

Documentation

THE 2009 LOK SABHA ELECTIONS*

John Desrochers

This documentation provides some relevant information on the 2009 elections. The titles and sub-titles give a good outline of the material. This article hardly goes beyond early April, and the situation is so fluid that significant developments will still take place. **In fact, commentators speak of the 2009 election as “the most uncertain ever”, and some fear it will also be “the most vicious ever”.**

In collecting this documentation, I learned much about India’s variety and complexity, as well as people’s needs and aspirations, and their expectations, especially from politicians and parties. I also came to know more about our political system and its strengths and weaknesses, and the challenges confronting it. I hope, dear readers, that you too will find these reflections useful and will become more convinced than ever of *your responsibilities of choosing the proper leaders for the years to come*. It is complex and far from easy, but we must do our best!

I. The Incomparable Indian Election

First, a curiosity item! **“In what is by some distance the world’s biggest and most complex democratic exercise, India with 714 million eligible voters will go to the polls in five phases, between April 16 and May 13, to elect 543 members to the 15th Lok Sabha...** (There will be 828,804 polling stations.) What will be mind-boggling to outsiders is the army of 4.1 million civic officials and 2.1 million security personnel who will be deployed for the exercise... The coverage of Electors’ Photo Identity Cards (EPIC) is now reported to be 82%.

* The following **abbreviations** are used: **DH** (*Deccan Herald*), **EPW** (*Economic and Political Weekly*), **H** (*The Hindu*) and **TOI** (*The Times of India*). The numbers in the parentheses indicate the day, month, year and page. Certain quotations come from news agencies or special correspondents and thus bear no names. The titles of the articles are often omitted. Most of the bold characters and italics are ours.

Together with the use of Electronic Voting Machines, these measures have helped bring in greater transparency and fairness in the conduct of elections” (Editorial, H, 5/3/09/8).

II. Basic Information on India’s Lok Sabha

1. The Members of Parliament (MPs)

These are a few data on the 2004 (14th) Lok Sabha (LS) (TOI, 4/3/09/2). **Education.** Out of the 560 MPs elected both in the general and by-elections, 18 (3.3%) are under matriculates, 104 (18.6%) matriculates/HSC/Diploma, 250 (44.6%) graduates, 166 (29.6%) post-graduates, and 22 (3.9%) have a doctoral degree. *More than 78% of the LS MPs are thus graduate and above.*

The average present age of the LS MPs is 52.6 years, compared to 50.6 in the House of Commons (UK), 52.3 in the House of Representatives (Japan) and 55.9 in the House of Representatives (USA). Out of today’s LS MPs, 63 are above 71 year-old, 150 between 61-70, 157 (51-60), 101 (41-50), and 35 below 41.

In the 14th LS, there were nearly 350 members who came from rural areas. The 14th LS had 230 first-timers and 222 re-elected members from the 13th LS. With a 63.56% turnout, the 1984 LS polls had the highest voting percentage, while the 1971 polls had the lowest – 55.29%. In 2004, Nagaland had the highest turnout (91.77%), and Jammu and Kashmir (where there was a boycott) the lowest (35.2%). *The 14th Lok Sabha election was the most expensive (Rs 1,300 cr).*

ABBREVIATIONS

AIADMK – All India Anna DMK; **BJD** – Biju Janata Dal; **BJP** – Bharatiya Janata Party; **BSP** – Bahujan Samaj Party; **CPI** – Communist Party of India; **CPM** – Communist Party of India (Marxist); **DMK** – Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; **JD(S)** – Janata Dal (Secular); **JD(U)** – Janata Dal (United); **JMM** – Jharkhand Mukti Morcha; **LJP** – Lok Janashakti Party; **LS** – Lok Sabha; **NCP** – Nationalist Congress Party; **NDA** – National Democratic Alliance; **PMK** – Pattali Makkal Katchi; **PRP** – Praja Rajyam Party; **RJD** – Rashtriya Janata Dal; **RLD** – Rashtriya Lok Dal; **SP** – Samajwadi Party; **SS** – Shiv Sena; **TDP** – Telugu Desam Party; **TMC** – Trinamool Congress; **TRS** – Telangana Rashtra Samiti; **UPA** – United Progressive Alliance.

2. Women's Representation in Politics

Worldwide, women “now occupy just over 18% of the seats in parliaments” – “an all-time high”. “Still, women face immense challenges in participating in the political process. Prejudices and cultural perceptions deter women from contesting elections. The women who do enter politics have a tough time being taken seriously. In India, though the number of women MPs in the Lok Sabha was at an all-time high of 49 in 1999, this accounted for merely 9.02%. No headway has been made on the controversial women's reservation Bill to provide 33% reservation for women in Parliament. *But the mandatory reservation for women in village panchayats has been successful. It has helped build women's capacity and create new political leaders at local levels. This could translate into women emerging as leaders at the state and national level also*” (Editorial, TOI, 10/3/09/10).

The percentage representation of women in Parliaments in a few countries is as follows: France (13.9%), Ireland (14.2%), Italy (17.1%), USA (16.3%) and UK (19.3%) (TOI, 7/3/09/4). Unequal gender representation in politics thus remains an universal phenomenon!

3. How Many Independents Get Elected?

“The Indian electorate prefers party over individual – and it has been a trend right from the first general election of 1951.” “Independents get the thumbs down” (Manu Alyappa, TOI, 7/3/09/4) (Table 2).

4. The Ongoing Parliamentary Crisis

An EPW Editorial (No. 2, 10-16/1/09/6) comments: “An obvious measure of effective working of Parliament is the number of days it

Table 2. Independents Who Made It

Year	Contestants	Won	Forfeited Deposits
1951	533	37	360
1957	481	42	324
1962	479	20	378
1967	866	35	747
1971	1134	14	1066
1980	2826	09	2794
1984	3791	05	3745
1985	103	08	85 (Assam & Punjab)
1989	3713	12	3672
1991	5514	01	5497
1992	32	00	32
1996	10636	09	10604
1998	1915	06	1898
1999	1945	06	1928
2004	2370	—	—

sits and the amount of business it transacts. **On both counts, the performance of India's Parliament is becoming increasingly deficient.** It sat for less than 50 days in all of 2008 and missed the whole Winter Session... The Lok Sabha met for an average of 150 days a year in 1951-56, for less than 80 in the last few years and for the smallest number ever last year. The number of bills passed by Parliament has also declined (from an annual average of 68 in the first decade to less than 50 now). The last session in December saw eight important bills passed in five minutes without a discussion. The functioning and expenditure of many ministries are not debated and scrutinised... *Parliaments in all other democracies with a system similar to ours work for longer periods.*”

“It is not just that the number of sittings and working hours have shrunk. *Even when the Houses are in session, much time is lost in disruptions. Informed debates on any subject are rarely heard in Parliament.* The composition of Parliament is a factor that has affected its functioning. Many members are not informed, some have criminal backgrounds, a good number are plainly uninterested and are cynical. They are unable to contribute to any discussion on most subjects. After last month's session, the presiding officers of both Houses have expressed their concern over the slide in the working of Parliament...”

“It is as if governments are comfortable without Parliament. Commitments given to Parliament are not honoured and are even violated. But if governments have taken Parliament for granted, it is basically because the legislative body has abdicated its responsibility to protect its powers and keep a watch on the functioning of the executive.” Even if remedial measures like compulsory attendance and forfeiture of salaries are adopted, “*there is no assurance that the situation will get better, as long as there is no change in attitude and the idea of the need for close parliamentary oversight of government does not sink deep into the minds of legislators. The primacy of Parliament needs to be established.*”

III. Looking Back at the 2004 Lok Sabha Elections

1. The 2004 Lok Sabha Results

An overview of the 2004 Lok Sabha results may be handy (TOI, 3/3/09/1).

The UPA got 221 seats: Cong: 145, DMK: 16, NCP: 9, RJD: 24, LJP: 4, TRS: 5, PMK: 6, JMM: 5, MDMK: 4, IUML: 1, RPI(A): 1, JKPPD: 1.

The NDA got 181 seats: BJP: 138, JD(U): 8, Trinamool Cong: 2, Shiv Sena: 12, Shiromani Akali: 8, BJD: 11, Naga People’s Front: 1, Mizo National Front: 1.

The Left Front got 61 seats: CPI(M): 43, CPI: 10, RSP: 3, Forward Block: 3, Kerala Cong: 1, IND: 1.

Others parties got 80 seats: BSP: 19, SP: 36, TDP: 5, JD(S): 3, RLD: 3, AGP: 2, National Conference: 2, AIMIM: 1, IFDP: 1, Sikkim Democratic Front: 1, NLP: 1, SJP: 1, BNP: 1, Independents: 4.

2. Understanding the 2004 Results

On 2nd March 2009, L.K. Advani explained that *the NDA Government lost the 2004 elections because of “over-confidence and using wrong slogans like India Shining”*. “Our opponents went to the people and asked them if their homes were shining... Everybody has his own problems... There is so much poverty in the country, farmers have their problems... (*Our opponents*) said, ‘Where is India shining?’” (H, 3/3/09/10). On this, see below, VI.1.

IV. Trends in the 2008 State Elections

1. The 2008 Assembly Elections

In November-December 2008, Assembly elections were held in 5 States, namely, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh (both retained by the BJP), and Delhi, Rajasthan and Mizoram (the first retained and the other two regained by the Congress). *The results were generally interpreted as a relief to the Congress and a disappointment for the BJP.* With varied emphases, commentators moreover highlighted **the role of development and good governance in these results, and the voters’ rejection of the BJP’s campaign on terror.** Though the results do not permit any clear forecast for the 2009 Lok Sabha elections, they contain certain lessons for both the Congress and the BJP.

* According to B.S. Arun, the outcome came “as a boost to the Congress and a wake-up call for the BJP” (DH, 9/12/08/8). The TOI Team observed that the result “has given the Manmohan Singh government the break it was desperately seeking”, “staving off doomsday predictions of a terminal slide” (TOI, 9/12/08/11).

* An Editorial from *The Hindu* thus understands the results: “*The people have voted largely on the basis of longstanding livelihood concerns and local issues – and not in a panic mode following the Mumbai terror attack.*” “Terrorism is an issue of electoral significance, but this does not mean the BJP... will gain at the expense of the secular parties after every major terrorist act of the Islamist variety” (H, 9/12/08/8). The *Deccan Herald* similarly comments: “*One most striking feature of the results is the rejection by the voters of the BJP’s virulent campaign painting the UPA government as soft on terrorism and politicising a national threat...* The verdict shows that the people did not listen to the divisive campaign and voted for parties and candidates on issues that affected their lives.” (Editorial, 9/12/08/10).

* Rajdeep Sardesai concurs: “The key takeaway from the Assembly election results is that *the Indian voter now places a premium on good governance at the local level.*” This explains the success of Sheila Dikshit in Delhi, Shivraj Singh Chauhan in MP and Raman Singh in Chhattisgarh. “*Strong anti-terror measures must be seen then as part of a wider governance plank...* While the

Indian voter wants *bijli-sadak-pani*, he also wants ‘*suraksha*’... (security) provided through tangible measures like police reform and revamping intelligence gathering systems” (DH, 12/12/08/11).

