

Elections in India

Challenges for the up and coming super power

**Executive Summary and Report
of the Symposium on the 2009 General Elections in India
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Executive Summary of the Symposium on the 2009 General Elections in India

In view of the significance of the 2009 Indian elections, an international Symposium was organized by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung in April 2009. The Symposium aimed at bringing together scholars, politicians and journalists from India and Germany and giving them the opportunity to exchange ideas and reflections related to the upcoming elections. A series of panels were organized around the themes of democracy and diversity, environment and development, Indian foreign policy and the Indian-German relationship. A public evening session dealt with India's role with regards to the Afghanistan-Pakistan crisis.

In the first session a number of issues were discussed related to the theme of the democratic process in India, the way it has evolved and changed over the past 30 years, and the difficulties it currently faces. Zoya Hassan spoke about the emergence and growing significance of regional parties over the past decades and the difficulties of balancing issues such as the importance of self-expression of the lower castes with the dangers of fragmentation. Praful Bidwai spoke on the liberalization of the Indian economy in the last 20 years, the growing inequality which has resulted and the need for an alternative to be presented. In his commentary Clemens Spiess questioned whether regionalization was in fact a new development or whether it had in fact been present throughout the history of Indian democracy.

In the next session concerning environment and development a general dissatisfaction was expressed with the lack of substantive actions undertaken by India in response to environmental problems. Both Joachim Betz and Praful Bidwai emphasized the seriousness of the threat posed by environmental issues, and drew attention to the inequalities of energy consumption in a society as economically divided as India. Mr. Bidwai emphasized the need for civil society groups to work together to put pressure on the Indian government. In his commentary Michael Köberlein attempted to balance the judgments of the two speakers by drawing attention to the challenges India is faced with as an emerging world power and expressing his belief in the capacity of India to meet the environmental challenges facing it.

In the third session, concerning India and its place in the world, Siddharth Varadarajan and Salma Bava both drew attention to multiple conflicting trends in Indian foreign policy, with Mr. Varadarajan speaking about the strategic options of forming alliances with the United States on the one hand or formulating a more multi-polar position on the other and Salma Bava talking about the tension between India either challenging or accepting the status quo of power relations as it emerges as a world power.

In the final session concerned with the relationship between India and Germany/the European Union Salma Bava argued that India was more likely to forge alliances with individual European states than Europe as a whole, as Europe is not yet sufficiently politically unified to act as a single actor. Josef Winkler, a member of the German Bundestag, talked about the relative slowness of the development of the Indian-German relationship while expressing his belief that the relationship which in recent years had taken many steps forward would continue to build. Finally, in an evening session open to the public, Michael Daxner joined a pair of earlier contributors in a discussion about India's role in the Afghanistan-Pakistan crisis.

Report of the Symposium on the 2009 General Elections in India

Welcoming Speech Julia Scherf

Julia Scherf opened by providing an overview of the situation in India and an explanation of the purpose of the conference. The size and scope of Indian democracy and its electoral process which involves more voters than the United States, Western Europe and Russia combined, renders it an object of fascination for Western observers. That and the growing importance of India on the world stage make welcome the opportunity for a symposium involving experts from India and Germany to share their knowledge with each other and to discuss the various issues at stake in the upcoming elections.

Democracy, diversity and conflicts

1st input presenter Zoya Hasan

Zoya Hasan spoke about the phenomenon of regionalization as it has transformed Indian democracy over the past 30 years. While Indian democracy during its first decades was overwhelmingly dominated by the Congress party, the past three decades have witnessed an upsurge in the participation within the electoral process of previously excluded groups. She argued that three factors have been principally responsible for enabling this transformation, namely the parliamentary system, the first-past-the-post voting structure, and a reaction against the centralization of power achieved by the Congress governments in the 70s and 80s.

At one stage regionalization was a positive development being linked to the growing self-assertion of the underclass and the breaking of the monopoly on political power held by the upper class elite. Now however, according to Hassan, it has become simply a mechanism for winning political power and has lost its subaltern edge. Regional parties are dominated by family dynasties no less than the central parties and are centralized, leader driven and sectarian in a narrow sense. What was once a progressive movement has lost its subaltern edge. Moreover, because the phenomenon of regionalization is so tied to caste, the process of regionalization can actually serve to legitimize and institutionalize caste division. In the same vain because regional parties are so tied to caste they tend not to respond to regional concerns, harboring national ambitions.

