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In Campaign 2024, the BJP's Hindutva Contends With the Congress Party's Nyay

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After floundering for a new identity the Congress has hit on 'Nyay': justice for 90% of the people. The BJP recognises the danger of this promise to reorder current privileges resonating with voters. It has therefore given up on speaking of economic issues and has fallen back on fear mongering.

It has been commented that the current election is quite 'normal'. As the campaign trudges along, this supposed normalcy of the election will surely be breached to some extent. Particularly for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), it is necessary to breach this normalcy and create anxieties, doubts and even suspicion so that voters will turn to images and stereotypes. All this can easily flow from the current tenor of the campaign.

For the time being, the campaign seems to be proceeding in the framework of two registers. The Congress Party has managed to force a register of *nyay*, something they could not push the last time, while the BJP has chosen to continue with the tripod of Modi, Hindutva, and distant dreams. In the coming weeks, much will depend upon (a) how the Congress ensures that these two registers continue in their current framing and (b) how the BJP brings emotive distortions to the two registers so that it will have an edge.

The Congress party register

For a party like the Congress, a choice of a somewhat coherent register of *nyay* is rather accidental. While sections of the media are scandalized by an impression that there is something 'revolutionary' in the Congress manifesto, there is a considerable continuity from 2004 in the party's *Nyay Patra* – statement of justice.

Ever since the Congress government of 1991–96 ushered in economic policies facilitating liberalisation and globalisation, the party has faced a dilemma. The economic policies had an attraction for the middle classes. But these classes were not the core supporters of the party, and the party has never won their consistent support even after 1991. On the other hand, the Mandal turn of politics in the 1990s took away whatever support it could get from castes located at the lower middle strata of society.

This has pushed the Congress on to the back foot since the late 1990s. Its initial experiment to neutralise this setback was to shape the idea of the 'aam aadmi' – something that avoided both caste and class polarisation, but at the same time sought to intimate that the party was close to the average citizen. That helped the party in 2004 to survive its terminal downslope.

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The Congress has had another Achilles' heel since the 1990s: it has been identified as a party "appeasing" the Muslims, while at the same time the Muslims have seen it as no good at protecting their identity, leave aside their interests. The innovative efforts during the period of the Manmohan Singh government were internally received with unease. The avalanche of Hindutva confused the party over its stand on questions of minority protection, inclusive policies, and a pluralist approach to socio-cultural issues. The rise of Narendra Modi and his brazen version of Hindutva during the last decade has put the Congress in a more defensive position on these questions.

During the current campaign – as mainly articulated by Rahul Gandhi – the Congress seems to have finally managed to strike a balance and present itself as a party different from the BJP and yet not a party that would talk only about the Muslims and the minorities. This is the baseline of the Congress party's campaign. Rahul Gandhi speaks of backward castes but quickly slips into questions of class; he mentions the minorities but quickly goes on to count them as part of the '90%'.

Thus, the Congress campaign appears to be imagining a 90:10 division of society – the 90% who toil, suffer, and get an unfair deal opposed to the 10% who are favoured by the BJP (and are also favoured by the 'system'). This juxtaposition, the party probably believes, is harmless if not straightaway beneficial to its electoral prospects. The line of thinking has a long lineage about who the

Bahujans are and who the ‘upper’ are. It is another matter that the Congress is still not confident to pick up this historical thread and it has adopted this approach rather late, resulting in a lack of ideological preparation of its rank and file.

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This ideologically ‘accurate’ framing has a couple of practical limitations in terms of its resonance among the masses and the possible electoral dividends. First, the 90% are still likely to be swayed by the rhetoric of religion and caste-based identities in the wake of parties that mobilise on those bases. The challenge before the Congress is to transform the ideological construct of the ‘90%’ into a political reality. Before the Nyay Patra was released, the only efforts that the Congress undertook in this direction were through the Bharat Jodo Yatra. The party structure on the whole has been rather distant from this rhetoric at the ground level.

The other limitation is that despite social and economic hierarchisation of society, when it comes to politics Indian society refuses to configure in neat hierarchical formations. Even after going through the sharp polarisation that Mandal brought in and after the complicated economic miseries that the economic policies of the 1990s created, neither do the ‘backward’ castes unite politically nor do the poor come together as a political force. Moreover, caste backwardness and economic backwardness together do not produce a politics of the underprivileged. While the privileged sections (combining caste and economic class privileges) tend to constitute a political-electoral bloc, the underprivileged sections are dispersed in their political choices rendering them politically ineffectual (Palshikar and Mishra 2023).

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Notwithstanding these limitations and having to struggle intellectually since the *aam adami* moment of 2004, the Congress has moved to a somewhat coherent position in its current campaign. It realises the traps. It cannot be merely a party of Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims. It needs to bring on board other caste groups. It cannot speak merely in caste-community terms and must discover the vocabulary of an umbrella social configuration that does not exclude any group. Instead of talking about the minority, it has to construct a majority that includes the poor and the minorities.

Above all, the trap is that if it speaks highly of the religious traditions of the Hindus, the ultra-radicals will malign it for espousing soft Hindutva, while if it attacks the economic disparities inherent in the system it will be attacked by the media for being too revolutionary. The Congress seems to have decided to take both these risks and talk about inclusion and fairness as its responses to religious fanaticism and economic disparity, respectively.

The BJP register

In contrast, what is the register of political rhetoric that the BJP has adopted?

