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The Intrinsic Limits of Hindutva as an Ideology of the Indian State

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The BJP has built an electoral juggernaut but the mishandling of the pandemic has shown that Hindutva as an ideology is a handicap in the running of a modern state. The challenge to the BJP will come at the state-level & will be rooted in a cultural pushback.

Beyond the pictures of funeral pyres in abandoned quarries, beyond the wails of women beseeching hospital officials to admit their relatives gasping for oxygen, and beyond the scenes of despair and tragedy lies a brutal truth. Hindutva cannot run a modern state. This is not hyperbole for such incapacity cannot be explained by the standard analysis of bureaucratic bottlenecks, decision delays, administrative failure, official apathy, leadership narcissism, political cynicism or even just bad luck. What we are seeing (but do not see) is something more fundamental at work. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has infused into the state structure an administrative culture that threatens the logic of a modern state. This needs to be named. The state that is emerging, or has emerged, depending on how one sees the news, leads to one conclusion alone. The BJP's governance philosophy makes it unsuited to deal with the demands of a modern state. To see it, therefore, as just another player in the game of competitive politics in India is a fundamental error.

The first task is to recognize that the BJP's qualitatively distinct cultural ecosystem undermines the foundational rules that our democracy has so meticulously built over 70 years. I use the term 'meticulously' consciously not to suggest deliberate agency by some enlightened leadership, although enlightened leadership and callous abuse were also there in these 70 years, but to suggest that in spite of these abuses the system grew through a process of accretion of good practices. Random examples can be offered such as the RTI Act (Right to Information Act) or the filing of affidavits by candidates standing for elections. There are many more illustrations of what we can describe as 'a gain of democratic function' of a constitutional state.

These gains we take for granted and have been made part of our democratic common sense but we must not do so. We must keep reminding ourselves that they are the cumulative result of many struggles by social movements, civil society groups, enlightened civil servants and an inspired leadership. This institutional evolution has many sources. India's democracy has drawn on Gandhian, liberal, secular, and socialist ideologies as it grew over 70 years. It had necessarily to be an eclectic mix since what was taking place was a unique historical experiment of making a plural democratic state in, and on, a complex and old civilization.

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The BJP ecosystem unfortunately stands opposed to the direction of this historical evolution. It seeks to dismantle it and is succeeding in doing so if one adds up all the major institutional decisions that have been taken in the last seven years. Take the recent appointment of Justice (Retired) Arun Mishra as the Chairman of the [National Human Rights Commission](#) in June 2021 or the most recent report of appointments of independent directors of PSUs over [half of whom are from the BJP](#). The BJP, it is clear, seeks a different India.

We need, therefore, to go beyond explanations of the deficits of Indian democracy that look primarily at effectiveness, efficiency, governance capability, etc. I want to suggest that what we are seeing is not just a lack of will that is preventing the repair of the deficits from taking place but a lack of imagination. It is a deficit not of action but of thought. I have come to the inescapable conclusion that, Hindutva, the presiding ideology of the BJP regime, does not have the imagination capabilities and is, therefore, intrinsically handicapped in running a modern state.

There are three basic challenges that Hindutva confronts. The first is the cultural pushback that the ideology of cultural nationalism promoted by the BJP will necessarily experience as it seeks to spread and capture social and geographical spaces where it has been hitherto absent. The state elections of April-May 2021 have shown that this is beginning to happen. The BJP cultural steamroller can and will be halted by a cultural counter rooted in the cultural resources of the regional state. The second is the challenge of large numbers that any demographically diverse society such as India throws up. Hindutva cannot overcome this demographic constraint. The third is the incompatibility of Hindutva as an ideology with the requirements of a modern state.

The intrinsic contradictions of cultural nationalism

In the last three decades, since the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the juggernaut of cultural nationalism has been marching across India from its early laboratory in Gujarat (Sheth, 2018) to states everywhere. Cultural nationalism wants to redefine the Indian state from one which was committed to an acceptance of plurality, where the rights and recognition of the other's presence were constitutionally guaranteed, into one based on the idea of majoritarianism, to a Hindu Rashtra. It seeks to move India from a politics of accommodation to a politics of othering, from an acknowledgement of minority rights to what is argued by the BJP as the rejection of minority appeasement.

