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Religious Amplification versus Fraying Charisma: Decoding Lok Sabha Elections 2024



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Prime Minister Narendra Modi waves at supporters during a campaign rally for the Lok Sabha polls, in Mathurapur, West Bengal, on May 29, 2024. Photo: PTI

*As India heads towards the home run of its 18th General Election-with just the last of the seven phases to be held on June 1, the slogans, posturing, and promises held out by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) point to a shifting of what was till recently taken as solid electoral ground beneath the party's feet. At this stage of the election, **Arjun Appadurai, Professor Emeritus, Media, Culture and Communication, New York University**, connects the dots between popular political discourse, the approach of the ruling party to governance, its furtherance of its ideological agenda in a plural India, and the manner in which it has read the electorate.*

Pointing out that “the Indian elections are simply too big and too local for control by any dictator or party”, Prof. Appadurai postulates that religious agendas have a limiting reach in a country like India – rooted in locality and caste – and explains the context behind the constant and steep ratcheting up of the BJP's calls for an India of its desire. The return of the party, and its leadership, to the pre-development sloganeering, he says, is reflective of its inability to move beyond its foundational ideological moorings.

I begin this essay with a caveat. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) might win the Lok Sabha elections (perhaps even with a landslide, 400-plus or -minus for the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), as they've been telling the electorate) and in that case my numerical predictions will be proven wrong. The qualitative trends identified below might still hold even if they are slow to crystallise.

This essay is being drafted a week before the end of the 2024 Lok Sabha Elections in India, of which the 7th and final round is to be held on June 1. Almost every serious poll-watcher – be it a pundit, psephologist, trend-spotter, pollster, or an analyst – admits that anything could happen. In the period since mid-April or so, there has been a deep rumbling that puts the Prime Minister (and a third-term aspirant) Narendra Modi's bombastic predictions on February 5, 2024, and the months thereafter in doubt. On that day – well ahead of the announcement of the General Election – in his reply to the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address in the Lok Sabha, Mr. Modi said:

“Now, the third term of our government is not too far away. There are about 100-125 days left. And this time, the Modi government, the entire country is saying, “This time, it’s the Modi government,” even [the Leader of the Opposition, Mallikarjun] Kharge *ji* is saying, “This time, it’s the Modi government.” But, Mr Speaker Sir, I usually don’t get caught up in numbers and statistics. But I can see the mood of the nation; it will ensure that the NDA (National Democratic Alliance) crosses the 400-mark. However, the Bharatiya Janata Party will surely get 370 seats. BJP will get 370 seats and NDA will cross 400¹.

Both arithmetic and chemistry suggest that some of the wind behind the sails of the BJP is now favouring the INDIA alliance². Mr. Modi’s supporters and the BJP believe this could reduce the Modi sweep to a more modest win, but a decisive win nonetheless. Those who support the INDIA alliance, whether or not they support the Congress, are optimistic about a possible upset in favour of INDIA, or an INDIA-led coalition. These include veteran election observers like Parakala Prabhakar and Yogendra Yadav.

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Let me proceed with a cautious prediction: Mr. Modi and the BJP will win, but by a far narrower margin than they had hoped and predicted. Whatever the final numbers, they will reflect some trends hardwired into the political culture of India, trends which I discuss below.

Elections as the Last Resort

There has been a recent argument among Western political theorists that elections are no longer a guide to the health of democracies, and that elections are indeed the place where democracies go to die. In the Indian case, in spite of many signs to the contrary, elections appear to be an important place where Mr. Modi's form of Hindutva on steroids — his open effort to project himself as a Hindu super-sovereign, his iconic narcissism in such pageants as the inauguration of the new Parliament building and the Ram Temple in Ayodhya — is being refused. It is evident that many Indian voters are tired of his millenarian bombast and are turning to bread-and-butter issues, as well as issues of personal safety, visible delivery of justice and reduction of public violence. And, the Prime Minister's response has been to double down on anti-Muslim dog whistles of every type, especially since January 2024.