In part, there is nothing new about the BJP register. Rather than relying on its performance, the BJP has avoided the register of governance and *acche din*.

Of course, the BJP could not have been oblivious to the intellectual moves of the Congress ever since the first Bharat Jodo Yatra. It has armed itself with a large menu of welfare deliveries that it can claim credit for. But its meta narrative in the campaign continues to be oppositional: searching for excuses, blaming ‘others’, creating negative anxieties and complaining rather than claiming, extending dreams rather than showing results.

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Besides, there are two very remarkable things about the BJP’s register of polemic in this campaign. These are its near complete reliance on Modi and its firm adherence to Hindutva.

The first is born out of the leader's obsession with the personality cult. In the prior general elections in 2019, the tagline was "*Modi hai to mumkin hai*" ('Modi makes it possible'). The party continues to believe in this. It thinks – or is it forced to think? – that it can win by piggybacking on Modi's popularity. It continues to be under such complete control of one person that its manifesto unabashedly promises everything as a gift by Modi. It is Modi's guarantee all over. It believes that the magic of the personality cult is still relevant and operational.

The politics that the BJP represents in its manifesto and its campaign hinges on a complete personalisation of governance and delivery. This is advantageous. The faith that many may still have in Modi the person, convinces them that 'Modi's guarantee' is worth trusting. This in part is a manufactured image through claims such as '*ek akela*'. In continuing to project Modi as the superman, and a quintessence of representation, the BJP has taken a calculated risk. Having projected Modi as the leader with a capital L, it hopes to pose an unspoken question in voters' mind: who, if not Modi?

In other words, the BJP campaign hopes – with active help from the media – to reduce democratic politics to a leadership contest and then show that there is no alternative. Should the opposition project a leader, it is easier for the BJP to encash Modi's comparative popularity. If the opposition does not project a leader, the question of leadership can be thrown in and Modi's image played up. The rhetoric of strong government has this same hidden message about a strong and decisive leadership.

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The second noteworthy aspect of the BJP's campaign is its steadfast adherence to the core Hindutva themes of converting religiosity into a weapon of othering and underplaying caste through the route of religious identity.

There has been considerable discussion of late about the communalisation of the campaign. What most commentators miss is that this is not a sudden response by the BJP but an essential part of the campaign it seeks to ride on.

The megalomania associated with the Modi factor and the personalisation of authority it represents deflect attention from the core agenda that the BJP's campaign follows: transforming the Hindu population into followers of Hindutva and shaping a public sphere that excludes Muslims, in particular, and all 'difference' in general. The BJP will be happily aware that notwithstanding economic worries, many voters support it for its 'Hindu consolidation' and its role in the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya.

To capitalize on this advantage, it was only natural for Modi to rake up various issues that have an overtone of identity and communal suspicion. His initial rhetoric about the Congress refusing to attend the consecration of Ram temple was aimed at communicating that the election was about choosing those who represent Hindus rather than about the economy. This strategy helps the BJP in two ways. First, it deflects attention from economic issues. The opposition gets dragged into the question of what the meaning of is of being a Hindu and what the Ram temple means for today's Hindus.

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Second, this rhetoric attracts various Hindu OBC sections away from issues of nyay, of shares in the economic pie. Instead, a Hindu consolidation may take place. After all, collective political identities are products of politics. As such, the BJP's Hindutva pitch simultaneously breaches the Congress' efforts to construct the '90%' as a self-conscious collective seeking justice. It also consolidates the Hindu political constituency in search of a majoritarian politics and governance.

Modi's more explicit juxtaposition of the Muslim 'Other' to whom the mangalsutras of Hindu women will supposedly go, combines the effort to construct the Hindutva sensibility with stoking deep-rooted anxieties about a reordering of privilege. He uses the hint of resource reallocation to whip up 'middle class' fears of any slight rearrangement of the present structure of privilege. More than that, the Modi project firmly hinges on the idea that any such rearrangement of privilege is unsettling and unwarranted (as expressed, for instance, in the arguments of the economist Arvind Panagariya that [growth with inequality is not a problem](#)).

The BJP and Modi know that if even a small segment of the electorate is attracted by the idea of rearrangement of privilege, it would undermine their present political ascendancy. All this results in anxieties producing a vicious response, leading to gross distortions and

fear mongering.

Conclusions

That is where we arrive at a crucial contrast between the two registers operating in the 2024 campaign. The two registers are speaking about two very different ideas of India.

The Congress' move is to juxtapose the 90% – easily identified as 'us, the people' – with the 10%, the anonymous 'they'. With all its ambiguities, it has a message of reformulating policy on the basis of inclusion and plurality.

In contrast, the BJP is not only wants to talk only of 'we the Hindus', but also explicitly presents itself as the party of aspirations without addressing basic inequities. It believes in the naturalness of economic comfort as a result of effort, irrespective of preexisting social asymmetries. More than everything, the BJP believes that the quality of life will improve with expansion of the economy and that policy should focus on the imaginary aspirational citizen, rather than on the 'last person' at the bottom.

Both because of Modi's obduracy and because of the accidental turn taken by the Congress, this deeper contrast of ideas has come to the forefront very sharply. This contrast makes Hindutva all the more critical to BJP's current register of rhetoric. The coming weeks will tell us how the BJP blends the two rhetorics of Hindutva and aspirations, to produce yet another turn for the undercurrent of pseudo-nationalism.

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