

ELECTIONS
HIGHLIGHTING
BY STATE 2024

WEST BENGAL: CAN BJP OUTSMART MAMATA?
PLUS MAHUA MOITRA: MY FIGHT IS AGAINST MODI

JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH | www.theweek.in |  TheWeekMag |  TheWeekLive | ₹ 80

UNIQUE NAMES
I AM DR LOOSAMMA.
AND I AM COLONEL
ISENHOWER

UNTOLD STORIES
TEJAS THACKERAY
GOES WILD!

MAY 12, 2024

THEWEEK

MANIPUR ONE YEAR AFTER

The implosion within

Ground report from
India-Myanmar border

PLUS

**CHIEF MINISTER
BIREN SINGH**
Assam Rifles
not guarding
the border

A child at a refugee camp
on the border

9 770975 227702



5 NYAYS GUARANTEED BY CONGRESS

YUVA NYAY

- 30 lakh government jobs
- ₹1 lakh stipend under Apprenticeship Act for degree / diploma holders

NARI NYAY

- ₹1 lakh annual cash transfer to women
- 50% reservation for women in government jobs

KISAN NYAY

- Legal guarantee of MSP
- Loan waiver for farmers
- GST-free agriculture

HISSEDARI NYAY

- Socio-economic caste census
- Settlement of all FRA claims within 1 year

SHRAMIK NYAY

- ₹400 daily wage under MGNREGA
- Free healthcare of up to ₹25,00,000



**HAATH
BADLEGA
HALAAT**





RECENTLY, A SENIOR editor of THE WEEK shared a rather disturbing conversation he had with his 13-year-old daughter.

“The war in Ukraine is over, right, Appa?” she asked.

Taken aback, he told her that it was still on and that a few innocent Indians also got tricked into fighting a war so far away from their homes. Shocked, she asked, “But, it is not on the front pages of the newspaper anymore!”

Having been in journalism for close to two decades, the father was stumped. How could he tell her that more immediate news dominates the front pages?

For the teen, it was somehow personal, because in mid-2022 she saw two videos that seared her little heart. One was of a Ukrainian child from Irpin clinging to his soldier father’s chest, pounding his helmet and his face, crying his heart out. They were a family of four, like the teen’s own. The mother was fleeing with the children, while the father was staying back to fight. The second video was of a little girl in a pink winter jacket sobbing as she bade farewell to her father and boarded a bus to safety. The father sobs, strokes her hair, kisses her face, adjusts her white woollen cap and after the doors of the bus closed, he presses his palm to

the window, trying to send all his love and longing through the cold glass.

We adults have forgotten them, but a teen in Kochi still remembers them and asks if they are all safe, if both children are back with their fathers again, if they are going to school, and how did their most recent birthdays go.

This issue of THE WEEK remembers our brothers, sisters and little ones in Manipur and marks one year of their pain. It is Journalism With A Human Touch. Deputy Chief of Bureau Namrata Biji Ahuja and Deputy Photo Editor Salil Bera travelled through the wounded state, taking stock of the security situation, the political situation and the trauma of the victims. The cover image, too, spells out why we chose to carry this cover in the heat of elections.

Our election coverage continues at full steam. From Battleground West Bengal we have senior journalist Sheela Bhatt sharing her observations from the ground on what is working for the Trinamool Congress and the BJP. From hotseat Krishnanagar, made famous for being firebrand Mahua Moitra’s seat, Correspondent Niladry Sarkar reports. Special Correspondent Mohit Sharma and Senior Special Correspondent Pratul Sharma write to you from the national capital, and bring you two interviews—the BJP’s Bansuri Swaraj and the AAP’s Somnath Bharti.

In the @leisure section, Special Correspondent Anjuly Mathai writes about people with unusual names. Like, Colonel Isenhower, who does not have a first name. Anjuly herself has a story behind her name. And that’s why she is not Anjali or Anjaly. Her mother picked the name out from *The Far Pavilions* by M.M. Kaye. In the novel, the princess’s name is spelt as Anjuli though.

A special article this week is about Tejas Thackeray, a wildlife biologist from the very political Thackeray family. Uddhav Thackeray’s son shared to our Principal Correspondent Pooja Biraia Jaiswal his journey to find new and lesser-known species in Maharashtra. I wonder what Balasaheb would have said to the passionate Tejas. Being a grandfather, I know he would have been proud. Immensely proud.

Phil Mathai,

contents

FOR THE WEEK MAY 6 - MAY 12



ELECTIONS 2024 BATTLEGROUND

WEST BENGAL 18

A range of contentious issues has raised the ideological and political stakes of the Trinamool-BJP battle to the highest level



My fight is with Narendra Modi: **Mahua Moitra**, Trinamool Congress candidate, Krishnanagar



Trinamool must study history before questioning my ancestors: BJP's **Amrita Roy**

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AAP-Congress alliance not a challenge for us: **Bansuri Swaraj**, BJP candidate, New Delhi



If BJP gets a third term, there will be no democracy left: **Somnath Bharti**, AAP candidate, New Delhi

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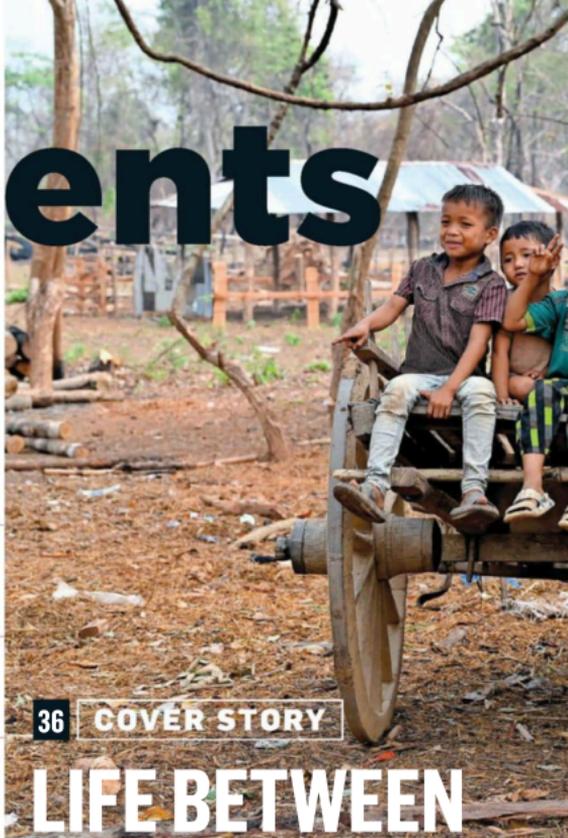


Congress's north-south game can divide the country: **Basavaraj Bommai**, former Karnataka chief minister

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Plagued by corruption allegations and desertions, **K. Chandrashekar Rao's** Bharat Rashtra Samithi seems to be on the verge of collapse



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LIFE BETWEEN DIVIDES

May 3 marks a year of ethnic clashes in Manipur. People are now living in islands of peace that exist between the valley-based Meiteis and the hill-based Kukis. But it is not just the violence that is worrying. An unfenced border, rising influx of illegal immigrants and the war in Myanmar are adding to India's security nightmares

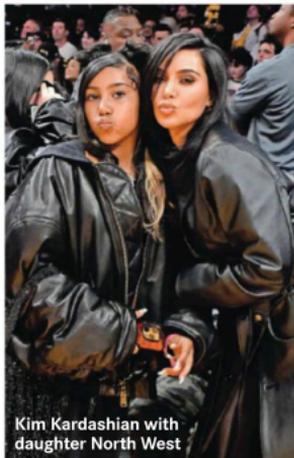


INTERVIEW

Assam Rifles not trained to guard borders; need separate force for Manipur border: **N. Biren Singh**, chief minister, Manipur

The Union home ministry is looking at a holistic approach to enhance security, both along the border and internally

In many parts of the world, unique names are becoming popular. So, what's really in a name?



Kim Kardashian with daughter North West

GETTY IMAGES



An Assam Rifles personnel near a refugee camp at Phaikoh village along the India-Myanmar border in Manipur

SALIL BERA

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Tejas Thackeray, younger son of former Maharashtra chief minister **Uddhav Thackeray**, on his passion for wildlife conservation and photography


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"In the southern states, there is no political surge around the temple despite religion being a more entrenched part of daily life than in the north."


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Bilateral trade between the UAE and India has grown almost 16 per cent year-on-year, touching

\$84.5 billion: UAE ambassador to India Abdulnasser Alshaali

COVER PHOTO **SALIL BERA**
COVER DESIGN **BINESH SREEDHARAN**

Printed at Malayala Manorama Press, Kottayam, and M P Printers, Noida, and published from Manorama Buildings, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi-682 036, by **Jacob Mathew**, on behalf of the Malayala Manorama Company Private Ltd., Kottayam-686 001. Editor **Philip Mathew**
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Destination South

Narendra Modi and the BJP have nothing to lose from here on. There is a likelihood of the BJP improving its tally in the south ('Heading south for the summer', April 28). That the BJP won 29 Lok Sabha seats in the south in 2019 is no less an achievement. But, of these 29 seats, 25 were from a single state—Karnataka, which is often referred to as the laboratory of hindutva in the south.

This time around, the BJP will win one or two seats in Kerala, and it might win five to six seats in Tamil Nadu. After Karnataka, it is in Telangana that the party has the maximum reach—it might get anywhere between seven and eight seats. Of the challengers in the south, I feel Telangana Chief Minister Revanth Reddy and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin could push back Narendra Modi. Pinarayi Vijayan and Siddaramaiah look weak in the face of Modi's juggernaut. Leaders like Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar and Reddy have risen to the challenge and saved the Congress from sinking in Karnataka and Telangana. Hats off to them.

Prakash Kapadi,
On email.

The Congress-led UDF will win it big in Kerala. The INDIA bloc will get most of the seats in Tamil Nadu. But, strangely, the principal opposition of the Congress in Kerala is the Left.

In Telangana, the BJP and the Congress will be neck and neck. In Andhra Pradesh, the NDA will score, thanks to the two opportunistic parties there—the TDP and the YSR Congress. All said, the BJP cannot become a prominent force in the south for many more years to come.

