

### Time to rebuild India's secularism:

#### **The government must ensure justice in cases of human rights violations in J and K**

The economy desperately needs to be repaired, as do rural distress, the job crisis and the free-falling rupee. The country's institutions demand urgently to be rebuilt — the media, police, judiciary, universities, the planning process, the Election Commission of India. But above all, if there is one thing that stands most dangerously damaged, it is our constitutional pledge of a secular democracy. What are the prospects of rebuilding this?

#### **Shrill, divisive campaign**

Listen carefully to the speeches in the shrill summer election campaign which has just come to a halt. From their podiums, Opposition leaders spoke of everything else — the agony of farmers, unemployed youth, suspect defence deals, crony capitalism and indeed crony institutions. But rarely did they speak of lynching, of violence against Muslims, Christians and Dalits, of the fear which has become normalised in their daily lives, of our wrecked social contract of equality and harmony. And never did they speak of secularism.

The imagination of secularism in the Indian Republic was rooted in its singularly pluralist civilisational ethos, in the lives and work of Ashoka and Akbar, in the teachings of Buddha, Kabir and Nanak. It was illuminated by our struggle for freedom, in the humanist and egalitarian convictions of Gandhi and Ambedkar, Maulana Azad and Nehru. It was the central iridescent idea: that this newly-freed country would belong equally to all its people. People of no religion, no language, no caste, no ethnicity, no gender, no class would be entitled to lay claim to the country more than any other.

Secularism is the soul of India's Constitution. Today the letter of this Constitution still remains unaltered, but its soul is mangled and choked. Not just the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); even Opposition parties seem to have accepted that India is no longer the secular country born of the legacy of India's freedom struggle, but a majoritarian Hindu country. In this new India, people of minority religions, castes and gender are second-class. Their safety and well-being are dependent now on the consent and will of the majority upper-caste, patriarchal Hindu, and the dictates of this Hindu are interpreted and violently mediated by the ideology of Hindutva.

It is a grave mistake to frame the 2019 general election as a battle of Narendra Modi against the rest. This is how Prime Minister Modi, referring to himself repeatedly in the third person, has framed this bitter electoral contest. This is how the Opposition has fought the electoral battle, of Mr. Modi versus the rest. This is how the majority of Indian voters view this combat.

#### **RSS vs. Constitution**

However, the electoral battle waged around the country is truly a different one. On one side stands the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and on the other is the secular idea of the Indian Constitution. Mr. Modi is a formidable, pugnacious, tireless and immensely popular mascot of the Hindu supremacist ideology of the RSS; and his image is powerfully buttressed by a pliant corporate media and dizzying levels of spending on a public relations blitz to manufacture consent. But the central danger to secular India is not the personality of Mr. Modi. It is the penetration of the RSS into every institution of the country, into every political party, the media, the university, the judiciary, the civil services, and most dangerously into mainstream everyday social life of every ordinary Indian.

In the RSS worldview, Muslims and Christians are not authentically Indian, their loyalty to the Indian nation is and will always remain suspect; therefore, they need to be tamed, to be continuously shown their subordinate status in the Indian polity and society. It is for this reason that virulent hate speech was so central to this election campaign, with Mr. Modi mocking his rival, Congress president Rahul Gandhi, for

seeking election in a constituency in which he would have to depend in part on Muslim and Christian voters; and other BJP leaders and candidates raging against the threats of the 'green virus' and 'termites'. It is for this reason that BJP president Amit Shah pledges to extend the National Register of Citizens to all parts of India, while ensuring citizenship to Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists from other parts of the subcontinent; in this way brazenly turning on its head the core constitutional idea that a person's religion is irrelevant to her rights to equal citizenship. And it is for this reason that lynching of Muslims and attacks on Christian places of worship, openly valorised by ruling party leaders, became the overarching symbols of the newly forged relationship of the majoritarian Hindu state with its now inferior religious minorities.