In short, failing objectively on both bread and on circuses, Mr. Modi has gone back to Modi 1.0, the Modi of the post-Godhra era, always on call ever since, which bets on anti-Muslim sentiments, communal hysteria, fear of Pakistan, all of which were sharpened during his rise to absolute power in Gujarat. As Modi 3.0 meets apathy or worse, Modi 1.0 is back on steroids. This will affect how voters think of Mr. Modi, regardless of how many seats his party and its allies win over the next week. Even with vote fixing through election bonds, numerous forms of extortion for generating electoral funds, and various forms of black money management, the BJP is unable to control the Indian electoral process. It has intimidated the Supreme Court, packed sections of the Union and State legislatures with politicians of questionable public standing, whipped the bureaucracy into compliance, and bought out a substantial part of India's media – big and small – that matter. But the Indian elections are simply too big and too local for control by any dictator or party.

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The eternity of locality and caste

Numerous observers have pointed to the renewed vigour of the caste factor in this election. Whether it is the complex inter-caste alliances in Uttar Pradesh, involving different fractions of Yadavs, Muslims, Dalits, with fractions of traditional upper castes; the puzzling mobilisation of Matuas in West Bengal; the Lingayat-Vokkaliga seesaw in Karnataka; the Patidar factor in Gujarat, and numerous other caste configurations in different parts of India, the relevant and mobilised electorate has become an evermore localised affair varying not only across seats, but even within seats.

Locality and caste are the crucial mutually reinforcing factors across centuries of Indian history, and no large-scale Indian empire, movement, party, or leader has succeeded without adjusting to these two foundational Indian realities. It is a cliché (still not fully understood) that caste works at a cellular, organic, small-scale level, without any credible central apparatus. Even the most ambitious Indian empires (such as the Guptas, the Vijayanagara kings or the Mughals) have worked by resting on the shoulders of a tiered system of smaller vassals, tax-farmers, and subordinate nobles, who, in turn, rely on highly localised caste formations, whose boundaries are defined by the rules of endogamy, residence, and occupation. Caste itself has never had a credible central authority (such as the Roman Catholic hierarchy or any modern bureaucracy or corporation), precisely because it has a social DNA which is entirely local in its logic.

Thus, Indian politics always tend towards the local, and caste can only be exploited during elections by figuring out its logic district by district, seat by seat, region by region. There is only one Indian State where Hindutva has appeared to decisively trumped caste and that State is Gujarat, where Mr. Modi, and his long-time political deputy and current Union Home Minister, Mr. Amit Shah, were able to suppress caste politics to a significant degree. In every other State, caste is active in one way

or another, even where it might seem to be irrelevant, as in the case of West Bengal.

On the whole, to draw on the overused metaphors of arithmetic versus chemistry, I suggest that we are witnessing a major reversal in India. Since the early 2000's, the impression created by many experts, pundits and prognosticators, is that caste is pure arithmetic but that Hindutva has cracked the chemistry of the Indian electorate. The emerging reality shows us that caste (as a supremely local reality) is national chemistry, whereas Hindutva increasingly relies on arithmetic.

Let me elaborate both sides of this contrast. At every level of social life where caste is a lived reality (marriage, jobs, food, reservations) the key variables are relational and distributional. Who is above me and can they hurt me? Who is below me and can they challenge with me? Who is with me (in my caste or subcaste) and can they assure me access to safety, status, and perhaps mobility? These factors can never be explained by juggling caste numbers. In general caste relationships cannot be gauged numerically. But they are decisive drivers of electoral alliances, appeals and outcomes. Take the recent alliance between Leuva and Kadva Patidars (Patels) in Gujarat, an alliance which has nothing to do with numbers and is a key to Mr. Modi's effort to consolidate the Patidar vote for the BJP without eliminating various castes who consider themselves Kshatriya. Or take Kerala and Bengal, where caste is believed to be barely relevant because of a Left political history, the truth is that caste voting blocs have proved a major electoral counterweight to Hindutva in Kerala. In West Bengal the marginalisation of Dalits has been justified by the claim of the political classes that caste does not matter in Bengal, and that any claim to the contrary is "casteist". This type of blanket claim is vigorously contested by many scholars of Bengal. In the last analysis, the influence of caste on elections is not well explained by numerical ideas like "vote bank". Caste is a micro-fact and explaining how it is aggregated is addressed later in this essay.

