

## **Don't see INDIA from old prism of opposition unity. It's about hope & street aggregation.**

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The formation of INDIA can be a turning point for India in 2024, provided it does not remain merely an exercise in opposition unity. As an old-style pre or post-poll coalition – arithmetic addition of votes in the election or simple accumulation of seats after the elections – the formation of INDIA offers rather modest additional dividends. But INDIA can be a game changer if it begins to articulate the idea of India and channelise all the dormant energies, if it ignites the aspirations of those at the bottom of the pyramid, if it lives up to its tagline, “judega bharat, jeetega India”.

It has already taken the first two steps in the right direction. The 23 June meet in Patna showed that the major opposition parties were not as hopelessly divided as they appeared, and that they could not only sit together but also initiate some coordinated action. The 17-18 July Bengaluru meeting demonstrated their collective ability to sort out or set aside smaller differences, develop a consensus statement and find a new name for the coalition. The BJP's knee-jerk revival of the near-dead NDA and the PM's reaction suggests that the ruling party is troubled. That is a good beginning.

The name INDIA – forget the mouthful Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, no one would remember anything but the acronym – is brilliant, one of the smarter communicative moves made by the opposition in a long time. It begins a symbolic recovery of the idea of India and wrong-foots the BJP and its courtiers in the media. The first reaction from the BJP camp shows its discomfiture: ‘na nigalte bane, na ugalte [can't swallow, can't spew]’, as they say in Hindi. The BJP cannot let go of ‘India’ – what with Start-Up India, Make in India, Skill India, Digital India and so on. Modi is smart enough to know that the India vs Bharat binary cannot be played with the younger generation. Nor can it let the opposition run with the name.

A good name, though, does not assure a decent career. The prospects of the new coalition depend on how it builds upon this initial advantage. That, in turn, depends on how well it recognises this basic truth: INDIA must not be seen through the old prism of opposition unity, of vote aggregation or seats aggregation; the new political unity is about hope aggregation and street aggregation.

## **Vote aggregation**

Two years ago, reacting to some premature attempts at drawing room opposition unity, I wrote that old-style opposition unity was a lazy idea. The article had recounted all that was wrong with the assumption that a pre-electoral alliance, a 'mahagathbandhan', of all major opposition parties, was necessary or sufficient to defeat the BJP. Much of that reasoning continues to hold today. Division of votes among the disunited opposition parties is not the main reason for the BJP's electoral success. The old logic of the Index of Opposition Unity that used to work against the dominant Congress does not work any more.

The reason is India's electoral geography. There are many states (Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh) where the BJP is still not a major electoral force, so it is pointless and counterproductive to unite the entire opposition against it. Then there are states like West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and Odisha, where the dominant non-BJP party does not need an alliance partner. There is also the vast region that the BJP dominates in a direct BJP-Congress contest (Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, and Rajasthan) where there is no other opposition party to ally with.

Most of the states where vote division could help the BJP – Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Bihar and Assam – already have opposition alliances at the local level. That leaves only Delhi and UP as states where vote aggregation through a fresh pre-poll coalition among parties that have joined INDIA can make a big difference. Given the peculiarities of these states, these are bound to be tough and uncertain negotiations. It is best not to expect a dramatic breakthrough here from the new INDIA formation. In any case, we cannot assume that voters are ready to vote the BJP out or just waiting for a joint opposition candidate.

## **Seats aggregation**

The challenge of seats aggregation is relatively simpler and more relevant to our electoral geography. Different parties win seats in their region on their own and then form a post-poll alliance to form a government. This is how UPA-1 was formed post-election in 2004. The formation of a pre-poll coalition like INDIA can help for any post-poll seats aggregation. But an over-emphasis on government formation can be counter-productive and can be used by BJP for its propaganda that this coalition is all opportunistic and that all the opposition has come together to dislodge one man. At any rate, it is too early to anticipate the post-poll scenario of 2024. We cannot be sure, till we have the final tally, where all the 26 parties that met in Bengaluru, or the 39 that met in the newly revived NDA, for that matter, would stand post-2024.

Thus, the principal value of INDIA does not lie in the traditional arithmetic of coalition politics, that of vote or seats aggregation. Its potential to change the electoral equation for 2024 lies in the message that it can send to the voters by way of its communication and ground action, by street aggregation and hope aggregation.

## **Street aggregation**

The first statement, or Samuhik Sankalp issued by the 26 parties that constitute INDIA, lists a series of issues on which it would combat and confront the ruling dispensation. The list includes authoritarian politics (assault on the Constitution, federalism, democratic rights and political opposition), social exclusion (hatred and violence against minorities and other socially marginalised sections and the tragedy in Manipur) and economic crisis (price rise, unemployment, cronyism, sale of national assets and the condition of farmers). All these are real and pressing issues that need a response.

The real challenge for INDIA now is to prioritise a few issues for imaginative national collective action, for these issues would not become electoral salient issues for Lok Sabha elections unless there is some nationwide movement before 2024. Protests against the victimisation of opposition leaders and governments would be justified, but could easily be discredited as self-serving actions to defend vested interests. Price rise and unemployment suggest themselves as the most obvious candidates for a nationwide movement. Coordinated action with kisan movements has the potential to reach every village.

The sharpest attack can be on Modani, an issue that has taken a back seat now. For energetic struggle on the streets, INDIA will have to be more than an aggregation of political parties, it will have to bring together agitations, movements and peoples' organisations that lie outside the pale of political parties. More than seats adjustment, what we need is adjustment of feet on the ground, or street aggregation in the run-up to 2024.

## **Hope aggregation**

Above all, what we need from INDIA is rekindling of hope, the affirmation that India deserves better, that there is an alternative and that the alternative is feasible. The joint statement points in this direction: "We pledge to the nation an alternative political, social and economic agenda. We promise to transform both the substance and style of governance that will be more consultative, democratic and participative."

An alternative agenda is, of course, a must for fostering hope. But that begins to register with the people only when they trust the sincerity and feasibility of this alternative agenda. That is not going to be easy, given popular distrust in most of the mainstream parties, including those in the opposition. It would also need a powerful and creative communication machine that can combat the lies and hatred spread by the sarkari and darbari media every day. Capturing the symbolism of India can only be the first step towards capturing the heart and mind of India.