

India's election was an eye-opener for struggling democracies



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The late Atal Bihari Bajpai, former Indian prime minister and founder of Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), has seldom been mentioned in the last 10 years. Lal Krishna Advani, who led the demolition of the 300-year-old disputed Babri Mosque, has remained uninvolved, and even Jagat Prakash Nadda, the current party president, is not given a speck of the spotlight. It's only Prime Minister Narendra Damodar Das Modi who has featured prominently in posters or hoardings. Even the all-powerful Home Minister Amit Shah, regraded as the second man in the BJP hierarchy, was not seen anywhere near the PM in important events like inaugurating the new parliament building, or the spectacular opening of Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, where the Babri Mosque once stood.

Over the last 10 years, it has been Modi, Modi and Modi in Indian politics and on the political canvas, even downsizing the images of Gandhi and Nehru.

Narendra Modi ruled India with an iron hand, transforming the nation, perhaps for the first time in its history, into what has been labelled as an "electoral autocracy" and "flawed democracy" by the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute. With no effective opposition in the 16th and 17th Lok Sabha, the BJP government essentially became a one-man show. Consequently, the "largest democracy in the world" slipped further to the 53rd position in the democracy index. Perhaps it was the mistake of the Indian voters who handed a landslide victory to Modi's BJP last time, without any counterforce to act as a check and balance.

However, in the recently concluded 18th Lok Sabha election, Indian voters did not make the same mistake. About 66 crore voted to demote Modi from the status of a self-proclaimed "god-sent avatar" to just a mortal human being. BJP could only secure 240 seats in the 2024 elections, falling short of the 272 seats needed to solely form the government. It had to seek support from its partners in the NDA, particularly from the Janata Dal (United)—headed by veteran politician and nine-time chief minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar—with 12 seats, and the Telugu Desam Party (TDP)—led by yet another seasoned politician from Andhra



Voters line up outside a polling station in Tamil Nadu, India, on April 19, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Pradesh, Chandrababu Naidu, with 16 seats.

What it means is that Modi, as the third-time prime minister of India, will not head a BJP government as he did in the last two terms. He has to lead a coalition government with two seasoned politicians by his side. It means that he has been brought down from being the single decision-maker of state affairs to a head of a consultative body, as should have been the case in a democracy.

On the other hand, voters have also provided a formidable opposition in the form of the Indian National Congress (INC) with 100 seats (including a rebel MP who joined) and its allies under the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) with 234 seats. This marks the first time in 10 years that a robust opposition has emerged.

Now, the question arises: why did the BJP fall short of securing enough power to form a government when they were confident of achieving an absolute majority of around 400 seats with the strong slogan "Ab ki bar char sau par" (this time over 400)? That number would have enabled the BJP to amend the constitution. The party unequivocally expressed its intention to transform India from a secular to a religion-

"Rakshak" emerged, engaging in unchecked violence against Muslims suspected of consuming beef or participating in related activities. Modi and Amit Shah, collectively referred to as MoSh, branded the country's minority communities as "Ghus baithi" (infiltrators) and likened them to "children-producing factories." They even stoked fear among India's Hindu majority, suggesting that if the opposition were to come to power,

BJP lost seats in Ayodhya, where Modi had inaugurated Ram Mandir a few months prior. Additionally, the party lost five other Lok Sabha constituencies in holy places like Kashi and Varanasi. Losses in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and West Bengal brought down the BJP, making it dependent on other partners of the NDA.

In Ayodhya, BJP ignored the fact that they built the temple with all the religious fervour at the cost of poor Dalits of the area, whose houses and businesses were destroyed without payment of adequate compensation.

Perhaps the party was certain that Indian voters would be mesmerised by the BJP's Hindu card, ignoring the fact that around 40 percent Indians still live below the poverty line. They are grappling with high prices of essential commodities, soaring inflation rates, increasing youth unemployment, and endemic corruption. Meanwhile, the government resorted to silencing opposition voices through coercive measures wielded by the central government. Opposition leaders and activists were harassed and jailed, their funds frozen. The inefficacy of democratic institutions exacerbated the BJP's downfall in 2024. Another factor overlooked by the BJP government was the burgeoning influence of alternative and powerful social media platforms, which countered the decline in press freedom and the dominance of crony media. The contributions of civil society organisations were also remarkable. Despite facing intimidation and fear, these organisations persevered, utilising technology alongside social media to drive home their agendas.

