India

# India's New Consensus

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**Recent regional elections in India handed Modi's BJP important new majorities. How can it be stopped?**

One can hardly overstate the significance of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) remarkable showing in India's recent state assembly elections in Manipur, Goa, Punjab, Uttrakhand, and Uttar Pradesh (UP), whose results were announced on March 11. Already the central point of political reference in the country and the only party with a genuinely national presence, the BJP made a qualitative leap forward. Its growing influence threatens to transform India into an authoritarian, Hindutva-ized polity and to strip the country's institutions of democracy.

While the BJP's victory in UP will be the main focus in what follows, the party's performance elsewhere cannot be ignored. The election results show its growing hegemony over the country as a whole, which will not only allow it to enact its Hindu-nationalist agenda but also help it further centralize power. In the face of BJP advances, India's progressive forces â€" ranging from the mainstream, anti-BJP parties to its Communist formations â€" must work together to change the national discourse and protect democracy nationwide.

# New Territories, New Challengers

The BJP's breakthrough in the northeast â€" a region that its main rivals, the Indian National Congress (INC), has long dominated â€" represents the party's second-most important long-term gain. The INC could once cite this area as evidence that it had the widest geographical spread, but, thanks to the BJP's strong performance in Manipur, Modi's call for a "Congress-free" country has taken on greater resonance.

Modi's general election victory in 2014 helped him propel his party into governance in two of the seven northeast states for the first time. In Manipur, the BJP has now jumped from next to nothing to controlling a third of the assembly with twenty-one seats out of sixty. With the help of local parties, desperate to curry favor with Modi, the BJP has formed the government outmaneuvering the INC and its twenty-eight seats.

This comes after the BJP's strong performance in last April's assembly elections in Assam, the most populated of the seven northeast states. There, it won sixty out the total of 126 seats; with the fourteen seats controlled by the regional Asom Gana Parishad (AGP), Modi's party established a comfortable governing majority.

In nearby Arunachal Pradesh, the INC won forty-three out of sixty seats in the 2014 assembly elections, but, by late 2016 â€" after farcical rounds of mass defections â€" forty-two of those legislative assembly members moved over to the People's Party of Arunachal (PPA), which promptly joined the BJP-led Northeast Democratic Alliance (NEDA) to form the government. Again, the lure of handouts from the central government was too tempting to resist.

Outside its northeastern stronghold, the INC defeated the BJP in Goa â€" taking seventeen seats to its rival's thirteen â€" but secured only 29.4 percent of vote. (The BJP took 32.5 percent.) Here again, the BJP has formed and leads the coalition government, testifying once more to the INC's declining appeal. In both Manipur and Goa, pliant, BJP-appointed governors skirted constitutional proprieties to secure these outcomes for their benefactor.

INC did secure a comfortable majority in Punjab, where it won seventy-seven out of the total 117 seats, pushing the

new Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) into second place. The greatly discredited leading coalition of the BJP and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), which caters to the majority Sikh community with an upper-caste bias, took eighteen seats.

This result represents a major loss for the AAP, which had anticipated either being the largest party or even securing an absolute majority. In 2014, it won four seats in the Lok Sabha, India's lower house. A year later, it formed the local government in Delhi and invested a major grassroots effort to prepare for these assembly elections.

Had the AAP achieved a majority, it would have appeared as the INC's most likely successor â€" a bourgeois, centrist force that could attract the widest cross section of the Indian electorate. Further, the win would have made the young party the only one besides the BJP with expanding popularity and geographic reach. Its results in Goa, however, dashed these expectations.

The AAP had reasonably high hopes of making a mark in that state, but it ended with only 6.3 percent of the vote (which was almost half the percentage tally of those voters who pressed the "None of the Above" button rather than choose any party) and no legislative seats. This reveals that, even with widespread disillusionment, the AAP couldn't seriously connect to local needs and issues.

