India's moment

The illiterate and uneducated masses have once again shown that India is a vibrant and alive democracy

by Vinay Lal

This is India's moment. The much-ridiculed illiterates and uneducated masses that still predominate in India's vast rural countryside have shown the wisdom, intelligence, and integrity that the much trumpeted educated and business elites of India could not muster. They have voted the National Democratic Alliance, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, out of power. At least for the moment, if only a faltering moment, India is the world's exemplary democracy.

Less than three months ago, when the BJP announced that general elections would be held in late April and May, its electoral triumph was taken for granted. In assembly elections held across several states in December 2003, the BJP trounced the Congress, the main opposition party led

by the Italian-born inheritor of the Nehru family fortunes, Sonia Gandhi. Last month, the Indian cricket team returned from a month-long tour to Pakistan after registering spectacular triumphs in both one-day and test cricket, and though the BJP wisely took no explicit credit for this achievement, it surely hoped to have benefited by this success. Many observers are inclined to describe cricketing relations as a reliable barometer of political relations between India and Pakistan, and

Prime Minister Vajpayee often declared that he sought peace between the two nations as the enduring legacy of his tenure in office. Relations between the two countries have, doubtless, improved considerably over the last six months—though, unless the BJP endeavour to have everyone succumb to amnesia is to succeed, it is also necessary to recall that war hysteria was pitched high through much of late 2001 and 2002.

The BJP had, as it allowed itself to believe, other grounds to be confident, even complacent. Monsoon rains over the last few years have largely been very good, and agricultural production and food stocks have never been higher. For decades, economists spoke mockingly of the "Hindu rate of growth": the economy, much like everything else in the country, slumbered on at an agonisingly slow pace. As late as the early eighties, it would have been something of a stretch to speak of the consuming classes as anything other

than a microscopic minority. Now the economy is, in a word, booming. Annual growth last year hit eight per cent, and affluent and middle-class urban Indians, who recall the fair price shops and shortages of milk and butter of yesteryears, now point with evident pride to the rapid proliferation of glitzy shopping malls. The markets are bursting with goods, the demand for luxury items has risen sharply; and consumer spending has risen to an all-time high. Even the outsourcing boom and the mushrooming of call centres, which arguably point to the emergence of new forms of coolitude, were cited as instances of India's rising stock in the world. The BJP attempted to sum up its achievements in a succinct yet bloated phrase, "India Shining".

Evidently, and wisely, the electorate in India did not find

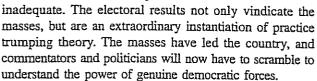
the country as resplendent as the BJP and its allies have been inclined to imagine. A fierce pogrom was launched against Muslims in Gujarat two years with no adverse ago. consequence for its perpetrators and their patrons. Over 2,000 lives were lost, and 100,000 people were rendered homeless, but the BJP sought to convey the impression that this was a mere unfortunate occurrence against the backdrop of increasing

Evidently, and wisely, the electorate in India did not find the country as resplendent as the BJP and its allies have been inclined to imagine...Chandrababu Naidu, the Chief Minister of Andhra who fancied himself a CEO, and dedicated himself to turning Hyderabad into a glass fortress of technology, has now received a rude reminder that the rural masses cannot be taken for a ride.

prosperity. Further south, Chandrababu Naidu, the Chief Minister of Andhra who fancied himself a CEO, and dedicated himself to turning Hyderabad into a glass fortress of technology, has now received a rude reminder that the rural masses cannot be taken for a ride. Now that Naidu's Telugu Desam Party has unceremoniously been booted out of office, he may be more attentive to those whose needs in the real world cannot be met by specialists in virtual reality. His compatriot in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, whose capital Bangalore spawned India's so-called Internet revolution, has at least had the decency to admit that his neglect of the rural countryside cost him his job. Though the government boasts of record grain stocks, and charity has been extended to countries such as North Korea and Russia, nearly half of India's own population still suffers from malnutrition. Growing rural indebtedness and the rapid privatisation of agriculture led thousands of farmers over the last ten years to commit suicide. Inequalities in India have never been greater.