Rajagopal Vinayak,
On email.

I liked your package on Battleground South. Winning 50 of 130 seats in the region is easier said than done. Yes, the BJP might improve its tally in the south, but it cannot win 50 seats. Voters in Tamil Nadu and Kerala have never accepted the BJP.

Vyom Prakash,
On email.

There is a strong cultural gap between the north and the south. The BJP leaders, including Modi, should not speak in Hindi when

they campaign in southern states. I have never seen Amit Shah speak English anywhere. If he speaks in English in the south, it will give him more reach.

Most south Indians prefer English to Hindi. The more the BJP leaders speak in Hindi in south India, the lesser are its chances of doing well in these states.

Guru Chandavarkar,
On email.

Good writeup

Reading Anuja Chauhan's article in the powerful collection of political tales was a pleasant diversion ('Dazed in Deccan', April 28).

It resembled a travelogue, or a small book filled with political allusions. Since I know the locations, it appealed to me even more. The article was fascinating because it was a first-hand account of things that Chauhan saw and experienced. Amid political unrest and the intense heat wave surging across India, her light-hearted banter was quite entertaining. Wish Chauhan had travelled more!

Praveen Thimmaiah,
Bengaluru.

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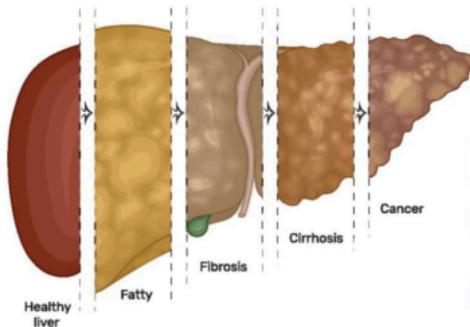
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Prioritize your Liver to Live Longer and Healthier

As we celebrate World Liver Day, it's essential to reflect on the significance of liver health and the crucial role of regular screening in maintaining a healthy liver.

Liver diseases are a leading cause of morbidity and mortality globally, with over 2 million deaths attributed to liver conditions each year. Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) affects approximately 25% of the global population, making it one of the most prevalent liver conditions worldwide. Viral hepatitis, including hepatitis B and C, affects around 325 million people globally and is a significant risk factor for liver cirrhosis and liver cancer.

Liver cancer is the sixth most common cancer globally, with over 900,000 new cases diagnosed annually. Early detection through screening can significantly improve survival rates. Excessive alcohol consumption is a leading cause of liver diseases, contributing to approximately 50% of liver-related deaths worldwide.

As per Dr. Elankumaran K., knowing risk factors and how liver diseases progress is critical so that we can do appropriate screening and maintain a healthy lifestyle to prevent liver-related conditions.

Rising risk factors: Factors such as alcohol consumption, obesity, viral hepatitis infections, and certain medications can increase the risk of liver diseases. Screening helps in identifying risk factors and taking preventive measures.

Silent yet steady progression: Many liver diseases progress silently without noticeable symptoms. Routine screenings enable early detection and intervention, preventing complications.

Screening Impact: Studies show that routine liver screenings can lead to early detection of liver diseases in up to 70% of cases, resulting in better treatment outcomes

and reduced healthcare costs. Hence, prioritizing liver health is paramount for overall well-being. Liver screening tests such as liver function tests (LFTs), imaging studies like ultrasound, and fibroscan can detect various liver conditions, including fatty liver disease, hepatitis, and liver cirrhosis.

Screening Guidelines: Consultation with healthcare providers for personalized screening guidelines based on individual risk factors and medical history is essential. Regular follow-ups and screenings are recommended for at-risk individuals.

Importance of Lifestyle: Adopting a healthy lifestyle, including a balanced diet, regular exercise, limiting alcohol intake, and avoiding risky behaviours, plays a crucial role in maintaining liver health.

By promoting awareness about liver health and advocating for regular screenings, we can empower individuals to take proactive steps towards liver wellness. Let's join hands to spread the message of "Love Your Liver" and encourage everyone to prioritize their liver health through education, prevention, and early detection. Together, we can make a difference and ensure a healthier future for all.



Dr. Elankumaran K.

Head – Liver Diseases & Transplantation Institute
Sr. Consultant – Liver Transplantation & HPB Surgery
Apollo Hospitals, Chennai.

For more details ☎ **044 4040 1066** | write to infochennai@apollohospitals.com

It may backfire

If Mani Shankar Aiyar says that the BJP will not scale the Dravidian wall, then there is a good chance of the BJP crossing it ('BJP can't scale Dravidian wall', April 28). It is better if Aiyar does not say anything in the election season. It backfires big time. The BJP is trying its level best and doing everything to win some seats in Tamil Nadu. Leaders like K. Annamalai can mobilise the masses, and he has a vision for Tamil Nadu. A popular figure, he is successfully wooing young people in the state. He could be the next Member of Parliament from Coimbatore.

Anupa Ravindran,
On email.

Save Bengaluru

As a resident of Bengaluru since 1980, I have witnessed the city's deterioration because of government apathy ('Last word', March 28).

'Rules are made to be broken' seems to be the mantra to convert the garden city to garbage city, which is today thirsty, filthy and crowded.

It is our collective responsibility to save the doomed city.

Sarita Bery,
Bengaluru.

It was sad to read about the water woes of Bengaluru. I visited Bengaluru for the first time in 1964 and enjoyed

the weather there. It was like a city of lakes. Today the place is a madhouse, with all the expansion. Traffic-clogged streets force us to walk every now and then. The core issue is unscientific waste management.

Laljee Verma
(retired air marshal),
On email.

To mitigate the perennial water crisis in Bengaluru, there is a need for urgent intervention and a pragmatic approach. The demand for water is expected to grow by 40 per cent by 2030. Already beset with climate change crisis and population boom, clean water is becoming a luxury.

P.V. Prakash,
On email.

Not that innocent

Initially, after he was arrested, I thought Arvind Kejriwal was framed in a false case ('Broom, bottle and a capital battle', April 14). But now, after his bail plea was rejected a few times, I feel he is not all that innocent. Kejriwal committed a big mistake by forming a political party [AAP]. If he had stayed with Anna Hazare, his stature would have increased manifold. And people would have taken him seriously. Why was there even the need to form the AAP? So many have left the party over the years. Many more will in the days to come.

Anosh Ahmed,
On email.

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King Log or King Stork?

Once upon an Aesopean time, an army of frogs living in a well thought they needed a king. They prayed to Jove, the king of gods, to send them one. Jove flung a log into their midst. The kupamandukas, terrified by the splash, scampered behind the rocks, but soon found the log to be harmless. In no time they were climbing and dancing over their king.

Soon enough, they got tired of their lifeless king. They asked Jove to send them one who had life and vigour. This time Jove sent them a stork. He ate them all up.

If you listen to our political pundits, you would think we are caught between a King Stork and several King Logs. The BJP intellectuals (pardon the oxymoron) would have us believe that if the INDIA alliance wins this election, they would rule as King Logs—a new one every year, as Narendra Modi has been mocking. Those kings would look the other way when ‘others’ claim our family wealth, when terrorists strike, and would do nothing to boost economic growth.

The Congress intellectuals (pardon the oxymoron) would like us to think Modi would turn into a King Stork if he gets a big win. He would scrap the Constitution, curtail liberties, arrest professors, exile poets, raid merchants, jail leaders, and give India’s wealth to his tycoon friends.

Caught between the two, what should “we the people”, who gave to ourselves a Constitution, do? Press the NOTA button? Sorry, NOTA can’t make governments. So, hold on.

Truth be told, the Log-Stork binary has been there in India’s electoral narrative ever since Modi stormed into the national scene in 2014. He had come in then scoffing at Manmohan Singh as a King Log—one who “wrote love letters” to Nawaz Sharif, was too weak to fight terrorists, and had looked the other way when po-

litical colleagues were carting away our coal reserves and downloading our 2G spectrum for a song. On its part, the Congress had then accused Modi of showing King Stork traits—having let Gujaratis massacre Gujaratis, let trigger-happy cops kill outlaws in cold blood, and helped crony capitalists to fatten themselves.

This columnist had used the same Aesopean allegory to describe the voters’ dilemma then too. As they say, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The Congress and co are now worried that Modi could actually turn a constitutional stork if he gets his 400-plus. He would turn a tyrant, they say, who would use the legislative majority to rejig the Constitution, or scrap it and get a new one.

Ironic it may sound, it was Modi’s own men who started the talk. First his handpicked intellectuals did a little loud thinking that got a bit too loud. Then as the polls approached, party MP Anantkumar Hegde called for a 400-seat target so as to amend the Constitution. Soon every party MP and his elder brother, every aspiring MP and his younger brother, and everyone who had flashed a saffron flag or shouted the Jai Shri Ram slogan was talking about it.

It was then that the opposition sensed danger, and an opportunity. They turned the message around, reposted it to the dalit millions who swear by Constitution-maker B.R. Ambedkar, saying the Modi-ki-guarantees in the BJP manifesto would replace the constitutional guarantees of school seats, scholarships and job quotas. In no time, the BJP sensed danger, cried “*shantam-paapam, tauba-tauba*,” and stopped talking of 400.

Now, another problem. Many among the upper castes had thought, though without basis, that it was a matter of time before Modi and co scrapped the quotas-log, stock and barrel. Who would they vote now —Log or Stork?



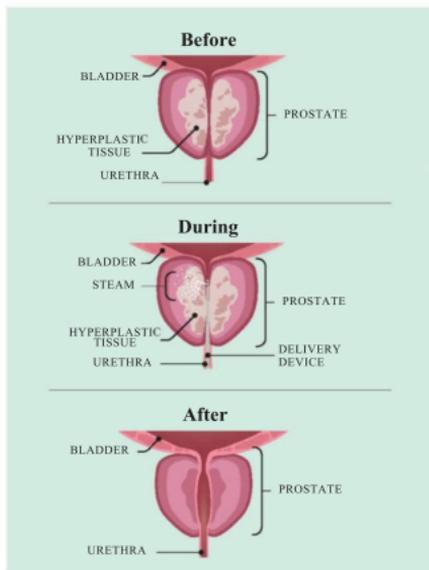
Tired Of Letting Prostate Problems Control Your Life?