* “No real conclusions can be drawn from the mixed results” of the Assembly elections for the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. “*What the elections underlined was that while ‘anti-incumbency’ is a factor, it need not be a decisive factor: the Congress demonstrated this in Delhi and the BJP in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Interestingly, the BSP led by Mayawati emerged as a party on the rise in parts of the Hindi heartland beyond Uttar Pradesh... The real message voters have sent out is, in balance, a reassuring one: elections are not single-issue affairs, no matter the propaganda of those who claim to be riding this or that emotional wave*” (Editorial, H 9/12/08/8).

* **The Assembly elections “hold important lessons for the Congress, the BJP, and other major parties.** In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress was a house divided with a clutch of chief ministerial aspirants trying to cut down one another. The party seemed to assume that victory would be easy, given the problems Mr. Chouhan inherited. In Chhattisgarh, the Congress leadership was dogged by corruption and nepotism charges and also paid a price for the UPA regime’s collusion with the ruinous Salwa Judum project. *The Congress needs to understand the importance of projecting a chief ministerial candidate with a clean record. The lesson for the BJP is that elections can be fought and won through quiet development work and without a socially disintegrative agenda*” (Editorial, H, 11/12/08/8).

2. The Loser of the 2008 Elections

An EPW Editorial (No. 50, 13-19/12/08/5-6) thus comments on these five 2008 state elections: “**There may have been no clear overall victor..., but there was certainly one clear loser, the BJP.** The BJP having worsted the Congress in a series of State elections over the past two years was confident that it had the latter on the mat”, especially with the addition of inflation and the Mumbai horrors. But the BJP “won in only two states, while the Congress came on top in three... *More important, the electorate has wisely not fallen for the BJP’s campaign that whipped up the issue of terrorist violence...* Polling in Rajasthan, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh

was held after the terror attacks between 26 and 28 November in Mumbai. The BJP had made terrorism and security a major plank in the polls and had expected to gain leverage in at least Delhi and Rajasthan... Yet, the success of the Congress in both these states revealed **the failure of the BJP strategy**, with the electorate possibly seeing this as a collective problem rather than one that could be put at the doorstep of the Congress.”

“*In many ways, the results of these elections (have also) put paid to the anti-incumbency theory... Development and grassroots work have helped ruling parties overcome the opposition, particularly when the other side is divided, does not offer a credible alternative, is plainly communal or is opportunistic. However, voting behaviour and outcomes are far too complex to be explained even in terms of ‘good governance’.* As the result in Madhya Pradesh shows, even an intelligent packaging of a government that seems to care can swing voters away from the opposition, even if there is no true improvement in people’s welfare. A better understanding is needed of how local, regional and national factors affect election outcomes at all levels.”

“*The Congress and the UPA need not now suddenly turn over-optimistic of their chances in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls.* Exactly five years ago, in the same states, the Congress was routed everywhere other than in Delhi. That emboldened the NDA to launch its ‘India Shining’ campaign and call the elections a few months earlier than scheduled. *But the assembly election results of 2003 were no harbinger of the Lok Sabha elections of 2004.*”

V. The Three Alliances/Coalitions

Section V discusses the issues of seat-sharing and alliance formation. After an introduction on electoral alliances in India (1), it highlights the respective problems of the Congress and the UPA (2), the BJP and the NDA (3), and the Third Front (4). It then presents the existing alliances in early April (5), and assesses the weight of the three alliances (6) before concluding (7).

1. The Fluidity of Electoral Alliances

* According to M.J. Akbar, “*the elections of 2009 might well be a game whose result is determined by the small boys.* Allies,

rather than principals, could be the key to the formation of the next coalition in Delhi. It will also depend on how many seats the Third Front gets, and on which side its partners fall if they have to choose between the UPA and the NDA” (DH, 5/1/09/10). **State alliances and battles will thus play a very crucial role in the Lok Sabha results** (cf. below, VIII.1).

* The *Deccan Herald* thus spoke of the **Open Season** for alliances towards the end of January 2009: “It is pre-election open season in the country with politicians and parties shifting positions and looking for new opportunities and alliances. *There are movements across parties and alliances, in all states and from and to all parties...* **The traffic of politicians is going to get heavier in the coming days and weeks**, and the regulating lights of ideology and principles will no longer be working. Personal predilections and prejudices and *the seats to be won* are going to be the only considerations, and **a political free-for-all is in the works**” (Editorial, 27/1/09/10).

* **In early March, Vidya Subrahmaniam** (H, 2/3/09/12) **thus described the political situation**: “There is a frenetic reaching out across the political spectrum. Riding on high aspirational levels, parties and players appear headed anywhere and everywhere as they explore alternative alliances and search for ever new ways to raise their Lok Sabha tally and enlarge their spheres of influence at the Centre. The rewritten rules of engagement would appear to exclude no alliance except that between principal rivals – such as the Congress and the BJP at the Centre and those directly competing for power in the States. *The effect has been to blur the boundaries between the three main groupings.*”

“*Existing alliances appear increasingly vulnerable.* Yet, the future is not easy to read, governed as it is by a complex interplay of ifs and buts. **Nonetheless, some broad trends are visible.** For one, the dividing line between national and regional parties has virtually disappeared with political ambitions soaring beyond the State boundaries... Second, the altered self-image of State players has made each of them a potential Prime Minister... Third, the Third Front space which receded with the seeming emergence of a bipolar polity in the past decade has revived dramatically.”

* An EPW Editorial (No. 10, 7-13/3/09/6) thus described the fluidity of the 2009 electoral alliances: “A significant aspect of the elections will be that the two main coalitions, the UPA and the NDA, are not set in stone. Unlike in 1999 and 2004, when there was no change in the poll alliances after the elections, there is no certainty that this will be so in 2009... **Allegiances and coalitions are likely to change depending on which formation emerges on top in the elections.**”

* “*Political parties forge electoral alliances by scaling down their ambitions to suit ground realities...* That two political rivals, Lalu Prasad of the RJD and Ramvilas Paswan of the LJP, made light of their differences and came together, leaving their senior partner at the national level in the lurch, speaks of the hardnosed bargaining that goes with electoral alliances today” (Editorial, H, 19/3/09/10). Of course, “*alliances may not stay in the present shape after the elections.* **The individual strength of parties will decide their post-poll worth. The present hard bargaining (regarding seat-sharing) is a result of that realisation**” (Editorial, DH, 23/3/09/10).

* **How to explain this political volatility and turmoil?** According to Vidya Subrahmaniam (H, 2/3/09/12), the truth stares both the Congress and the BJP in the face, but neither fully realises its implications. **The root cause lies in India’s changing political reality**: “In 1984, when the Congress won 404 of the 514 Lok Sabha seats, national parties polled 80% of the popular vote to only 11% by State parties. In 2004, when the Congress and the BJP won 145 and

Box 1. The “Secular Alliance”

* **The SP, RJD and LJP “have decided to come together in a ‘secular alliance’ to fight the Lok Sabha elections in UP and Bihar.** Besides joint campaigns by the leaders of these parties, there is a proposal not to field candidates against one another. The move is expected to consolidate backward class and Muslim votes in the two States, which together account for 120 seats.” The SP General Secretary Amar Singh explained: “Just as the Congress is seeking to expand its base in Bihar and UP, *the SP, RJD and LJP too have the right to keep their identity...* Let there be a struggle for the survival of the fittest” (Gargi Parsai, H, 27/3/09/1).

138 of the 543 seats, national parties polled 56% to 36% by State parties (including the NCP and the BSP). Seventeen State parties contested the general election in 1984 as against 45 in 2004. *The fragmentation this represents can be read negatively. Or it can be seen more realistically as a pointer to a changing India defined more and more by underclass aspiration, inclusiveness and diversity.*”

2. The Congress' Dilemma and the UPA

* A DH Editorial (5/2/09/10) thus explains **what is perhaps the major election policy of the Congress**. “*The CWC's (Congress Working Committee) decision not to contest the elections under the UPA banner at the national level but to limit seat adjustments with its allies to their strongholds is, at the same time, a pressure tactic and an enabling move to contest as many seats as possible. The allies are naturally unhappy with the Congress decision because some of them wanted to contest seats outside their areas of influence with the support of the Congress. Sharad Pawar's NCP, Mulayam Singh's SP and Lalu Prasad's RJD want seats, but these could be only at the expense of the Congress... The weakened position of some allies like the DMK, the RJD and the JMM was also a consideration... The Congress is also not sure of the loyalty of its allies in the post-poll scenario and would not want to risk increasing their strength.*”

* “Subrahmaniam is more critical: “From a superficial perspective, the Congress' refusal to go into the election as a single, unified entity (as the UPA) made sense. To any observer it was evident that the party was being driven to the wall by its allies... *However, in so summarily despatching the UPA, the Congress overlooked a vital point. The UPA might be the sum total of a series of State-level alliances, but it had a philosophical core. It was the Congress in fact that trumpeted the UPA as a grand idea, and posited its secular-egalitarian orientation as the opposite of the NDA's sectarian, pro-rich approach... Other than Sonia Gandhi and Manmohan Singh, few in the Congress seem convinced of the coalition imperative. The contempt for State players reveals itself repeatedly in private conversations.*” *Basically, “the Congress has a disdain for alliance politics”*. Its problem is ‘arrogance’ (op. cit.).

* An EPW Editorial (No. 10, 7-13/3/09/6) agrees: In the pre-poll discussions, the Congress seems reluctant “to cede ground to its coalition partners in seat-sharing” and to consider them as enduring allies with a common programme in the post-poll scenario. On their part, some allies are looking for a broader national presence beyond their regional boundaries and are using pressure tactics. The Congress' ‘political culture’ and its ‘fantasies to still dominate’ make it difficult for the UPA to “present itself to the electorate on a common platform of policies, promises and ideas... **What the Congress does not realise is that a greater or lesser willingness to work with allies may well decide its fortunes in the April-May elections.**” “*The main reason for the fluidity in the alliances is not any programmatic differences, but the continued unwillingness of the Congress Party to fully accept that the age of one-party rule has long since ended.*”

* A TOI Editorial (31/1/09/14) is however more positive: “*Decisions taken by the CWC on 29th January could influence the results of the upcoming general elections. One, it has decided that the party will not contest the polls on a UPA platform, but have its own manifesto and explore State-level alliances. Two, at least 30% of the tickets will be given to youth. The CWC hopes that these decisions will help the party gain more seats in the Parliament and to negotiate better with allies after the elections. However, current allies of the Congress are unhappy with the party's refusal to fight the general elections on a UPA platform... Ideally, UPA members should have sought a mandate for the coalition and a vote on the performance of the (reasonably stable) Manmohan Singh-led government. Why did the Congress refuse this option? One probable reason is that the party wants to contest as many seats as possible... Also, the Congress is unsure whether allies will stick with it after the elections. The fears are valid.*”

* **Harish Khare** (H, 24/3/09/9) **explains the dilemma as follows:** “The Congress has inevitably run into a spot of bother with its allies in the Hindi belt because the coalition partners compete for the same electoral patch... It is natural for the local/regional partner to want to keep intact, if not expand, its electoral strength and presence so that it will continue to enjoy a clout at the Centre; on the other

hand, the dominant party wants to reduce its dependence on the junior partners. The Congress and, for that matter, the BJP cannot voluntarily put a moratorium on their growth in this or that part of the country.”