As a result of this loss, it will struggle to construct an effective national challenge to the BJP. Now it is marking time, leaning on its performance as the leading party in Delhi and as the main opposition in Punjab to determine whether it can grow or whether, like other upstart parties, it will fade away.

We can easily identify the AAP's fatal flaw: at a moment when politics is moving steadily to the right, it would not seriously challenge the BJP's Hindutva agenda. Hoping to avoid the issue altogether, the AAP instead focused on safer, public-service campaigns that cut across class, caste, religious, and regional lines, revealing that it will neither emulate nor confront the Hindutva platform. The AAP, in fact, has no distinctive ideology and offers no alternative to the BJP's nationalist discourse. Indeed, it sometimes even bends to its rival's agenda. AAP may be able to win over the non-BJP parties' voters, but it cannot make a serious dent in the leading party's base, which is expanding because of â€" not despite â€" its Hindutva ideology.

In the northern province of Uttrakhand, where the INC held just one more seat than the BJP, the former lost twenty-one seats (leaving it with only eleven), and the BJP gained twenty-six, giving it fifty-seven seats and a clear majority. In UP, the BJP took 312 seats out of 403, giving it another super majority. Even in the context of India's first-past-the-post system, these results are extraordinary.

For the last three decades, UP's demographics have largely determined electoral outcomes, but this seems to be changing. Here, two major communities â€" the Dalits, which make up about 20 percent of the population, and Muslims, which make up over 19 percentâ€"do not support the BJP. Despite this, Modi's party has won large majorities in the past two elections.

In the 2014 general elections, Mayawati'sBahujanSamajParty (BSP) obtained 20 percent of the vote, and the BJP took 42 percent. Yet her party won no seats, and Modi's bagged seventy-one out of the total eighty. This year, Mayawati's vote share went up to 22.2 percent, but she secured only nineteen seats. The Samajwadi Party (SP), which enjoys support from the Yadav and Muslim communities, also fared dismally, taking forty-seven seats on a vote of 21.8 percent.

Of course, uneven demographics partially explain these results. The BSP's 20 percent represents an average across the state. In some areas, it would not have reached even double digits while, in majority Dalit regions, it likely took

around 40 percent, give or take. Nevertheless, the surprising results have raised concerns about the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) that India has used since 2004.

No other democracy has relied on this system so repeatedly or extensively. Indeed, most advanced democracies have rejected its use because the machines do not leave a paper trail to ensure accurate results. It is not surprising, then, that Mayawati publicly accused the BJP of manipulating the system. Her party's general secretary also wrote a formal letter of complaint to the election commission (EC).

Indeed, a team comprised of three experts from India, Netherlands, and the United States has studied the EVMs, and their documentary reveals how easily the machines can be tampered with. Further, in April 2014, evidence that one machine could only record BJP votes went public. On this occasion, the INC complained, but when it last won the general elections in 2009, the opposition parties â€" including the BJP â€" registered their concerns about the system. Since it took the 2014 general election, Modi's party has been silent about the issue.

While there is surely great potential for voter fraud across India, exit polls in UP â€" which skirt the issue of EVMs completely â€" all predicted that the BJP would win somewhere between 180 and 280 seats. We must then analyze how Modi's party won and what its victory means for the country and the future.

# Uttar Pradesh, Why and How?

The 2014 general elections marked the first time since independence that the majority party in the Lok Sabha did not have a single Muslim MP. In the 2017 UP elections, the BJP did not put up a single Muslim candidate. Modi's message is clear: the BJP does not care about the Muslim vote, proving that it, unlike all the other parties, refuses to play the politics of appeasement.

The BJP's victory in UP raises a number of questions. Considering the state's population is 20 percent Muslim â€" and that both the SP and BSP courted these votes â€" how did the Hindu nationalists secure victory? Do Muslims vote en bloc? Did they in fact vote for the BJP in substantial numbers, as party leaders like Amit Shah and others have claimed?