Recently, a 55-year-old man from Cochin, who had been enduring excruciating pain and difficulties during urination for the past five years, successfully underwent a non-surgical alternative at Aster Medcity in Kochi. This marks the first instance of Rezūm Water Vapor Therapy in South India and the third in the country.

The innovative procedure known as Rezūm Water Vapor Therapy holds the potential to transform the treatment of Benign Prostate Problems, particularly in younger males. Many people facing the difficult decision of seeking prostate treatment while also considering the risks and complications associated with traditional surgical methods opt for this procedure that can give relief to prostate problems within a month or two. It may do so even without further medications."

What is Rezūm Water Vapor Therapy?

Rezūm Therapy uses water vapor a non surgical method to target and shrink excess prostate tissue that may cause obstruction. It addresses symptoms, reduces complications of benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH), a condition where the prostate gland enlarges and causes urinary symptoms.



During the procedure, the stored energy in the water vapor is released into the prostate tissue when the steam comes into contact with it. The prostate shrinks as a result of body's natural healing process absorbing the treated tissue over time. The urethra opens when the excess tissue is removed, lessening the symptoms of BPH.

Traditionally, prostate enlargement has been addressed through laser procedures and Holmium Laser Enucleation of the Prostate (HoLEP). However, Rezūm Water Vapor operates utilizing the natural energy stored in water vapor, or steam, to effectively remove excess prostate tissue that exerts pressure on the urethra. It is the best alternative for young patients who do not prefer surgical management. Another advantage of this treatment is that procedure could be performed in all risk categories of patients also on patients who are on blood thinners and there wont be any sexual related problems after the surgery.



Benefits of Rezūm Water Vapor Therapy

Gone are the days of invasive surgeries and long-term side effects. Rezūm Water Vapor Therapy is simpler than traditional surgeries, making it a safer and more patient-friendly option for prostate care. Patients frequently notice significant improvements in their symptoms within a few weeks of starting this treatment, resulting in a higher quality of life without the need for lengthy recovery times or extensive post-operative care.

At Aster Medcity, we are committed to providing the most up-to-date and effective prostate treatments. Get to know more benefits of Rezūm Therapy at Aster Medcity and start living a more comfortable life today.

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THE BIG PICTURE

KEEPING A COOL HEAD

Traffic policemen in Lucknow with air-conditioned helmets to beat the heat. The helmets, manufactured by a Hyderabad-based company, can bring down temperature by 15 degrees Celsius. Each rechargeable helmet has four vents to provide cooling effect.

PHOTO BY PAWAN KUMAR

POINT BLANK



The Indian voter is a smart voter and, if I may add, a moral voter. It quickly punishes real or perceived attempts to shortchange or insult its aspirations and intelligence.

Tejashwi Yadav,
RJD leader

Why are you creating a fear that Muslims produce more children? According to a data from the Modi government, the population growth and fertility rate among Muslims has decreased. Muslims use condoms the most, and I have no shame in saying this.

Asaduddin Owaisi,
AIMIM chief

Life can be led in extremes, but if you go beyond the black and white and accept the grey, you will be much more in touch with reality. Because the many shades of grey define us today...

Karan Johar,
filmmaker

Very often, athletes link their self-worth to their name on the ranking list of a sporting competition, which I think is absolutely idiotic. Because you are basing your happiness on where your name will appear on a ranking list of a sporting competition. And there is no guarantee in sport, right? That is the beauty of sport. That it is unpredictable.

Abhinav Bindra,
former shooter

WORD PLAY

Greenstalling is the act—usually by a business—of delaying taking action to reduce carbon emissions over concerns about being criticised for doing the wrong thing or not doing enough.

MILESTONES



SHUTTERSTOCK

SKIN CURE

An international trial of the world's first personalised mRNA cancer immunotherapy for melanoma has begun at University College London Hospital (UCLH). Melanoma is the most serious form of skin cancer and is among the most common types of cancer.



XI LONDON MARATHON

MAKING HISTORY

Lloyd Martin, 19, a runner with Down's syndrome became the youngest person in his learning disability category to complete the London Marathon. He ran with his mother, Ceri Hooper, as his guide.



HENRY ALDRIDGE & SON

TIMELESS PIECE

A gold pocket watch recovered from the body of John Jacob Astor IV, the richest passenger on the Titanic, fetched £1.175 million at auction. Hailing from the wealthy Astor family, John Jacob founded the iconic St. Regis New York hotel. The 14-carat Waltham, engraved with the initials JJA, has set a new world record for Titanic memorabilia.



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MANYAVAR, BEHENJI...

In the poll chatter dominated by the BJP and the INDIA bloc in Uttar Pradesh, the BSP is trying hard to find its space. As expected, party president Mayawati has been the star campaigner. But now, she has company. Her nephew, Akash Anand, is increasingly making his presence felt. Unlike his aunt, Anand does not shy away from the glare of the media. He also regularly invokes B.R. Ambedkar. Interestingly, Anand's rise coincides with the absence of Mayawati's close aide Satish Mishra from the campaign. The BSP's clout in electoral politics may be declining, but Anand is rising within the party and is expected to inherit the legacy from Mayawati.

ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

STALIN KEEPS IT COOL

It is vacation time for Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin. After the Lok Sabha polls in the state, Stalin left for the Kodaikanal hills with his family. Before leaving Chennai, he met party colleagues who monitored each constituency to assess the DMK's chances. He also visited his sister, M.K. Selvi, at her Gopalapuram residence to greet her husband, Murasoli Selvam, on his birthday. By the time he left the capital, it felt as if Stalin did not even need to cool off at a hill station. He already seems like the coolest man in Tamil Nadu politics ahead of the election results in June.



KCR 2.0

After his party's electoral setbacks, former Telangana chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao has found both the time and inclination to connect more closely with the public. In a surprising move, KCR recently joined X to reach out to netizens. He has also revamped his approach to election campaigns. Now, he engages in road shows and addresses crowds from bus-top—things he never did while he was in power. His stance towards the media, too, has changed. After almost a decade, he visited a news channel's studio and gave an interview running into more than four hours.

DARK DAYS AHEAD?

In recent weeks, there has been a notable increase in power consumption in Kerala—thanks to the heat wave scorching God's Own Country. April saw power consumption hit an all-time high. And, as water levels are low in dams with hydroelectric projects, the government is contemplating load-shedding.

Meanwhile, power cuts have increased in frequency, prompting novel protests—like a sleep-in at a Kerala State Electricity Board office by a group of young men. The unkindest cut was that the lights went out when Electricity Minister K. Krishnankutty was casting his vote for the Lok Sabha polls. The minister clarified that while unchecked consumption was stretching the capacity of the grid, there was no plan to impose load-shedding in the immediate future. Now that the Lok Sabha polls in the state are over, the gloves might come off.



GRAPES OF WRATH

A range of contentious issues has raised the ideological and political stakes of the Trinamool-BJP battle in West Bengal to the highest level

BY SHEELA BHATT, KOLKATA, COOPER'S CAMP, RANAGHAT, BASIRHAT AND HASNABAD



Seema Ray stood in her ramshackle hut, holding a letter as if it were a death sentence. The letter informed her that the Unique Identification Authority of India had deactivated the Aadhaar allotted to her husband, Parimal Ray.

Seema was in shock. Two decades ago, the Ray family had migrated from Bangladesh to West Bengal. They had been living in Cooper's Camp, a town in Ranaghat subdivision of West Bengal's Nadia district,

which borders Bangladesh. The Rays are part of the Namasudra community, also called Matuas, who number around 70 lakh in West Bengal.

For migrant families residing in districts along the state's 2,217km-long border with Bangladesh, Aadhaar is more than a survival kit. Having an Aadhaar protects them from uncomfortable questions regarding their migration. Acquiring Aadhaar is also the first step in letting migrant families grow roots on Indian soil.

Parimal's Aadhaar was his family's lifeline. It helped Seema work as domestic help, and Parimal as a labourer. Their son Anik, who has liver disease, requires medicines worth ₹2,000 a month. The Ray family fears that they could well cease to exist if Parimal's Aadhaar is permanently deactivated.

Border districts are filled with such stories, but they are yet to become part of national consciousness. "In Cooper's Camp, 95 per cent of the population is *udbastu* (refugees),"



The Sandeshkhali controversy could be more impactful than the CAA, because it concerns law and order, communal harmony and security of the poor in villages.

THE BATTLE GOES ON

Women at a grievance cell opened by the state government in Sandeshkhali

from Bangladesh.

Matua migrants who have acquired Aadhaar and other identification documents appreciate the BJP's gesture. They say the CAA, when implemented, will add a layer to their identity as Indian citizens.

But far away from their world are the elite *bhadralok* and liberals of Kolkata, who strongly oppose the CAA. "It has only one purpose—create communal polarisation in a society that has 27 to 30 per cent Muslim population," said Prasenjit Bose, a left-leaning economist and activist.

According to Bose, "Ninety-nine per cent of infiltrators from Bangladesh are Hindus. The CAA 'chronology,' which Union Home Minister Amit Shah talks about, is that counting for the National Register of Citizens will happen only after giving Indian citizenship to Matuas. Dilip Ghosh, former state BJP president, has declared that once the NRC is done, they will deport one crore Muslims. But the BJP, of late, has realised that most of the Muslims in West Bengal were born here."

According to Amit Malviya, BJP IT cell chief and co-in-charge of the party unit in West Bengal, the state needed an "alignment of religious Hindus". "The average Bengali is both deeply religious and ritualistic. But in Bengal, ironically, the Congress, the left and the Trinamool Congress are all left-leaning. Religious Bengalis have found a home with the BJP. Bengalis may not be outwardly expressive of their faith, but they are not agnostic either. We have found each other," he told THE WEEK.