“*The breakdown of alliances in the Hindi heartland is no catastrophe for the Congress.* When all is said and done, a Lok Sabha poll carries with it enormous mobilisational potential and offers a great opportunity for any political organisation to renew its bonds with the cadres, deepen its social base, and garner additional acceptability. On the other hand, an electoral understanding or pact inevitably means the absence of the party’s candidates from a number of constituencies, and **this presents the coalition partners an existential dilemma**: how to keep intact the cadres, support base and morale if the party ceases to be a serious contender in the electoral game.” Most parties “*find merit in trading off a share in power for a shrunken political space*”, but “*the Congress has a right to try to continue to be a dominant party*”.

* **A TOI Editorial (27/3/09/14) thus weighs the pros and cons of the Congress strategy**: “Rahul Gandhi put on a brave face regarding the breakdown of seat-sharing arrangements with UPA allies by saying that going it alone in UP and Bihar could rebuild the party in these states. But what about the south, where the PMK just ditched the UPA in order to sign up with Jayalalitha’s AIADMK? The only significant friends the Congress has left appear to be the NCP in Maharashtra, the DMK in Tamil Nadu and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. *The Congress strategy in going it alone if regional allies attempt to drive a hard bargain, does have a compelling logic...* In the past, tying up with the BSP in UP or the RJD in Bihar has meant handing over a large chunk of its vote share to these parties. Continuing with that strategy would have meant regional parties growing at the expense of the Congress, which would be reduced to a cipher.”

“**But going it alone has its risks too.** Can the Congress rebuild itself at the grassroots this late in the day, with less than a month left before general elections begin?” The alignment of the PMK with the AIADMK could be a sign that “the ground is shifting from under the Congress’ feet. *The Congress could win big if its poll strategy works. But if it doesn’t, and the party is left with only a rump in*

Parliament and few friends, it will have a weak hand in post-poll bargaining.”

3. The BJP’s Internal Struggles and the NDA

A. Riding the Hindutva Tiger

According to Amulya Ganguli (TOI, 4/3/09/14), **the BJP has no choice but to ride the Hindutva tiger**: “Like geriatrics reminiscing over the exploits of their youth, BJP leaders refer to the Ram temple at regular intervals. The nostalgia is understandable. It is the only issue that brought the party some success in its nearly six decades of existence under two names, the Jan Sangh and the BJP... When the temple issue helped raise its tally of the Lok Sabha seats from two in 1984 to 86 in 1989, its main adversary, the Congress, was slowly sinking... *The BJP was therefore seen as an alternative by a sizeable section of the people.*”

“**But the BJP’s six years in power from 1998 onwards spelt its doom.** For starters, the hope raised by the change from a Bofors-tainted Congress to a supposedly purer BJP was nullified by the likes of Pramod Mahajan. In addition, except for Atal Bihari Vajpayee, *no other BJP leader seemed to have a vision that did justice to India’s pluralism.* Yet, for this very reason, Vajpayee became *persona non grata* to saffron hardliners. Not surprisingly, the BJP’s share of votes began to stagnate at 20% in 1991 and 1996 after rising from 11.5% in 1989. It did rise to 25.5% in 1998, but only to drop to 23.7% in 1999 and 22.1% in 2004.”

“*The BJP’s mixing of politics and religion has backfired.*” In fact, “*the BJP never thought through the implications of its temple agenda*”. The country suffered during the communal riots of 1992-93 and in Gujarat in 2002, but the BJP itself also did. “The BJP apparently never considered the possibility that an uncontrollable *vanar sena* in the form of the VHP, Bajrang Dal, Sri Rama Sene and others might emerge from the temple movement. Rather, it saw a straight line from rising voting percentages after the Babri masjid demolition to untrammelled power in New Delhi and ultimately to the establishment of the Hindu rashtra.” On their part, the BJP outfits like the VHP and Bajrang Dal “were so sure the time had come to

push ahead with the pro-Hindu agenda that, led by the RSS, they ascribed the BJP's 2004 defeat to a failure to do so".

"For the BJP, the defeat and the tapering off of the voting percentage were signs that it had overreached and that Vajpayee was right when he had advised Advani against embarking on his yatra. Hence, Advani's donning of the former prime minister's mantle of moderation. **But, now, it is too late.** *Even if the BJP favours a tactical retreat, the vanar sena will not let it, for they have taken upon themselves the task of carrying on with their anti-minority and pro-Hindu agenda...*"

B. The BJP's Recent Postures

The internal tensions in the BJP between the RSS hardliners and the moderates are well-known. In fact, the BJP's 2009 election agenda often swung between these two tendencies. The Varun Gandhi's shocking hate speech in Pilibhit in UP was a watershed in this respect. His venomous diatribe against the Muslim community "was couched in language so crude and violent that it has made hardened communalists blush" (Editorial, H, 29/3/09/8). Though Varun claimed that the tapes were doctored, *the speech and the subsequent 'demonstrations', arrest and jailing of Varun under the National Security Act (NSA) polarised the electorate and strengthened the hand of the hardliners.* It was even said that "the speech was part of a well-planned strategy to compel the BJP to toe a hardcore Hindutva line in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections" (S. Balakrishnan, TOI, 29/3/09/8).

As sometimes remarked, the BJP speaks in many voices. In the same speech, L.K. Advani for example supported Varun Gandhi and asked all BJP candidates "to exercise restraint". A few days ago, the BJP even nominated Manoj Pradhan as its candidate for the G. Udaygiri Assembly of the riot-hit district of Kandhamal in Orissa. "Pradhan, a Kui tribal who is the main accused and alleged mastermind behind last August's communal riots in Kandhamal, is now lodged in G Udaygiri jail. Police officials said he has been booked in 10 cases, of which seven are related to murder during last year's riot" (D. Mohanty, *Indian Express*, New Delhi, 1/4/09). The BJP has also chosen Ashok Sahu, the Hindu Jagaran Sammukhya leader, as

candidate for the Kandhamal Lok Sabha constituency. Not surprisingly, he made a hate speech against Christians.

Some commentators moreover assert that the BJP's communal image makes political parties shy away from the NDA. For instance, the anti-Christian riots in Kandhamal contributed to bring about the breakdown of the 11 year-old alliance of the BJD with the BJP, though Naveen Patnaik can be rightly accused of criminal delay and opportunism. Lately, the Bihar CM, Nitish Kumar, also strongly criticised the BJP for its support of Varun Gandhi.

The well-known sociologist and author Christophe Jaffrelot however points out that the BJP now (co)governs nine States. It can also "rely on pervasive Hindutva forces whose growth has continued in several directions". Its right-wing agenda (including the promotion of capitalism and the partnership with the USA and Israel) has gone mainstream. Yet, "the NDA looks weaker as it has lost a record number of constituents – seven – over the last 6 years. Does it mean that the BJP is back to the Jan Sangh years when no decent man wanted to join hands with a 'communal' party? Have Gujarat and Orissa – and maybe Karnataka – at last had an impact on the BJP's partners, who may be afraid of losing the minorities' votes and their own credibility? **Only the post-election scenario will tell, but if the BJP retains its 2004 tally, many regional leaders may be prepared to do anything**" for the sake of sharing power (TOI, 22/3/09/11).

Is Hindutva both the 'strength' and the bugbear (bête noire) of the BJP?

4. The Controversy Over the Third Front

* **A TOI Editorial** (14/3/09/16) **thus describes the inherent limitations of the Third Front (TF):** "The array of leaders on view at the launch of the TF on 12th March was impressive." Together, the 9 or 10 parties have 84 MPs in the Lok Sabha and are influential in at least half a dozen States. "But is this anti-Congress, anti-BJP coalition that includes disparate political groups a viable alternative to the UPA or the NDA? Hardly. *Too many contradictions threaten the TF. The TF has no core to hold it together...* In its present form, it doesn't even have an all-India spread... Even if political parties that

are now part of the UPA and the NDA join after the general elections, *the TF is unlikely to have a simple majority in the House.*” To choose a leader and *the lack of a coherent political programme* could be other problems. Many of its constituents hold different views on economic issues and reforms, and do not share the Left’s anathema to the Congress and the BJP. *“A coalition of convenience built around negative agendas is unlikely to last long, especially when there is no centre to hold the disparate elements together.”*

* An Editorial from *The Hindu* (18/3/09/12) further discusses **whether the TF can truly provide an alternative:** *“The greatest strength of the TF – its ability to attract all non-Congress, non-BJP parties – also makes it vulnerable.* Whether it will hold together in the post-election scenario depends on the nature of the poll outcome... If the UPA or the NDA emerges within a striking distance of a majority in the 15th Lok Sabha, some of the TF constituents might be wooed back by their former partners. *In the event of neither the Congress nor the BJP faring well, the TF might conceivably supply the Prime Minister...* But that arrangement would almost certainly be at the mercy of one or the other of the two leading parties in the political system. *At this stage, what the TF appears to have achieved is to throw this election wide open.*” N.D. Shiva Kumar adds that *the TF “could undercut the Congress’ secular vote”* (TOI, 13/3/09/1).

* **An EPW Editorial** (No. 11, 14-20/3/09/6) **looks at the TF role as follows:** *“As currently constituted, the TF is a major electoral impediment* for both the UPA and the NDA, and also for the Congress and the BJP as individual parties – neither will be able to win enough seats so as to dominate a future coalition government. On the other hand, the TF is unlikely to be able to come anywhere near forming a government at the Centre. Nevertheless, even if the 2009 TF experiment does end by an extraordinary set of circumstances in the formation of a non-Congress, non-BJP government, *it would be far-fetched to expect such a government to base its programmes on a substantial alternative...* The amorphousness of the TF precludes the possibility of a strong third pole, distinguished and separate from the UPA and the NDA in India’s national polity. *Unless, of course, the alternative is constructed programmatically and nationally gathers critical support for its agenda.*”

* **Pritam Singh** (EPW No. 12, 21-27/3/09/8-11) **however sees a great and crucial potential for the TF, especially on a long-term basis:** *“The common opposition to the centralising idea of nationalism espoused by both the Congress and the BJP provides the ground for the coming together of Left, regional and lower-caste political forces. For this to happen, all three will have to imaginatively rework their programmatic positions to accommodate the aspirations of the others. While there are many hurdles to this, such a front is essential if the stranglehold of the parties representing Indian big capital has to be broken and the space created for the long-term success of progressive politics.”* Otherwise, *“the centre of gravity of Indian politics will move towards Hindutva-oriented politics... (Only) a TF based on an agenda of egalitarianism and decentralisation can decisively change the terms of the political discourse and (mobilise our country) away from this possible drift towards Hindutva...”*

“To acquire credibility and sustainability, a TF has to be sufficiently broad-based in its appeal, and should include environmental activists, peace campaigners opposed to the nuclear nationalism of the BJP and the Congress, human rights groups, NGOs working for egalitarian development projects and progressive currents of the Indian diaspora. A TF in Indian politics is a historic necessity and has a reasonable chance of success in the present context of India. Although the... prospects of a successful performance in the coming elections could be an important glue for welding a TF, *the potentialities of a third alternative for shaping a progressive politico-economic agenda for India is of a long-term significance.*”

5. Existing Alliances in Early April

“With no single party expected to win a majority in the Lok Sabha, the political alliances are highly malleable, and very crucial.” In fact, they are likely to decide the new government (D.K Upreti, DH, 3/3/09/8).