Since one community is, by definition, regarded as constituting the majority, this majority has first to be constructed in thought and, subsequently, on the ground through a sustained campaign of cultural politics. This has required a takeover, or at least a domination, of the public discourse. The idea of Indian nationalism has changed in this new discourse from being inclusive of all communities into one that gives pre-eminence to one. It is important to acknowledge that this transformation in discourse has occurred because the Hindutva campaign has been mounted at many levels from the subliminal to the overtly political, from the subtly symbolic to the stridently expressive such as the demand to chant *Jai Sri Ram* and *Vande Mataram* as a sign of patriotism. So, if 'love jihad', anti-conversion, *ghar wapsi*, beef eating, etc are aspects of the campaign that subtly spread its influence at the folk level—playing to the prejudices, fears and aspirations of ordinary people—the campaign to describe individuals and institutions such as JNU as anti-national, is played at the more overt level of the public discourse. The writing down of Article 370, and the discussion on the Uniform Civil Code, especially of Triple Talaq, belongs to this overt level.

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For three decades the politics of cultural nationalism has sought to first drive out from public cognition the Nehruvian politics of accommodation and replace it with the ideology of Hindu Rashtra drawn from the writings of Savarkar and Golwalkar. This has received institutionalized endorsement since the formation of the BJP-led government in 2014. This social psychological dimension of the BJP's cultural politics, where a virtuous self and a villainous other are constructed, must be recognised. This construction of self and other comes from the works of Savarkar and Golwalkar. The latter writes:

... foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu Culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment even citizen's rights. There is, at least should be, no other course for them to adopt'. (Golwalkar, 1939, p47-48)

The BJP's cultural campaign has sought to make this 'self-other' binary a fact on the ground. Through a relentless campaign it has notched up many successes as its footprint has spread across the country. It has used every trick of modern marketing, from subliminal messaging—playing to fear, hope and aspiration—to conventional door-to-door canvassing, promoting the cult of the strong leader, etc., to dominate the public discourse and thereby to manipulate the voter's mind.

Its success can be seen in the growing percentage of support for the BJP over the decade from 2009 to 2019. In the last three general elections, the BJP's vote share has grown from 18.8% in 2009 to 37.36% in 2019. This data, when disaggregated in terms of rural/urban, male/female, educated/uneducated, upper class/ lower class, SC/ST, etc., shows a steady growth across all social categories. Even in the recently concluded state elections where the BJP lost seats, its percentage of votes increased. In Kerala it grew from 10.6% in 2016 to 11.3% in 2021, in West Bengal from 10.7% to 38.1%, in Assam from 29.5% to 33.21% and in Tamil Nadu from 2.86% to 2.62%. Only in Tamil Nadu did it marginally decrease.

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While there are many factors to explain this outcome such as caste coalitions, organisational effectiveness, candidate selection, a partisan Election Commission, the appeal of the star campaigner, etc., I wish to argue that the role played by the Hindutva cultural

campaign has been central. And, so, while we may look at material factors and governance performance, which are no doubt important, I will look at the politics of othering, the politics of polarisation, and its cultural messaging. The BJP's cultural politics of constructing the patriotic self and the anti-national other has increased its political footprint. But can it continue to grow indefinitely? This is the key question that I ask here.

I argue that it will grow, if the conditions are appropriate as in Assam. The Hindutva campaign in Assam, which identified the Muslim other as the enemy of the Hindus, the Bangladeshi outsider, also co-opted smaller cultural groups into the larger Hindu landscape. The BJP actively courted leaders from the 'smaller indigenous communities' and treated them as belonging to the larger culture of [Assamese Vaishnavism](#). This cultural strategy of cultural appropriation adopted by the BJP, seeks to incorporate into what it considers the Hindu cultural landscape the diverse identities and lesser icons of local contexts. Appropriation is a strategy of expansion and inclusion. It is also a strategy of exclusion when groups who are left out are presented as the adversarial other.