The concurrent rise of the Modi brand, of the BJP, and of Hindutva, is the most common example of the importance of chemistry (rather than arithmetic) in explaining Indian election results. And this reading is a by-product of the mistaken idea that nationalism is a natural aggregator of popular sentiments which depends on “chemical” emotions like love, anger, awe, and piety. The truth is that nationalism is built one brick at a time, one memory at a time, one battle at a time, glued together as a grand narrative through the painstaking work of schools, textbooks, monuments, and spectacles. Beneath the appearance of mass chemistry is a great deal of arithmetic (censuses, surveys, polls, and media campaigns). That nationalism, and the image of its major icons, is built painstakingly from the foundation of intensely local stories, metaphors, and memories, is brilliantly demonstrated by Shahid Amin in his essay on how Gandhi became the Mahatma³. In short, there is nothing obvious about the making of the “national”, and locality has much to do with the so-called chemistry of nationalism.

**Nationalism is built brick by brick,
memory by memory, battle by battle, all
glued together by painstaking work.**

All this leads me to argue that the results of the 2024 election process in India are pivoting on the intricate dialectic between caste and locality and this foundational reality has been a key to much of recorded Indian political history. The coordinated participation of a billion Indian citizens in a phased seven-week electoral process cannot be studied by repeating clichés about arithmetic and chemistry. We need fresh ideas about aggregation in social life to tackle a phenomenon like the Indian elections.

Micromotives and Macrobehavior

The Nobel Prize winning economist, Thomas C. Schelling, wrote a remarkable book based on game theory, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*⁴, which is still a bible for many social scientists who wish to explain how individual choices aggregate into large collective patterns. In his analysis, the crucial variable was

that individuals often respond to the actions of others engaged with the same resource, context, or market and thus the shape of the resulting collective pattern is made up of self-fulfilling prophecies, tipping points, interactive decisions, and dynamic changes in the environment, so that aggregation is never a simple result of additive logics. As Schelling was an economist and his primary agent was the choice-making individual, his account of social life remains confined to marketised behaviours of calculating actors. What we need to ask is Schelling's question, taking the primary actors to be local castes (*jatis*) as actors at the seat/constituency level of Indian society, not individuals making calculative decisions.

The role of caste in the Lok Sabha elections has widely been approached by most analysts through the examination of the most local (seat-level data) and aggregating it to predict (or retrospectively interpret) higher level patterns (district, State, region, nation) or to explain national results most accurately. This approach systematically ignores the fact that caste leaders and electorates are constantly determining their actions on the basis of their perceptions of, and interactions with, other castes, above all those in their own locality, and secondly those who they learn about through social media, news media, and other digital information channels. The way in which aggregate outcomes emerge is thus characterised by tipping points and temporary equilibria. Its results are numerical, but its dynamics are not.

The key to this complex and unpredictable process of aggregation in the Indian electoral system is First Past the Post (FPTP) system, also called the Westminster system, whereby the winner is the person who gets the largest percentage of the votes cast, even if it is well below 50 per cent. This has meant that winners (both locally and nationally) can win the majority of seats in the Lok Sabha with much less than 50 per cent of the votes. This difference between seats and votes has characterised the political dominance of both the Congress and the BJP for all 20th century elections. The biggest peculiarity of this system is that it rewards

dividing the vote among small vote banks for a potential winner, thus replicating the basic principle of caste which is its local foundation. Economist Vani Borooah called the capacity of a party to convert votes to seats under the FPTP system the “amplification coefficient”⁵, the factor that has favoured both the Congress and the BJP.