The UPA is led by the Indian National Congress. Its allies are the RJD and LJP in Bihar, the DMK in Tamil Nadu, the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Kerala, the National Conference (NC) in Jammu and Kashmir, the Jharkhand Mufti Morcha (JMM), the Trinamool Congress (TMC) in West Bengal, the SP in Uttar

Pradesh, the NCP in Maharashtra and some small parties. On account of the breakdown of seat-sharing with the Congress and the formation of the “secular alliance” between the RJD, LJP and SP in Bihar and UP, and because of several controversial statements and conjectures, it is debated whether and how firmly these three parties are with the UPA.

The NDA is led by the BJP. *Its allies include* the JD(U) and RLD in Bihar, the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) in Punjab, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) in Assam, and the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) in Haryana.

The TF comprises the Left parties (mainly strong in West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura): the CPI, CPM, the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation CPI-ML(L) (in Bihar). Its allies are the TDP and TRS in Andhra Pradesh, the JD(S) in Karnataka, the AIADMK (and PMK and MDMK) in Tamil Nadu, the BJD in Orissa (not officially confirmed), and the BSP in UP.

6. The Weight of the Existing Alliances

* An Editorial from *The Hindu* (1/1/09/10) points out that “*today’s UPA is a far cry from what it was in 2004*. That year’s big hitters seem out of form. In 2004, the Congress alliance maximised its potential in seven States – Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Haryana, Delhi, and Himachal Pradesh – and took 129 of the 156 seats on offer. Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh alone contributed 64 seats to the alliance. Five years on, there seems little left of that winning chemistry. The Congress has suffered a succession of defeats in State Assembly elections. In 2008, it partially redeemed its stock with victories in Rajasthan and Delhi, and a reasonable performance in Jammu and Kashmir. Yet significantly, the party lost in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, two States it was banking on to make up its likely losses elsewhere.”

The RJD in Bihar and the DMK in Tamil Nadu moreover seem on slippery round, and there are also tensions and mistrust between the NCP and the Congress in Maharashtra. “*The Congress is lagging behind the BJP in Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Karnataka. It*

is better placed in Punjab and Rajasthan, but could be in trouble in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh” (Rajeev Deshpande, TOI, 19/3/09/9). This is also true in Tamil Nadu after the alliance between the AIADMK, PMK and MDMK. Big states like Bihar, AP and TN will probably see lower returns for the UPA than in 2004. On the other hand, the Congress is likely to make some important gains in West Bengal and Kerala.

* On its part, *the BJP “finds itself struggling to expand an alliance that at one time boasted 23 constituents but has been reduced to seven”* (Editorial, H, 1/1/09/10), and even six with the breakaway of the BJD. “By all counts, the NDA is “alliance-starved” in comparison to the pre-poll scene in 2004. Major parties in the South like the DMK, AIADMK and TDP are not with the NDA and so is the case with the PRP” (Upreti, DH, 3/3/09/8). The breakaway of the BJD in Orissa is a blow to the NDA. In spite of (co)governing in nine States and having strong Chief Ministers in some of them, the BJP is weak in States like UP, TN, AP, WB and Kerala.

* On account of the Congress-Trinamool alliance in West Bengal (with an expanding share of at least 36% of the vote) and the Left Front’s problems in Kerala and WB, the Left may get only 35-40 seats instead of 60 in 2004. *All the same, it may “be a post-poll pivot”*. The Left leaders however admit that some of the TF allies like Jayalalitha, Mayawati, as well as the TRS, PMK, and JD(S) “may be fickle” (TOI Team, 3/3/09/13). Ramadoss’ PMK already speaks of the possibility of joining the UPA **after the polls**. Pawar’s NCP may however join the Left. On the other hand, several of the UPA and NDA allies (like the Trinamool Congress, the Shiv Sena, the Akali Dal, the DMK and the SP) are very unlikely to join the TF. In fact, it even remains possible that the Left, in spite of the hardening of positions in the current campaign, rejoins the UPA – especially if the Prime Minister does not belong to the Congress – to prevent the formation of a NDA government.

7. Conclusion

* “At this point, the electoral race may end up with anyone of three possible outcomes: a Congress-led UPA win, a BJP-led NDA victory or a TF coming out ahead. *Right now, the ruling UPA looks to be the frontrunner. But so did the NDA at this stage in 2004...*

With the exception of 1996, it is difficult to think of an election as open as this one... Unlike the elections of the 1970s and 1980s, there will be no nation-wide wave. *The final outcome will reflect the sum total equilibrium of political forces at the State level.* One can moreover foresee that no pre-poll alliance will get a majority. As we shall see in Section VIII.1, *“this election is all about the States”* (Yogendra Yadav, TOI, 23/3/09/12).

* Rajeev Deshpande even estimated on 19th March that **the polls are now “even more open than they were a couple of weeks ago”** (op. cit.). About a week later, M. Gunasekaran and K. Venkataramanan added that, on 24th March, “the PMK parted company with the Congress and DMK to hitch with Jayalalitha’s AIADMK, currently with the TF. Another Tamil Nadu player, actor-turned-politician Vijayakanth (DMDK), wooed by the Congress, stuck to his decision to go it alone... *These two developments, coming soon after the UPA’s bust-up in Bihar and UP, have opened up this election, with (some) political pundits claiming the UPA has now lost its edge.* In 2004, the UPA had swept all the 39 seats in Tamil Nadu. The re-alignment may tip the scales in favour of the AIADMK in a State which has a history of having elected a combination that ultimately formed the government at the Centre in every election since 1991” (TOI, 27/3/09/9). **But will this tradition continue in 2009? In any case, the balance after the elections will tend to swing towards the alliance with the larger numbers.**

VI. Key Issues and Concerns

As an introduction, it may be relevant to mention that *several groups have used the elections to ask the political parties to put certain issues on their agenda*, for example women’s rights and concerns (Aarti Dhar, H, 18/3/09/14), child rights (H, 26/3/09/2), and health rights (Dhar, H, 25/3/09/22). The **South Asian People’s Initiative** with its many grassroots groups has even issued a *People’s Manifesto 2009* (PM 2009), and the **Civil Society Organisations of Orissa** a document entitled *Adivasis and Dalits of Kandhamal Speak Out!* (both given in *Critique*, April 2009, ISI, Bangalore). Y. Yadav gives other such examples (H, 9/4/09/13). Several local groups have also highlighted their specific demands.

1. Return to the Livelihood Concerns of the *Aam Aadmi*

As the 2009 Lok Sabha elections approach, **“the focus seems to be returning to the *aam aadmi* and their livelihood concerns... No doubt, it is these concerns which had shaped the central agenda during the 2004 elections.** And the *aam aadmi* had voted with a vengeance against the perverse notion of ‘shining India’. The lengthening list of farmers’ suicides, increasing number of sick and closed small and medium enterprises, and the aggressive sale of public assets at a throwaway price... provided the backdrop which forced the *aam aadmi* to use the ballot as a weapon to bring about a regime change. *This time around, the concerns are the same, but the context is different... Now there is a mood swing.* **The great bubble of global prosperity stands punctured. The paradigm of neo-liberal globalisation stands challenged and discredited”** (N. Basu, DH, 3/3/09/10).

“The battle, therefore, in this election will again focus on jobs, food, schooling, health and such concerns of the common man. The global setting provides a new context, 2009 is different from 2004. **The battle is on for choices and alternatives that can move India forward towards a more humane and pro-people economic policy paradigm, which addresses the concerns of this majority.”**

2. Two All India Surveys

According to an NDTV survey, 37% of the respondents identified *terrorism* as the most important issue, 19% *economic recession*, 17% *development* and 13% *inflation*. About 46% regarded Manmohan Singh’s handling of terrorism as good and 36% as bad, while 43% regarded Advani’s handling as good and 30% as bad.

*This is the percentage of the respondents of **The Week/CVoter survey** who saw the following as the key issue: “economic slowdown/inflation (21%), internal security & terrorism (17%), corruption (14%), civic amenities*

Box 2. Who can handle these issues better? (%)	
UPA (Congress+Allies)	37
NDA (BJP+Allies)	27
Third Front	14
None of these	14
Others/Can’t say	8

development (12%), employment opportunities (8%), reservations (6%), stability and leadership (6%), education (4%), farmer indebtedness (4%), NREGA (3%), Indo-US nuclear deal (1%), secularism/Hindutva (1%), others/can't say (3%)” (*The Week*, 19/4/09/52-3).

3. IMRB and Synovate Surveys

* In late February, an IMRB survey was done for the TOI. It covered “6,000 respondents in India’s cities, towns and villages”. It revealed that “**terrorism, unemployment and inflation, along with education and law & order, are key concerns**”. “While terrorism, employment and inflation topped the charts with 25%, 21% and 15% respectively identifying them as most important, a surprise was that just 3% thought corruption was the most important issue.” It should however be pointed out that *the views significantly differ across the spectrum*. Take terrorism, for instance. “While 29% of urban Indians saw terror as the top issue, only 23% of rural respondents shared this view. In the west, including Mumbai, 33% said it was the most pressing concern, but in the north only 22% agreed. In the lowest income group (those below Rs 1,000 per month), a relatively low 18% voted terror as the single biggest problem... In contrast, in the Rs 3,000-10,000 per month income group, 29% felt terror was the key issue” (TOI, 3/3/09/12 & 1).

According to the same survey, 83% and 72% of the respondents respectively felt that most of our politicians are corrupt and inefficient; 67% also felt that making money is the primary motive of most of our politicians. In another survey by Synovate in 10 of the biggest cities, “a whopping 60% blamed the politicians for the nation’s sorry state, 48% said the main factor in the poor quality of our political class is corruption, and 59% felt the primary motive of most politicians is to make money... **There is hope, though, in the proportion that believes this will be changed and that the voters can change things for the better.**” A majority of 54% were indeed convinced that “the political class will have no choice but to improve”. They will be forced to do so by regulating bodies like the Election Commission and the Supreme Court (28%), enlightened leaders forcing others to improve (18%) and especially by the voters’ rejection of non-performing politicians (54%) (TOI, 3/3/09/1).