The influx of regional parties has led to a greater importance for coalition politics. Coalition politics in India is, however, imbued with a series of problems. Forging coalitions takes precedence over policy, and leads to opportunism. As distinct from European coalitions, post-poll alliances take priority over pre-poll alliances with the result that they do not necessarily reflect voter's choices.

Regionalization further entrenches political and national fragmentation. Accordingly the 2008 elections are marked by the absence of fundamental differences between the parties and the absence of a larger debate over differing visions for India. While the 2004 election was a battle on two different models of India, such a question seems to be absent in this years election.

Ms. Hassan concluded by stressing the importance of countering the phenomenon of regionalization. For this to happen political parties need to be democratized and reconfigured as internal coalitions, and, finally, a leftward turn in Indian politics would be salutary.

2nd input presenter Praful Bidwai

Praful Bidwai began by notion a series of anomalies which characterize this year's elections. In spite of the global financial collapse and the discrediting of the neoliberal model, no real ideological divides exist between the main parties in India. There is a tremendous promiscuity in which political powers are talking to each other across alliances, even going as far as parties within the Third Front talking to

the BJP. While the past 30 years have witnessed a surge of social movements on a range of issues, none of these movements are reflected in the political parties. No party is presenting a radical agenda of redistribution, of taxing the rich to pay for much needed public services. Finally there is no debate on India's role as an emerging superpower within the world order.

There is a mismatch between the natural center of gravity of India's politics which should lie somewhere on the left, and the actual center, which is quite diffuse and further to the right. For this gap to be redressed there needs to be a reconfiguration of the relationship between political parties and social movements and grass roots movements within civil society. The neoliberal economic policies of the past 20 years have resulted in the disempowerment of underprivileged groups creating a middle class which is hostile to the poor. There is a need for some alternative to be presented. Further, there is a need for a reform of the system of political representation and a strengthening of local representation.

Commentary Clemens Spiess

Clemens Spiess, while largely in agreement with the arguments offered by Ms. Hasan and Mr. Bidwai, questioned whether the phenomenon of regionalization was really so new. Even during the period of Congress Party dominance regional politics played a strong role. According to Mr. Spiess what has changed is the importance of regional politics for government formation owing to the changing role of federalism which has become more competitive, partly as a result of liberalization.

Mr. Spiess also questioned whether electoral reform and the introduction of proportional representation would help or whether it would further entrench regionalization. In response to the issue of the need for rejuvenation of political parties he suggested that this could be aided by a law proscribing democratization in the organizational structure of the political parties.

Finally he suggested that the absence of substantive debate over large issues and over India's role in the world might have something to do with a common ideological dilemma shared by the three large parties relating to the near universal acceptance of neoliberalism. Lastly he questioned whether the importance of social movements in recent years was a completely new phenomenon and suggested that some steps have been made in forging links between civil society movements and the political parties.

Moderated Debate: Environment and development

Joachim Betz

Joachim Betz expressed dissatisfaction with the current lack of attention given to environmental issues within Indian politics. None of the three main political parties in India at the moment attach great priority to environmental issues, which take second place to questions of development. European nations, in the period of their industrialization, also did not place great concern on environmental issues. Though India's contribution to global warming is, and is likely to remain, not as great as western nations, nevertheless they will be forced to bear the consequences of environmental changes and have a common interest in acting seriously to address environmental problems.

Current efforts to rein in emissions resulting from car traffic have been hindered by the auto industry. There is currently the opportunity to chart a course of development with more environmentally-efficient technologies than has hitherto been applied.

The Indian environmental ministry is currently very weak in comparison to ministries concerned with growth. The Indian position, that a more environmentally conscious growth model would hurt the poor, is hard to accept as the poor currently consume a fractional margin of the country's energy. Mr. Betz argued that the adoption of environmentally conscious development programs would benefit India, rendering it less dependent on foreign sources for oil and gas.