But the response, in reality, has been mixed. Some say the CAA's symbolic value matters, but others are plainly dismissive. Mamata Bala Thakur, a Matua leader belonging to the family of Harichand Thakur, the

said Dilip Das, town president of the Trinamool Congress. "We live in a notified area. We have around 18,000 voters."

The Union government said it was "by mistake" that a few thousand Aadhaar cards in the region were deactivated. After the issue came to light, local BJP workers frantically sent messages to Delhi to make the UIDAI re-activate the Aadhaar cards. Das and other Trinamool leaders have also been working to connect with people who have been affected.

Parimal has been told by his bank that his Aadhaar will be reactivated in two months. But, in the meantime, he and his family will have to live in constant fear.

It was to address this fear and insecurity of the Matuas that the BJP had come up with the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2019. The objective was to help only the Hindus among the migrants, and win their votes. For the BJP, the CAA is a tool to instantly connect with lakhs of Bengali Hindus who came

SALIL BERA

19th-century founder of the Matua sect, said the BJP had lost credibility among the community because the party failed to fulfil its 2019 promise. “They have not started the [CAA] process,” said Thakur, a Trinamool leader and Rajya Sabha member. “I want to ask the BJP: ‘Didn’t you win seats in 2019 with the help of Matuas? In 2019, Matuas could vote for you because they are Indian citizens. Then why is the CAA necessary if we are Indian citizens already?’”

Trinamool leaders say the CAA would prompt “reverse polarisation” among Bengali-speaking Muslims in border areas, which will end up benefiting their party. “The CAA is all set to fail. The BJP got the Ram Temple it wanted. Now, it should stop spreading hatred,” said Vivek Gupta, Trinamool MLA from Jorasanko.

According to him, the BJP in West Bengal is in a catch-22 situation. “If it makes the CAA an election plank, it will unite Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants in support of the Trinamool. The Hindu migrants know that nobody is going to get citizenship because they do not have the documents needed to apply.”

Traveling through border villages, one gets the feeling that no state in India is as desperate to vote as Bengal is. Unfortunately, for the Trinamool, a series of events in Sandeshkhali in North 24 Parganas district has now overtaken the CAA issue. A popular agitation against Sheikh Shahjahan, a local *mastan* (bully) and Trinamool strongman, is becoming a turning point in the political battle. Shahjahan was



PHOTOS SAJIL BERA



RAGING FIRE

An anti-CAA protest in Kolkata; (below) ISF leader and Bhargar MLA Navsaw Siddiqui, who the Trinamool has branded as the ‘Owaisi of Bengal’

once a close associate of Jyotipriya Mallick, a former food minister who was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate last year in a case related to an alleged ration distribution scam. When ED officers reached Shahjahan’s house to question him in January, his supporters attacked them. After Shahjahan went into hiding, many local women, both Hindus and Muslims, levelled allegations of rampant land grab and sexual harassment against him. They also began speaking out in support of a woman who testified in court accusing Shahjahan of raping her.

Shahjahan was arrested on February 29, and is now in police custody. The allegations against him have

become a talking point across the state. The controversy could be more impactful than the CAA, because it concerns law and order, communal harmony and security of the poor in villages. During a visit to Arambagh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself told women: “*Har chot ka jawab vote se dena* (Remember your wounds while voting).”

In the battle for Bengal, Modi and the BJP have raised the ideological and political stakes to the highest level. The BJP first got a taste of success in 2019, when it won 18 of

I want to ask the BJP: ‘Didn’t you win seats in 2019 with the help of Matuas? Why is the CAA necessary if we are Indian citizens already?’

—Mamata Bala Thakur, Matua leader and Trinamool MP





42 seats with a 40.64 per cent vote share. In Alipurduars constituency in north Bengal, the BJP got as much as 54.4 per cent of votes. Buoyed by the results, the BJP campaigned harder in the 2021 assembly polls, but the party could win only 77 of 294 seats. Now, once more, the BJP is pulling out all stops in Bengal.

The state has always been special for the RSS, as it was Syama Prasad Mookerjee—founder of the Bengali Hindu Homeland Movement—who co-founded the BJP's predecessor Jan Sangh. "For many of us, West Bengal is a Hindu homeland," Anirban Ganguli, BJP candidate in Jadavpur and director of the Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation in Delhi, told THE WEEK. "The Bengal assembly, on June 20, 1947, had voted in favour of the division of Bengal. Then the Congress, the Hindu Mahasabha and left parties voted for the division to have a Hindu homeland for Bengali-speaking Hindus. Don't forget [CPI(M) leader] Jyoti Basu, who as a member of the assembly, had voted for it."

Upper-caste Hindu Bengalis oppose the BJP, though. "If the BJP succeeds in Bengal, they would first target the *bhadralok*," said prominent journalist Sudipta Sengupta.

The *bhadralok*—a class of 'gentle-folk' comprising traditional upper castes such as Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas—have long been admired for their refined taste in arts and culture. But they seem to be losing their political relevance now—not just because Bengal is in transition, but also because there are many Bengalis now.

The Bengal of the Rajbanshi community in the north, for instance, has a fascinating history of its own. In 2019, the BJP won seven of eight seats in north Bengal riding on the "identity politics" of the Rajbanshis, who trace their roots to the erstwhile Kamata and Koch kingdoms in the Cooch Behar region.

Then there is the Bengal of Panchayats, which has long been a violent epicentre of power politics. A reason that Bengal has turned fertile ground for the BJP is that Chief

Minister Mamata Banerjee has not been able to change the nature of panchayat politics since she ended the long rule of the left government. Interestingly, in some places, the Sheikh Shahjahan effect is so strong that people are comparing the three-decades-long Left rule with the Trinamool's 13 years in power.

"The Trinamool controls panchayats to control funds," said journalist-author Rajat Roy. "Around 40 per cent of panchayats are uncontested. Local leaders in Bengal enjoy immense power. Bengal has traditions of *bhakti* and *shakti* movements. The violence is ingrained in us as much as *bhakti*."

According to Roy, the fact that the land issue in Bengal is not yet solved is "creating pressures and fights". Large-scale land grab by *mastans* at the panchayat level remains a big problem. "There are many Shahjahans in villages," said Dipayan, a boy in Basirhat who was helping the BJP collect booth-level data. Apparently, the *mastans* turn the land they grab into illegal *bheri* (shallow fish ponds).

At Shyamnagar, a village in Ranaghat constituency, THE WEEK came across a crowd of around two dozen people who were protesting a land-grab attempt by a local *mastan*—Pinto Dutta, a Trinamool strongman. "Pinto wants to grab this land. Residents are opposing the move," said Amar Dakua, a local boy.

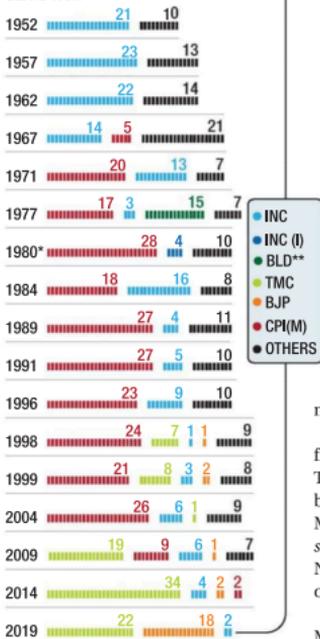
An acquaintance of Pinto, who was also a Trinamool leader, said that trouble started when Pinto asked villagers to download an app and put money into it. "He promised to get them jobs in the Army," he said. "Many villagers lost big money. After strong protests, the police acted and sent Pinto to jail."

Later, Amar told me that Pinto had dropped his plan to grab the land and sell it. "It is the Shahjahan effect!" he explained.

The BJP has been trying to take

SNAPSHOT
WEST BENGAL

SEATS WON



NOTE: NUMBER OF SEATS HAS CHANGED BASED ON REORGANISATION OF STATES AND DELIMITATION.

*In 1980, the INC contested as INC(I) and INC(U). By 1984, former prime minister Indira Gandhi's INC(I) was recognised as the INC and the INC(U) was renamed Indian Congress (Socialist).

**The BLD had merged with the Janata Party ahead of the elections. But, it contested using the BLD's symbol

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.
 RESEARCH KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

advantage of the grassroots anger. "In our village, we worked for the BJP in the last election," said Kunal Brahm of Basirhat, who used to work for the left. "All anti-BJP forces got angry. Our water supply was cut off. State BJP president Sukanta Majumdar came to our village and installed a



SALIL BERA

new hand pump for us."

Proshanto Das, a dalit migrant from Bangladesh, is angry at Trinamool leaders for closing his business in Basirhat. "Nandigram se Mamata didi aye the, Sandeshkhali se jayegi (Mamata rose because of Nandigram; she would fall because of Sandeshkhali)," said Das.

Few voters, however, criticise Mamata directly. "Tolabaazi (extortion), cut money (illegal commission) and *mastan* are adjectives associated with Trinamool leaders in villages," said a boy in Basirhat, "but Mamata is always addressed respectfully as 'didi.'"

At Hasnabad, a town near Basirhat, I met Trinamool's local party president Eskender Gazi, who has a flourishing fishing business and an office surrounded by wetlands. "Jab tak Trinamool ke saath Muslim vote rahega, tab tak Trinamool rahega (Trinamool will survive as long as the Muslim vote remains with it)," he said.

The Sandeshkhali issue has given the BJP a talking point, but the saffron party cannot do anything about the massive vote bank of Bengali Muslims that gives Mamata the edge.

"The BJP has ambitious Bengal plans, but they won't work," said Gazi. "The CAA is terror. There is no question of accepting it. Mamata didi will get votes of Bengali Muslims, and there won't be any division [of votes]."

But there could well be a dent in the Trinamool's Muslim vote base. The Indian Secular Front, led by Bhangar MLA Nawsad Siddiqui, has tied up with left parties and the Congress. The ISF was founded in 2021; the same year, Siddiqui defeated a Trinamool candidate to become its first MLA. His brother Abbas Siddiqui leads an influential *mazar* (shrine) at Furfura Sharif in Hooghly district.

