

Indian elections: widening chasm between official politics and the working masses

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The first two rounds of India's general election have been completed and already there are indications of widespread voter indifference to both major political formations—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and the opposition Congress (I).

In the first round of voting, which was held September 5, only 58 percent of the 160 million eligible voters cast ballots, as compared to 62 percent in the last election held in 1998. A very low turnout of 15 percent in Kashmir, where separatist guerrillas have been calling for an election boycott, depressed the national total, but only marginally, because Kashmir has just a handful of Lok Sabha seats. In the national capital, New Delhi, the election turnout was 47 percent.

According to the Election Commission's preliminary estimate, 56 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots in the second round of the voting, which was staged last Saturday. In 12 previous national elections, stretching back to 1952, an average of 60 percent of the electorate has voted. Should the current trend persist, as seems likely, the turnout for the thirteenth Lok Sabha election will be the lowest in a decade.

Some analysts attribute the lack of voter interest to the fact that the current election is the third national vote in less than three years. The Calcutta daily *Asian Age* headlined an article in a recent issue, "Jaded Voters Tell Parties: We Are Fed Up". In announcing the combined voter turnout for the two election rounds in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, State Chief Electoral Officer Naresh Gupta said the low polling figures were due to "voter fatigue".

The real reasons for the popular disinterest are more profound and complex. There is a growing apprehension that India's political elite—which is fractured into dozens of parties, most of which base their appeal on caste, communal and/or regional identities—and the electoral process are not responsive to the concerns of India's impoverished masses. Rather the parties function as patronage rackets that work hand-in-glove with big business and a rural elite comprised of India's ex-princes, *zamindars* (big landlords) and rich farmers.

A schoolteacher, Rajini Sharma, interviewed by the press gave a hint of the real causes of voter apathy. "How can we keep on voting every year? And what do these politicians do for us anyway? They get our vote and then do not show their faces

until the next general election." As the report noted, the campaign has been "notable less for its issues than the vitriolic mudslinging between rival politicians".

Dealing with the same theme, an article in the Chennai (Madras) *Hindu* of August 30 argued: "The campaign failed to generate enthusiasm because the most pressing issues are either excluded from the debate or taken up perfunctorily. Sacrificed in the process are the all-important economic matters, foreign policy, and defence issues, dangers to national security, social tensions and a host of other subjects which concern the people and the country."

If there is little debate on serious issues it is because a consensus exists among the rival parties over India's new "export-oriented" economic strategy, under which price supports, social spending and protective tariffs are being dismantled so as to attract foreign investment. The concern of the *Hindu* commentator is that neither of the major parties will emerge with sufficient numbers in parliament to form a strong government and that the subsequent jockeying for political advantage among the politicians will frustrate attempts to impose unpopular "reforms". In the last election, the BJP and Congress (I) together polled just 52 percent of the vote.

A centre-page article in the *Hindu* published on the first day of polling stated: "The sterile nature of the campaign may be consistent with what many commentators have seen as a uniformity of approach with respect to the economic agenda." Each of the parties is attempting to outbid its rivals for big business support by promising to increase infrastructure investment at the expense of social spending, press ahead with privatisation and public sector job cuts, and amend "hire and fire" laws to allow employers to dismiss workers freely.

In February 1999, the BJP-led coalition government cut Rs 50 billion (US\$1.2 billion) from price supports, which led to food grain price increases of 30 to 80 percent and an 11 percent hike in the price of urea fertiliser. These measures contributed to the fall of the Vajpayee government in a non-confidence vote a few weeks later, bringing about the present election.

In the absence of fundamental political differences, the election campaign has centred on the personality of the party leaders—so much so that some writers have called it a presidential rather than a parliamentary election. While the BJP

has been attacking Congress (I) President Sonia Gandhi for her Italian origins and projecting Vajpayee as a strong “war-tested” leader, Congress has been presenting their leader as the heir to the Nehru-Gandhi family dynasty that has provided the Congress prime ministers who ruled India during most of the five decades since independence in 1947.