Nevertheless, India's democratic institutions, electoral integrity, and practice of liberal democracy have long served as influential models for postcolonial Afro-Asian countries, especially those in South Asia. However, this influence was disrupted by the regression of democracy in India. The South Asian powerhouse's democratic backsliding did not bode well for the neighbouring countries.

Although Modi has become the prime minister of India for the third consecutive term and may compare himself to Nehru, he now relies on two more secular regional leaders, political tacticians who could potentially outmanoeuvre the Modi-Shah duo. The current NDA government marks the end of the BJP government, at least for the time being. It will face a robust opposition scrutinising and challenging every misstep both inside and outside the parliament. This has brought relief to democratic and liberal Indians of diverse religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds and given them hope that the 18th Lok Sabha may herald the return of a tolerant, secular India reminiscent of the Gandhian-Nehruvian era.

A monologue on the beasts among us



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The butcher cuts the meat into pieces. It's hard to believe that the hide was concealing so much. Each organ of the animal has its own story, but now it's all history. Just the day before Eid, we bought the animal from a makeshift cattle market. There was visible dissatisfaction everywhere. The traders complained they were not receiving the prices displayed by the online markets, while the buyers believed the traders had entered the market with unrealistic expectations curated by some corporate manipulators. The farmers who fattened their animals realised that most of their customers' wallets were far from fat.

As I stand before the heap of fresh meat, my thoughts turn to the slain politician who was hacked to death, and his body was disposed of like trash. When MP Anar went missing, I cried with his family. His daughter's appeal to find her missing father moved me. I thought he was a simple man who crossed the border in a rickshaw van. Then the truth started coming out of the hide, piece by piece.

The MP turned out to be someone with a notorious past: underground politics, gold smuggling, and racketeering. It was hard to imagine that the face could hide so many secrets. Information came to light byte by byte. The sympathy for the public figure waned, yet his brutal end served as a reminder that, in the end, we live in a jungle where beasts will devour beasts. Once the skins of civilisation peel off, the inner beasts are revealed. Once exposed, the animal becomes a target. The hunter is hunted. You can only pray that you don't become prey.

The pile of meat starts getting bigger and bigger under the blades of our hired butcher. I am manning the mission so that beefs don't get mixed up, pieces don't get missing during the process, and the size of meats remains appropriate for distribution. The animal we bought the day before probably had no clue about our purpose. Even if it did, it was helpless. It followed us, meeting its fate rather naively. Again, I think of the slain parliamentarian. I

could have thought of Jamal Khashoggi, but Anar is nearer. They used the same technique, luring Anar into the trap only to hack him into unidentifiable and disposable pieces. Is it true that they marinated Anar's meat with spices to mask the corpse smell? I suddenly lose my appetite, and the meat looks gross despite its holy nuances.

The political animals are full of tricks. They know how to bring other animals into their traps. At times, lust taints the baits, painting them with desire. We hear that the predators lured Anar into a honey trap. The bait unleashed the inner beast within the man who met his demise. Other beasts were waiting to match him.

The baits come in different shapes and sizes. Animal traders know which bait to hook their prey with. Some baits are glorified by focusing on size. The bigger the animal, the larger the display. The spectators wait for the animals' dramatic fall, with resounding thumps that will echo through heaven's doors to announce the sacrifice. Private prayers become public. Instead of sacrificing their inner beasts, some animals prefer displaying their bestial energy when sobriety is required. Some fall for the honeyed words of the traders who have corporatised the trade.

They reimagine Darwinian selectionism—the principle of survival of the fittest. Being fit, on the other hand, entails being intelligent enough to be adaptive. The strongest of animals have disappeared, while we humans have survived, not because we were the strongest, but because we were quick learners. The small can only eat the big if you know how to process it. The animals who are having a field day may very well be devoured by us, the humans. The day may come when our skins will peel off, and we will match the bestiality of other animals.

After all, we are all animals, whether political or biological. Some animals are bigger than others. Some are smarter and more adaptive.

Some eat while others are eaten. Someone who drags an animal with a rope may soon find themselves roped in. The one who sharpens the blade can soon be under its edge.