Nawsad has been touring border districts where Muslims are dominant. Whether his party would be able to win voters remains uncertain, but Siddiqui has already been branded by the Trinamool as the 'Owaisi of Bengal'—after Asaduddin Owaisi of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, who has long been accused of splitting Muslim votes to help the BJP.

"I am against the violence and corruption of Trinamool bullies," said Siddiqui. "I am totally against



PH

the CAA, which is merely a BJP game to corner votes. Everyone knows that there is a 'setting' (deal) between the Trinamool and the BJP.... Mamata has been getting Muslim votes since 2011, but she won't give them development and education. She is not capable of freeing panchayats from corruption and violence."

The reality, though, is that Bengali Muslims do not really have an

Bengali Muslims do not really have an alternative to Mamata right now. Her connect with district party leaders and cadres remains outstanding.

alternative to Mamata right now. Mamata's connect with district party leaders and cadres remains outstanding, and she continues to enjoy the image of being pro-poor. She has also been using Bengali sub-nationalism with ease to attract 7.5 crore voters. "Mamata's popularity rating in the state has always been 80 per cent," said Pratik Jain, head of I-PAC, which handles the Trinamool's social media accounts.

For its part, the BJP is hoping that Modi and his narrative of nationalism stand to gain in the Lok Sabha polls. "Our survey shows that in each Bengal constituency, Modi has an exclusive pull of 6 per cent to 8 per cent votes," said Samik Bhattacharya, BJP leader and Rajya Sabha member.

Sunil Bansal, national general secretary of the BJP, said there were 70 lakh direct beneficiaries of the Modi government's welfare schemes in Bengal. "Our major vote base is the poor," he said. "Bengal elections are violence-prone. There are over 78,000 booths, and around 20,000 booths are exclusive 'minority voters' booths. The Trinamool gave political power to Muslims to woo them; since then, poor Hindu Bengalis have

STRAIGHT FIGHT

Mamata at a rally in Paschim Medinipur district on April 25; (far left) Modi during a rally in Arambagh, Hooghly, in March

gravitated towards the BJP. Their Hindu sentiments were suppressed within.... We have brought out their hidden Hindu identity."

That Abhishek Banerjee, her brother's son, has risen rapidly in the Trinamool has exposed Mamata to charges of nepotism. The corruption cases against Abhishek are also a liability for her. Also, part of the Trinamool is Mamata's sister's daughter, Aditi Gayen, who is said to be nursing her own ambitions.

The Trinamool is heavily relying on Mamata's tenacity in overcoming challenges. The party also expects women voters and beneficiaries of the government's 20-odd welfare schemes—from egg curry for Rs5 to ₹1,000 as monthly allowance to women—to power the party to victory.

But in Bengal, it is always difficult to predict the outcome of elections. Because, here, people do not just go and vote. Here, vote *korante howe!* You have to manage to get them to vote. ●



SALIL BEERA

ROYAL BENGAL BATTLE

Krishnanagar has emerged as one of the key constituencies because of the candidates in the fray and the electoral factors at play

BY NILADRY SARKAR/KRISHNANAGAR

In the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the East India Company under Robert Clive defeated Bengal's last independent ruler Siraj-ud-Daulah, marking the onset of British rule in India.

The sprawling battleground of Plassey no longer exists. Only a sole monument in Krishnanagar serves as a poignant reminder of a turning point in Indian history. But Plassey, along with the rest of Krishnanagar in West Bengal's Nadia district, is in the middle of another intriguing fight. Krishnanagar has emerged as one

of the key Lok Sabha constituencies because of the candidates in the fray and the electoral factors at play. The Trinamool Congress has once again chosen Mahua Moitra, a fiery critic of the BJP and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. She was expelled from Parliament after her alleged involvement in a cash-for-query controversy. The BJP has fielded Amrita Roy, whose husband, Soumish Chandra Roy, is a descendant of the erstwhile king Krishnachandra Roy. Krishnanagar is named after the king.

Moitra's expulsion from the Lok

Sabha and the subsequent CBI action against her are viewed by the Trinamool as yet another instance of the alleged misuse of Central agencies by the Modi government. Moitra wants to return to Parliament with a bigger mandate to give the BJP a "fitting reply". "Last time, I won with a margin of over 60,000 votes. This time, I want a lead of over one lakh votes," she told a small crowd in Krishnanagar.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said winning Krishnanagar was important for the Trinamool. She made

MY FIGHT IS WITH NARENDRA MODI

BY NILADRY SARKAR

MAHUA MOITRA STARTS her daily campaign with a roadshow early in the morning. She avoids the intense heat in the afternoon and resumes her campaign in the evening, addressing several meetings till late in the night. THE WEEK caught up with her at Krishnanagar town where she has set up a team of tech-savvy youth to help in the campaign. She gave them brief instructions before discussing with us a range of issues, including her expulsion from Parliament, her challenger from the BJP and Prime Minister Modi. Excerpts:

Q/ Krishnanagar is a very important seat for the BJP.

A/ Every seat is important. But tough luck to them. Last time they lost by 65,000 votes. This time, they will lose by over one lakh votes. I work hard. I have developed my constituency and I am standing up to fascist forces again.

Q/ But this time the BJP has fielded an interesting candidate.

A/ How is she an interesting candidate?

Q/ She belongs to the erstwhile royal family.

A/ They are saying she is a *rajmata*. I have only one question, *kon rajar ma* (which king's mother is she)?

Q/ While campaigning, you attack Modi much more than speaking about local issues.

A/ The BJP people themselves do

that. They have got only one pony. It's a multi-trick pony, but it's only one pony. And they have made this a three-month election so that this one pony can trot everywhere. As a party, I would like to speak against the BJP. But the problem is that it is impossible to talk about the BJP without talking about Modi. He is the finance minister, he is the external affairs minister, he is the defence minister, he is everything. He is the BJP. They are saying Modi is the candidate in all 42 seats in West Bengal. If he is their only candidate, then who is the *rajmata* anyway?

So, if I am fighting him, then, of course, I am going to speak about him. The BJP has only two rules and I have broken them both. One is you cannot attack Modi and the second is you cannot attack his best friend Gautam Adani. I have done both.

Q/ Don't you think the same applies to Mamata Banerjee?

A/ She is definitely the face of our party and we are fighting as her soldiers.

Q/ So, is there a difference between the BJP and the Trinamool?

A/ Of course. Even when they are fighting panchayat elections, they put up Modi's face. They have nobody. They have no leadership in Bengal. Mamata Banerjee set up a party that has been in government for over 10 years. She has got a whole gang of leaders today. In Parliament, there are six or seven of us who can take on the BJP. Mamata

Banerjee has already created a second rung of leadership. Who do they have?

Q/ Your critics say you never raised any issues about Krishnanagar in Parliament.

A/ I was not a member of a panchayat. I was a member of the Indian Parliament and one of the 78 women representing 50 per cent of India's 1.3 billion population. So, I think I don't need to talk about whether I have drains in my area. I have a government here that looks after them. I raise issues that are pan-Indian and national.

Q/ Will you get any leverage out of your expulsion from Parliament?

A/ In urban areas in Bengal, voting percentages vary between 50 per cent and 60 per cent. In rural areas, it is between 80 per cent and 90 per cent. People live for that one day in five years that they will go and vote. They do not like it if somebody throws their representative out. Rural India feels very strongly about its politics.

Q/ The BJP is making women's safety an issue, especially in the context of Sandeshkhali.

A/ Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh sat in Parliament and the prime minister did not say anything. They are going to lecture us about women's issues? Have you seen their candidates' list? We have 37 per cent women candidates and that shameless party has 14 per cent women candidates. ●

INTERVIEW

AMRITA ROY, BJP CANDIDATE, KRISHNANAGAR

I DON'T NEED A BAG OR LIPSTICK

BY NILADRY SARKAR

AMRITA ROY, THE BJP candidate from Krishnanagar, spends a substantial part of her election campaign doing roadshows, just like her Trinamool opponent, Mahua Moitra. On a hot evening in Krishnanagar North, THE WEEK joined Roy for a short interview on the sidelines of a roadshow. She said she was looking for a platform to serve the people of Krishnanagar and free them from

the Trinamool's corruption. The BJP, she said, provided her that platform. Excerpts:

Q/ How do you see your journey from the royal residence to the doors of the common people?

A/ I was always a queen in the hearts of the people of Krishnanagar. Nothing will change that. In fact, coming from the royal family is an advantage because my ancestors traditionally served people.

Q/ If elected, what do you want to do for the people of Krishnanagar?

A/ I want to get the Beledanga flyover done. Then I want to work on the Krishnanagar-Karimpur railway project. Drinking water is a major issue which needs to be resolved. The roads, mainly in the rural parts, have to be developed.

Q/ Why did you choose the BJP?

A/ Because the BJP has a clean image and the party is not associated with any scam. Importantly, it is an all-India party.

Q/ Don't you think that the BJP also has several leaders who face allegations of corruption?

A/ I don't know what you are talking about. But [such] people are there all over. That you cannot avoid. I don't want to think about it. I will be doing my work so long as I get support from the Centre.

Q/ What do you have to say about the Trinamool?

A/ I am against corruption. I am against the problems that the people of Bengal are facing because of the Trinamool. We live in a democracy but the Trinamool does not allow people to speak their minds. During

Moitra the Nadia district president of the party and announced her candidacy even before the official list of candidates was released. Mamata, in fact, started her campaign for the Lok Sabha polls from Krishnanagar.

For the BJP, apart from stopping Moitra from returning to Parliament, the contest is also about regaining lost ground. Although the party has been historically a minor player in West Bengal, it came second in Krishnanagar in 1998 and won it in 1999. After relapsing to second position in 2004, it slipped to third position in 2009 and 2014. But it saw a resurgence in 2019, winning the second spot.

Established in 1967, the Krishnanagar constituency was a left bastion. The CPI(M) held the seat for nine consecutive terms from 1971 till 1999. It regained the seat in 2004,

but the Trinamool has dominated it since 2009, with strong support from Muslims in Tehatta, Chapra and Nankashipara assembly constituencies. The CPI(M) candidate this time is S.M. Sadi, a former MLA.

