-vis labor in India, and it is now the high time for the Left to introspect and abandon its urge to remain in power through electoral politics under any circumstances. History shows that there have been problems with this kind of politics: the opposition triumphs and decimates the Left forces. Specific states such as Bihar as well as the National scenario now provide us ample proof. While the process of frontal politics took away the sharpness of class politics that the Left is supposed to have, it has also allowed for the degeneration of party structures as well as individuals (though many would argue, and with some grain of truth, that there have been historically certain problems inherent with the organization of the communist parties itself). Result has been the loss of any radical programmatic alternative after the land reforms[6] and, therefore, loss of popular support and its gradual distancing from mobilizational politics and a move towards electoralism. At this hour a critical introspection into the kind of politics that the Left has been pursuing becomes the highest agenda.

The basis of alliances and coalitions since 1989 has been either to oust the Congress Party or the BJP. While in 1989 the Left supported the V.P. Singh government from "outside" along with BJP and, later on, in 2004, it supported the Congress Party. In between it supported the governments led by I.K. Gujral and H.D. Deve Gowda as well so that the right wing could not come to power. No doubt the electoral alliances delayed the process but BJP did come to power. And in 2004 the Manmohan Singh government was formed with the support of the Left. What has happened since 1991 has been the unbridled march of neoliberalism — irrespective of whose government was in power, and obviously the Left was also a party to it. And the argument was obvious: it was more important to keep the danger of religious hatred at bay than to oppose a neoliberal onslaught. Keeping the right wing at bay rather than opposing a neoliberal onslaught emerged largely from a conception that saw emergence of right wing politics in disjunct from the class politics. The violence in which thousands of Muslims were killed at different points of time also needed to be located in the political economy of times. Hence, it was not a tacit argument but a failure to give primacy to working class politics to understand the developments that led to the emergence of right wing politics.

Neoliberalism and the right wing's emergence are seen as two disjunct developments, rather than as aspects of the same rule of capital. The consolidation of the rule of capital has happened whether the government is Right wing or a so-called centrist or a "Left-of-Center" government. Secondly, communalism was, myopically, not seen as a class issue. The salience of class has now been amply proven, as the right wing has been taking up the "developmental" agenda, retaining its colors of hatred as mere tools of mobilization. Thirdly, within all this cacophony of secular vs. communal rhetoric, the working class was left out. The Labor unions, student organizations, the landless agricultural worker movement have been weakened, or they have been siding with capital on policies that result in reduction in services, such as denying education and doing away with the system of pension and basic health care facilities, etc.

Coalitional politics itself has been mired in contradictions. The same partners in coalition have been supporting right-wing politics at one time and Left-wing politics at another. The problem of such a contradiction has not been so serious for those parties who are anti-working class and regionally focused. It is rather problematic for Left politics, which bases itself on the premise of mobilizing the working class for dismantling the capitalist state. Becoming part of such coalitions runs counter to the aspirations of the working class and destroys the integrity of politics itself. The Left in India will have to engage in serious debate regarding its politics before building strategies to contest and win elections, and this debate will have to be carried out within those spheres which have a firm commitment in working class politics and which believe that the issue confronting us will be resolved only through the abolition of capital.

## Identity Politics and the Neoliberal Consensus

THE GENERAL ELECTIONS 2009 have also shown how the relevance of identity politics based on caste and religion diminishes when its utility to capital is over. This is not to deny the momentary relevance of identity-based mobilizations but one needs to look at identity formation as a process that is characterized by constant flux.

