

Indian Elections: Lessons from Gujarat Results

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The widespread factionalism in the Gujarat Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) ranks and the fact that on the eve of the polls Modi stood firmly indicted for his regime's role in the Gujarat genocide and custodial killings of Sohrabuddin and others created a uniquely favourable situation for its main contender, the Congress. If in spite of this, Modi scripted a win, there is no escaping the fact that it is the craven capitulation by the United Progressive (UPA) Government at the Centre as well as the Congress in Gujarat on the issue of state sponsored communal violence, accompanied by the failure to offer any meaningful alternative to Modi's brand of neoliberal 'development' which is dispossessing Adivasis, Muslims and rural and urban poor, that are to blame. The last minute rhetorical flourishes by Sonia Gandhi failed woefully to compensate for the bankruptcy of the Congress on the question of offering a credible and consistent challenge to the communal fascism of the Sangh Parivar and BJP. Its reliance on BJP rebels as candidates and its official embrace of the 'soft Hindutva' slogan further announced the Congress' surrender on this issue.

Modi has entered his third term strutting with impunity, declaring that he has always been and will always remain the Chief Minister (CM). The BJP camp, riding the Gujarat euphoria, is already claiming that Gujarat marks 'BJP rising', and hopes that the 'Modi mask' that symbolises the Gujarat win can give BJP a facelift nationally. The corporate houses are celebrating the victory of the 'CEO CM'. Meanwhile the Congress is hoping that the debacle may have the silver lining of pressurising the secular parties to close ranks and unite with the Congress in the name of countering communalism.

The Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) - CPI (ML) contested seven seats in Gujarat. We polled third with 7289 votes in the Kherbrahma seat in Sabarkantha district where the CPI (ML) is leading struggles of the tribal poor against eviction from land and dispossession from water sources, and for rights over forest land. Kherbrahma and Meghraj (where the CPI (ML) candidate polled 3031 votes), are both seats in the Sabarkantha district, an Adivasi area that was one of the hotpots of the communal pogrom of 2002. CPI (ML) started work in this area in 2003-04, reaching out to marginalized Adivasis (this section had been mobilised in Modi's mobs in 2002 but who were worst hit by Modi's 'development' and had in many cases been cheated of their land by Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Bajrang Dal). In the process we attracted many democratic forces towards us. Encouraged by our initiative, local CPI (M) ranks including a member of the CPI (M) district committee too joined us. Our main slogan in this constituency was 'Jhanda par teen tara hai; jal jangal zamin hamara hai' [Three stars on a flag (the CPI (ML) election symbol); water, forests and land are ours].

CPI (ML) candidates polled 3031 votes in Meghraj; 2209 votes in Bulsar; 1123 in Umbergaon; 899 in Bhavnagar North; and 265 in Bhiloda. CPI (ML) had also fielded a candidate in Maninagar against Modi, advocate and youth leader Amit Patanwariya, who polled 1045 votes. On polling day (December 16), our candidate and supporters braved a violent mob attack by Modi supporters led by the notoriously criminalised local BJP corporator Jayas Patel who is a close aide of Modi. Our supporters fought back, and our candidate, his father Lakshman Patanwariya who is our Town Committee Secretary and three brothers were all arrested by the partisan police force on serious

charges of attempt to murder and Arms Act. Our supporters rallied around at the thana lock up, mounting a spirited pressure, even as Modi visited the thana gate with his convoy to buoy up his supporters. Eventually our perseverance paid off, the police booked our candidate and his family on less serious charges of rioting and was also forced to book Modi's supporters on the same charges.

In the wake of the Gujarat results, the CPI (M) has advised the Congress that the BJP cannot be defeated in a mere electoral battle, communal fascism needs to be tackled ideologically. For the Left movement in the country, Gujarat indeed poses tough questions. Can the Left afford to wash its hands off responsibility for the state of Gujarat merely by advising the Congress to correct its course and abandon soft Hindutva? Isn't it true that the absence of a powerful Left movement inside Gujarat has also left the state vulnerable to the unchallenged domination of the communal fascists? In Gujarat, the CPI contested two seats, polling 1236 votes in one and 4236 in the other, while the CPI (M) contested only one seat in a seat-sharing arrangement with the Congress and NCP. The UPA Government betrayed its single *raison d'être* by abandoning the fight against communalism. But equally, the CPI (M) led Left camp too, in spite of its 60-plus tally of MPs in Parliament, did precious little to utilise its impressive parliamentary profile as a foundation for any serious Left presence in Gujarat. For all its pontifical advice to the Congress now, the fact is that the CPI (M) too chose to toe the Congress' bankrupt line rather than take up the arduous task of developing a Left movement in the Sangh stronghold of Gujarat.

With the Congress' dismal failure to combat communal fascism underlined, it is all the more clear that what Gujarat urgently needs is a powerful Left movement and a credible third force that is willing to challenge the communal forces head on and mobilise the poor and marginalised on issues of livelihood and survival. The CPI (ML) has made a small but encouraging beginning in this direction. The encouraging response to CPI (ML)'s campaign in a sharply polarised election and against a BJP tide, despite its fledgling presence in the state, is a sign that there is a real space in Gujarat for progressive, democratic, Left politics. The CPI (ML) is committed to consolidating this response and expanding this space in the days to come.

P.S.

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