Put simply, Shah is incorrect. Given his party's Hindutva ideology, its leadership's venomous attitude toward Muslims, and the brutal history of both communal riots and individually targeted assaults carried out by the BJP's affiliates, like the Rashtriya Swayemsevak Sangh (RSS), Muslims as a group oppose the BJP. That said, the Muslim community does not have a consolidated strategic vote, which the BJP's success in these areas makes evident.

The Hindustan Times analyzed forty-two of the seventy-three constituencies where the population is over 30 percent Muslim and found that the BJP won thirty-one. (The SP took ten and the BSP only one.) Besides voting against the BJP, Muslims pick their candidates like everyone else: class, caste, and local concerns shape their preferences.

In states with a two-horse race between Congress and BJP, Congress wins the Muslim vote. In states where neither the BJP nor Congress has power, the Muslim vote splits among other regional parties. In states with three or more major parties like UP, the votes are spread between Congress, SP, and BSP.

Here, region, class, and caste play a decisive role. For example, more poor Pasmanda Muslims support the BSP than the SP. Likewise, the Yadav community, officially classified as an "otherwise backward caste" (OBC), prefers the SP, and the Jatav community, which belongs to the Dalit caste, largely votes for the BSP. In the 2012 assembly

elections, the Yadav and Jatav communities offered more consolidated support for their parties than Muslim and Brahmin voters. Two years later, however, Brahmins and Muslims were more consolidated than the Yadavs and Jatavs. In areas where riots have taken place, the Muslim vote understandably comes together more tightly.

Fortunately, UP did not have a repeat of the 2013 riots, but the BJP nevertheless played the ethnic card in its campaign. It did so on various registers, ranging from Modi's more masked â€" but still clearly abusive â€"rhetoric to many of the party's candidates more naked hate speeches. These tactics should have forced the EC to disqualify the candidates, but it did not.

When it comes to caste, the RSS/BJP and cohort organizations had to operate differently. Given that the Yadav OBCs constitute a loyal SP block, that the Jatavs go for the BSP, and that Muslims would never vote for the BJP, the party had to win as much as possible of the remaining 60 percent of the electorate, which is comprised of Brahmins and other upper castes (around 25percent), non-Yadav OBCs (around 30 percent), and non-Jatav Dalits.

The BJP's strategy depended on the nation's rapidly changing economics and ideology. Uneven capitalist development, accelerated by the neoliberal turn, has combined with the communications revolution to begin to unify the country. Fewer and fewer Indians rely on the agricultural sector for employment, turning instead to the low-paid and insecure non-farm rural and urban labor markets. Migration to major cities and to larger towns in the rural areas has created new links between rural and urban life, confronting citizens with the connection between economics and politics.

Voters now recognize the central government's power to shape life in the provinces, the inequalities within and across states and regions, the ever starker contrasts between the rich and the poor, and the corrupt processes that have helped create this situation. Life becomes more precarious for many while others are making steady progress, creating class and caste resentment. Meanwhile, a nationalist identity is developing alongside more local and traditional forms of collective identification.

In India, the emotional content and practical thrust of nationalism is very much under construction. Here the numerous organizations that make up the Hindu-nationalist Sangh Parivar have been incredibly effective: the BJP has taken up residence in the halls of state and central government while the rest of the Sangh's organizations have integrated themselves throughout civil society. The Sangh built its power on a longer process that cultivated a sense of belonging to a broader cross-caste religious community among Hindus.

This growing sense of nationalist identification does not necessarily oppose more local forms of identification. Rather, in UP and elsewhere, the national and the local have started to meld. This change is by no means permanent, but only particular forms of struggle can move politics in a more progressive direction. Indeed, the caste reservation systems, which guaranteed representation in government and civil society for historically oppressed groups like Dalits and the OBCs' lower layers, acted for a time as barriers to the advance of the BJP/RSS. Not anymore.

On the one hand, the BJP/RSS has largely accepted the principle of reservations. On the other hand, the profound limitations of this, the strongest form of affirmative action, have now been laid bare. Reservations can only exist for a small minority within the reserved ranks, and its application has disproportionately favored the children of those who already used the system to climb the social ladder. The system no longer meets the needs of those left behind. At the same time, it has created frustration among the higher rural castes as they watched their fortunes erode thanks to rising production costs, declining inherited land holdings, and so on.

