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Heady electoral rhetoric with a hegemonic ring to it

The run-up to the general election this year is a propitious moment to interrogate the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition's self-presentation of its rule to the electorate, in whose name it governs.

As the ruling coalition seeks a third consecutive mandate at the Centre, one can trace a tangible shift in the coalition's campaign pitch to voters. At the surface, one finds a perceptible repositioning in the campaign's mainline narrative: economic progress and 'softer' cultural rejuvenation have morphed into welfare guarantees and blunter Hindu majoritarianism. At a deeper level, the defining characteristic of the sought mandate has turned away from promises of socio-economic transformation and moved closer towards a referendum on a hegemonic political order.

The latter shift can be gauged from the disproportionate political capital expended towards demonstrating the ineptitude or venality of the opposition parties. The government appears on less sure ground on its billboard 'Modi ki guarantee' theme: a motley of stated government achievements (identified in a personalistic manner with the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi) across social, economic and cultural fronts.

The rationale for the government's apparent hesitancy in clearly foregrounding a pro-incumbency campaign – similar to the NDA's 'India Shining' campaign in 2004 – is not particularly hard to fathom. While the term 'guarantee' signifies an expectation of certainty, the claims encoded within the 'guarantees' appear to carry, on the whole, a much more limited popular credibility.

'Guarantees' versus survey

To illustrate the point, let us juxtapose the claimed guarantees being proffered in the Prime Minister's name, with the corresponding set of survey evidence (taken from last month's bi-annual *India Today* 'Mood of the Nation' (MOTN) survey).

The guarantee of 'A Promising Ecosystem for the Amrit Peedhi' portrays a rapid pace of job creation – "reducing the unemployment rate from 5.8% in 2018-19 to 3.2% in 2022-23". In contrast, the voter survey exhibits a marked dissatisfaction on job creation, with only about a third of respondents crediting success to the government on this front. The 'welfare guarantee' also appears to be on a shaky foundation as 62% express difficulty in managing daily expenses. What about the 'empowering *amudata* (farmers) guarantee' or the 'middle class emerges a winner' guarantee? The survey shows a plurality (45%) blaming government policies for widening the gap between rich and poor. What about the 'Indian Economy: A Story that Inspires' guarantee? A quarter believe their household income will improve in future, while



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three-quarters believe it will either remain stagnant or worsen. In fact, more respondents expect a reduction in future income (30%) than those who expect an improvement (25%).

The most damning indictment is expressed on the question probing which sections are seen to have benefited most from government policies – 52% say big businesses, compared to 9% for farmers, 8% for salaried classes and 6% for daily wage labourers.

The basis of a hegemonic strategy

In spite of this awkward dissonance between incumbent claims and popular perceptions, the headline figure of the *India Today* survey depicts the NDA heading for a comfortable majority, skirting the scale of the 2019 mandate. The government itself projects the ringing figure of 400-plus. The inevitability and incontrovertibility of a third term is itself presented as the overarching guarantee of the campaign narrative.

This is what we mean when we say that the NDA seeks a mandate characteristic of an aspiring political hegemon. A political regime can draw sustenance through such a self-perpetuating hegemonic effect even in the absence of widespread popular approval of its political project. The critical condition hinges on the political project's credibility as representing the 'only game in town'.

What are the mechanisms through which such a hegemonic effect is maintained? One can glean three complementary legs of the NDA's hegemonic tripod: the first is tactical incorporation of rival political elites through a mix of coercive measures and power-sharing incentives. The second is delegitimising the political Opposition as corrupt or pernicious, focusing attention on their 'normless' self-seeking opportunism. The third is undermining the possibilities for emergence of a broad programmatic coalition, while inundating the media spaces, with depictions of the fragmented or listless state of rival political formations, heralding the much-trumpeted certainty of coming electoral triumph.

However, even this overarching guarantee of electoral triumph remains blighted with deficits in credibility. On the question of whether the INDIA bloc can defeat the NDA, 31% of the 'MOTN' survey respondents say yes and 55% say no. Nevertheless, as the magazine adds: "the drop in voter confidence has not been as sharp even as the alliance has lost key partners".

The NDA's own political manoeuvres also betray the stubborn openness of the political contest. The portrayal of opposition alliances as woefully lacking in popular acceptability seems to be rebuffed by the regime's high-profile attempts at breaking away these very rival formations, including in the core heartland states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

In the book, *Neoliberal Hegemony and the Pink Tide in Latin America: Breaking Up with TINA*,

political scientist Tom Chodor examines the conditions undergirding hegemonic sustenance and breakdown. In the Latin America of the 1980s and 1990s, right-wing regimes took power by instituting neoliberal economic policies which were consistently blamed for increasing socio-economic inequality and even intensifying absolute poverty.

As Chodor explains, while their economic policies remained widely resented by the broad populace, these 'Cesarist' regimes survived by assembling a coalition of dominant social classes: industrial bourgeoisie, rural oligarchy and upper middle classes. A steady mix of coercion and incorporation of elite challengers, buffeted by an equal emphasis on the opposition's 'unfitness to govern', helped institute a 'common sense' understanding in Latin America that there was no alternative to their respective regimes of unconstrained neoliberalism.

The pink tide of social democratic forces taking power across the continent from the early 2000s (notably in Brazil, Argentina and Venezuela), according to Chodor, succeeded through a forging together of an evolving counter-hegemonic bloc. This convergence entailed fusing the old leftist 'working class consciousness' with newly politicised 'marginalized and excluded subjectivities': an 'anti-elite' coalition built on an enlarged political bloc including women, indigenous communities and growing sectors of informal labourers.