India's elite, and its chattering classes, clearly did not take stock of all that has transpired in an India that they barely know. A campaign call with a recorded message from Vajpayee was made to nearly every household with a telephone or Internet connection, but down to the present day there are much fewer than 50 million land and cell phones in a country of over one billion. But however much this election points to the immense disconnect between

India's elites and consuming classes on the one hand, and its poor and working classes on the other hand, its significance is even wider. The academic specialists, veteran journalists, political commentators, psephologists who were nearly unanimous in projecting a victory for the BJP must perforce also recognise that their conception of leaders and followers is wholly



There is, in these elections, an object lesson for others besides the BJP, Hindu nationalists, and those who dwell in the urban areas of India. The United States, which has been peddling itself ad nauseam to the world as a bastion of democracy even while its two parties have become indistinguishable and an oligarchic mob presides in the White House, might learn something about both the power of the poor and the working class and the plurality of political positions. Nearly 40 parties will be represented in the new Lok Sabha. While the trend towards regional parties has become even more pronounced, the communists have done very well for themselves. Though Indian leftists have been staunchly committed to secularism and have every reason to feel satisfied by the outcome of their principled opposition to religious extremism, their worldview cannot be reconciled so easily with the worldview of India's rural masses. A strong predisposition towards technology, the regime of science, and the ideology of development have long characterised the Indian left, and the dream that India should become a proper and modern nation-state is one that the Indian left shares with the Hindu right. It is, however, the non-modern sector of the population - the much-derided and allegedly backward people of what is jeeringly called the "cow belt" or "saffron belt" of north India - which dealt Hindu nationalists and technocrats a decisive defeat in this election.

The people of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh derive their values not from the Enlightenment, or from the world of modern science, but from what might be described as "customs in common" shared between adherents of different languages, religions, castes, and the like.

An anecdote from the life of Mohandas Gandhi furnishes the perfect template for gauging the profound significance of this election's outcome. Sometime in 1927, Gandhi was visited by a clergyman by the name of Reverend Mott. In the course of the conversation, the

Reverend remarked, "There must be many ups and downs in your work; events hope disappointment. In such circumstances, what gives you the most comfort? Gandhi replied, "The fact that the Indian masses, despite the provocation, do not abandon non-violence." And what is it, Mott asked, "that worries you the most and makes you restless all



Shining or burning? India refused to overlook what the BJP did in Gujarat

day and night?" Gandhi paused, and then said: "The hardheartedness of the educated is a matter of constant concern and sorrow to me." Had the Cyber Czar of Andhra Pradesh taken note, he might have not have to puzzle over the crushing defeat of his party. It is often remarked that India is a country of extremes: nearly 50 per cent of the country remains illiterate, and yet its hundreds of thousands of scientists, engineers, and computer specialists are winning it accolades in India and abroad when they are not pretending to be Sam rather than Satwinder and Matt rather than Mahesh. On the UN Human Development Index, India still ranks nearly towards the bottom. But what this election has done is to make palpably evident that we can no longer be unthinkingly invested in categories such as "education" and "literacy". Education has done evidently little to make American politics a hospitable space for humane and thinking people, and we have to be thankful to the illiterates of India for expelling those who rested their hopes on transforming all our realities into "virtual" and "Hindu" realities from the seats of power. The world. and the Congress party whose fractious, opportunist, and nakedly self-aggrandising politics allowed the BJP to flourish, should take heed. This is India's moment.

Vinay Lal teaches history at the University of California, Los Angeles. His most recent books are Empire of Knowledge: Culture and Plurality in the Global Economy (London: Pluto Press, 2002) and Of Cricket, Guinness and Gandhi: Essays on Indian History and Culture (Seagull, 2003).