In Uttar Pradesh, the BJP and Hindutva forces are constantly appropriating as many icons and legacies as they can for their political garland. The major strategy of this management of memories of Hindutva politics is to explore marginalised and oppressed narratives within the secular meta-narrative of society, culture and politics, and then retell them. If someone closely watches the politics of the BJP and Hindutva family, they may understand that they have identified "memory zones" based on the influence of heroic symbols — such as Suheldev in central and eastern UP and Gokul Jat in western UP. Based on these memory zones, the BJP-led government and party plan activities around "[memorial politics](#)".

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The Assam case shows that where there is a powerful local leadership that is willing to be co-opted in the campaign of cultural nationalism then an opposition politics that counters it by talking development and other non-cultural issues, i.e., those of the outer world, will face a more difficult challenge since the BJP campaign connects with the inner world of the voter. In West Bengal, the All-India Trinamool Congress (TMC) understood this and thwarted the BJP's cultural politics by a counter cultural campaign that presented the BJP as the cultural outsider. Mamata Banerjee was seen by the women of Bengal, according to Mrinal Pande, as 'Mahishasur Mardini', the warrior goddess who managed to vanquish the demon whom the male gods had tried but failed to defeat.

Mamata met the BJP's cultural charge, outplaying it at every level with her own cultural resources. If they shouted "Jai Shri Ram", she countered with "Joy Bangla". When they accused her of appeasement, she chanted the "Chandi path". When they inducted film stars into their campaign, she gave film stars tickets. If they charged her with being chauvinistic, she charged them with being disrespectful of Bangla culture. Her campaign even accused the Union Home Minister of desecrating the hallowed chair of Rabindranath Tagore when he visited Visva Bharati. When the BJP launched a meme war against her, she responded with Bangla songs and memes. Remember "[khela hobe](#)"?

The BJP's strategy of cultural assimilation also drew a blank in Tamil Nadu. Its attempt to convert the narrative in Tamil Nadu from a 'Dravidian Tamil' to a 'Hindu Tamil' discourse was met with much hostility especially by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) campaign which also presented the BJP as the hostile [cultural outsider](#). These are two examples of parties opposed to the BJP countering the nationalist cultural mantle, with which the BJP has cloaked itself, with a counter-narrative of state cultural identity being under threat by the BJP's narrow depiction of India's cultural heritage. One is tempted to even see the Kerala result through the same lens since 89% of the voters did not buy either the BJP's Hindutva rhetoric or its governance claims when it presented E. Sreedharan as its mascot. The state voter preferred the contest between the two stable coalitions and saw the BJP's politics as destabilising their evolved formula of secular politics with a Kerala distinctiveness. Hindutva politics has limited traction in Kerala, unlike in Assam, because the state has an imaginative leadership at all levels that has countered it. And although Kerala is a devoutly religious society it preferred its own version of religious politics, what George Mathew has described as following a communal road to becoming secular (Mathew, 1990).

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These three cases point to basic internal contradictions that BJP's Hindutva will encounter.

The first contradiction is that a competitive state cultural response can be mounted to the nationalist culturalist discourse of Hindutva. A state party can construct an alternative cultural discourse in opposition to the cultural nationalism of the BJP as happened in West Bengal. Because these state cultural resources are based on historical and societal compromises and exist at the culturally accessible level of the folk, they are more inclusive of both majority and minority communities. Bengali, Tamil, Manipuri, Odia, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, etc., can be politically activated, by an imaginative political leadership, to pose a cultural counter to the juggernaut of the BJP. Since every region in India has its own cultural identity that a nationalist discourse may try to assimilate, such assimilation can be resisted by a powerful local leadership that mounts a counter along the axis of the insider versus the outsider, the protector versus the intruder. As Didi did. Cultural nationalism will then have to confront and counter India's essential cultural plurality. Any attempt to deny it, or diminish it, as the BJP's politics of othering has necessarily to do if the meta-narrative of Hindutva is to gain traction, could potentially face a backlash. Every state has therefore two options before it: go the Assam way or go the Bengal way.