The individuals who fatten their beasts manipulate the egos of their intended victims. They are aware that certain animals are susceptible to being deceived by appearances. Then there are corporate masters who understand the power of images. They import rare breeds to stand out from the crowd. To maximise their profits, they hide import documents. They claim their items are exotic, albeit esoteric. To make claims for their goods, they invent family lineages. Little do they realise that once the meats are processed, it's all the same. The hide will remain on the pavement without any offer. Another syndicate. They'll make you wait so that you can give it away for free.

In the market of sacrifice, it is difficult to distinguish between devotion and devotee. Who sacrifices whom? For whom do the sacrifices take place? When did God require projected pride manifested by the size of the beasts, as opposed to humility and submission? Who buys these animals? Does God sanction the purchase of a holy sacrifice with unholy money? Who uploaded the images with the intention of manipulating the public's perception? The unreal cost of an animal piques the public's interest. The boasting beasts come under scrutiny. The hidden animals get exposed. The father disowns his son—or should I say sacrifice? The analogy becomes a false echo of the original sacrifice. The fallen animal proves to be less intelligent and less adaptive. Darwin wins. Does their former master's sacrifice of the mighty ones reflect God's will? Or is it the will of the political master? Was Anar sacrificed, too? The list of fallen heroes and runaway animals is growing.

The heap starts getting bigger and bigger. The creature has long come out of its hide. It will be consumed. Its energy will be dispersed. The yields will be bagged. The yields will be eaten. The meat will undergo a transformation into various forms of energy. It will reach the bloodstream. It will travel to various cells at different ends. The beast will be reborn.

Everything must come to an end. But who will have the last piece? Who will have the last laugh? Are the fallen false gods and the reign of animals a test of God's will? Pray we don't become prey.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Wise ones
- 6 Kind of doors or oven
- 11 Juan Perón's wife
- 12 Cornhusker city
- 13 Fleet-based
- 14 Fishing spots
- 15 Yale rooster
- 16 Even score
- 18 Auditor's org.
- 19 Swindle
- 20 They hold power
- 21 Goose egg
- 22 "Life of Pi" director
- 24 Screenwriter James
- 25 Deluge
- 27 Santa sound
- 29 Prefer to
- 32 Put away

- 33 Urgent call
- 34 Seth's mother
- 35 Hold up
- 36 Due follower
- 37 Bridge action
- 38 Unfettered
- 40 TV's Sawyer
- 42 Wed in haste
- 43 City on the Mohawk River
- 44 Silver or gold
- 45 Dev of "Slumdog Millionaire"

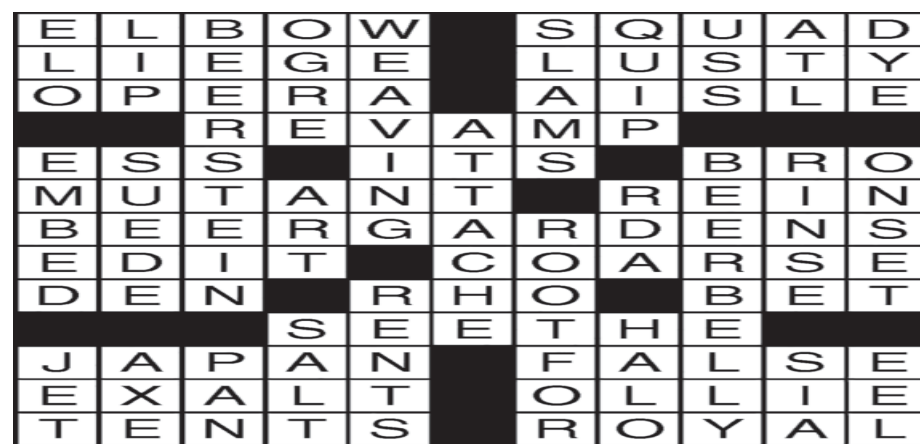
DOWN

- 1 New York tribe
- 2 Arthurian island
- 3 Firing
- 4 Greek vowel

- 5 Laced with more four-letter words
- 6 Parcels out
- 7 Thurman of film
- 8 Falling for something
- 9 Sweetheart, in Paris
- 10 Nuisance
- 17 Wrong
- 23 John, to Ringo
- 24 Leaf carrier
- 26 Abated
- 27 Apollo Theater setting
- 28 "Becket" actor
- 30 Show clearly
- 31 Bridge do-over
- 33 Girder material
- 39 Health retreat
- 41 "Give — rest!"



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