Commentary

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Post-election India: Where does Development Stand?

India voted a religious fundamentalist party to power again in May 2019. The Bharatiya Janata Party (literally, Indian People's Party) won far more seats in the lower house of the parliament than was required to form the government.

The party also gathered 45% of all votes cast along with its allies, a handsome figure in a multi-party electoral system. The opposition parties failed to unite and form a credible alliance or launch sharp criticisms at government policies.

The ruling party, meanwhile, managed to deepen its institutional presence, capturing one state institution after another. Dubious electoral bonds and generous corporate funding flowed to the ruling party's coffers. The Election Commission turned its sight away from any violation that the top leaders in the ruling party committed while campaigning for votes.

Time could not have been riper for the Hindutva establishment – the larger form of the BJP that wants to declare India a Hindu nation – to sail through the elections. The money spent on offline and online publicity machinery, especially in building the messiah masculinity of the prime ministerial candidate, did its job.

This much we know. But how do we understand the place of development in a majoritarian democracy? Why do people vote for a party that does not deliver on development for the masses?

The previous government under the same prime minister had come to power with the slogan *sabka saath, sabka vikas* ("with everyone, development for everyone").

In November 2016, the government had pushed the entire country into queues before banks, when it had announced that currency notes of Rs.500 and Rs.1000 would not be accepted anymore. The justification given was that it would bring back undeclared money, presumed to be held in cash.

This caused a large part of the cash-driven economy of India to come to a standstill. Reports of deaths occurring in queues came in from across the country; the government refused to provide an exact number.

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (literally, clean India mission), the government's initiative to build toilets across the country, produced questionable results. States were declared open-defecation free using unclear criteria.

Millions were spent, but the initiative could hardly bring about behavioural changes in people to encourage toilet usage. There

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was [no serious effort in eliminating manual scavenging](#), a lot of which was done by Dalits, the communities placed at the lowest rung of India's caste hierarchy.

The agrarian crisis had reached a new peak. Farmer protests had rocked the country – from Delhi, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in the north of the country to Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in the south. The anger was explicitly directed [against the government at the centre](#).

The government's response was to deposit a measly sum of [Rs.6,000 annually in farmers' bank accounts](#). A crop insurance scheme announced in the name of the prime minister was recently shown to have [40% of farmers' claims unpaid](#).

[Unemployment had reached a 45-year high](#). Despite its concerted efforts, the government could not stop an official report stating these statistics from getting leaked, [conceding the information later](#). Unemployment, moreover, was [deepening frustration among the youth](#) . The skill development programme that the government had rolled out [did almost nothing](#) to raise the calibre of the workforce.

That the opposition could not make critical points out of these issues during the election campaign was definitely its shortcoming. But these were issues that were felt by the people in the everyday lives and potent enough to have had them vote the ruling party out of power.

This is when we begin to understand how development could easily be reduced to a non-issue through clever public relations work. This is not to say that the people of India could be easily be asked to believe the eyewash. The ruling establishment, with all its political and non-political off-shoots, have managed to create an effective system of clientelism across the country, spanning local neighbourhoods to the corporate sector.

Almost a hundred years in the workshop, this clientelist structure was custom built to translate patronage into votes. In a democracy where welfare systems are broken, courts mired in long delays, and formal state still absent in the remote corners, patron-client relationships provide important services in resolving local problems, influencing state officials and gaining access to resources.

The ruling establishment has been capturing these patron-client links at the grassroots, replacing the clientelist systems over which other parties had held sway. With each link, party goals, liberal use of physical violence against Dalits and Muslims, and newer promises of patronage are passed on.

For these reasons, it could be short-sighted to see the electoral gains of the Hindutva forces last month as merely a part of the trend of right-wing parties gaining power around the world.

That a party that could not deliver on development for many was still voted back to power might seem ironic. The revised logo of the new government – *sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas* (the last bit means "everyone's trust") – might provide some cue. All the government now needs is people's belief that it will bring development. They shall gloss over its failure on fundamentals – from toilets to employment. To salvage India, development needs to be salvaged from being turned apolitical.