The second contradiction is also fundamental. For Hindutva to receive an audience it must be offered to the public in a simplistic (not simplified) form of the 'us versus them' variety. This simplistic form can only be presented by a few leaders. Preferably by one. But such simplistic construction faces limits. It must necessarily exclude the diversity of cultural forms present in India at the lived level, the local level, resulting in a misalignment between the leader's framing and the actual experience of the targeted listener. The lived experience is beyond the binaries of 'us versus them', for it is more mixed, manifesting itself as sometimes us and sometimes them, and sometimes as a joint us-them. Over time such simplistic articulations begin to produce cognitive discomfort and even emotional fatigue. I believe this is happening in western UP where the Jat-Muslim hostility, created by Hindutva a decade ago, is being replaced by a Jat-Muslim *bhaichara*. The disaffection has its roots, and can be fanned, by some significant experience outside Hindutva such as the [farmer's protest](#).

Since every region in India has its own cultural identity that a nationalist discourse may try to assimilate, such assimilation can be resisted by a powerful local leadership

Caught in the conundrum of this social logic, Hindutva, to retain its novelty, would need many leaders to speak on its behalf. But such leaders would offer different inflexions—as different voices indeed must—and hence the power of a single leader or of a duopoly to offer simplistic frames of seeing gets weakened. This is the second contradiction Hindutva has to face. One leader or many, one story or many. The longer it remains in the forefront of public discourse the more easily will it be undermined by the over-exposure of the supreme leader. This will produce perception fatigue. This has already begun to happen in the multi-media satire we see of [the supreme leader](#).

The third contradiction comes from India's federal system. Although the BJP is trying to convert India from a federal polity into a centralised one, its attempt will have to contend with the political realities that the federal project has already created, such as cultural institutions and cultural honours within each state. These, in turn, produce cultural elites who have a stake in establishing the uniqueness of their state culture and in arguing for its distinctiveness over the cultural identity of a neighbouring state. That is why Goa did not merge with Maharashtra in the 1960s and Assam split into the seven sisters of the North-East. Even in a state where the same language is spoken, two states, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, have emerged.

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India's federal history of state formation is also a history of cultural assertion. Hindutva has no response to regional cultural elites who want to assert their distinctiveness vis-a-vis their neighbours. Parties opposed to the BJP can use this fact on the ground to generate a deep rooted cultural and political challenge to Hindutva. Tamil Nadu has done so consistently and successfully and that is why the BJP's vote share has not grown in five years beyond 2.62%. Other states have been unable to get their cultural elites to speak in opposition to cultural nationalism. Assam got co-opted but one thing is certain: when its current politics of othering has run its course, the delayed contradiction will emerge. It cannot be averted. These three contradictions, if played intelligently as was done in Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, will halt Hindutva's cultural juggernaut.

The challenge of large numbers

Let me now shift the analysis from the cultural domain to the statistical and demographic one. This is the second set of limits that Hindutva faces and is quite straightforward. Robert Dahl, the theorist of democratic politics, in his popular book *A Preface to*

Democratic Theory, made the observation that in any large community seen in demographic terms, plurality will necessarily emerge. Large populations are inevitably internally plural. Can the plurality of India, therefore, be contained by cultural nationalism and its credo of ‘diversity in unity’, where diversity is allowed only within unity? Or will such plurality necessarily spill over, resisting the vessel of its containment, Hindutva, and supporting the contrary Nehruvian idea of ‘unity in diversity’, where diversity is promoted because it strengthens unity. Plurality, in this Nehruvian perspective, is seen as a common good.

If to this moral argument we graft the sociological argument that producing a common collective perception or action among large populations is near impossible—we can at best mobilise only a significant percentage and not the whole population—then the BJP juggernaut will have to contend with this statistical social limit. It may seek to create a stable Hindu majority, but will not succeed because of the internal plurality of the targeted community. Hindutva may temporarily produce an electoral majority, with a rise in vote share from 18.8% to 37.36%, but this can be fractured by a counter-mobilisation that is both cultural and material. The farmers’ movement and dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of Covid pandemic provide a historical opportunity and material basis for such fracturing. It appears that the Hindutva campaign has reached the limits of its capacity to produce the collective perception and action it seeks.