### **In a place of fear**

If Mr. Modi is returned with an emphatic majority when ballots are counted on May 23, as many exit polls predict, this will herald that India has fallen deep into a cold hard place of hate and fear. It will signal that a significant majority of Hindus endorse the Hindu supremacist ideology of the RSS. It will indicate the popular abandonment of the secular and humane vision of India's Constitution, and its replacement by a violent and chauvinist majoritarian Hindu nationalism, which is suspicious and hateful in its relations with people who follow minority religious faiths. This outcome would also further imperil all left, liberal and democratic dissenting voices, in civil society, in the media, in universities, and in letters and the arts.

A second scenario, anticipated by a much smaller number of political commentators, is of reduced support for the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), its tally falling short of the half-way mark. In such a situation, they anticipate the possibility that many regional parties could be persuaded to support an NDA government only if it is led by a less belligerent leader than Mr. Modi, possibly Nitin Gadkari or Rajnath Singh. Many are relieved by the possibility of such an outcome: anyone other than Mr. Modi would be welcome, they reason. But it would be a dangerous mistake to believe that such a choice would pull India out of the dark abyss into which it has slipped. Even with a more acceptable face, as with Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the RSS would use political power to further penetrate all institutions, and enfeeble what survives of secular practice.

The least expected scenario, of the victory of the United Progressive Alliance or a federal front of regional parties, cannot be ruled out yet. After all, the BJP has lost no exit polls since 2004, but it lost many elections. However, even with such an outcome, the crusade against secular democracy waged with such vigour by the RSS will not be won. The appetite and moral courage to fight majoritarian politics head-on stands perilously weakened among Opposition political parties. Whatever the final outcome, this fight to salvage, defend and fortify secularism will have to be fought by the Indian people. India is today a wasteland of compassion. It will take generations to clean out the toxins of hate from Indian society. It is a battle that must be waged with courage, with perseverance and with love. History in the end is on our side.

<b><u>Words</u></b>	<b><u>Kind</u></b>	<b><u>Meaning</u></b>
In tatters		ragged, torn, tattered, in ruins, destroyed
Desperate		hopeless, anguished, distressed, wretched
Distress		Anguish, suffering, pain, agony
Pledge		Promise, undertaking, vow, words
Shrill		Piercing, sharp, ear piercing, penetrating
Divisive		Alienating, separating, estranging, schismatic
Agony		Pain, suffering, torrent, anguish, affliction
Crony		Friend, companion, confidant (e)
Lynch		Kill illegally
Wreck		debris, remains, remainder
Singularly		surprisingly
Ethos		character, mood, feeling, atmosphere
Illuminate		throw light on, brighten, embellish

Egalitarian		used about a person, system, society etc.
Conviction		Declaration of guilt/ belief, thought.
Iridescent		Sparkling, dazzling, shining, gleaming
Ethnic		Racial, race related
Mangle		damage, disfigure, injure, main
Combat		oppose, cross
Formidable		Frightening, intimidating, alarming
Pugnacious	Adjective	combative, aggressive, antagonistic, belligerent, warlike Tireless vigorous, energetic, industrious, zealous
Immense		Huge, enormous, gigantic, very large.
Mascot		an animal/toy, people believe that brings good luck
Buttress		support, abutment/safeguard
Pliant		flexible, adaptable, biddable, compliant
Dizzy		light headed, unsteady, vertiginous
Penetration		piercing, puncturing, stabbing, / intelligence cleverness.
Tamed		tame, domesticated, docile, trained.
Virulent		poisonous, toxic, venomous, noxious
Brazen		shameless, unashamed, unabashed
Valorise		give/ascribe value/ validity
Forge		build, construct, form, create
Herald		declare, aver, avow, profess, assert
Endorse		support, back, agree with, approve
Humane		Compassionate, kind, sympathetic, lenient
Chauvinist		Jingoistic, patriotic, xenophobic
Dissent		disagree, differ, demur
Outcome		result, aftermath, upshots
Imperil		endanger, jeopardise, put into danger
Belligerent		war like, bellicose, combative
Abyss		a very deep hole, seems to have no bottoms, chasm
Enfeeble		debilitate, exhaust, fatigue, tire
Perilous		dangerous, noxious, deleterious