As Moitra embarked on a roadshow in an open jeep, the excitement was palpable. She could be seen instructing Trinamool workers to stick to the well-planned convoy route. All along, the banker-turned-politician meticulously ensured that everything, from flag placement to crowd management, was well-organised. She has designed her campaign carefully around key issues, focusing on her expulsion, the BJP's hindutva politics and the welfare schemes implemented by the Mamata government.

"The BJP illegally removed your voice from Parliament. We have

to remove the BJP" Moitra told a mostly-Muslim crowd. "They want to decide what people wear and what they eat. They want to decide if you can wear lungi or not." She also spoke about Lakshmir Bhandar, a state government programme that gives women a monthly allowance.

The BJP's primary focus is on holding the Trinamool accountable for issues concerning women's safety, in the context of the Sandeshkhali protests over sexual exploitation, and corruption charges against Trinamool leaders. There is also the projection of Modi as a world leader and his 'guarantees.'

"I am not fighting Mahua Moitra. I am fighting corruption and I am fighting to provide my mothers and sisters a safe and secure life," said Amrita Roy during a roadshow. Mallika Ballav, a BJP worker, said



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my campaign, I have heard so many people speaking about their fears. They say, "If I speak, someone will target my son or rape my daughter or someone will bomb my house." I am fighting these problems.

Q/ How do you view your opponent Mahua Moitra?

A/ I don't need to say anything about her. She is not my opponent. As I said, I am fighting the Trinamool's corruption and I am trying to be a-

former. I think people need a change in the system and I couldn't have brought the change by myself. So, I needed a platform and that is the BJP.

Q/ There are allegations against Moitra that she did not say anything about Krishnanagar in Parliament.

A/ [She didn't speak about Krishnanagar] because she was not honest with her mindset. One needs to know why they are in Parliament. I won't

Mamata was buying votes. "She cannot give jobs whereas Modi ji is building roads and railway lines to attract big businesses. This is how a government should be run."

When the BJP announced Roy as its candidate, there erupted a controversy over the history of the royal family. The Trinamool claimed that king Krishnachandra had supported the British in the Battle of Plassey. Roy defended him, saying he had done so to "protect sanatana dharma".

The controversy, however, gained very little traction. Instead, the voters were more concerned about their long-standing demands for a flyover, railway line extension and supply of piped water. "We either buy water or squeeze hand pumps. Almost every household in my village has a tap, but there is no water," said a tea-sell-

er at a BJP rally.

Interestingly, workers from both parties expressed disappointment with their candidates. BJP supporters said a local candidate would have been better. "Roy is a resident of Kolkata and only visits Krishnanagar during Durga puja," said Archana Chandra, a BJP worker. "But this vote is not about her. It is about Prime Minister Modi and we will make sure his candidate wins."

Within the Trinamool, Moitra is considered an elite who likes to do things on her own terms, ignoring local political equations. Selena Mondal, a party supporter, said, "Mahua Moitra always carries an attitude and local leaders don't like taking orders from her. But we only support Mamata didi. Nothing else matters."

The Matuas form a considerable section of the Scheduled Caste pop-

ulation in Krishnanagar. Originally from Bangladesh, they have long sought unconditional Indian citizenship, a concern the Citizenship (Amendment) Act aimed to resolve. However, contrary to public belief, the CAA is not a major electoral issue. The candidates do not frequently discuss it in their public meetings.

Q/ What do you have to say about the comment that king Krishnachandra Roy supported the British during the Battle of Plassey?

A/ [Those who are saying this] have not studied history. I don't go by rumours. If they have to challenge me, let them challenge me. I will provide papers that will very naturally and obviously [prove them wrong].

Q/ The Trinamool says the king sided with Mir Jafar.

A/ Were they alive at that time? [Do they know] the social and political structure at that time? They [can study about it from] books. Why don't they study those books?

Underpayment and employment scarcity are major concerns for farmers and agricultural workers, particularly because of the suspension of NREGA works. Jaffer Sheikh, a sharecropper, said he was forced to take up multiple jobs as it was impossible for him to run his family with income from agriculture alone. When asked about the elections and his expectations, he said, "We are poor and we are not allowed to have any expectations. But I will surely vote." ●

Capital challenge

BJP hopes Modi's popularity will help it beat the Congress-AAP alliance

BY MOHIT SHARMA

Bansuri Swaraj, the BJP's candidate from the New Delhi Lok Sabha constituency, is a natural on the campaign trail. At an election meeting in south Delhi's Sant Nagar, she instantly struck a chord with the crowd. Daughter of former Union minister Sushma Swaraj, Bansuri, 40, resembled her mother in attire, articulation and demeanour. Throughout her hour-long event at Sant Nagar, Bansuri, who is making her electoral debut, mingled with the crowd, reminding people of her late mother and the popularity she enjoyed in New Delhi constituency, which will vote on May 25. "If Delhi is the heart of Bharat, New Delhi is the heartbeat," she told THE WEEK.

The BJP's decision to field the lawyer had taken many by surprise. She entered politics as co-convener of the Delhi BJP's legal cell about a year ago. And she was chosen over Meenakshi Lekhi, the incumbent MP and a Union minister, perhaps to cash in on Sushma's enduring appeal.

Not everyone agrees, though. "Votes are cast in the name and symbol of political parties and not so much on the candidate," said



KRITAJNA NAIK

RALLYING POINT

Bansuri Swaraj on her way to file nomination, accompanied by BJP leaders

Sanjay Kumar, co-director of Lokniti, a research programme of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies. "In this particular case, there would be a positive feeling among voters that Bansuri is the daughter of Sushma Swaraj, who was a respected leader. Still, the bigger point is that she is contesting on a BJP ticket."

Unlike in 2019, when Delhi witnessed a triangular fight between the BJP, the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party, this time it will be a two-way contest as the Congress and the AAP have allied. The AAP is contest-

ing from four seats and the Congress from three.

To take on Bansuri in New Delhi, the AAP has fielded seasoned politician Somnath Bharti, a three-time MLA from Malviya Nagar. The 40-year-old has been associated with the AAP since the party's inception. In the 2020 assembly elections, he polled 57.97 per cent votes in a triangular contest. "This election is against the autocratic rule of the BJP," said Bharti, who has clubbed his morning walks with campaign-

AAP-Congress alliance not a concern for us

BY PRATUL SHARMA AND MOHIT SHARMA

Bansuri Swaraj, daughter of former Union minister and BJP leader Sushma Swaraj, is making her political debut from the New Delhi Lok Sabha constituency. The 40-year-old lawyer's candidature has brought freshness to the BJP's campaign in the national capital. In an interaction with THE WEEK at her Hailey Road office, Swaraj said her campaign was very positive and that the BJP had a report card of the past 10 years to show. Excerpts:

Q/ Comparisons with your mother must be happening. What have you learned from her?

A/ It is not that I have picked up something politically from her, because I was never the daughter of Sushma Swaraj, the politician. I was always the daughter of Sushma Swaraj, the mother. But I definitely consider that I am a distillation of her values as she was the architect of my personality in some ways. One thing that she taught me is to be fearless, to give your best and then leave the rest to God without worrying about the results.

Q/ The Aam Aadmi Party and the Congress have come together this time. How do you look at this challenge?

A/ Arvind Kejriwal had sworn on his children that he would never form an alliance with the Congress. He has done a U-turn, which has eroded his credibility. Second, the

alliance is actually hinged on selfish political interests. The AAP was actually chosen on an anti-corruption plank, but today, it is entrenched in corruption. The voter of Delhi is intelligent and, therefore, I do not see the alliance as a challenge.

Q/ Is this a contest between the Modi guarantee and the opposition guarantees?

A/ Respectfully, it is not. Narendra Modi is the epitome of promises fulfilled. Whatever was enunciated in the manifesto has been fulfilled. Whether it is the abrogation of Article 370, bringing the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, the women's reservation bill or the construction of the Ram Temple, he has fulfilled his promises. Modi's guarantee and the vision of Viksit Bharat resonate with the electorate. When you talk about the opposition, those are not guarantees, but mere statements.

Kejriwal ought to resign on moral grounds. I want to ask if it is morally right to run the government from jail after taking resignations from Manish Sisodia and Satyendar Jain.

Q/ Kejriwal is in jail and he has refused to resign. Is it affecting the governance of Delhi?

A/ Kejriwal's insistence on running the government from jail is certainly detrimental to the people of Delhi. I do not understand why he is clinging to power. When the oath of office is taken, an oath of confidentiality is also taken. But when you are in jail, no document can be passed across to you until the prison authorities have seen it. So Kejriwal is compromising on this particular oath. I want to ask, is there a dearth of talent in the AAP? Of the 60 [odd] MLAs, is there not a single one who is competent enough to discharge the duties of the chief minister? Kejriwal ought to resign on moral grounds. I also want to ask if it is morally right to run the government from jail after taking resignations from Manish Sisodia and Satyendar Jain.

Q/ How do you respond to accusations that the BJP is carrying out political vendetta and is misusing investigating agencies?

A/ Recently there was a judgment by the Delhi High Court on a petition filed by Kejriwal. This petition asked the court to adjudicate whether his arrest was legal, which meant that he wanted the courts to go into the nitty-gritty of the evidence. The courts perused the evidence in its entirety and deemed that Kejriwal was involved in his personal capacity as the convener of the AAP. He was involved in taking kickbacks worth crores and that money was misused for party activities. The court held that his arrest was legal. The BJP has no role regarding the politicisation of investigating agencies. ●

INTERVIEW
SOMNATH BHARTI
 AAP CANDIDATE, NEW DELHI

If BJP gets a third term, there will be no democracy left

BY MOHIT SHARMA

Somnath Bharti, the three-time MLA from Malviya Nagar, is one of the four candidates announced by the Aam Aadmi Party after an alliance with the Congress in Delhi. Bharti, who is contesting from the New Delhi constituency, is banking on his work as MLA to win over the voters. In an interview with THE WEEK, he says he has been “available, accountable and answerable to everyone beyond religion, caste, regionalism and party affiliations.” Excerpts:

Q/ New Delhi will vote on May 25. How are the preparations going on?