Chodor argued that this coalition strategy followed "Gramsci's insistence that the construction of a radical collective will is 'an active and reciprocal' educative relationship...illuminating the intersecting dimensions of class, race, and gender exploitation".

A similar coalition of backward castes, labouring classes, and marginalised minorities and women was formulated more than half-a-century ago by Rammanohar Lohia. Interestingly, the choice of the newly incorporated parties in the NDA (the Janata Dal (United) and Rashtriya Lok Dal) suggests the BJP's discomfort at the possibility of an INDIA coalition which can fuse together the constituencies of caste-based social justice and agrarian discontent within its ideological umbrella.

Notwithstanding the heady hegemonic rhetoric, the NDA remains acutely cognisant of its previous losses: from the 2015 defeat in Bihar to a social justice platform of a grand Mandal alliance to the recent electoral losses in Karnataka and Telangana.

The Hindutva coalition has indeed wilted away on quite a few occasions in the recent past, faced with a backlash emanating from the backward castes and rural sectors. The only guarantee inherent in the political process is of a fluid space where alternative imaginations and possibilities can be temporarily suppressed but never foreclosed.

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Green jobs and the problem of gender disparity

The transition to low-carbon development has the potential to add about 35 million green jobs in India by 2047. The International Labour Organization defines green jobs as "decent jobs that contribute to preservation or restoration of the environment". Many of these span across sectors, such as manufacturing, construction, renewable energy, energy efficiency and automobiles, which traditionally saw a lower representation of women.

Globally, men are likely to transition to green jobs faster than women. Even as India increased its renewable energy capacity by 250% between 2015 to 2021, women comprised merely 11% of workers in the solar rooftop sector. The Annual Survey of Industries 2019-20 shows that women workers are mostly concentrated in industries such as apparel, textile, leather, food, and tobacco. In contrast, a Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) 2019 report shows that men comprise 85% of the work force in sectors such as infrastructure, transport, construction, and manufacturing.

A study in 2023 by the Skill Council for Green Jobs indicated that 85% of the training for green skills was imparted to men while over 90% of women believed that social norms limited their participation in training for green jobs. These restrictive social norms include factors such as the belief that women are unsuitable for certain technical roles, safety concerns, lower representation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subjects, and familial constraints.

As India embraces a green transition, empowering women and advancing gender equity in climate actions will be one of the keys to unlock the co-benefits of a low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economy. Increasing women's representation in green jobs has several benefits.

In the short run, it can address the gender biases in the Indian labour market and improve women's labour force participation rates. In the

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Increasing women's representation in green jobs will lead to benefits such as boosting a low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economy

long run, this can contribute to improving women's agency and their empowerment by creating economic, technical, and social opportunities.

Address the gaps in data

There is limited data to understand the landscape of women's work for green jobs in India. Mapping emerging areas for green growth and collecting sex-disaggregated data on green jobs could be the starting point to improve women's participation. There is need to build evidence on the present and future impact of low-carbon transitions on women workers and entrepreneurs while considering the hidden and invisible roles played by women across different sectors and geographies. This could be done by conducting gender analysis, collecting gender statistics on green jobs through periodic labour force surveys and mobilising additional resources to emphasise and encourage women's role in the green transition.

Globally, women are being left behind in the worldwide race to achieve climate targets and sustainability goals. This is particularly evident in the transition to a low-carbon economy, where new opportunities are created alongside job displacement and transformation. Recently in a critical stride towards justice and inclusivity in transition planning, COP 28's high-level dialogue launched 'Gender-Responsive Just Transitions and Climate Action Partnership' with a focus on improved data, targeted finance, and skill development.

Given the unequal landscape of women's work and participation in green jobs, we need to ensure that women can access emerging opportunities from low-carbon transitions. There is a strong need to review the status quo, map the current roles of women, address structural barriers that hinder women's employment choices, and also create a conducive ecosystem to foster their participation in green jobs.

In India, despite 42.7% of the total number of STEM graduates being women, they represent

only 30.8% in engineering, manufacturing and construction programmes which are the key sectors for green transition. To bridge this gap early hands-on learning, mentorship, scholarships, financial assistance, and awareness generation are crucial to empower women in green jobs-related fields.

Supporting women entrepreneurs

Gender-focused financial policies and products catering to the requirements of women entrepreneurs can spur their ability to enter the green transition market. Collateral-free lending, financial literacy training and building supportive networks are crucial steps to unlock their potential. Suitable tools must be developed to assess creditworthiness, disburse loans, and reduce operational costs for women-owned businesses.

Finally, bringing in more women into leadership positions to incorporate gender-specific needs in low-carbon development strategies can promote women's integration in green jobs.

A gender-just transition demands a multi-pronged strategy that focuses on employment, social protection, reduces the burden of care work, and enables skill development. Partnerships across government, private sector and other stakeholders are necessary to leverage the benefits of innovation, technology and finance for women entrepreneurs and workers.

Businesses must recognise the centrality of gender justice and ensure equity throughout the process of green transition by mitigating barriers that exist due to stereotyping or gender bias and fostering equitable job opportunities for a just transition that benefits everyone. This is the time to build the capacity and support women in meeting the demands of the new world of work and co-design a future pathway that is socially equitable and inclusive for all.

The views expressed are personal