For her part, Gandhi, widow of assassinated prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, has gone to extraordinary lengths to prove her Indian connections. In a speech on September 3 she told a meeting in the Bellary constituency: “I am tied to the Indian Soil.... I cannot express in words the love I have for India.... My family's only identity is sacrifice and service to the nation.... I have made India my own. I am tied to the Indian soil.”

To cap it all, her daughter, Priyanka Gandhi, introduced Sonia Gandhi to her next meeting, saying: “Twenty-one years ago my grandmother Indiraji [former prime minister Indira Gandhi] came here to contest the election, now we present you my mother Soniaji.”

The Congress president is seeking election from a southern Karnataka constituency solely because her election from a seat in Uttar Pradesh (the ancestral Nehru-Gandhi home) is far from certain. For decades Uttar Pradesh (UP), India's largest state, was a Congress bastion, but in the 1990s the Congress has been reduced to fourth place in UP, garnering just 15 percent of the vote.

The other main election issue has been the Pakistani-organised incursion in the Kargil area of Indian-held Kashmir. The BJP has tried to batten on its “success” in forcing a Pakistani withdrawal from Kargil. Congress earlier tried to discredit the BJP by pointing to the failure of the Indian military to detect the infiltration of Pakistani-backed fighters. Now it is claiming that the government deliberately allowed the infiltration so as to exploit the affair for election purposes. Each party is seeking to outdo the other in militaristic and nationalist phrase-mongering.

It is little wonder that there is growing discontent and alienation from official politics. The major parties are not even attempting to address the broad concerns of masses of working people, whose living standards have deteriorated during the past decade of economic “reform”.

After 50 years of formal independence, India, with 15 percent of the world's total population, contains 25 percent of the world's poor and produces just 1.5 percent of the world's wealth. Of the 988 million people in India, between 33 and 40 percent live below the official poverty line, which is set at a subsistence level. Since 1952, when the first census of the post-1947 period was taken, 250 million people have been added to the total number of poor. In 1998, the annual per capita income was just US\$490.

At present 30 percent of the population lives in the cities. By 2040, the urban population is projected to increase to 50 percent. This shift, however, does not denote rational development. Youth are being forced to flee diminishing

opportunities in the countryside, where capitalist agriculture is producing enormous concentrations of wealth and poverty. Some 40 percent of the rural population are essentially landless.

The dreams of rural youth of a better life in the cities are not materialising. Over 30 million people are unemployed and of those employed, 20 million are in debt bondage. In the Sivakasi area in Tamil Nadu, some 45,000 people toil as bonded labourers in fireworks factories. The Population Council says that India's urban areas are rapidly becoming super-slums.

The average life expectancy in India is 56 years. Of every 1,000 babies born, 86 die at birth, and 108 out of every 1,000 Indian children die before reaching the age of five years.

A survey conducted in 1995 showed “nutritional anaemia is a major micro-nutrient deficiency in India and is estimated to affect over 50 percent of pregnant and lactating mothers. This could well be responsible for 20 percent of maternal deaths.” The maternal mortality rate is as high as 4.48 per thousand, and would be much greater if the large number of deaths that go unreported were included.

A September 2 press report indicates that while India's millions are malnourished, the government is holding the single largest stock of wheat in the world. Congress spokesmen, while criticising the present government for not using the grain to provide free or cheap food, has itself made no promises to release the grain to the unemployed or landless.

These bald statistics go far to explain the sensitivity in ruling circles to the growing hostility of the electorate not simply to individual political figures and parties, but to official politics as a whole. As the *Hindu* noted: “Nothing tangible seems to have been done all these years for the amelioration of that indeterminate quantity called the *hoi polloi* [masses.] It is in this light that the elections to the thirteenth Lok Sabha are to be seen by the 60-odd crore [600 million] eligible voters.”



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