Now, upper-caste OBCs and even some forward castes demand reservations for themselves and scapegoat those whom the system was designed to favor. There is the absence of enough decently paid jobs throughout urban India,

and the country's utterly inadequate health, social security, and educational services means that huge numbers cannot be lifted out of poverty. The turn to religious forms of consolation â€" a global development â€" is an unsurprising response to the forms of alienation that the neoliberal order imposes everywhere.

It is in this fertile soil that the BJP's leaders have been diligently planting their message. They accuse the parties that oppose them â€" the protectors of the Hindu faith â€" of trying to appease Muslims. What about the Hindus? Then they point out that the BSP favors the Jatavs and the SP favors the Yadavs. What about the rest of the Dalits and OBCs?

When it comes to Muslims, the Sangh Parivar plays its nationalist card, emphasizing the rising danger presented by homegrown Muslim terrorism and by Pakistan. Indian Muslims, they presume, sympathize with the enemy by virtue of religious affiliation. Indeed, Modi did not hesitate to imply, without any evidence, that a railway accident in UP was the work of foreigners.

If there had once been widespread indifference toward the plight of Muslims, now resentment and even hostility has grown. As a result, a majority religious community has come to believe that it is the victim. This gives the BJP more latitude to deploy its Muslim-baiting agenda, both regionally and nationally.

Finally, we must take two other factors into account. Alongside the Hindutva narrative â€" ably spread by a powerful grassroots network of cadres that is unmatched by any other collection of party organizations â€" the BJP has repeatedly claimed that the Modi regime brought about rapid economic development. In truth, the party's overall record, both in central government and in BJP-ruled states, is quite unremarkable when compared to public requirements, to non-BJP ruled states, and to Congress's record. But Modi understands that short-term perceptions now have greater weight than actual performance.

Secondly, the greater influence of media on politics has paved the way for a new kind of personalized populism, allowing for a seemingly more direct relationship between the supreme leader and the public. This bypasses representative institutions because the public feels that its concerns are reaching the very top. The supreme leader can thereby centralize more power through both representative institutions and internal party structures.

In UP, the BJP refused to name a chief ministerial candidate, relying on Modi to lead the campaign. Never before has any prime minister taken so much time off from central responsibilities. He and BJP president Amit Shah are therefore taking credit for the UP victory, making them effectively unassailable from internal criticism at least until the next general election. This constitutes a shift within the Sangh in the favor of the Modi/Shah-controlled BJP. Even RSS cadres are extending greater loyalty to Modi personally. The RSS leadership, already wary of concentrating power in the prime minister's hands, will not like this development.

Finally, Modi appears to voters as an incorruptible politician. His poor OBC background â€" a first for India's prime minister â€" further boosts his popularity. Over time, this highly exaggerated self-projection might lead to a dramatic popular disillusionment, but if the short-term gains are important enough â€" as they are in UP â€" the long-term benefits are also considerable.

For example, Modi believed that the demonetization gamble would win him huge public support. Despite the fact that it imposed substantial socioeconomic distress on a wide scale, the strategy has succeeded. Modi came across as a single-minded warrior against the rich and their ill-gotten wealth. The assembly election results in UP and elsewhere underline that Modi won the battle of perceptions. Those who suffered as a result of demonetization believed they were making a honorable sacrifice for the greater public good. Modi effectively welded class resentment to nationalist fervor.

# The Sangh's Next Moves

This victory now makes many courses of action that once seemed distant more feasible. Most importantly, of course, Modi and the BJP are now the frontrunners for the next general elections, which are due in mid-2019. Assembly elections in Gujarat (currently held by the BJP) and Himachal Pradesh (held by the INC) will take place in November–December 2017. The BJP will pull out all stops to win these, particularly Modi's home state of Gujarat, where the main contender is once again the Congress. In November–December 2018, elections are due in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh (MP), and Chhattisgarh, all three ruled by BJP administrations. Modi may call for general elections around that time.