At the national level, the virtual rejection of BJP shows that its usefulness to capital as a political platform that would have provided much needed "stability" to the neoliberal onslaught in an era of coalitional politics is over. There is a general consensus now on the kind of politics that every political formation needs to practice — the politics of "development." In this consensus lies the mantra of a Left revival as well as the possibility of a complete decimation. The end of a hatred-based right wing mobilization that provided fodder for development of coalitions of the "secularists" has created a space in which the distinctions of political formations are blurred. The sporadic emergence of Varun Gandhi is symptomatic of political formations that are fighting to keep their distinctions alive (which may again become relevant at some point as per the needs of capital) as well as trying to demonstrate who is a better agent of capital (the contest over kind of "development" that Modi has initiated in Gujarat, Nitish in Bihar, or Manmohan in India). The Backward caste are primarily poor peasantry and landless workers; and politics in pre-independence Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were products of a long drawn mobilization on the basis of caste (visible in the form of caste-based associations). The struggles of the Backward caste were not demanding very radical alternatives to replace the existing Hindu social order but were, rather, demanding a higher place in Hindu hierarchy (the demand for *kshatritya*[7] status or the "Janeu"[8] movement). Their radicalism in systemic terms was manifested in a sometimes demand for withdrawal of the "begari" system (forced labor) or mobilization against an unfair system of taxation. The post-independence Backward caste mobilization was largely an effort to catapult the emergent elite to political power. The ideas and policies of distributive justice, like land reforms, facilitated the emergence of this elite, which was desperate for a share in political power. The 1960s and 1970s were witness to consistent switching over of parties by the leaders representing this process. Ultimately, the Mandal Commission provided that historical moment when a backward caste elite could capture power.

The Mandal Commission paved the way for violent conflict in the state of Bihar between the Backward castes and the entrenched hegemonic interests represented by the *dwija* castes (twice born castes). It was not a caste conflict, as various analysts have shown but rather a struggle between the emergent elite of Backward castes and the entrenched hegemonic interests which did not want to part with political power. The Backward caste elite gradually realized the need to transcend its narrow identitarianism and forged alliances with the entrenched interests — the so-called upper castes.

During the subsequent regimes (of Laloo Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar) integration of neoliberalism occurred. The Backward Castes, which are primarily poor peasantry and landless workers, could only get the confidence that for the first time somebody from their own caste (and this was also a result of constant use of caste as an ideological apparatus) became a cabinet or Chief Minister, nothing beyond that. The ten years of Laloo-Rabri[9] rule provided sufficient avenues for the elite of the backward castes to muster strength to enter into competition with the entrenched interests. But that, obviously, does not mean that the whole of the Backward caste population became elite. The new elite which had acquired sufficient capital through enhanced access to political, administrative and economic machinery needed to go beyond, transcend, the stagnant economy that Laloo Yadav and company had created. A more vigorous development of infrastructure, expansion of the market, and aggressive consumerism were required. The existing

regime could not understand that they needed to move beyond to the next stage. It was then that Nitish came on stage through his dextrous alliance with interests across caste. Caste was no longer the consideration for him and the fact that he relied, extensively, on bureaucrats; and provided ministerial representation to different castes proved it. There is always a possibility for Laloo Prasad Yadav to come back to power and Nitish Kumar may stand defeated electorally. However, in the end, irrespective of the defeat or triumph of particular political parties, it will be the triumph of the capital because they would represent the interests of the capital under the rhetoric of social justice. Nitish Kumar appeared as a perfect flag bearer of neoliberalism. The General Elections 2009 in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar have shown how collective caste-based identitarian politics failed to perform in expected electoral terms. Consequently, it has been the Congress in Uttar Pradesh and Janata Dal (United) in Bihar which capitalized electorally on the limitations of identitarian politics.

The point that is important here is not the way election results have shown how identity politics is weakening but that even if the identity politics had triumphed in electoral results, it would have been nothing more than the victory of the neoliberal consensus. Identity politics that bases itself on the rhetoric of social justice has failed to represent its own constituency or, in fact, it cannot represent that constituency because of its inherent political understanding that rejects class and does not see the dialectic of the capitalism and repressions of Dalits etc. Results of such an understanding have been obvious — capital escapes our attention as the perpetrator, and the enemy is constructed through the obvious and apparent "other," which is no doubt the perpetrator but which needs to be seen as an embodiment of its social identity as well as the economic location. Because the current forms and stage of identity politics is not based on such an analysis and is more cultural and social (as autonomous categories) the ultimate resort will be to side with capital, rather than work towards its abolition. And that is very well happening.

