



INDIA ELECTION 2014

FIRST
REFLECTIONS

Edited by
EINAR THORSEN and CHINDU SREEDHARAN

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For the marginalised
voices of India

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strong regulatory framework to ensure fairness and objectivity in the journalistic practices of Indian media. There is a need, in the meantime, to turn the Press Council of India as a watchdog that can take punitive action against those who seek to work against public interest, objectivity and fairness in journalism.

Endnotes

- 1 Ramadoss and Vijaykanth are leaders of the PMK and DMDK parties respectively.

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Amit Sarwal

The whole world keenly watched the 2014 Indian election as a “festival of democracy”. Also observing this election were 390,000 Australians with Indian ancestry, who felt the United Progressive Alliance government under Congress’s Manmohan Singh had failed to address the concerns of Indians abroad. Even in 2007-09, during the racist/opportunist attacks on Indian students in Australia, the Indian government struggled to give reasonable explanations and responses to the “Indian student question” raised in the media. Indian diaspora community newspapers and magazines in Australia, such as *The Indian Sun*, *Indian Link*, *Indian Voice*, *Indian Herald*, and *Public Telegraph*, ran calculated opinion pieces and reports in their monthly issues.

In 2013, Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) compared the 2014 election to the 1977 (post-emergency) parliamentary poll, and urged the 25 million-strong Indian diaspora to help bring back “good days” or “new hope” (*Indian Herald* 2013a). To reach out to its lobby groups abroad, most Indian political parties now have offices of their “overseas friends”. In Australia, the Overseas Indian Cultural Congress Australia (formed in 2010), the Overseas Friends of the BJP Australia (formed in 2013), and the Aam Aadmi Party of Australian Indians (formed in 2013), serve their motherland. These groups with Indian-Aussie volunteers manage community media relations, generate funding, run small campaigns, and liaise with local Australian politicians to build a resilient bilateral trade and socio-cultural relationship with India. But amongst them, too, the OFBJP-Australia emerged as a clear winner.

Balesh Singh Dhankhar (President, OFBJP-Australia) stressed that OFBJP's role was not limited to the 2014 election but was all about "improving relations between Australia and India on various layers including political, business-to-business, governmental agencies, cultural and most importantly people-to-people" (*Indian Herald* 2013b). Rahul Jetia (Chairman, OFBJP-Australia), opening a new chapter in Adelaide, asserted that their members are "dedicated to working towards projecting a positive and correct image of India and its people in the Australian and foreign media" (Vasan 2014). In 2014, the OFBJP received Michelle Rowland, Australian MP and the Shadow Minister for Citizenship and Multiculturalism, at the headquarters of the BJP in Delhi. Indian and Australian leaders exchanged views in the "areas of campaigning and international cross-party relations". Impressed by the number of women in senior positions within the BJP and its interest in creating a strong link with Indian-Australian diaspora, Rowland noted in her report:

The BJP was also intensely interested in the Indian diaspora in Australia and I was able to report that their colleagues down under were doing them proud in all aspects of academic achievement, senior positions in industry and participation in our own democratic processes. (*Public Telegraph* 2014)

Rowland was amongst the first Australian parliamentarians to congratulate the BJP and Indian-Australians on Modi's win and observed that this will not only benefit India but also the vast Indian population whom she represents in Greenway, NSW (Rowland 2014).

Pawan Luthra, a well-respected member of the Indian community and publisher of the *Indian Link*, believed that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) "on its platform of anti-corruption, has a very fertile field on which to plant its future plans" and:

The Congress faces the burden of incumbency. After 10 years in power, they are looking old and jaded. They are failing to capture the attention of the constituents, whereas the Bharatiya Janata Party has a strong and a highly controversial leader in Narendra Modi, who is successfully positioning himself as a viable alternative. (Luthra 2014a)

On the other hand, the *Public Telegraph* (2014a) highlighted views of AAP-Australia, hoping that “homeland does not lose this historic opportunity of political cleansing”. The *Indian Sun* highlighted how more than 350 Indian-Aussies signed in support of the AAP and were looking forward to a positive change.

Luthra in his editorial, “Election Tamasha Rolls into Town” (Luthra 2014b), revealed an overwhelming support for the BJP as opposed to the Congress or AAP amongst Australia’s Indian community. *Indian Link* conducted an online survey (9 to 12 April 2014) and received 672 responses. Luthra noted that 73 per cent of the respondents backed the BJP followed by 165 supporting the AAP, and only 6 per cent supported the Congress. *Indian Link* also asked its respondents which party would be better for Non-Resident Indians (NRIs). Fifty-five per cent of Indian-Aussies clearly supported the BJP in this as well, while the AAP took 22 per cent of the votes with only 14 per cent going in favour of the Congress. One thing was clear from the opinion pieces and election survey: Indian-Aussies were ready for change, development and the BJP.

To celebrate the historic victory of the BJP and Modi, on 16 May 2014, more than 500 members and supporters of the OFBJP-Australia participated in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide, in an aptly titled function—*Vijay Diwas* (Victory Day). In a video message General V. K. Singh, MP, recognised the important role played by the OFBJP-Australia and NRIs all over the world in these elections (*The Indian Sun* 2014).

The victory of Modi, the charismatic and self-assured darling of the corporate world, is seen as good news for Australia’s relations with India. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott is keen on developing economic diplomacy with trade and investment as key priority areas. Modi’s vision is of making India a key player in Asia affairs and containing China’s rise in the region. He plans to do so with the help of Japan and South Korea. Given Abbott’s closeness with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Modi’s interest in the Australian mining sector, Australia-India can look for a fruitful economic partnership in the near future.

In conclusion, while Modi's election victory has already made history, there is a lot more to come. It was not only Australian policymakers who looked forward to Modi's visit in the 9th G-20 Summit in Brisbane in November 2014. It was—as the *Indian Link* (2014) wrote in an earlier article in May 2014—"a momentous trip" for the Indian community at large. More so because only three Indian prime ministers, Morarji Desai, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi have visited Australia since 1951, while almost every Australian prime minister has visited India. Only time can tell if Modi's historic win and visit to Australia will deepen and strengthen our ties.

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