The central government has already put out floaters to assess support for synchronizing the central and state elections. The BJP no doubt feels this change would play to its advantage everywhere and set a precedent for future elections. Adopting synchronized elections, however, would reduce the political diversity that has marked the Indian polity since the late 1960s,which have made it much more difficult for a single party to dominate the whole country.

In July, an electoral college â€" consisting of MPs from both houses of parliament and MLAs from the state assemblies â€" will choose a new president. The BJP's gains in the state assemblies almost certainly guarantee that they will get to pick the president.

In 2020, seats in India's upper house, the Rajya Sabha, will be up for election, and its composition will depend on how well parties do in the next general elections. The BJP wants to ensure that it holds a two-thirds majority in both houses, which will put it in a position to carry out major constitutional amendments. Should this happen, it may move toward a system of governance more centered on the president.

The Sangh has its own policy ambitions, many of them religious in nature. In UP, it will likely build the [Ram Mandir](#), which it wants to place on a site where a mosque was destroyed in 1992. The plan has been held in abeyance by the Supreme Court since then, but the BJP/RSS might start construction after making a deal with the puppet Muslim religious organization in the disputed area. Such a deal would give them legal justification. The temple would concretize the Sangh's claims that India is not only a Hindu nation but in fact a Hindu state in all but name. The surprise announcement that Yogi Adityanath â€" a godman turned politician (with criminal cases lodged against him) and hitherto seena s occupying the extreme â€˜fringe' among Hinutva fanatics â€" the clearest signal that the temple issue will be upfront for the 2019 general elections.

The Sangh will also push for outlawing [triple talaq](#) within the Muslim community. All progressive sections of society, including many Muslim women, will support this plan. Much trickier would be trying to establish a Uniform Civil Code (UCC), although the Sangh has long called for one. Any genuinely non-discriminatory UCC would have to address the patriarchal characteristics of existing Hindu inheritance and tax laws as well as marriage customs. This explains why, for all their tirades against Muslim law, the Sangh has never put forward a draft UCC for public discussion. We can also expect mobilizations and proposals to ban the sale of beef and its transport nationwide. Yogi Adityanath has already announced the closure of "illegal" abattoirs in UP, which has encouraged physical assaults on Muslim-run businesses as well as sending a political message that Hindutva concerns on various fronts will be strongly advanced.

Existing efforts to carry out education reform will be enhanced at both the central level and in states ruled by the BJP. Already, the Sangh has revised curricula and hired new personnel in hopes of changing the terms of intellectual discourse. Since 2014, central universities have faced systematic assaults, including physical violence. Most recently, the students and faculty in Delhi University, the country's largest, have seen an attack on freedom of speech and of association in the name of preventing supposedly antinational discourse and organization. Self-censorship and fear of physical reprisals have become widespread among dissenters, critics, and even neutral parties.

Labor reforms that give more power to employers to set wage and working conditions have already been introduced, and many more are on the way, further pushing the economy in a neoliberal direction.

The BJP will also become more aggressive in the Kashmir Valley, and they will likely escalate their attempt to finish off the Naxalites in Central India, irrespective of the collateral damage inflicted on local tribes. This is no campaign to win over hearts and minds.

The government will also accelerate the effort to make holding a Unique Identification Document necessary if not compulsory for all citizens. Given the absence of meaningful safeguards against invasion of privacy, this will start transforming India into a strong surveillance state. The Sangh has always wanted this outcome so that it can better monitor the behavior not only of its principal enemies â€" Muslims and the Left â€" but also of those it considers opponents of the Hindutva project.

Higher levels of the judiciary have shown some resistance to the Modi regime, but they will not remain immune to the shifting balances of forces in society at large.