This development has occurred not only in the state of Bihar but even at the national level. Backward caste politicians, such as Laloo Prasad Yadav and Mulayam Singh Yadav, try to be staunch proponents of neoliberal capital under the façade of social justice and defense of the welfare of the downtrodden. The not-so-powerful Dalit leaders like Ramvilas Paswan have been no different except that their strength has diminished. This is not to deny the radical role that the mobilizations based on caste identity have shown at particular historical conjunctures, highlighting the oppression in the society and the contradictions of our system. However, beyond these mobilizations, they have not been able to consistently take the sides of the constituency that they represent. Their politics has seldom raised the demand for economic reforms, land to tillers, employment, or decommodification of the social sector. Struggles are reduced to the more symbolic issues of dignity and social recognition, as if they are autonomous.

The General Elections 2009 is the culmination of such a politics. It shows the building up of consensus across political formations in favour of neoliberalism. The rule of capital is more firmly entrenched now and it is carried forward without any semblance of questioning the injustice that it fosters. The desperate letters of support by all to the Congress Party point to the fact. Every political formation focuses on "developmental" agenda, and even the right-winger BJP had to downplay its rhetoric of *mandir* (temple) and *masjid* (mosque). One cannot differentiate between the developmental programs of these political formations because there is an underlying homogeneity of commitment to capital. From where would the counter-agenda of development emanate? It has to emerge from a practice rooted in a working class politics, which breaks away from the idea of frontal politics and which realizes that the time is for consolidation of the Left forces in the country, or India will sink further into the neoliberal swamplands.

## Footnotes

1. I am grateful to the editorial committee for comments on the article.
2. BSP — It is the political party which emerged as a representative of the Dalits (or the castes which have been at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy) claiming to be imbued with the ideas of Bhim Rao Ambedkar. It has argued for social justice for these sections and believes that the repressive so-called upper castes have been responsible for the plight of the Dalits. However, they emerged victorious in elections in Uttar Pradesh and had a successful alliance with the so-called upper castes. Many people see it as the death of social justice agenda of such political formations.
3. It is a political formation active primarily in the province of Bihar and currently holds the political power in Bihar with the aid of Bhartiya Jananta Party. JD (U) is an offshoot of the Janata Dal, a political formation that came into being around late 1980s offering an alternative to the Congress regime and came to limelight with the formation of a non-Congress government in 1989 with the support of the Left and the right wing Bhartiya Janata Party. Later Janata Dal disintegrated, and many regional parties emerged out of it. Most of these new regional parties championed the cause of Backward castes.
4. These are piecemeal programs run by the State in partnership with non-State actors. This has

allowed the State to absolve itself of its responsibilities.

5. The frontal politics here refers to the nature of politics that became the order of the day after 1989 when coalitions were formed on certain temporary, momentous grounds such as in 1989 Left and the Right wing supported National Front government to keep Congress Party out of power and then in 2004 Left supported Congress Party to keep Right wing out of power. The formation of such fronts has been justified on grounds that "it is important to defeat the more dangerous enemy." However, whatever the argument be, it is the working class politics that has suffered. Even when the governments supported by the Left have been in power they could not have been more nakedly neoliberal.
6. When one talks of land reforms in an Indian context it differed from state to state. In case of West Bengal where, in fact, it brought CPI(M) to power, it meant land distribution. A ceiling was fixed beyond which a landowner cannot own land and the surplus land was distributed among the landless and also the right of the share-croppers was enforced on land because s/he was the actual tiller of the land.
7. In the traditional *varna* or caste hierarchy the *Kshatriyas* were the warriors or the rulers who were provided intellectual support by the *Brahmanas*. It was always the alliance of these castes that led to the sustenance of the caste system in India. Many Marxist historians such as D.D. Kosambi, R. S. Sharma, or Irfan Habib have shown how caste was an instrument of economic exploitation as well, for instance an extra-coercive means to exploit the landless and poor who belonged to the so-called lower castes. The Backward castes of today come from the traditional *Vaishya* and *Shudra* category of *varnas*, who were the lower castes.
8. *Janeu* is a sacred thread worn by the *dwija* or twice born castes, which denotes their higher status in the caste hierarchy. It was largely the prerogative of the *Kshatriyas* and the *Brahmanas*.
9. After ten years of rule Laloo Yadav had to resign because of a corruption case, and he made his wife Rabri Devi the Chief Minister for the next five years. Due to this it is mentioned as Laloo-Rabri.