Praful Bidwai

Praful Bidwai likewise placed emphasis on the severity of the environmental problems currently facing India and the failure of the government to address the issues. The impact of climate change on India is enormous and growing rapidly. We are currently witnessing a retreat of the glaciers on the Himalayas creating the danger of a cycle of periodic flooding followed by draughts of the country's major rivers. Unusual weather patterns have already had harmful effects on wheat growing in northern India. This however has not been matched by a serious effort on the part of the Indian government to counter this process. Industrial pollution in urban areas is currently causing the yearly loss of up to 3% of GDP according to World Bank estimates. More and more virgin forests are being lost and replaced by compensatory forestation. Another important trend is the dismantlement of coastal zone regulations.

The Indian government attempts to evade its international environmental responsibilities by pointing to statistics such as per-capita emission which compare relatively favorably to that of Europe. This is however disingenuous given the unequal consumption of resources in a society as economically divided as India. Of the various commissions to reduce emissions none have so far yielded concrete proposals. Mr. Bidwai suggested finally that civil society groups need to work together to put pressure on the government to adopt a more responsible position with regards to international initiatives.

Commentary**Michael Köberlein**

Michael Köberlein sought to balance the negative assessments of Indian's environmental policy with some acknowledgment of the difficulties they are facing. At the present moment there is no alternative available for India in light of its rapid economic growth outside of the burning of fossil fuels. Positive progress is in part hindered by the many institutions working in the field and their difficulties working together. What is needed is a clear and coherent approach to dealing with the environmental challenges. One should expect that the transformation from a fossil fueled economy to one based on long carbon will require a great deal of time. Mr. Köberlein closed by expressing his faith in the capacity of the various actors within Indian society to address the challenges they are faced with.

India in the world**1st input presenter****Siddharth Varadarajan**

Siddharth Varadarajan offered a comprehensive overview of India's foreign policy and the possibilities for its development in the coming years. The question of India's role in the world and foreign relations in general has not been a factor in the elections. When posing the question of the type of power India would like to be, we can identify two main positions and three strategies. The dominant vision held by the elites is that of conventional realist power politics. This vision does not seek to change notions of power relations at a global level. The crucial moment for this vision is the decision to become a nuclear power in 1998. Within this vision there are two main strategies. The dominant strategy is that of linking with the United States. This strategy has fit in well with the United States' desire to manage the security situation in South Asia. The second strategy is that of playing with the idea of the multi-polar world. Within this strategy the alliance with the United States is balanced by a realization of the existence of multiple power centers in the world. This strategy has led to a strengthening of ties between India and China over the past few years.

The second vision of India as a world power emphasizes the unique role that India can play working as a mediator through such institutions as the United Nations working towards a more equitable world order. This vision works against the naked assertion of power and puts greater stress on the notion of enlightened national interest. This vision is reflected in such cases as public pressure to take a stance in support of the Palestinians and a commitment to a non-aligned world.

In practical terms, India's relation to the world is proceeding simultaneously on a number of levels, with efforts to build relations with the United States balanced by efforts to reach out to other powers such as Russia, China and the European Union and efforts to forge a South-Asian policy. An example of

the latter is the role India played facilitating the removal of the monarchy in Nepal. The last significant development is a reaching out to Africa and Latin America.

There is not a great difference to be found between the Congress party and the BJP with regards to their vision of India's place in the world. If however the Third Front was to emerge as a victor in the elections one could expect a slowing down in the India-US alliance. In any case there are certain structural factors which could lead to such a development even if the Congress party is victorious, primarily the use of the rhetoric of non-alliance as it is used by the business community. The strategy of working towards an equitable and more balanced world may turn out to be a strategy which in the future will be adopted by the business community as a way of furthering its own interests. One can expect to see the multi-polar strategy being increasingly employed over the coming years as a way of granting India desired flexibility in international and business relations.

2nd input presenter

Salma Bava

Salma Bava presented a general overview of Indian foreign policy. She argued that it is important to emphasize that foreign policy plays a very limited role in National politics. A significant feature of India's foreign policy is its omni-directional nature, its interaction with a multiplicity of foreign powers on a number of levels. This has in part been driven by economic liberalization.

The primary dynamic at work in the competing visions of Indian foreign policy is that between the notion of India as supporting the status quo and that of India being a challenger. This tension is reflected in the contradictory nature of Indian society; while in terms of technological development India can count as a first world society, with regards to other issues such as poverty it cannot. On the world stage we thus see India in some circumstances accepting established norms and in others challenging those norms.