VII. Political Manifestos

1. How Useful are Manifestos?

* A DH Editorial critically observes: “Election manifestos are often not worth the paper on which they are written as the promises are forgotten after the elections, and as they offer everything to everybody. The 2009 Congress manifesto is also true to that nature.” Its cheap rice scheme “is electoral populism, but that does not make it a bad idea, if implemented” (26/3/09/10). If the TOI could say that “every vote bank was addressed in the Congress manifesto” (25/3/09/9), the BJP’s undoubtedly outdid it!

* On the other hand, Yogendra Yadav states that, though often remaining words, *manifestos “provide a better idea than the editorial pages of most national newspapers of the issues and problems that face the country...* The major national parties have clearly put in some effort and thought” into them. Giving several examples from the 2009 documents, Yadav concludes that *manifestos “deserved to be analysed and debated in the media”* – though their growing ideological convergence is a serious defect (H, 9/4/09/13). *Manifestos can moreover enable the voters to challenge their representatives to become more accountable.*

2. The Congress and the UPA

A. Did the UPA Fulfill the 2004 CMP?

* Manoj Mitta writes: “For all its claims of having fulfilled its Common Minimum Programme (CMP), *the UPA government has, for various reasons, failed to deliver on at least seven major legislative commitments.* While it did implement the pledged NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) and RTI (Right to Information), the avowedly secular government failed to push through its much-touted legislative response to the Gujarat riots. Nor could it make the promised breakthrough to put in place statutory mechanisms for ensuring probity in the political executive and higher judiciary. The UPA also failed to bring about the laws promised on gender justice and women’s quota in legislatures. And it reneged on its commitment to resolve labour issues” (TOI/8/3/09/1 & 6).

* According to a survey reported by NDTV, *the two UPA's measures most appreciated by the people were the cancellation of farmers' debts and the NREGS.*

* According to the Week/CVoter survey (op. cit.), **these were "the UPA's achievements (%)**: farm loan waiver (19), NREGA (18), economic growth (16), political stability (16), Indo-US nuclear deal (14), controlling inflation (5), corruption-free image (4), tribal rights bill (3), RTI (3), can't say (2).” **And these were "the UPA's failures (%)**: price rise/inflation (32), terrorism and national security (26), compromise with the US (10), rising crime against women (9), declining job opportunities (8), naxalism (6), world trade (4), farmers' suicides (4), can't say (2).”

B. The Congress Manifesto

* “The Congress kicked off its election campaign on 24th March with the promise of enacting a *National Food Security Act* per which every family living below the poverty line (BPL) in both rural and urban areas will be entitled to 25 kg of rice or wheat per month at Rs 3 a kg. Also on the cards if the Congress comes to power is *one-third reservation for women in all central government jobs...* The party also seeks to build on the success of the NREGS by pledging *at least 100 days work at a real wage of Rs 100 a day for everyone as an entitlement*” (Anita Joshua, H, 25/3/09/15).

* **A TOI Editorial thus highlights the social dimension of these promises**: “Unveiling its poll manifesto, the Congress tries to show that its heart continues to be in the right place: with the *aam aadmi*. Countering the NDA's ‘India Shining’ campaign in 2004, the party had made the slogan of inclusive socio-economic progress its electoral USP. In 2009, it again seeks to convey that *policy-making must be socially conscious so as to be politically acceptable.*” It is worth making the NREGS individual-based and expanding its ambit and wages. “*Ensuring food security too is a goal to pursue...* The problems of corruption and leakage would, however, need tackling if money isn't to go down the drain” (TOI, 26/3/09/14).

The manifesto's intentions are good, but “pledges that win votes ultimately need delivering”. Hence, there is “*the economics of execution*, be it with a widened NREGS, free education for SCs/STs or food security and health insurance for the poor. *The Congress*

isn't clear about how it will bear the fiscal strain. Given the UPA's fiscal profligacy, public finances are in bad shape. Taxing or borrowing sprees are unaffordable ways to payroll social programmes.”

* **The previous day, Times had expressed its views in a more positive manner**: “Announcements like 25 kg of rice per poor family at Rs 3 per kg could be criticised as populist. While the promise is clearly aimed to lure the voter, that in itself does not make the scheme bad. *When governments across the world are pouring billions into bailout packages for corporate fat cats, it would be strange to argue against a scheme that gives the poor food by spending just about Rs 5,700 crore.* The key, of course, will be to ensure that the benefits reach the genuinely poor and are not cornered by middlemen. It is also sad the Congress should have thought of this as an election gimmick rather than during the five years in which it headed the government” (TOI, 25/3/09/9).

3. The BJP and the NDA

A. The BJP's Political Resolution (Nagpur, 8th February)

* According to an EPW Editorial (No. 7, 14-20/2/09/5), **the BJP “offers a confused mixture of policies but it remains anchored in Hindutva”**. “As an opposition party, the BJP has over the past five years repeatedly disrupted proceedings in Parliament on the slightest or no pretext. The space for a meaningful opposition was occupied by the Left parties, even before they withdrew support to the UPA government. After five years of rabble-rousing and harping on agendas such as ‘minority appeasement’ and India becoming a ‘soft state’, the BJP had more of the same in its political resolution for the coming Lok Sabha elections.”

“The economic road map chartered by the party claims to promise an employment-oriented policy of growth and professes a determination to address the agrarian crisis in the country. But beyond pointing fingers at economic mismanagement by the UPA, *the BJP has little to offer on how it plans to repair and then spur the economy through ‘recapitalisation of the financial sector’ and ‘spend on infrastructure’*. While the BJP criticises fiscal spending and suggests that this led to high inflation, it does in the same breath make ‘massive’ infrastructure spending on a ‘war-footing’ part of its core agenda...”

“The BJP’s insistence on retaining its Hindutva extremist fringe has seen it reap highly polarising gains in Gujarat, Karnataka and Orissa... But more recently it has had mixed results as shown by the losses in Rajasthan and Delhi. The party’s polarising ideology has seen to it that *it stands bereft of an alliance partner and a base in most States in the south and the east*. And the language used by the party only suggests a further isolation.” “*The rise of the BJP to the centre-stage... has had a disastrous impact on the Indian State...* That the party has stuck with Hindutva as a core and basic political philosophy (till now) reveals the threat that the cancerous influence of communalism continues to pose to India’s polity.”

* An Editorial from *The Hindu* (10/2/09/12) similarly criticised the outcome of the BJP National Council meeting. The BJP unveiled in Nagpur a political vision that hark back to “its Ram Mandir campaign, minority-bashing, and Pakistan phobia. The failure to offer new ideas to address the mounting national challenges was glaringly apparent.” The image projected was that of “an obscurantist party with an unidimensional agenda”. Though in different words, a DH Editorial expressed the same views (11/2/09/10).

B. The BJP Manifesto

On 3rd April, the BJP released its manifesto and announced **the following policies and promises**: 35 kg of rice or wheat every month at Rs 2 per kg to all BPL (below poverty line) families (thus bettering the Congress offer of 25 kg at Rs 3 a kg); ushering in a ‘Ram Rajya’, including the construction of the Ram temple at Ayodhya and evolving a new route for the Sethusamudram Channel Project bypassing the Ram Sethu; ensuring minority welfare and development, especially for Muslims; student loans at 4% interest; bicycles to every school-going girl from BPL families; exemption from income tax for those earning up to Rs 300,000 per year, and up to 350,000 for women and senior citizens; IT exemption for all armed forces and paramilitary personnel; ban on foreign direct investment (FDI) in the retail sector; etc. (DH & H, 4/4/09/1).

Neena Vyas adds: “*The party moreover announced a slew of measures to help farmers*: a complete loan waiver for all farmers...; availability of loans to farmers at 4% interest; a guaranteed farm income and crop insurance; irrigation of 35 million hectares of additional

farm land; and revision of minimum wages to help the landless agricultural labourers.” The manifesto also expressed the BJP’s “ideological concerns – cow protection, implementing a uniform civil code and abrogating Article 370 of the Constitution (special status for J&K) without which ‘full integration’ of the nation was ‘not possible’” (H, *ibid*).

“The manifesto supported the creation of smaller states and backed Telangana as a separate state. It also promised to sympathetically examine and consider the long-pending demands of the Gorkhas and the Adivasis of Darjeeling district and Dooars region... On the anti-terrorism front, the BJP said it would revive the anti-terror mechanism, improve upon POTA, give assent to anti-organised crime laws drafted by States and launch a massive programme to detect, detain and deport illegal immigration. These steps would be taken within 100 days of the party coming to power” (DH, *op. cit.*).

What to think of the BJP manifesto? It should first be pointed out that *the positive and negative comments of the TOI on the Congress manifesto apply to the BJP manifesto as well* (above, pp. 63-64). Senior Congress Leader Pranab Mukherjee moreover remarked that “this is a quasi-Congress manifesto”, “*the only new thing being the saffron’s party’s divisive agenda*”. He also observed that the BJP had promised rice at Rs 2 a kg in the Assembly polls in Karnataka in May 2008, but that nothing to this effect has been done in the two budgets of the Chief Minister. “How can we expect them to deliver on their promise in the rest of India?”, he asked. The irrigation of 35 mn hectares is an UPA programme. “Over 3.6 cr farmers have already benefited from the debt waivers of Rs 65.3 thousand cr” by the UPA Government, he said. The NDA raised the IT exemption from 40,000 to 50,000 in the first year of its term, but did nothing afterwards; whereas the UPA raised the exemption limits from Rs 50,000 to Rs 150,000 per annum in its term (A Bhaumik, DH, 6/4/09/9).

4. The CPM Manifesto

* “**The CPM election manifesto**, which was released in Delhi on 16th March by General Secretary Prakash Karat, said the party would work for enacting a comprehensive law against communal violence, ensure speedy justice and adequate compensation to the victims of communal violence like the Gujarat riots of 2002, and

implement the Justice Srikrishna Commission report... The manifesto also spoke of universalising the public distribution system (PDS), cutting petrol and diesel prices by slashing taxes and duties, strengthening the public sector, protecting the domestic industry and prohibiting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the retail sector” (DH, 17/3/09/8).

* Karat explained that “**the alternative policies would have at least four components:** reversing the neo-liberal policies and bringing in pro-poor policies; standing firm on secularism and defending it; giving a new deal to all oppressed sections and ensuring social justice; and having an independent foreign policy” (K.V. Prasad, H, 17/3/09/10)..