# The Opposition

The election results predict a bleak future in which opposition parties and marginalized sections of society will be forced to survive. Among Muslims, the search for self-protection could go in two directions: many will decide to declare loyalty to the BJP, while others will become more attracted to radicalized Islam. While counterproductive, we cannot dismiss this development as inconceivable.

Meanwhile, membership in Sangh organizations will grow. Greater ideological agreement will account for some of this, but straightforward money-making and career-enhancing reasons will also swell the group's membership. Certainly, the Sangh's more dedicated foot soldiers will have greater freedom of action.

A number of factors will shape the responses of the political parties that rule non-BJP states. First, they will have to assess their confidence in their future prospects. The BJP made it clear immediately after the election that it would target the 120 LokSabha seats in the states where it has yet to gain a foothold, which include West Bengal, Odisha, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and the remaining states of the northeast.

Further, these opposition parties will have to determine how much they depend on central largesse to pursue policies that will strengthen their base. Their historical relationship with the BJP and their ambitions for the future will play an important role as well. Some have been content to remain purely regional forces and therefore are more open to reaching a modus vivendi with the BJP, while others have wanted to expand their presence and influence, which would demand some kind of confrontation.

The Congress, the BSP, the SP, and the mainstream left parties â€" the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M), the Communist Party of India (CPI),and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation (CPI-ML) â€" all have, for differing reasons, no choice but to come out in strong opposition to the BJP. Even the AAP may do so.

These forces could become the building blocks for a national opposition, but there are reasons to doubt that they can cooperate with each other, let alone bring in other allies. For one, they have regional rivalries. Furthermore, the elections have sparked serious internal tensions within the INC, SP, and BSP. The SP might split, while we can expect calls for leadership change in the other two parties. In all three, members will likely defect to join the BJP.

Fear of a common opponent without a unifying platform does not offer much promise for a strong coalition.

The mainstream left faces another kind of crisis. The CPI-ML is the smallest party, with no parliamentary representation. It has an active student base in Delhi and parts of Bihar, but the other two parties do not take it seriously. The CPI and CPI (M) now have two kinds of members: those with little or no ideological commitment who will shift loyalties if material or political gains are available, and more ideologically committed members who now suffer from low morale. While no longer confident in their parties' vision, they want to be active on the ground. If the leadership can guide them, they will engage seriously in grassroots struggles.

We now face not merely an interlude of BJP dominance; we must recognize that the party â€" and the Sangh more generally â€" has established a certain level of hegemony that is still expanding. The more immediate effort to defeat Modi's party in the upcoming elections must be integrated into a long-term strategy to establish a more humane and progressive consensus.

The Modi regime's neoliberal policies cannot provide the development that the prime minister promised. Undernourishment and malnourishment will remain at unacceptably high levels, calling into question his claims that absolute poverty is declining. As it is, the government measures this poverty level through household income surveys that do not include the cost of most basic requirements like education, health care, housing, and social security. Modi cannot meet, either quantitatively or qualitatively, the two needs that are the most demanded â€" decent jobs and public healthcare. Income inequality is rising rapidly, creating increasing frustration. These failures guarantee mass discontent, but how will this anger and frustration be channeled politically?

Party-level politics to defeat the BJP in the forthcoming elections will undoubtedly be pursued with very uncertain outcomes. To the extent that the Left and other progressive forces can contribute to this effort, fine. But we must also begin to construct a broader anti-neoliberal platform from which a newly rejuvenated left can emerge. Where this invigorated resistance comes from is a separate discussion.

For now, I'll propose five concrete areas around which the mainstream left and other progressive organizations can build anti-BJP momentum.

1. **Fight for rural employment**
 2.
 Modi has called the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) wasteful and proposed diminishing its scope of operation. Unable to completely repeal it, he had to retain its promise of 100 days of annual employment at guaranteed wages for all those demanding work.

He has not fulfilled this promise, and corruption among the officials assigned to oversee its implementation remains widespread. Since the scheme was democratically enacted, the situation offers a perfect opportunity for mainstream left parties â€" which have both the material and human resources â€" to intervene. They should audit its implementation and mobilize the beneficiaries to make sure its provisions are carried out. This engagement would directly connect the Left with the poor and downtrodden, win their support, and geographically extend its base.