Hindutva cannot run a modern democratic state

The third set of limits that Hindutva faces stems from its ideology. Although there are interesting differences between Savarkar and Golwalkar, in that the former was an atheist while the latter was not, they shared certain key assumptions about the sacral geography of India. Their conception of Hindutva has two main features: (i) showing the commonness of those whose religious faiths and traditions are indigenous to the Indian subcontinent, which they showed to be race, sacred text and language etc, thereby giving them a common civilizational basis, making India both their *pitrbhumi* (fatherland) and a *punyabhumi* (holy land), and (ii) identifying the enemies of Hindu nationhood, i.e., Muslims and Christians (Khan et al, 2017).

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This ideology is intrinsically incapable of running a modern state both because of its internal elements and also because it is an ideology, and thereby shares the exclusions that other ideologies demonstrate. These exclusions are costly for a modern state since they are required for its running. Ideologies exclude and include. The included get rewarded and handed key offices of state. And, so, when people talk about lapses, or decision failures, or incompetence, etc., they miss the point. When Hindutva occupies state power it will produce governance deficits that are intrinsic to its operation manual because it rewards (i) loyalty to the leadership, (ii) a long association with the cultural ecosystem of the BJP, (iii) obedience to the chain of command, (iv) unquestioning defence of the decisions made by the top leadership, even calamitous ones such as during the pandemic, (v) belief without ambivalence or doubt in the leader’s capabilities, (vi) acceptance of the majoritarian future for India, and (vii) a massaging of the facts so that they always appear pro-regime and inconvenient truths are suppressed.

When this happens, and it has become widespread since 2014, the implicit and incremental gains of a modern state—capability and autonomy of institutions—are undermined. This happens because the advocates of Hindutva have neither been taught to think about what a modern state requires, nor do they have the imagination—corrupted by their education in *Shakhas*—to appreciate the skills and institutions required for a smooth delivery of services.

My argument is, however, different in that I attribute these failures to the ideology of Hindutva. It was bound to come to such a pass as the modern state makes demands. Obscurantist ideologies replace science as the basis of government. This became apparent in the government’s response to both the first and the second waves of the pandemic. In the first surge, a Union Minister Ramdas Athawale asked us to chant ‘Go Corona go’ to make the virus go away. He was not reprimanded because it was consistent with the culture of government.

When the second wave hit us with blinding force, and when every epidemiologist warned about super-spreader events, the Uttarakhand government, with the acquiescence of the Union government, permitted the Kumbh Mela in Haridwar to go ahead on the specious defense that the sacred river will protect the pilgrims. We are paying the price for such obscurantism in a health tragedy that has gone out of control. Scientific temper should have been the basis of government but instead obscurantist thinking and a scientifically regressive ideology have become the guiding principle of the Indian state. Obscurantism can be barely tolerated by a working state in

normal times, but in abnormal times it is disastrous causing immense havoc as we have been seeing during the pandemic. Nehru understood the value of scientific temper for the state. The current regime does not.

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For Nehru, the scientific temper carried larger social implications. According to him,

The scientific approach, the adventurous and yet critical temper of science, the search for truth and new knowledge, the refusal to accept anything without testing and trial, the capacity to change previous conclusions in the face of new evidence, the reliance on observed fact and not on pre-conceived theory, the hard discipline of the mind – all this is necessary, not merely for the application of science but for life itself and the solution of its many problems.’

At the helm of affairs as the prime minister of a free India, Nehru acted on his belief. Scientific temper was key to national development.

When scientific temper as the culture of the state is replaced by Hindutva, then the independence and competence of experts, required by the state, is substituted by their loyalty to the power wielders and by their ideological affinity to the powers that be. When this ideology is challenged by science then, in some cases, the challengers are even assassinated because the ideology has taken deep psychological residence in the inner world of the leadership. This is compounded by the ceding of areas of state authority to religious leaders and even giving them elected office, as has happened in India’s most populous state.

When loyalty replaces impartiality and competence then the decision-makers will not get the range of options required for them to make robust political decisions. An ideological state, which India has become, values loyalty more than independence and competence. This means that the feedback loop that is so important for scientific based policy (Is the policy working? What are its impacts? What is the review and consultation process? What is the evidence? etc..) gets significantly weakened. The loyalists give only information of what is happening, and not the critical data of why and how, to the political leadership. This produces lack of trust in information and in decision-makers. A modern state requires people to trust the information it provides. When information is malleable and massaged by the regime, distrust grows.