VIII. State Alliances and Battles

I. The Crucial Importance of States

* According to Diwakar (TOI, 3/3/09/13), **the 2009 Lok Sabha elections “will be shaped by state battles.** For instance, how the NDA fares will be influenced less by L K Advani and more by the performance of the NDA Chief Ministers... Likewise, the degree to which the Congress minimises its expected losses in Andhra Pradesh will have a crucial bearing on its chances. Likewise, Prakash Karat’s ambition to be kingmaker hinges on how well West Bengal and Kerala do. But all these calculations can go haywire if Mayawati sweeps the 80-strong UP.” The campaigns of the three main contenders – the UPA, NDA and Left Front – do not seem so convincing to the voters, and even Mayawati’s ‘sarvajan’ pitch may not appeal outside UP.

* In the same vein, Yogendra Yadav (H, 30/3/09/14) writes: “We have leaders, but no one who (really) drives popular choices at the national level.” “*With States emerging as the principal battleground, political charisma has shifted to the local level.*” All the same, it may be interesting to highlight what percentages of

Table 3. A Look at Some Political Leaders (%)

	Manmohan Singh	Sonia Gandhi	L.K. Advani	Mayawati
Strong Leadership	70	84	76	72
Honesty	72	68	61	40
Trustworthiness	50	50	48	46

people believe that leaders possess certain qualities (CNN-IBN national poll conducted by the CSDS in January 2009, *ibid.*).

2. Impact of Key States on Lok Sabha Results

The following States have the greatest number of Lok Sabha seats: UP (80), Maharashtra (48), WB and AP (42 each), Bihar (40) and TN (39). *The last three are considered particularly important, for their voters often deliver one-sided results and swing the power balance in Delhi* (DH, 22/3/09/9). This may not however be the case in 2009. Though the following documentation expresses some views on the prospects of various parties, **it must be emphasised that commentators and opinion polls greatly differ in their conclusions.**

A. Andhra Pradesh

An EPW Editorial (No. 7, 14-20/2/09/6-7) **thus describes the political situation in Andhra Pradesh:** “*The opposition parties, including the TDP, the Left parties and the TRS, have formalised a grand alliance against the Congress Party, which is in office... What prevents the elections from becoming a two-horse race is the dark horse, the PRP, formed by the popular film actor Chiranjeevi... The Congress faces a formidable challenge posed by the grand alliance and the PRP. The biggest loser is likely to be the BJP.* After a burst of growth in the 1990s, the BJP has been sidelined in AP.” Recent estimates speak of about 20-25 seats for the Congress, and 18-20 for the Left Front, and 2 for the PRP. The results in Telangana may play an important role.

B. Uttar Pradesh

* *These are some considerations for the prospects in UP.* “The BJP’s Lok Sabha tally from UP declined from a high of 57 seats in 1998 to 10 in 2004, whereas the SP’s share went up from 16 to 36, (the Congress’ from 0 to 9), and the BSP’s from 4 to 19 in the corresponding period.” Now that Kalyan Singh, the former BJP Chief Minister, has revolted and joined hands with the SP, “*the SP may make some gains in terms of seats, while the BJP and the BSP may suffer*” (Editorials, TOI, 22/1/09/14 and DH, 27/1/09/10). On the other hand, the results of the 2008 Assembly elections show that the BJP has become the fastest growing party in the country (Editorial,

DH, 12/12/08/10). Though anti-incumbency undoubtedly exists in UP, Mayawati's BSP possesses a strong core vote (V Subrahmaniam, H, 27/3/09/10). According to B.S. Arun (DH, 29/3/09/7), Mayawati is expected to do well, being also a PM candidate.

* The BSP's list of 80 candidates for UP has been released on 20th March. It contains 29 upper castes (of which 20 are Brahmins, 6 Thakurs, 2 Baniyas and 1 Punjabi Khattri), 20 OBCs, 17 Dalits and 14 Muslims (A. Tripathi, TOI, 21/3/09/17). The list has a large number of turncoats (who crossed to the BSP from other parties) and about two dozen people with mafia and criminal antecedents. "Mayawati went back to her tested formula of 'social engineering' (bringing Dalits and Brahmins together), which saw her party catapulting to power in the 2007 Assembly polls in UP" (TOI, 21/3/09/8). Mayawati promises reservation benefits to the financially poor among the forward castes.

The situation is very complex in UP because of quadrangular contests between the BSP, SP, Congress and BJP (and its minor allies). Both the Congress and the BJP may get about 10 seats. Neither the BSP nor the SP is expected to get less than 20 seats. It is difficult to say how many of the other 20 seats the BSP and SP will respectively corner; these seats may be rather equally divided. After the polls, the BSP or the SP must firmly join one of the three coalitions to play a key role in national politics (cf. S. Pandey, DH, 29/3/09/7).

C. Bihar

We have already spoken of the "secular alliance" among the RJD, LJP and SP in UP and Bihar, and the breakdown of seat-sharing with the Congress (above pp.), which will to some extent divide the UPA vote. *This means there are quadrangular contests almost everywhere in Bihar* between the Congress, the "secular alliance", the NDA (comprising mainly the JD(U) and the BJP), and the United Left Block (ULB). The latter will indeed contest 32 seats, the CPI 6, the CPM 5 and the CPI-ML (L) 21 (C. Dasgupta, EPW No. 10, 7-13/3/09/15-18). The BSP and the Left parties have now forged a seat arrangement. In 2004, the UPA got 29 seats with 45.10% of the vote (38.86% by the RJD & LJP, and around 4.5% by the Congress). The NDA got 11 seats with 36.93% of the vote. Both the

BSP and the Left parties had about 3.58% of the vote (K. Balchand, H, 31/3/09/12).

In 2009, the battle will be mainly between the RJD-LJP and the JD(U)-BJP combines. The former have a 28:12 seat adjustment and the latter one of 25:15; and the Congress will contest about 37 seats. With his clean image and his three years of good governance, Nitish Kumar (JD-U) may lead the NDA to a victory (Abhay Kumar, DH, 22/03/09/9). *The NDA may get about 25 seats, the RJD-LJP 15, and the others 1 or 2.* Yet, the RJD and the LJP have strong candidates and a caste alliance that may deliver the Yadav, Muslim and SC votes (Balchand, op. cit.).

It might be good to add here that, in spite of difficulties, Nitish Kumar is kindling new hope of changing Bihar (Ajay Singh, DH, 4/3/09/11). On 6th February, **S.P. Yadav, a JD(U) leader, invited the Karnataka Government to follow the Bihar model, not Gujarat.** He said: "Whatever the RJD could not do in 15 years and the Congress could not do in 20 years, Nitish Kumar-headed Government has done it in three years." "Mr. Yadav claimed that the Bihar Government had successfully managed to replace anarchy with law and order, appointed more than 1.5 lakh teachers and was providing free medical assistance to poor people" (H, 7/2/09/13).

D. West Bengal

* "Mamata Banerjee, the lone enduring symbol of Opposition politics in Bengal, is now a force, thanks equally to the tactical follies of the Left and her success in mobilising resistance to the Tata project in Singur and the doggedness of her cadres who stood up to the CPM in Nandigram. And now with rural masses rallying behind her, as the victory in Bishnupur by-poll has shown, this could be Didi's best opportunity to serve a blow to the Left. The firebrand leader is wiser – at least that's what seems so far. The way she used the land acquisition issue was commendable, say political pundits. With the smaller parties and a section of intellectuals rallying behind her, **her party is stronger than ever before**" (TOI, 6/3/9/10).

* "*The Red bastion in West Bengal is under threat.* No one in the CPM, from Jyoti Basu to the activist in the *para*, will deny this. Nor the fact that the number of Left MPs from West Bengal this time

will be far below the existing 35. The question is how far? Will the Opposition cross the 16-seat mark that the Congress bagged in 1984 after Indira Gandhi's assassination?" "At least 10 Left LS seats in south Bengal look vulnerable to Mamata's tide" (Saugata Roy, TOI, 6/3/09/10).

* "The pre-poll tie-up worked out between the Congress and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal is likely to consolidate the anti-Left Front votes in the State." Helped by "its vote share of at least 40%" and "local factors like anger against the Left-Front government's land acquisition policy", *this combine "could bring down the tally of the Left Front significantly and boost the prospects of the Congress"* (Editorial, TOI, 3/3/09/14). In 2004, the Left won 35 seats, the Congress 6, and the Trinamool Cong 1. **The Left may now get 24-26 seats and the UPA 16-18.**

E. Orissa

* **A TOI Editorial (10/3/09/10) thus comments on the BJD-BJP divorce in Orissa:** "By changing track on election eve on grounds of 'winnability', Patnaik invites the charge of political opportunism. *The BJP, on its part, should see the limits to the politics of exclusivism and of manipulating religious sentiments.* It clearly took the BJD for granted, pushing the wrong buttons by charging its own ally of going slow in the Laxmanananda case and going hard on proselytisers. As in Gujarat, it seemed to want to encash the sectarian polarisation sought to be created by saffron extremists like the VHP and Bajrang Dal. Whether in Orissa or in Karnataka, its proclaimed respect for social pluralism and harmony has come to be questioned, to the cost of its image... **There's no denying the NDA has suffered a big blow.**"

* According to Sandeep Mishra (TOI, 25/3/09/14), **Orissa is now split wide open**, but with the Kandhamal wounds yet to heal, **the Congress has the edge.** "In 2004, the Congress polled the highest, nearly 34% of the votes, followed by the BJD with 28% and the BJP 17%." But because of its alliance, the BJD captured 11 seats and the BJP 7 against only 2 by the Congress and 1 by the JMM. "In the new scheme of things, the Congress stands to get up to 7 or 8 LS seats; the BJP, even with its tear-jerking campaign about

'betrayal' can't seriously hope to get past 3. And the BJD would consider itself lucky if it can hold on to 11." *According to The Week (19/4/09/46), both the Congress and the BJD will get 9 seats, and the BJP 3.*

F. Tamil Nadu

In Tamil Nadu, "both the leading Dravidian parties have polled 25% to 30% of the votes in the last one decade. The DMK's main ally, the Congress, has 8% of the vote share." The PMK has 5%, significantly concentrated in 8 northern districts, the MDMK close to 4% mainly in 7 southern and western districts, and the CPI and the CPM roughly 2.5% each in various pockets, and the BJP only 2%. As we know, the AIADMK, PMK, MDMK and the Left are allies, while the Congress has only the DMK as partner, and the BJP goes solo (Jayaraj Sivan, TOI, 27/3/09/12).

According to S. Murari (DH, 22/3/09/9), the 2009 "outcome is expected to be a split verdict like in 1998 and '99. In 1998, the AIADMK-BJP combine won 28 seats. In 1999, the DMK-BJP front won 25. It is too much for the DMK and the Congress to expect a sweep like in 2004 this time, as the anti-incumbency factor will work against both. Moreover, Mr. Karunanidhi (84) has just recovered from a major surgery. He is the only one who can galvanise the voters, and he cannot campaign actively now." The Left Front has therefore the edge, but the post-poll alliances appear unpredictable. **The DMK-Congress may get about 14 seats and the AIADMK-PMK-MDMK and Left 25.**

IX. The Problem of Corruption

1. The Criminalisation of Politics

* **Out of 543 politicians elected in the Lok Sabha in May 2004, 125 had criminal charges against them.** "A large chunk faced serious charges including murder, rape, dacoity, kidnapping and corruption. The 125 MPs were from 17 different states and two Union territories, which between them account for 499 of the Lok Sabha's 543 seats. Also, these MPs belonged to 17 different parties. *Clearly, the rot is spread – both spatially and politically – much worse than we normally think it is.* Of the 125, there were at least 96 who

faced charges with potential sentences of two years or more. Under the Representation of the People Act, a person sentenced for two years or more is disqualified from contesting elections... Several (of these 125 MPs) had already served more than one term in Parliament. More than a quarter of them had already done three or more terms” (*Times Insight Group*, TOI, 10/3/09/2).

