

Opinion – Opposition Strategy and Perspective in India's 2024 Elections

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/05/28/opinion-opposition-strategy-and-perspective-in-indias-2024-elections/>

AJAY GUDAVARTHY, MAY 28 2024

Worldview – a way of thinking about the world – could be the fault line between the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) success and the opposition's struggle to dethrone Modi, even after ten years of rule. There is a fundamental difference between the campaign of the BJP and the opposition parties. The BJP does not campaign on issues but puts forward a perspective and a worldview that lends a frame of approaching not only contentious electoral issues but a frame that has the potential of analysing all other issues that are not necessarily and immediately connected to elections. The BJP offers a perspective or a frame of analysis, while the opposition is only offering comments on independent issues without a perspective or a narrative. It can therefore make contradictory claims and get away and the opposition's critique does not stick because there is no perspective. The BJP has made governance mobilisation, while the opposition parties have made counterarguments look legalistic and part of governance language. It could well be the result of most parties in the opposition today were in power for a long time, unlike the BJP which has gained this kind of domineering position more recently.

The BJP is driven by the activism of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), while the opposition is driven by organisational machinations. Surprisingly, even the language of the left parties looks more statist and bland. They lack imagination, while the BJP, despite being in power, looks like an oppositional force. The BJP offers a moral worldview; the opposition looks like it has no worldview. Apart from money, media, and other factors, the reason why the opposition is ailing is it strangely continues to have a lacklustre campaign. It could well be because it is drawn into the echo-chamber Modi and his media has elaborately constructed. Modi with a support of 30 per cent has succeeded in magnifying his support and stature. The opposition is not convinced that it can beat Modi's credibility, which is like losing the battle even before it is fought.

The opposition needs to offer a perspective-based narrative – a story that connects issues and does not leave them standing alone. A perspective or a moral worldview constructs the way life is or ought to be lived. The opposition is wary of the question because Modi turns it around to a '70 years narrative', and they are not invested enough because they wish to play within the limits of corporate capitalism. The BJP-RSS are offering a strong, emotional, and 'ethical' worldview of how 'Indians' and 'Hindus' need to be recognised. In this, they have a story of Hindu historical injury, which already occupies the place of an underdog fighting for justice. This large narrative is then woven into multiple narratives, but the moot point is they are all connected. With demonetisation, (where all bank notes over Rs 500 were nullified in an attempt to fight corruption) it's about black money, the 'war on terror', fighting the Maoists, and *saaf niyat* (pure intentions). The opposition might say demonetisation is a failed policy but where is the story or a worldview here? The failed policy of demonetisation should have been linked to how the Modi government thinks and what can be expected of it in coming years. This, perhaps, might have set people thinking and evaluating.

A worldview has to be lived, moral and experiential for common people to relate. It carries with it a folkish character to its storytelling ability. Among the opposition leaders, Arvind Kejriwal of the Aam Admi Party (Chief Minister of Delhi) comes a tad closer to this ability to offer a frame, a worldview and a story. For instance, most political parties opposed the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) as being unconstitutional and majoritarian in its discrimination against Muslims. Kejriwal, on the other hand, argued that the CAA will bring people from other countries who will

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demand jobs and resources. Where will the BJP bring them from? This offers a story that also beats the Hindu-Muslim binary and converts it into an insider-outsider binary perspective. Similarly, in the Delhi assembly, Kejriwal narrated the story of 'chouthi pass Raja' (uneducated king). This is the reason that Kejriwal is being hounded, he can tell a story that sticks. But the interesting part is Modi recognises the potential of this storytelling. Kejriwal held the potential to breach the Hindu vote bank of the BJP but also within the limits of the majoritarian psyche.

Rahul Gandhi, of the Congress, has opted to go beyond the logic of majoritarian ethics but this will require an even better story leading to a worldview. Framing an alternative in the context of a fossilised majoritarian frame is no easy task, unlike Kejriwal and most regional parties that have limited themselves to a more pragmatic option. Gandhi occasionally comes close to this ability to offer a story but otherwise, it's mostly ethical positions and critical comments on individual issues. Issues, policies, comments, and campaigns of the BJP are rarely connected. Rahul Gandhi, at a press conference, narrated a story of a king who had his soul in a bird. He linked the soul of Adani (Indian billionaire businessman) and the king, of course Modi. Rahul therefore offered a perspective that if Modi is attacked, he is silent but if Adani is critiqued he gets investigative agencies to hound you. Similarly, left parties are mostly ideological in their critique around stated principles. The problem is not in being ideological, but in the failure to create a narrative. Class too has 'moral foundations' and has experiential dimensions. D. Raja, General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (CPI), at a recent event said his Bharat Mata is the lady who cleans public toilets. This is a powerful imagery that bursts the masculinity in hyper-nationalism.

In history, all dominant ideologies and regimes were delegitimised by holding a mirror to their claims. During the anti-colonial movement, Gandhi held a mirror to colonial power's claim of being liberal. Subversion has to be internal to the dominant narrative. Marxists dethroned the bourgeoisie by exposing its claims to universality. In the Indian case, the claim is to Hindu inclusivity and ascendance. Most parties have failed to find a way of delegitimising the claims of Hindu supremacy. This was partly due to a fear of a Hindu backlash. Demagogues are strong not because of the narratives they set but in being keenly aware of the limits of those narratives. They are aware of what kind of narratives can dislodge them. They therefore set the tone of counter-narratives and frame it in such a way that counter-narratives strengthen the dominant narratives.

The only way to break free from such shackles is to espouse a worldview with great commitment that offers the electorate a different and contrasting way of evaluating the issues at hand. Ten years was a sufficiently long period for this lesson to be learnt. This will remain an important lesson, irrespective of the results in 2024. The trick is a deft combination of performance and perspective in creating an alternative sense of reality. What creates effective campaign narratives is a complex question but at least part of the explanation seems to lie in the ability in bringing alive a campaign that can speak in multiple registers to different constituencies. The outcome of the results in general elections in 2024 in India will allow us to further reflect on this.

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