A/ For the AAP and the INDIA

ing. “My day starts at 4am and ends around midnight. We are raising the issues of unemployment, inflation and women’s security among others. The Narendra Modi administration has turned out to be only rhetoric and no action. The people of Delhi know this and will vote for us in large numbers.”

Apart from New Delhi, a few other seats are also expected to see a tough fight. Said political commentator Ashutosh, “It will be interesting to see the fight in North East Delhi and Chandni Chowk.” Manoj Tiwari, the candidate from North East Delhi, is

bloc, the dividing line was March 21, the day Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was arrested. The entire paradigm got shifted. After that, no one is asking any questions because a three-time popular chief minister—who took a political party from nowhere to national status in just 10 years—was arrested without any evidence.

The first phase of voting has given the nation an understanding that the era of Narendra Modi is over. Look at unemployment, inflation, and what happened in Manipur. Other than rhetoric, nothing else has been delivered on the ground.

Q/ You are facing Bansuri Swaraj, daughter of former Union minister Sushma Swaraj.

the sole incumbent from the national capital to be retained by the BJP. He is facing Kanhaiya Kumar of the Congress. In Chandni Chowk, businessman Praveen Khandelwal has been chosen by the BJP against Congress veteran J.P. Aggarwal. In the reserved North West Delhi seat, the Congress has put up Udit Raj against the BJP’s Yogender Chandolia, former mayor of North Delhi Municipal Corporation. Udit Raj had won the seat in 2014 on a BJP ticket; he switched to the Congress after the BJP ignored him in 2019.

Many Congress workers are

A/ Modi says he wants to defeat dynastic politics. What is this? There is a sea of difference between what the BJP says and what it does. I have done work in my assembly constituency selflessly. I am a first-generation lawyer and politician. The AAP has become the choice of even the upper class because of its work. I am available, accountable and answerable to everybody beyond religion, caste, regionalism and party affiliations. The fight is between *kaamdaar* (worker) vs *naamdaar* (dynast).

Q/ The AAP has an alliance with the Congress. What about the synergy between the two parties?

A/ The BJP has become a party that fuels fights. It spreads hatred. If it gets a third term, there will be no democracy left. That is why all those who are concerned about the country have come together. In Delhi, coordination committees are being formed. Every Congress candidate will be fully supported by the AAP cadre and vice-versa.

Q/ How is the AAP coping in Kejriwal’s absence?

A/ It is unfortunate that he is in jail.

unhappy over the selection of Udit Raj and Kanhaiya Kumar, and over the alliance with the AAP, indicating fissures within the party. In a major setback to the Congress, state president Arvinder Singh Lovely quit on April 28, citing his objection to the alliance. Reportedly, his differences with Congress general secretary Deepak Babaria, Delhi in-charge of the party, also contributed to the resignation. The resignation has brought to the fore simmering conflicts in the Congress, with less than a month left before the city votes.

Despite the challenges, the



Of course, we miss his physical presence. But, a conspiracy is being hatched against him. People tell me that even BJP workers are not happy with the way a chief minister is being mistreated. Everyone is conscious

that voting must be done in the interest of democracy.

Q/ Many AAP members are leaving the party.

A/ The BJP's washing machine and

AAP-Congress alliance has made the contest interesting to watch. Kejriwal's arrest in the liquor scam case has brought the sympathy factor into the picture. The AAP is projecting him as a victim of "political vendetta", accusing the BJP of trying to "decimate the AAP and Kejriwal". The party is running an emotional campaign, with Kejriwal's wife, Sunita, as its face. Said Ashutosh, "The sympathy factor will come into play after Kejriwal's arrest. However, it would be difficult to say how much of it would convert into votes as it requires resources and booth management."

Sanjay Kumar, however, said that neither the alliance nor the arrest would help. "In 2019, the BJP secured more than 50 per cent votes in all constituencies except one and its vote share was more than the AAP's and Congress's combined. The alliance is unlikely to make any difference." Kejriwal, he said, was arrested on corruption charges. "The bigger factor is that he is being denied bail by the courts, which erodes his credibility."

At Sant Nagar, much of Bansuri's speech was about Modi. "My request for votes is not for my political

the Enforcement Directorate are on their jobs. I am a personal witness to the departure of [former minister] Raaj Kumar Anand. He was about to get arrested by the ED. Nobody is leaving willingly; they are under pressure from the ED.

Q/ Delhi is on the cusp of a constitutional crisis. Is governance taking a hit?

A/ Governance is taking a hit because of the unconstitutional interference of the BJP. In 2014, the Centre brought a notification and took away the services department from Delhi's elected government. The Supreme Court ruled in favour of the elected government. Eight days later, in complete insult to the Constitution and the mandate given by the people of Delhi, the BJP brought an ordinance that undid the Supreme Court judgment and took away the control of services. The BJP has been creating constitutional crises. Despite the severest of situations, we are trying to run the government efficiently. That is why people will choose a government that will fight for their rights and Delhi's statehood. ●

interest but for yug purush Narendra Modi who transformed Bharat in the past 10 years," she said.

After the first two phases of polling, the turnout has been lower. Although the Election Commission is holding meetings to find ways to improve the polling percentage, the apathy among the electorate is troubling. While it could hurt the BJP, the party takes comfort from the fact that Modi's overwhelming popularity and the absence of a credible national alternative could help it beat back the joint efforts of the Congress and the AAP. ●

INTERVIEW

BASAVARAJ BOMMAI,
 FORMER KARNATAKA CHIEF MINISTER

CONGRESS'S NORTH-SOUTH GAME CAN DIVIDE THE COUNTRY

BY PRATUL SHARMA

The Lok Sabha elections may see former Karnataka chief minister Basavaraj Bommai moving to national politics, as he is contesting from the Haveri constituency, a BJP stronghold. Son of former Karnataka chief minister S.R. Bommai, the 64-year-old engineer-turned-politician started his political career in the Janata Dal, and he moved to the BJP in 2008.

Bommai has no doubt that the Modi factor is the most important force in the election, and it is the key to success in Karnataka, as the past 10 years have created a huge number of beneficiaries of Central government schemes. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ How do you assess the political situation in Karnataka?

A/ We are very strong in northern Karnataka, central Karnataka and, of course, coastal Karnataka. With the tie up with the Janata Dal (Secular), we have become a formidable force in southern Karnataka. We are confident that we will retain what we had got last time, 25 of the 28 seats.

Q/ The Congress claims that the atmosphere is favourable to it.

A/ The Congress is living under that illusion because of the advertisements and the government machinery it is using. But, on the ground, people are saying that bringing the

Congress back [in the state] was a mistake. Development has totally stopped. Their achievement is zero.

Q/ The Congress says that the government's guarantees are positively impacting the people.

A/ These guarantees are not new for Karnataka. Former chief minister B.S. Yediyurappa had given free power to all farmers, but we lost. Elections are fought on so many issues. Each election has a different factor. Now, it is the Modi factor here. On an average, five lakh beneficiaries of the Central government schemes are there in each Lok Sabha constituency. These beneficiaries have been there for the past 10 years. People judge carefully. Guarantees are a misnomer because what is promised is one thing and on ground it is something else.

Q/ Can you give an example?

A/ They said they were going to give 10kg rice; they have not given even one grain. They said electricity was free till 200 units, but nobody consumes less than 200 units. They have raised the electricity charges by four times and there is no power in the villages for farmers. Then there is the question of free power. The Gruha Lakshmi scheme (₹2,000 financial assistance to the elderly women) is not coming every month and has only covered 25 per cent of the applicants. The government is making a

big show, but people are feeling that they have been deprived.

Q/ So, these elections are a contest between the Congress guarantees and the Modi guarantees?

A/ Exactly. The difference between the Modi guarantee and other guarantees is that the Modi guarantee is a permanent guarantee. For example, the PM Awas Yojna. We have given





BHANU PRAKASH CHANDRA

houses; they are permanent. We have given toilets; they are permanent. We have given Ujjwala LPG gas; that is permanent. We are giving water at the doorstep, we are giving 5kg of rice; these are permanent. The Modi guarantee enhances the living condition of the poor.

Q/ The state government accused the Centre of not releasing funds.

How do you look at this?

A/ Central ministers have replied to that. In fact, in the past 10 years, the NDA government had given almost three times more than what the UPA government gave. The Congress government is trying to bring in calculations that are not tenable or real. They are misguiding the people to cover up their failure in the financial sector.

Q/ What was the financial condition of the state during your time.

A/ The current financial state of Karnataka is precarious. The government is unable to mop up resources. Expenditure has come down, loans are increasing. We are in a debt trap.

Q/ Was it better during your regime?

A/ Certainly. I presented a surplus budget. Despite two years of Covid, we bounced back and presented a surplus budget. Now, it is a deficit budget for the second time.

Q/ It is said that the JD(S) may gain more from the alliance with the BJP?

A/ No, that is not the case. There is an overall political impact of these two parties coming together. The strengths of these parties will be made use of in different constituencies. It is a harmonious coalition. Geographically also it has suited us. We are strong in north, central and coastal Karnataka. They are strong in south. So it fits very well. It is a win-win situation.

Q/ The BJP is strongest in Karnataka among southern states. What is the reason for the state being a fertile ground for its ideology to prosper?

A/ Large sections of Karnataka, especially farmers and workers, are anti-Congress. Its has been so for the past six decades. Later, our leader Yediyurappa could harness the farmers and create a farmers movement, which got us a big vote bank.

Q/ The Congress talks about the north-south divide when it comes to election results.

A/ They are desperate. They have been washed out in the north. So, to keep whatever little they have left in the south they are trying to create this divide. Their political game is so low that it can divide the country. ●

HOUSE OF CARDS

Plagued by desertions, corruption allegations and a rudderless leadership, the Bharat Rashtra Samithi seems to be on the verge of collapse

BY RAHUL DEVULAPALLI

The times are tough for K. Chandrashekar Rao, Bharat Rashtra Samithi chief and former Telangana chief minister.

