**[A billion Indians minus the four](https://www.dawn.com/news/1793201/a-billion-indians-minus-the-four)**

[Jawed Naqvi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/280/jawed-naqvi) Published November 28, 2023

ELECTIONS are underway in five Indian states. The BJP lost all five last time, though it has created the impression that it won the round hands down. Many see the races as the pre-finals before the general elections due in six months. Prime Minster Narendra Modi is seeking a third successive term and the BJP has cast the net wide, with its standard blend of religious polarisation, caste-based promises and claims of glitzy development.

The BJP faces the centrist Congress one on one in three states of the five — Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh — while in Telangana and Meghalaya the two national parties must challenge or woo local satraps. Though the BJP lost all five races, it wrested power in Madhya Pradesh after engineering defections from the Congress, which otherwise had a clear majority. The BJP also outfoxed the Congress by shoring up a coalition with local parties in Meghalaya where it secured all of two seats in the 60-member assembly!

Apart from its humongous financial clout, and its honed street power, albeit mostly in states it rules, the BJP has another arrow in its quiver — the federal police and tax sleuths that raid opposition leaders. It has all but decapitated the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) — which came to power on a platform of fighting corruption — with the arrest of key ministers from the Delhi government for alleged graft.

A criminal probe has been initiated against Mahua Moitra, the articulate opposition woman MP from West Bengal. Charges of corrupt practices against her are widely seen as spurious and contrived. A BJP MP has accused her of asking questions in the Lok Sabha on behalf of a businessman and taking money for it. A BJP-led house committee investigated the matter and recommended her removal as MP.

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Ms Moitra and AAP ministers are leading voices in targeting tycoons close to Mr Modi, together with Rahul Gandhi of the Congress. He too was expelled from Lok Sabha for allegedly slurring the name ‘Modi’. The supreme court restored his membership although the case continues.

Gandhi, Moitra and AAP leaders are ferociously critical of Mr Modi’s proximity with the Adani Group. On the media front too, journalists filing unflattering reports on Gautam Adani have been targeted and threatened with arrest. A senior executive and the editor of the NewsClick news portal are currently in jail over allegations of accepting money from a businessman of Indian origin considered close to China. NewsClick has led a sustained campaign against crony capitalism, which it says deeply benefits the Adani Group.

On the communal front, the BJP is whipping up a polarised campaign ahead of next month’s proposed inauguration of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, built at the site of the destroyed Babri Masjid. The BJP government in Uttar Pradesh has unleashed a range of measures to provoke communal backlash from Muslims, a pleasure thus far happily denied. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath’s government recently placed a ban on food products carrying the label of ‘halal’. It frowns on meat-eating even as many Hindus eat meat and eggs, foods shunned by puritans among them. A ‘halal’ label, in any case, not only enables practising Muslims to identify the food permitted by their religion, but also cautions Sikhs and other communities that avoid ‘halal’ food prohibited by their religion. The halal ban order wouldn’t stand scrutiny in a court of law, but it’s enough to create distractions from what are counted as Mr Modi’s failures in 10 years of his rule.

Another distraction is the proposal to rename Aligarh town, host to the fabled Aligarh Muslim University, to a Hinduised ‘Harigarh’. This is part of the campaign to change names of cities and avenues with a Muslim connection to Hindu names — Allahabad to Prayagraj, Mughalsarai Junction to Deen Dayal Upadhyaya station. Aurangzeb Road in New Delhi, where Mohammed Ali Jinnah had his classy home, is, however, Abdul Kalam Road, after the Muslim nuclear scientist.

Despite its indifferent electoral grades in recent years, the Congress party alone commands a reach right across the country, from the north to the south, and east to west. The BJP on its part is struggling to get a toehold in the south, and the northeast barring Assam. The pivotal role for the Congress in the newly minted INDIA opposition alliance in the campaign is to depose the Modi government in May thus makes the current state elections important.

The Congress has undergone a notable change from its pro-business Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh days to become a strong voice against the intrusive role for businesses in politics. It has also adapted to a new focus on social justice triggered by a caste census carried out by allies in power in Bihar. That’s a worry for Mr Modi whose claims of representing Hindu interests have been gobsmacked by revelations in the census.

Consider the example of four men who died in Gujarat in a septic tank that they were cleaning for a living when the rest of the state and the country were glued to TV sets, watching a cricket tournament. The headline after the finals said Australia broke a billion hearts in defeating India. A billion minus the four, perhaps, would have been a truer description. What should worry the BJP more is that of the four men, three were Hindus and the fourth a Muslim.

This was not a stand-alone tragedy as manual scavenging, although illegal, is rampant in states like Gujarat. There have been deaths in septic tanks in Ahmedabad too. What the tragedy illustrates is that Hindus are being exploited remorselessly by their own spokesmen. It also shows that Muslims are equal victims in the deeply unjust system. Here the picture of Modi hugging Indian bowler Mohammed Shami may not yield political dividends, even if it makes an unusual statement of the Muslim-baiting prime minister embracing a Muslim cricket star.

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