**Facing the debacle:**

**Congress stocktaking must be deeper than an off-the-cuff take on Rahul Gandhi:**

In light of the Congress's dismal defeat in the 17th general election, Congress president Rahul Gandhi's offer to resign from his party post at the Congress Working Committee on Saturday was on expected lines. What came as a surprise is the indication that he was seemingly unmoved by the CWC resolution that urged him to continue as president and restructure the party. Either way, whether Mr. Gandhi finally insists on quitting or allows himself to be persuaded otherwise, the party cannot look away from a dilemma that has shadowed it for long: the double-edged sword of the dynasty. Devoid of a coherent ideology or organisational structure, especially over the past two decades, the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty has remained the party's cementing glue. The family is projected as the party's emotional currency with the public and the Gandhi surname is invoked to hark back to the formative years of modern India. However, now in 2019, facing its toughest crisis, the Congress must address the question unflinchingly, and in depth, if it is to refresh itself as a political force. The decline of the Congress is symptomatic of the fading appeal of the old ways of conducting politics and of the disenchantment with opaque and unaccountable power-wielding by political dynasties. Also, as with the Left

and Mandal parties, the Congress has collectively failed to upgrade its message, modes of outreach and organizational structures. But the Congress's success in nimbly facing up to the rout is vital if India is to have a coherent political opposition that keeps the government of the day democratically accountable.

Of course, Congress leaders argue that the party would disintegrate if Mr. Gandhi were to quit. Mr. Gandhi, who had once likened power to poison, must take full responsibility for his party's debacle. However, figuring out the form that this account-taking must assume is what makes it a difficult moment for him and the Congress. Whether Mr. Gandhi sticks to his resolve to quit or not, the party will have to go through a process of revitalization that deals with the hollowing out of its intra-party democracy. Any organizational reform that does not decentralize decision-making and fix accountability at all levels is bound to fail. It must involve a frank assessment of the Congress's risk of failing to cohere if Mr. Gandhi were to abruptly leave his post as party president. True, the Congress may well be able to sustain itself without a dynast. But unless the new leadership emerges through a truly democratic exercise, and is truly independent of the dynasty, any half-hearted restructuring will only lead to the enfeeblement of the party. A dynasty-free Congress will surely invigorate the Indian polity, but a Congress-free polity could well prove dangerous for Indian democracy.

<b><u>Words</u></b>	<b><u>Kind</u></b>	<b><u>Meaning</u></b>
Off the cuff		Speak off, impromptu, extempore, ad-lib, speak
Seemingly		apparently, clearly, outwardly
Insist on		Stand firm, be determined
Resolution		Intention, determination, tenacity
Urge		encourage, exhort, prod, appeal (to)
Persuade		Prevail on, induce, coax, convince, tempt
Devoid		deprived, destitute, bankrupt, denuded
Coherent		clear, explicit, unequivocal, lucid, transport
Glue		gum, adhesive, fixative
Invoke		cite, refer to, allude, touch upon, point to
Hark		listen, pay attention, attend to
Un flinching		determined, dogged, tenacious, bent on/upon
Symptomatic		characteristic, indicative, typical
Disenchantment		disappointment, disillusionment, dissatisfaction
Opaque		unclear, equivocal, ambiguous, enigmatic, cryptic, murky, muddy
Nimble		active, agile, sprightly, lively
Accountable		Responsible, liable, answerable
Dis-integrate		Break up, break apart, fall apart
Liken		compare, equate, bracket together
Assume		presume, suppose, take per granted
Revitalize		re-invigorate, boost, revivify, re-energise
Hollow out		dig, cut. Ex carate
Abruptly		Suddenly, summarily, unexpectedly
Enfeeblement		weaken, debilitate, indispose, lay low