2. The Buying of Votes

A 2008 study conducted by the Delhi-based NGO, Centre for Media Studies (CMS), “has Karnataka shamefully topping the country in voters being bribed to cast their vote in favour of a particular political party for money... The study has Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar trailing Karnataka in the ‘vote for cash’ phenomenon... The bribing menace was found to be lower in the Left Front-ruled states of Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura. Sadly, vote buying was rampant in highly literate states like Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh” (Anil Kumar M, TOI, 25/12/08/1).

Karnataka	47	Delhi	25
Tamil Nadu	34	Gujarat	24
MP	33	Chhattisgarh	22
AP	31	UP	18
Bihar	31	Assam	14
Orissa	27	Rajasthan	14

3. Electoral Promises and Doles

* This should not be strictly classified under corruption, but every section of voters was promised ‘poll free’ goodies before the Election Commission code of conduct deadline – “free TV sets, cheapest possible rice (TN), monthly cash help to BPL families (Andhra), massive waiver on rural power arrears (UP, Bihar, MP and other states) and other monetary schemes for the rural and urban poor” (*Times News Network*, TOI, 10/3/09/0).

Let us give a few other concrete examples. The following ‘gifts’ were announced: free health insurance to 10 mn poor families, rice at Re 1/kg, and colour TV sets (TN); loan waiver up to Rs 100,000 to SCs-STs-BCs and minorities (CM in AP); wheat at Rs 2/kg, farm loans at 3%, and Rs 50,000 farm loan waiver (ruling BJP in MP); a Rs 5,106 cr fiscal stimulus package, including rice at Rs 2/kg and

20% hike for teachers (Left govt. in WB); plaques for 36,500 km of roads (cost: Rs 16,300 cr) by Lalu Prasad and schemes for Rs 10,000 cr by Nitish Kumar in Bihar; and so on...

X. Lok Sabha Projections and Opinion Polls

1. The March Estimate of the TOI Team

The TOI Team (TOI, 6/3/9/1) **published its projections for the LS polls on March 6:** “Rather than hide behind some pollsters’ projections, we decided to stick our neck out. We picked the brains of our bureaus across India as well as the national bureau. We argued and differed on some estimates. Finally, here’s what we came up with. *The UPA is likely to win 201 seats, the NDA 195, the Third Front 82 and Others 65.*” That means that neither the Congress nor the BJP “has a clear shot at forming the government”.

“Mayawati’s BSP, which in our projection should win about 35 seats, could well end up holding a lot of the aces. There are, of course, a host of caveats... Any dramatic event between now and the polls could radically alter the situation.” Most of the TOI assumptions for their projections turned out to be correct, except those concerning a tie up between the RJD, LJP and Congress in Bihar, and between the BJD and BJP in Orissa.

2. A Mid-March Survey

“A survey by market research agency Neilsen has given the UPA 257 seats in the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls, putting it within 15 seats of the 272 required for majority in the 543-member House. Its rival NDA is projected to get a smaller total of 184 while the Third Front, being cobbled together by the Left with regional parties, is projected to get 96 seats.”

The tallies of important parties are the following: in the UPA, Congress (144), SP (30), DMK (24), Trinamool Congress (13), NCP (13), RJD (11), LJP (6); **in the NDA**, BJP (137), JD(U) (16), Shiv Sena (12); **in the Third Front**, CPM (25), BSP (21), TDP (14), AIADMK (9), BJD (9), JD(S) (5), CPI (3)... (TOI, 23/3/09/9). The above tallies may significantly change with the latest developments in Orissa, UP, Bihar and Tamil Nadu. *Without the RJD, LJP and SP, the UPA indeed gets only 210 seats.*

3. Bookies' Estimates in Mid-March

S. Balakrishnan first quotes a crime branch official: "Bookies follow political developments very closely and have their own informants in major political parties. Hundreds of crores will be wagered by the time the first phase of the polls start." He then comments: "Various studies around the world indicate that the betting industry (comprising both legal and illegal bookmakers) has its ear close to the ground and often outsmarts psephologists and political pundits when it comes to poll predictions" (TOI, 14/3/09/13).

"Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appears to be a favourite as of now, unlike the NDA's prime ministerial candidate, L.K. Advani. While a rupee bet on Singh becoming PM will fetch you a profit of Rs 2.50 (1:2.5), in the BJP leader's case, it is 1:5. The chances of Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati becoming PM appear to be slim with the odds at 1:25, NCP leader Sharad Pawar is better off at 1:8. The other odds are as follows: BJP (for winning 120 seats) – Rs 1.10; Congress (150 seats): Rs 1.20; BSP and allies (50 seats) – Rs 5; for 40 seats – Rs 2 and 30 seats – Re 1."

4. The April Estimate of the TOI Team

On April 10, the TOI Team published its revised projections (Table 4) (TOI, 10/4/09/1). It thus summed up its findings: "**The UPA – in which we are now not including Lalu Prasad's RJD, Ram Vilas Paswan's LJP or Mulayam Singh's SP – is likely to end up with 198 seats. The NDA – which no longer includes Naveen Patnaik's BJD – is expected to get 176 seats.** The Left could slip to 35 seats, a huge fall from the 60-plus it had in 2004. Compared to our first assessment, the UPA is down by three seats, the NDA by 17 seats and the Left by five seats." **The Left Front tally however comes up to 109** (a rise of 27 seats) and the others'/independents' to 60 (down by 5).

"The **Third Front** includes the BSP (33), AIADMK+MDMK+PMK (23), TDP+TRS (15) & JD-S (3); **Others** include SP (29), RJD+LJP (11), BJD (11), Praja Rajyam (2), AUDF (1), SDF (1), NPF (1), MPP (1), Haryana Janhit Congress (1), Ind (2)."

Table 4. TOI Projections for LS Polls

State/UT	Cong	Cong+	BJP	BJP+	Left	Others	Total
Uttar Pradesh	8	0	7	3	0	62	80
Maharashtra	14	12	10	12	0	0	48
Andhra Pradesh	21	1	1	0	2	17	42
West Bengal	5	12	1	0	24	0	42
Bihar	1	0	10	18	0	11	40
Tamil Nadu	5	9	0	0	2	23	39
Madhya Pradesh	7	0	22	0	0	0	29
Karnataka	8	0	17	0	0	3	28
Gujarat	7	0	19	0	0	0	26
Rajasthan	13	0	11	0	0	1	25
Orissa	7	0	3	0	0	11	21
Kerala	12	3	0	0	5	0	20
Assam	5	0	4	3	0	2	14
Jharkhand	3	2	9	0	0	0	14
Punjab	7	0	2	4	0	0	13
Chhattisgarh	4	0	7	0	0	0	11
Haryana	7	0	1	1	0	1	10
Delhi	5	0	2	0	0	0	7
J&K	2	3	1	0	0	0	6
Uttaranchal	1	0	4	0	0	0	5
Himachal	2	0	2	0	0	0	4
Arunachal	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Goa	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Manipur	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
Meghalaya	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Tripura	0	0	0	0	2	0	2
Mizoram	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Nagaland	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Sikkim	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Andaman, Nicobar	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Chandigarh	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Dadra Nagar Haveli	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Daman & Diu	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Lakshadweep	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Puducherry	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	154	44	135	41	35	134	543
Grand Total	UPA	198		and	NDA	176	

5. The Week/CVoter Countrywide Survey

Table 5 gives the findings of **The Week/CVoter Survey** among 30,318 respondents across 221 LS constituencies in 24 states between March 20 and April 5 (*The Week*, 19/4/09 esp. 44-46).

Table 5. The Week/CVoter Survey

UPA			
Congress	144	NC	3
NCP	13	JMM	1
DMK+	13	RJD/LJP	15
TMC	11	SP	32
UDF	2	Total	234
NDA		Third Front	
BJP	140	Left	33
JD(U)	18	BSP	29
SS	12	AIADMK+	24
AGP	5	TDP/TRS	14
SAD	5	BJD	9
RLD	4	JD(S)	2
INLD	2	HVM	1
Total	186	Total	112
PRP	2	Others	9

At first, these results look very different from those of the TOI projections. But it is mainly a question of methodology; the former indeed includes the seats of the RJD, LJP and SP in the UPA, while the latter does not. If one removes these 47 seats, the UPA gets only 187 seats and the others/independents 58. The Week/CVoter survey also publishes the state-wise results, some of which are somewhat indicated in the tally of various coalitions.

According to this survey, the UPA gets a vote share of 35% and the NDA one of 31%. The article further points out that, on the whole, there is no anti-incumbency wave. *The Congress “retains its 2004 seat level, though the seat distribution is different.* It drops seats in some States, but gains spectacularly in states like Kerala. The Congress is still the single largest party by a small stretch, similar to what it was in 2004... *There is no major erosion in the BJP’s strength in its strongholds...* But there are no visible signs of post-

electoral allies, though the ground situation could make regional parties rethink after assessing the political scenario. *The prospect is bleak for the Third Front.* The predicted number of 112 seats is not big enough to woo other regional parties...” Together, the Congress and the BJP net 284 seats, 52.3% of the LS seats.

6. The NDTV Survey

According to the NDTV survey among 50,000 people, **the UPA will get 210 seats** (including 163 for the Congress and 15 each for the NCP and TMC), **the NDA 166** (BJP 123, JD(U) 22 and SS 9), **the “secular alliance” 33** (SP 21, RJD/LJP 10, and PRP 2) **and others 8.**

In the midst of the emerging trends, one can therefore see the variety of views and opinion polls, and the complexity of the post-poll scenario and bargaining.

XI. Appeals to Voters

1. The Lead India '09 Pledge

* Among other things, **Lead India '09** <www.lead.timesofindia.com> invites people to work for change and even “be the change”, by voting for the right candidate and focusing on transparency. The CMC (Common Minimum Programme) of the TOI Team is: “*Throw Out Criminal Candidates.* It is time to act. Parties agree the problem is acute, but won’t act unilaterally to weed out those with dubious pasts. That leaves it to voters to send out a clear message.” **LEAD India '09 conducts a Campaign: “No Criminals”.** *It also asks voters to make the following pledge:*

“I SWEAR.

I swear that this time I will stand up.
Not for what I believe in, but for what I don’t.
This time I will vote. Not for, but against.
Against my own helplessness.
Against my own laziness.
Against two words called *Chalta hai*.
Against short-cuts in queues.
Against cheating in exams.