Today, a few progressive civil society groups and local movements perform what little auditing is done. They would surely welcome an infusion of effort, which would also regenerate activism and enthusiasm among grassroots workers and cadres.

2. **Build coalitions with social movements**
 3.

A host of progressive movements, which by their very nature oppose the Sangh's ethnic orientation and development plans, would benefit from Left engagement. These organizations operate all over the country. Some work on specific issues, others on the concerns of particular sections of the population, including tribal groups, lower castes, women, fisherfolk, and those displaced by dams and other big infrastructure projects.

The Left has the capacity, even without the support of the other non-BJP parties, to bring these movements together andcoordinate their struggles. Over time, this network could develop a common platform that all its constituents would own. This would represent a major political breakthrough with national resonance.

## 3. **Engage with Dalit activists**
 4.

 The Dalit question remains fundamental. The reservation policies' dead end means that more young Dalit leaders recognize the need to go beyond the old politics of recognition and move toward redistribution. To do so, they will need to strike wider alliances with other lower castes, with deprived classes, with besieged minorities (religious and tribal), and with left and progressive forces. The rising popularity of Jignesh Mevani, a young Dalit lawyer in Gujarat who has called for land reform for Dalits (many of whom are landless workers),reflects this new reality.

The Left has many opportunities and openings to explore. But, since even the ordinary cadres of these parties are steeped in caste practices, the leadership must model how to make connections that transform the interactions between their members and those of Dalit organizations.

## 4. **Preserve civil liberties**
 5.

 The Left can unite with other non-BJP parties around protecting civil liberties. Repeated, large-scale extra-parliamentary agitations will matter more here than any legislative opposition. Drafting a joint Charter of Rights through public discussion would be one way to start.

Further, this coalition could attack one of the BJP's weakest points. Like most right-wing and far-right neoliberal forces, the Hindu nationalist party has depoliticized the notion of human flourishing by presenting marketed pleasures as the route to self-fulfillment. This brings the principle of lifestyle freedoms â€" such as sexual orientation and partnership choices â€" with it. Growing numbers of educated, young Indians of both genders believe in sexual freedom, and it could become the basis for strong resistance to the Sangh's "love jihads" â€" their crude attempt to portray young Muslim males as sexual predators. The opposition can highlight not so much the Muslim-Hindu interface but simply the right to love for all, including for gays and lesbians.

The media features many liberal commentators who oppose these restrictive laws, but no party has felt comfortable enough to support, let alone plan, street protests around these issues. A pro-love movement would rile Hindutva forces and find support even among the educated, young voters otherwise sympathetic to the BJP and its affiliates.

Further, women's political activity is growing, as reflected in their rising turnout at elections. Progressive forces should capture this momentum. Women have always participated in struggles around everyday problems of livelihood. The mobile revolution has made it easier for women to organize around gendered issues â€" all the more reason for the Left to focus on such concerns.

## 5. **Change the discourse**
 6.
 Finally, the terms of public discourse will not change unless a counter-hegemonic strategy challenges what now prevails. There must be a continuing battle of ideas. In fact, the intellectual challenge to the BJP and Sangh has often

seemed more successful than the political one.

Certainly, the Sangh understands the importance of this terrain, which is why it has fought to transform education, but left, liberal, feminist, and Dalit students have organized demonstrations and confronted the Sangh. To be sure, the battle of ideas will never be the decisive lever that brings about a hegemonic shift, but it will play an important role. Without gaining ground here, electoral and political defeats for the BJP â€" no matter how severe â€" will not produce a more just national consensus.

# A New Consensus

Struggles on the terrain of discourse should take up four broad themes: a more humane nationalism, a more democratic India, a greater commitment to social justice, and a wholesale rejection of neoliberalism.