The template we see emerging is currently the realist template with India trying to secure the strongest position for itself at the bargaining table. At the same time the emerging framework of international relations is one in which no one state can leverage claims absolutely over others. The increasing interdependence of global networks of production ensures that no one state can lord itself over the others. There is a current interplay within Indian foreign policy between hard and soft, normative power. This is strengthened by the conviction that the exercise of normative power demands the backing of hard power, as seen in such issues as nuclear non-proliferation.

There is a split nature in Indian identity; on the one hand, India, as a democracy, is ideationally close to the west, while on the other, Cold War history found India on the other side of the east-west divide.

With regards to the financial crisis, India finds itself well-poised to deal with the financial turmoil having had strong banking regulations over the past years. As such, she argued, we can expect a faster recovery in India than in the rest of the world.

Commentary

Christian Wagner

Christian Wagner addressed the related questions of India's strategies in formulating its foreign policy and the challenges it currently faces as an emerging world power. He argued that over the last 20 years India has achieved its position as a world power through a process of cooptation. This development has played itself out in relation to the security concerns of the United States, the G8, and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. India's main strategy has been to bind itself to powerful actors in order to secure for itself an increasingly powerful position within international relations.

With regards to the question of the strategy India will adopt as a world power, Mr. Wagner argued that India would not seek to alter the general rules of international systems and that beyond looking after its own interests would play a largely defensive role. In this connection it could be expected that India would retain its pro-Western orientation.

As for the challenges faced by India, India's attempts to retain a fully independent stance within international relations has become increasingly difficult to maintain as the forces of globalization have lead to ever greater interlinkages between countries. The Indian political parties have however not yet fully adjusted their outlook to take account of these developments.

Mr. Wagner then addressed the issue of India's role in relation to the current concerns of the United States in South Asia, especially in relation to the current war in Afghanistan. The sensitive question of Kashmir will continue to pose difficulties for Indian foreign policy.

Lastly with regards to the world financial crisis he addressed the problem of guest workers from the Gulf states being sent back to India and the importance of India finding appropriate mechanisms for fighting against the economic crisis.

Dialogue: Which consequences do the lower-house elections have for the European-Indian and German-Indian relationship?

Salma Bava

Salma Bava addressed the various difficulties in the relationship between India and the European Union. The India-EU relationship is a strong relationship going back to 1963, founded on the common support of democracy, rule of law and human rights, the three criteria used in the Copenhagen criteria for expanding EU membership.

In the EU there are two sets of actors, being the individual member states and the EU. India has had and continues to have good relations with the individual member states, exemplified by its close relations to Germany. In terms of the EU as a whole, the EU, while being very united in terms of economic policy is not so united with regards to its foreign policy. The EU security agenda of 2003, outlining a common EU security policy specified India as a strategic partner. However in 2004 Asia paper India was still presented within the development paradigm. So there is a contradiction within EU policy as to whether India will be treated as a significant actor in its own right.

The EU is seen as a normative power, pushing for democracy, rule of law and putting emphasis on procedures such as multilateralism. What we see in the years following the Indian nuclear tests is two different strategies for policy setting between the United States and the EU, and thus we see India adopting different strategies based on which one it is talking to.

The strategic partnership between the EU and India has so far not progressed beyond action planning to the level of concrete steps. The question is whether the EU is currently united enough as a body to offer concrete measures to India. At the present moment, she argued, it seems that it is not and that state capitals are better poised to offer such measures.

Josef Winkler

Josef Winkler spoke in his capacity as a MP with regards to the current relations between Germany and India. In recent years India has come to receive attention equal to that of China, which was not the case for many years as German governments were slow in recognizing its growing importance on the world stage. Though the positive possibilities of a German-Indian relationship were slow to be discovered there now exists a general agreement between the various German political parties to continue to intensify the relationship between the two countries. Mr. Winkler spoke about projects for cooperation in the areas of technological development aimed at increasing the quality of life for the Indian population. He mentioned the issue of Monsanto and the current difficulties faced by farmers with relation to inflation and the desire to provide them with assistance. Lastly he expressed his hope that whichever government is formed would not act to inflame the religious conflict.