Thus, if the logic of the amplification coefficient can favour parties with very different ideologies, icons and platforms, and the BJP has been the beneficiary of this logic since 2014, what might this mean for 2024? The signs are that the BJP’s amplification coefficient (votes to seats conversion metric) might be on a downward slope, but whether the slide is to 300, 270, 250 or even 230 seats, what is it about?

Several analysts have pointed to a shift from the overheated rhetoric of Pulwama, Ayodhya, and *Paramatma* to the more pragmatic rhetoric of *Samvidhan* (Constitution) which appears to often translate into everyday benefits and proximate guarantees. The discomfort of the BJP (and Prime Minister Modi) with this “rights and guarantees” rhetoric is revealed by the dog-whistle crassness of terms such as *mujra* (Muslim courtesan style of dance), *mangalsutra* (Hindu bridal necklace) and *ghuspaitiyon* (infiltrators). This rhetorical degeneration reveals that the logic of aggregation is shifting and that the BJP knows it.

But the big question still remains unanswered: Can Hindutva have risen on the backs of local politics (which is primarily caste politics) and now be challenged by it? Which is the tail and which the dog? For a tentative answer to this question, which is intended to explain any significant reduction in BJP/NDA seats in the Lok Sabha when the final tally is announced on June 4, I turn to a speculative hypothesis.

Modi, Charisma, and Over-Leveraging

Charisma – the oft-touted Modi magic – never increases indefinitely. In a lifetime – be it that of a leader, a prophet or an icon – what rises begins to fall. The great social scientist, Max Weber, referred to this process as the process of routinisation. All charismatic movements survive only through routinisation, by turning magic into rules, miracles into recipes, and mysteries into predictable procedures. Death by bureaucracy awaits all charismatic movements. As for the icons and figure heads of these movements, their uniqueness is an extreme form of popularity, which is conferred on them by their followers. What followers give; they can also withdraw. Thus, the need of all charismatic movements to become routinised and bureaucratised combines with the tendency of personal charisma to decline, together work against Mr. Modi and the BJP in 2024, after their electoral peaks in 2014 and 2019. The bloom is off the rose, and so the question: How many seats will the BJP and the NDA lose, even in their Hindi-speaking strongholds?

Why was Modi not able to smoothly routinise his charisma through his strong party structure, the ever-available fervour of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh

Hate, as a form of political energy, never descends reliably from the top. It always boomerangs from below.

cadres, the compliant bureaucracy, the supine Enforcement Directorate, the Income Tax authorities and many other state-controlled machines, not least the police (at all levels) in States ruled by the BJP? The answer has been staring us in the face since 2002, when Mr. Modi first crafted his brand, and began to separate the BJP from the RSS, learned how to vernacularise and localise his hate politics (first in Gujarat) and make his personal authority feudal, global, and holographic at the same time. His miscalculation was to imagine that unleashing local hate could allow his national and global image to remain linked to *Vikas*, global *realpolitik*, 56” diplomacy, and Himalayan images of *sanyas*. The big mistake of this strategy, which we are seeing in current trends in the 2024 elections, is that hate, as a form of political energy, never descends reliably from the top. It always boomerangs from below and bites

the master who thinks he holds the leash. True charisma, akin to the kind effused by the father of the nation, Mahatma Gandhi, the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, always learns from the follower. As the great psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, said of Gandhi, when he “listened to his inner voice, he heard the voice of the people.” Prime Minister Modi represents the exact opposite. When he listens to the people, he only hears his own inner voice. In 2024, whatever the final numbers, the people will challenge this ventriloquist’s illusion.

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2. On July 18, 2023, a total of 26 Opposition parties met in New Delhi and formed the Indian National Developmental, Inclusive Alliance, with the acronym, INDIA. Promptly, the BJP and its allies commenced using the name "Bharat" for India. It has also referred to the newly formed Opposition alliance as "Indi-Alliance" in all its communication. [Return to Text](#).
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