Against Karcha Paani in offices.
 Against powerless inquiry commissions.
 And powerful vote banks.
 Against religion in politics.
 And politics in religion.
 Against illegal constructions.
 And legal loopholes.
 Against every cynic. Every non-believer.
Against the belief that nothing will change.
 Against the feeling that my
 vote cannot make a difference.
 Against every excuse for not voting.
 And I will do this without fear or shame.
 Because only by voting against all that
 is destroying our today, will give my
 children something to vote for tomorrow.

LEAD INDIA '09
Let's make this vote count."

2. CBCI's Appeal to the Electorate

"On behalf of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI), its Secretary General, Archbishop Stanislaus Fernandes, SJ, has issued an 'Appeal to the Electorate' after a Consultation held on 1 Feb. '09, at New Delhi, attended by representatives of various Christian Churches and Church-related organisations." The whole document (given in *The New Leader*, 16-31/3/09/10-13) is worth reading. It invites the voters to reflect on the "formidable challenges" confronting India at this "defining moment" of our history, and "to exercise judiciously their right to elect those representatives who will facilitate the emergence of the nation that we want to be through a responsible and accountable governance". After a brief introduction (#1) and mention of relevant principles (#2), the Appeal considers *Our Economic Scenario* (#3), *Our Parliamentary Democracy* (#4) and *Our Socio-Cultural Situation* (#5). In each section, the document highlights our nation's major achievements and today's problems and concerns; for lack of space, our extracts focus on the latter. Before concluding, the document makes *An Earnest Appeal* to India's citizens (#6).

Our Economic Scenario

"The alarming rate of suicide among farmers, the growing rate of unemployment, the continuation and even growth in the percentage of people below the poverty line, and the increasing divide between the rich and the poor, are disturbing signs of our economic planning and performance. The deplorable practice of child labour, the trend to eliminate the girl child, the rural and urban displacement of people as a result of the lopsided understanding of development, and the increasing restlessness among the rural population in the wake of Special Economic Zones need our immediate attention. Moreover, due to the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources like ground water, forests, minerals, rivers, etc., there is a heavy toll on the ecology and the environment with dire consequences like global warming and climatic changes. These do forebode ill for the life-system of our small planet."

"Lack of sensitivity towards the legitimate grievances of the people such as landlessness, ill governance and massive unemployment have forced people, mistakenly of course, to take to organised violence. *Considering such violent protests as a mere law and order problem and controlling them by brute force is a cause of great concern.* **The much-lauded economic growth will be justified if it is socially inclusive and the benefits reach the weakest sections of our nation."**

Our Parliamentary Democracy

"Our national heritage especially our Constitution, is founded on ethnic, racial, religious and cultural pluralism. Diversity is a distinctive feature of our composite culture..." *In spite of our achievements, "the steady decline in credibility in the functioning of our democratic institutions disturbs us.* Frequent disruptions of Assemblies and Parliament by needless walkouts and adjournments, disrespect for presiding officers, passing of some bills without sufficient discussion and informed deliberation and the criminalisation of politics are highly deplorable. *A constant breakdown of the rule of law, mob violence and assault on institutions and organisations, disregard for the life, rights, liberty and property of citizens leading to increasing lawlessness, and absence of timely intervention on the part of law enforcing agencies, aggravate this ailing condition."*

On Socio-Cultural Situation

In spite of our esteemed values and our “fairly commendable level of socio-cultural integration”, “too frequent has been the threat to our nation’s identity and unity by causing disaffection towards a particular race or region or religion. Delay on the part of the State to act on time and deal firmly with individuals and organisations responsible for hate campaigns, mob violence, organised attacks and wanton destruction of precious human life and public property has often been disheartening and disappointing. The increasing communal divide, responsible for the frequent and widespread communal violence, and forced migration where Indians live as refugees in India, are instances of sheer ill-governance.”

“*External and global terrorism, like the recent aggression in Mumbai, is as much a threat to national security, identity and integrity, as internal terrorism, like instigated mob atrocities as in Orissa.* Similarly, intolerance towards creative artists, critical writers, Dalit leaders, and those who resist mafia culture has to be strongly opposed. The cancer that affects the healthy functioning of our democracy has been the all-pervasive evil of corruption. The degeneracy it inflicts on social ethics and public morality is openly bemoaned by society at large. Idolising power and money displaces God and human beings to the fringes of humanity, thereby undermining the ethical and moral values.”

Call to Duty and Responsibility

The voters are finally invited “to vote for a party/candidate that will ensure the following”: protection/promotion of our secularism and democracy; “commitment to religious, racial, cultural and linguistic pluralism”; “enforcing the fundamental Human Rights: to Liberty, Equality and Justice, including the Minority Rights...”: selecting/promoting “candidates without any criminal record or background and having the genuine concerns of youth, women and particularly of the poor and marginalised at heart”; “a commitment to the eradication of poverty and total elimination of illiteracy...”; providing all citizens the basic needs; abolishing child labour and helping the schooling of all; upholding gender equality, the right to life and the right of Christians of SC origin to equal rights and reservations; promoting communal harmony, also by adopting preventive steps and

punitive measures; and empowering “the electorate with the right to recall their elected representatives on grounds of non-performance, corruption and lack of personal integrity”.

The Appeal concludes with these words: “In our journey through democracy, we need to rekindle hope and enthusiasm in our citizens... Let us cultivate the culture of open dialogue, unbiased and respectful discourse even on disputed issues. As we stand at a moment of great challenge and greater opportunity, **let us focus on a governance that brings people together across party lines to work for the common good.** No matter how great the challenge or how difficult the situation, change is always possible if we are willing to strive for it and, most of all, believe in it. *Let us pledge, with a firm resolve in our hearts, to honour diversity in unity.* **Let the good of the least and the last citizen of our country be our criterion and starting point in this effort of achieving our goal as we have it in the vision of the Father of our nation.**”

XII. How Will the 15th Lok Sabha Look?

1. Who Will Be the Next Prime Minister?

A few years ago, Sharad Pawar said: “‘If Deve Gowda could become prime minister with no experience in national politics, I guess any of us can aspire to the top job!’... (Gowda) has ensured that becoming the prime minister of the country is now as much about luck as it is about competence, mass appeal or even political acceptability. The Ambani-Mittal-Tata troika might have created a stir by projecting Narendra Modi’s prime ministerial credentials based on his investor-friendly policies; but the fact is that *in an era of messy coalitions, there is a real danger of the prime minister’s office becoming a bit of a lottery...* Indeed, five of the last six Indian prime ministers (were given this responsibility) through amazingly fortuitous circumstances” (Rajdeep Sardesai, DH, 23/1/09/11).

“*In this general election year, the shrinking of the national parties now threatens to re-open leadership issues all over again.*” On 24th March 2009, the NDA has rallied around L K Advani’s leadership and the UPA around that of Manmohan Singh. “But in an increasingly fragmented electorate, 272 seats – or the half-way mark of the Lok Sabha – appear a distant figure, almost certainly out of

reach of any pre-election alliance. In such an uncertain political scenario, there is every possibility that post-poll *jugaad* could determine who lands the prime ministerial jackpot.” **Post-election alliances and bargainings could well decide the issue!**

“As a result, the voter is faced with the distinctly discomfiting prospect of a prime minister being chosen through drawing-room negotiations not popular support, through individual whims not voter preferences. A post which in a constitutional democracy should be the ultimate barometer of leadership skills could now be decided by arithmetic jugglery revolving around political immorality of the worst kind. *In the process, the prime minister’s office could end up further diminished, its authority further eroded by the compulsions of rickety coalitions.*” **Let us hope that this won’t be the case!**

2. Looking at the Future

An Editorial from *The Hindu* thus assesses the situation on 1st January 2009: “*The year 2008 saw major political upheavals. The Left parties withdrew support to the UPA. Bitter foes SP and Congress became friends. Heavyweights Mayawati and J. Jayalalitha veered left to try their luck with the Third Front (TF). Yet, these turns and twists might be nothing compared with the surprises the New Year is likely to bring. With just five months to go for the 15th general election, there is no way of guessing which way the die will roll when the three formations – the UPA, the NDA, and the TF – face off. There is an extraordinary fluidity on the ground, which suggests there will be a major post-poll churning*” (H, 1/1/09/10).

By mid-April 2009, the situation has even become more complex with the rise of the fourth formation. Crucial post-poll re-alignments and new understandings will be needed. Hard bargaining will take place and a Common Minimum Programme (CMP) will be made by the coalition that acquires power, hopefully for a pro-people and stable government.

We may conclude with B.G. Verghese’s hopeful words: “None of the prospective coalitional formations is proposing a pre-poll CMP. This is being left to be worked out after the polls on the basis of the fallout – the number of seats won and the relevant bargaining power of the main constituent units... The view held by some that the rise of

regional parties and the weakening of the Congress and BJP as core political formations at the Centre spell doom for cohesive and strong governance is mistaken. This represents the typical political infantilism of the middle classes who seem to be out of touch with the evolving social dynamism of the country and grassroots social realities.... **The under-mass of India is astir and this upthrust from below is reshaping Indian politics**” (DH, 18/3/09/10). **May the new birth not be too painful!**

APPENDIX

An Interview with Jean Dreze

Sandeep Bhaskar recently interviewed Prof. Jean Dreze on public action and other subjects. These are a few of the questions and answers (DH, 29/11/08/13).

“Do you believe the success of NREGA depends upon the good will of our political leaders? I don’t think that we should depend on the ‘good will’ of political leaders. *Political priorities can be altered through public action.* There are vast possibilities of organisational work around the NREGA, waiting to be tapped.

Is corruption rampant in the NREGA? There are enough positive experiences to show that corruption can be largely eliminated from the NREGA. The main point is to enforce transparency safeguards, such as payment of wages in public, openness of muster rolls, maintenance of job cards and regular social audits. This can be done, as some states have already shown, but *it often involves confronting the nexus of corrupt contractors, bureaucrats and politicians who are attempting to make money from the NREGA.* In states ridden with corruption and violence, this is a big political challenge.

Are you satisfied with the role of the media in highlighting the problems related to food security in India? The mainstream media generally pay very little attention to social issues like hunger, health and education. This is just one aspect of the lopsided nature of the Indian democracy. Having said this, *the media are also a powerful*

tool for public action. For instance, in Madhya Pradesh there have been sustained efforts to secure better coverage of hunger-related issues in the Hindi media, with good response. In most newspapers and television channels there are committed journalists who are ready to write on social issues. *This is an important opportunity for people's movements.*

How do you see the contribution of villages to the national growth in the next decade? *I would like to see much more of India's national growth happening in villages.* That is where most people live and it is distressing to see so little improvement in rural living standards, especially in the poorest areas, with the national economy doing so well. Correcting this imbalance requires much more attention than the development of economic and social infrastructure in rural areas” (DH, 29/11/08/13).