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The reaction to this decline in trust is to ramp up the propaganda about an anti-national discourse that seeks to malign the nation, besmirch the personality of the leader, and spread a negative instead of a positive message of India. The critic and truth teller is thereby further demonized. Of course all this is to secure a favourable image of the plebiscitary leader who, since 2014, has come to dominate all public discourse seeding it with words and phrases such as *andolanjeevis* and Foreign Destructive Ideologies (FDIs) that have become key phrases in the hostile social media campaign. This necessarily leads to the weakening of autonomous institutions. But weak institutions, eroded trust, discounted competence and ignoring of science are not accidental but an inevitable outcome of the ideological politics of Hindutva. It cannot run a modern state even if it wants to. Tragically this has been cruelly demonstrated by the pandemic.

What happens next

The preceding analysis has made four points. The first is that the BJP’s electoral juggernaut is formidable and has been spreading its shadow across India, consolidating its presence in states where it has acquired a dominant presence, and entering states where it has not hitherto been present. It is formidable because of six elements: (i) enormous financial resources at its disposal, (ii) organisational sophistication, (iii) large number of feet on the ground, (iv) its collaboration with organisations that share its vision of building a Hindu Rashtra, (v) its domination of social media through thousands of WhatsApp groups, lakhs of trolls, lakhs of Facebook accounts, etc., that spread its message of a strong India which has ready appeal, and (vi) its plebiscitary leader. That is the reason it has grown, increasing its vote share from 18.8% to 37.36% in the three general elections between 2009 and 2019, and also why it has created a large constituency of support even in states where it has lost the state elections of 2021. Its message of Hindutva has many takers

because it plays to a successful social psychological politics of othering.

When loyalty replaces impartiality and competence then the decision-makers will not get the range of options required for them to make robust political decisions.

The second point, contrasting with the first, is that we may be seeing in 2021 the peaking of the growth of this juggernaut. Part of the reason is messaging fatigue, leader over-exposure, and governance failure. Two events of the last year of 2020-2021 have produced disenchantment with the BJP's propaganda. The first is the farmers' protest that has been sustained in spite of government indifference and that has reversed the polarisation within the farming community effected by earlier BJP campaign, thereby establishing new solidarities and re-establishing old ones. The second is the devastation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This has exposed the incompetence and hollowness of the current leadership in government. We do not have just policy paralysis but action paralysis, thinking paralysis. Besides exposing the BJP's politics of undermining of institutions, and the diminished personalities of even their tallest leaders, the pandemic has driven home the point that Hindutva is intrinsically incapable of running a modern state. It does not have the knowledge resources, or political will, or wisdom, to do what [is required](#).

This has led to the third point that we have to look at post 2019. The commentary on Indian politics, even after the cataclysmic pandemic, has to exit the conventional frames of caste alliances, [welfare schemes](#), disjointed opposition, dominant party in governance, etc., in other words the frames of the normal politics of democracy, and recognize that there is a different beast on the loose. It cannot be named by the old formulas. It has to be described in terms of what it is, what it does, and how it crosses all the red lines of democratic politics. Conventions are abandoned. Rules are ignored. Institutions are undermined. And decision-making is arbitrary and whimsical. This has produced the election juggernaut of Hindutva. But it is faltering. It can be stalled and defeated by a counter strategy the elements of which have been discussed here. To defeat the BJP requires a cultural agenda that is prominent and sits alongside the welfarist agendas, social coalition strategies, and organisational resources of normal politics.

We do not have just policy paralysis but action paralysis, thinking paralysis.

This leads to the fourth and final point. Will the opposition be able to seize the moment? They will have to if they wish to defeat the BJP in 2024. The juggernaut is stalling but it is still formidable. Hindutva belongs to a different league from the other parties. To mount a credible challenge in 2024 the opposition will have to begin from now to build the cultural discourses at the state level, discourses that the BJP cannot co-opt. If they succeed, public perception will change from its current TINA or there is no alternative, to the mood that is growing as a result of the pandemic, ABB or anyone but BJP. This is a mood that must be given political leadership.

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