For all of nationalism's limitations and its inherently two-faced character, the left must challenge the Hindutva version with its own. The nation state remains the principal political unit in which ordinary people feel politically empowered; they are at least the legitimizers, if not the exercisers, of power. Opposition forces must present a secular and democratic vision of the nation to oppose the Sangh's exclusivist and authoritarian Hindu nationalism.

Indeed, secularism is a necessary but not sufficient condition for democracy. Seeing that no country is as culturally diverse as India, there is no reason to believe that a particular Hindu order lies at the heart of Indian identity. The Left's central message has to be that there are different ways of being and feeling Indian, which can only happen once all citizens' cultures, languages, and religions are respected and their material needs and concerns impartially addressed. Only then can India construct a nationalism that gets its strength from its humaneness and democracy.

Indeed, Hindutva ideology poses a serious threat to democracy. The Left must find ways to stop this erosion and to further strengthen Indian institutions. Here two issues must come to fore: first, we must reject any attempt by this or future governments to synchronize elections. Almost all the non-BJP parties should be able to agree on this and mobilize against it because they fear losing any electoral ground. But this is a narrow and self-serving reason.

More fundamentally, synchronization will erode Indian federalism's distinctive nature and thereby weaken the nation's democracy. Unlike in the United States, the distribution of powers between the federal and state governments favors centralized power, making the potential for authoritarianism greater. State legislatures and judiciaries do not have the same freedom in India as they do in the United States to counter, for example, Trump's white nationalist agenda.

To further strengthen democracy, the opposition parties should support replacing first-past-the-post polling with proportional representation. The non-BJP parties will need to be convinced, as doing so will lessen their chances of winning majority rule in the provinces. But because the fear of overall domination by the BJP at both the provincial and central levels is growing, some parties might come around. Regardless, making this change will establish a crucial institutional barrier to Hindutva political domination.

By any standard of basic democratic principles, the first-past-the-post system is a disgrace. The main argument for it has been that it provides stability of rule. Not only is this not itself an indisputable virtue, but there is little evidence to support this claim. The Indian experience has shown that the system does not necessarily produce a two- or three-party system. Further, coalition governments in India and elsewhere can and do enjoy stable power.

Ending first-past-the-post would require a constitutional amendment, with two-thirds of both houses in support â€"

something that is far from today's reality. But the time has come to begin serious public discussion about it and about ways to strengthen the democratic character of the polity.

Third, India needs much greater social justice. Here the issue of caste is paramount. While continuing to defend different forms of affirmative action, we must now fight to empower the lower castes and to completely destroy the caste system.

Here again, a strong momentum to achieve this would strike a body blow to the forces of Hindutva, which must retain a Brahminized version of the religion. Howsoever loosely accommodative this Brahminism might be, it would remain fundamentally inimical to Ambedkar's project and hopes.

The project would start with a constitutional amendment outlawing caste itself, refusing to be satisfied with the existing clause that only bans discrimination. This provision endorses the belief that a non-discriminatory caste system is possible and would be acceptable â€" an absurdity that has never been sufficiently attacked. Modi and the Sangh are trying to appropriate Ambedkar's legacy, and they should not be allowed to get away with this.

Lastly, the Left must oppose the neoliberal policy framework, arguing as forcefully as possible that it has proven to be a comprehensive failure on economic, social, political, and ecological grounds. Simply, it does not address basic needs; it has already created and will continue to create unacceptable levels of income inequality, an affront to the principle of basic dignity for all. Equal basic liberties without equal basic sufficiencies hollows out democracy, while growing economic disparities result in plutocrats' rising influence in the corridors of political power.

Ecologically, the single-minded obsession with achieving and sustaining the highest possible average growth rates spells disaster. Steadily retreating natural forest cover, expanding desertification, declining water table levels, soil erosion, phosphate poisoning, greater air pollution, and diminishing biodiversity are all processes in motion.

If avoiding these future disasters through an alternative development path to that of neoliberal capitalism remains in doubt, the necessity of fighting for one has never been clearer.

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*PS:*

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