

## The July 2008 Confidence Vote in the Indian Parliament: *Tamasha, natak, and arthashastra*

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### *Introduction: Parliamentary debate in early 21<sup>st</sup> century India*

The theme for this workshop is the politics of neoliberalism, a phrase that carries the impression of an India in the throes of ideological transformation, but it is often hard to get a real handle on what this actually entails in terms of changing political praxis. I was in India as the Indian public watched the *natak* or *tamasha* (Urdu – show, entertainment or, pejoratively, farce) of the confidence debate and vote in the Lok Sabha on its television screens on 21-22 July 2008 and have been trying to make sense of the politics of it, asking myself the question 'What is the place of ideology in party politics in India today, or is the question simply irrelevant when it comes to the practise of Indian politics?'

For an answer I decided to start where one rarely thinks of starting when it comes to studying Indian politics – what politicians actually say in debate. This is scarcely surprising given that India is, to pick up on Ramachandra Guha's analogy, a country where while the maintenance of the 'hardware' of democracy might prompt self-congratulation, the 'software' is corrupted with most political parties family firms and most politicians corrupt if not actually criminal (Guha 2007: 749). Guha concludes that India is a 50:50 democracy with the negative 50 per cent rating reflecting the functioning of politicians and political institutions. His elegant epilogue is entitled 'Why India Survives' but begs a question mark because he doesn't actually get beyond asserting "India is simply *sui generis*" (2007: 771).

### *The Background to the Confidence motion*

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh asked for a vote of confidence two days after the Left parties finally withdrew their support for the United Progressive Alliance government over the decision to go to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conclude a safeguards agreement that would pave the way for the US to approach the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) to grant a waiver from existing rules allowing members to engage in civil nuclear trade with India. The UPA's Common Minimum Programme had omitted any reference to a nuclear agreement or strategic relationship with the USA and ever since Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and

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President Bush indicated their desire to reach such a deal at their meeting in Washington in July 2005 it became, according to Prakash Karat, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)), 'the running thread of conflict' between the Left Front and the Congress Party (interview, 'We'll vote against the UPA govt', *Outlook*, 14 July 2008: 38). By contrast, on economic liberalisation, there was enough give and take on issues such as the opening up of the telecom sector (the cap on foreign direct investment was increased despite objections from the left) and divestment of government shares in the profitable Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. (the idea, opposed by some Congressmen as well as the left, was dropped) for the UPA-Left coordinating committee to manage their differences (Thakurta and Raghuraman 2007: 86, 90).

Ten days after the government's victory in the confidence vote, the IAEA approved the safeguards agreement and a month later the NSG granted the waiver making India the only country not a party to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty permitted to engage in civil nuclear commerce. Following approval in September by both houses of the US Congress of the bill enshrining the 'Agreement for Cooperation between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of India concerning peaceful uses of nuclear energy' (123 Agreement) reached in August 2007, India and the US finally signed the deal operationalising the 123 Agreement on 10 October 2008.

### *The Debate*

The special two-day Lok Sabha debate on the confidence motion moved by the prime minister opened on 21 July and had to be repeatedly adjourned by the Speaker, Somnath Chatterjee, who was himself subsequently expelled by his party, the CPI(M), for not heeding its direction that he resign and follow the party whip and vote against the motion. The longest adjournment followed an allegation by three BJP members holding up wads of rupees that they had been proffered bribes by Amar Singh, the Samajwadi Party MP and dealmaker (it was the Samajwadi decision to abandon the United National Progressive Alliance of some regional parties and extend support to the UPA that enabled the government to contemplate staying in office despite a breach with the Left).

Apart from the Prime Minister and LK Advani, the Leader of the Opposition, a total of 60 MPs spoke in the debate, just over half (32) in English. Few stood out in terms of eloquence or lucidity, though Finance Minister P. Chidambaram made a well argued case for the government and Railway Minister and Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Lalu Yadav, , speaking extempore in Hindi, entertained the House and landed some telling blows on the opposition, while saying little

about the nuclear agreement. Many were poor and some rendered hilarious by the Lok Sabha Secretariat in translation: BJP MP Satyanarayan Jatiya was quoted as saying the 'poor had been finding it difficult to make their both ends meet' (Lok Sabha Secretariat 2008).

### *The Vote*

The vote had been anticipated to be extremely close but yet when the House finally divided late on the evening of 22 July, the government won by the surprisingly comfortable margin of nineteen votes – 275 to 256. So what happened? If members had cast their votes strictly according to party instructions, the UPA would have lost by three votes – 271 to 268. However, while only six Samajwadi members and a longtime Congress dissident cast their lot with the opposition, fourteen MPs from opposition parties (four from the BJP, two from the Marumalarachi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam and one each from the Janata Dal (U), the JD (S), the Biju JD, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Telugu Desam (TDP), the Telengana Rashtriya Samiti, the National Loktantrik Party and the Nagaland People's Party) voted for the motion and a further eight (four BJP and one each from the JD (U), the TDP, the Shiv Sena and the Akali Dal) either absented themselves or abstained.

While a range of inducements were certainly used to influence how members voted, three features of the outcome stand out. First, the relative cohesion of the governing UPA – not a single member from any of the Congress' minor coalition partners defected. Second, the solidity of the Left Front, barring the case of Speaker Somnath Chatterjee, who held his parliamentary and constitutional duty above loyalty to party, none of the 58 other left MPs departed from their party line. And third, given that, apart from the communist parties, the Hindu nationalists were once regarded as the other ideologically disciplined formation in Indian politics, the apparent inability of the official BJP opposition to prevent eight of its 122 MPs from failing to vote against the government in such a crucial division (all eight members were subsequently expelled from the party).

### *Conclusion: Tamasha, Natak and Arthashastra*

Serious observers of Indian politics have long scratched their heads perplexedly to account for, to borrow JK Galbraith's famous description, the 'functioning anarchy'. More than twenty years ago James Manor was warning of how "decay within parties and increasingly destructive conflict among parties have so eroded the strength of the open political system that its survival is in question" (Manor 1988: 62). Perhaps the answer to India's survival lies in what another

veteran foreign observer of modern India insightfully notes about recent trends in Indian democracy:

Improvisation is characteristic feature of all aspects of Indian life and is also true of Indian democracy. There is a general lack of institutionalization of the party system ... Cynics may scoff ... but with all its drawbacks it has proved very resilient. Emerging political forces have been accommodated more or less smoothly. Violent clashes of interest have been avoided and the legitimacy of the state has been maintained. The rise of coalition governments fits into this pattern of political accommodation. (Rothermund 2008: 27).

A recent analysis of the evolution of the party system in India recognises the long history of the pliability of ideological differences in politics and sees the apparent decline of ideology as actually the reflection of an ideological consensus: “the acceptance of liberal economic reforms ‘with a human face’, and a somewhat diluted secularism” (Gowda and Sridharan 2007: 17). In this case the 2008 confidence vote should be seen not simply as a *tamasha* (spectacle) that made a mockery of democracy but rather as part of its continuing *natak* (drama), a *natak* reflecting the *arthashastra* (science of wealth and power) of 21<sup>st</sup> century India.

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