His daughter, K. Kavitha, is in Tihar Jail in Delhi for her alleged role in the Delhi liquor scam. KCR's elder brother's son Tejeshwar Rao is in Cherlapally Central Jail near Hyderabad after being arrested in a land-grabbing case. One of KCR's favourite bureaucrats, former state intelligence chief Prabhakar Rao, is now the first accused in an illegal phone tapping case. He is believed to be in the US, and a red corner notice has been issued against him. Another accused in this case is Shruvan Rao, owner of a Telugu news channel who is said to be close to the BRS. He has also fled the country. KCR's closest nephew, Rajya Sabha member Santosh Kumar, has been booked for forgery and trespassing.

The Congress government in Telangana has initiated probes in more than half a dozen cases of corruption and irregularities when KCR was chief minister. A judicial investigation is on into the alleged construction-related lapses in the ₹1.47 lakh crore Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project, which KCR had showcased as an engineering marvel. Senior Congress leaders hint that even KCR could face cases in the near future.

KCR himself is recovering from a fall—not the electoral one he had last November, when the BRS lost the polls, but a physical one that happened last December that resulted in a hip fracture. As his party appears to crumble under a sustained campaign by rivals, KCR has been venturing out with the help of a walking stick and making a desperate attempt to win back people's





trust through road shows.

"We are in a tight spot," said a senior BRS leader who did not wish to be named. "We have been defamed to such an extent that any measure to defend ourselves will be counterproductive." For now, the BRS is sticking to criticising the Congress on civic issues like water supply and power.

The BRS is battling accusations that it is a party of the corrupt and the lawless. Probe in the phone-tapping case has revealed that when the party was in power, it had handpicked a few officers to illegally eavesdrop on conversations of politicians and their relatives, and celebrities and journalists. The Anti-Corruption Bureau has arrested two veterinary department officials for an alleged fraud of more than ₹250 crore in a case related to a sheep distribution scheme. The ACB has also unearthed a real estate scam in which a senior bureaucrat was found to have illegally amassed assets worth ₹250 crore.

The cases have dented KCR's image as an icon of the Telangana statehood movement. The BRS, which won just 39 of 119 assembly seats in the 2023 polls, is also anticipating defections. Congress leader Mynampally Hanumanth Rao

recently said that 26 BRS legislators were ready to join the Congress.

Two legislators, Danam Nagender and Kadiyam Srihari, have already done so; and so have two former Congress leaders who had been with the BRS—Hyderabad Mayor Gadwal Vijayalakshmi and her father,

Rajya Sabha member K. Keshava Rao. Rumours abound that more BRS leaders are in talks with Chief Minister Revanth Reddy. The BRS, according to Reddy, will be empty once the Congress "opens the floodgates".

The BRS camp appears helpless. "It had inducted a lot of MLAs from other parties in the past, so it has lost the moral right [to criticise the Congress]," said political analyst K. Nageshwar. "Nobody seems to be sympathetic towards

[the party]. Even though they had 88 of 119 seats in their second term, and their government wasn't in danger, they took in MLAs and did not let other parties survive."

In the run-up to the Lok Sabha polls, the BRS had to face the humiliation of its tickets being rejected by more than half the leaders in the party's original list of candidates. Some of them even threatened to quit if they were forced to contest. In some constituencies, as many as four leaders rejected BRS tickets before a candidate could be found. Apparently, the BRS, which won nine seats in 2019, could well draw a blank this time.

Even other parties have been shunning the BRS. Soon after assembly polls debacle, the BRS tried to strike an alliance with the BJP for the Lok Sabha polls. But the BJP declined. Worse, a few days after KCR met Bahujan Samaj Party's state president R.S. Praveen Kumar and jointly announced an alliance, the BSP's national leadership called it off. Kumar later joined the BRS as a face-saving move. He is now the party candidate in Nagarkurnool.

The BRS also seems to have abandoned its national ambitions. In Maharashtra, where the party had launched a unit early last year, leaders have been leaving the party. "When KCR was chief minister, I used to talk to him every day. After he lost the polls, I came to Hyderabad eight times to meet him, but I could not manage a single appointment. Even BRS coordinators in Hyderabad have stopped taking our calls. There was no direction on what to do next," said Manik Kadam, who recently quit as president of the BRS's former cell in Maharashtra and joined the Nationalist Congress Party.

The BRS is at its weakest structurally as well. Even though he was a leader of the Telugu Desam Party, which has strong foundations and a robust structure, KCR did not focus on building a strong party from the grassroots. Instead, he handed over party work to itinerant leaders and MLAs who had no emotional connection to the Telangana movement.

If the BRS fails to put up a decent show in the Lok Sabha polls, the party could collapse like a pack of cards and its top faces could abandon it. In 2016, the TDP in Telangana merged with the BRS; in 2019, defections had the Congress's legislature party merging with the BRS. History could well repeat itself in 2024, with the BRS at the receiving end. ●

The Congress government has initiated probes in more than half a dozen cases of corruption and irregularities when KCR was chief minister.

STICK BY HIS SIDE

KCR has been making a desperate attempt to win back people's trust through road shows

TUG OF WARS

The Meitei-Kuki conflict in Manipur completes a year on May 3. But for the people on the state's border, there is another threat closing in. With the rise in the number of illegal immigrants and the ongoing war in Myanmar, the unfenced border has become one of India's biggest security nightmares. **THE WEEK** looks at the lives of the people facing two wars

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA/IMPHAL, CHURACHANDPUR & INDIA-MYANMAR BORDER

PHOTOS BY SALIL BERA



भारत INDIA
2015-16
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MYANMAR
→

FOREST VIGIL
An Assam
Rifles personnel
patrolling the
India-Myanmar
border

T

he constant buzz of insects is broken only by the rapid movement of feet and the noise of a China-made scooter carrying fresh fish. In the humid forests of Phaikoh, the last village in Manipur on the India-Myanmar border, thousands of hungry

faces peer out as plumes of smoke rise from thatched huts. The wood fires add to the heavy air of gunshots and violence. The village falls under the Kamjong district of Manipur, but blends smoothly into the upper Kabaw valley of Myanmar.

THE WEEK travelled north from Imphal to Ukhrul and onward to Kamjong in a six-hour backbreaking journey that crisscrossed police barricades and makeshift checkpoints manned by village guards. These posts divide the Imphal valley and the hills as the Meitei and the Kuki communities guard their territories with guns, creating islands of tenuous peace. This has been the case for a year now, ever since violence between the communities broke out on May 3 last year.

Leaving these strife-torn zones behind, we climbed the treacherous terrain to reach the international border. The jungle near Phaikoh opened up into the Kabaw valley, an open area of relatively flat land surrounded by tall whispering trees. Tiny leeches stuck to my feet and, as I tried to remove them, I saw droplets of blood. The burly voice of an Assam Rifles guard asked, "Do you even know where you are standing?"

Border pillar number 102 was on my far right; there were small Myanmar hutments and a rice mill some 50m away. But border pillar number 99 fell behind at a considerable distance on my left, barely making itself visible amid refugee shelters that housed more than 600 men, women, the elderly and children from Myanmar. Some border pillars

seemed to be missing. This divide, the international border, is less painful than the division of hearts between the hill-valley people in Manipur today.

It is foolish to think that international boundaries run in straight lines. This fenceless, formally un-demarcated border is fraught with complications. Locals believe Kabaw valley was given away to the Burmese under a faulty strategy after independence and at least some 2,000m actually belongs to the Indian side. There are no records to prove this and the Treaty of Yandabo, signed in 1826 between the British and the Burmese, crops up in conversations with locals every now and then. They feel the 22,210sqkm Kabaw valley will make the fencing of the India-Myanmar border an



ON GUARD

A checkpoint in Phaikoh, the last village in Manipur on the India-Myanmar border

emotive issue for Manipur.

But these are only local sentiments; in the larger picture, this is the only Indian border that is undisputed. On the others, there have been disputes with Pakistan, China and even Nepal and Bangladesh in some cases.

This, however, does not mean that the Myanmar border is trouble-free. In fact, it has become one of India's



biggest security nightmares. And Manipur has become its first casualty.

As many as 6,973 Myanmar immigrants have entered Manipur illegally as of April 12. Of this, 652 have been pushed back, 12 are in judicial custody or children's homes, and 6,309 are staying in temporary shelters near the border. State authorities have till now captured biometrics of 6,306 people. They have been given identity cards that say 'Myanmaese Refugee,' and display their camp number and location, permanent address

in Myanmar, birth date and identification marks. Thousands of women (many of them widows), children and elderly from neighbouring villages like Ongjia, Thanan, Mantou, Phailen, Zedy and Mong-jang-Momo in Myanmar have made border stretches of Phaikoh and Shangkalok in Kamjong district their home. "We saw our houses burnt in bomb explosions," said Nenthilal, who entered India after the

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fall of Thanan in Myanmar's Sagaing region. "The refugee population is huge and there is scarcity of fresh vegetables on the Indian side. So we have to rely on our resources in villages [in Myanmar]. Depending on the security situation, we go and work there and return [to India] at sunset."

Chousou, also from Thanan, said, "I am returning after catching fish [from a pond in Myanmar territory]. We live here (Indian territory), but go to collect paddy or catch fish during the day. We entered India in December with our families. We can hear firing and gunshots, but at least we are safe."

Mortar shelling and drone strikes are happening not far from this border stretch. Vast swathes of Myanmar territory have fallen to rebel forces—there is an ongoing war between the Myanmar junta and ethnic rebel groups—which has direct implications for Manipur and other northeastern states. The upheaval in Myanmar following the coup in 2021 prompted several Manipur-based insurgent groups, with bases across the border (see graphics), to draw lines along ethnicities in war zones, too. It is learnt that Manipur's valley-based groups are supporting the Myanmar army, while the hill-based insurgents are backing the opposing People's Defence Force.

Latest intelligence reports reveal that there has been a consolidation of more than 200 valley-based insurgents, equipped with latest arms, in Myothit in Myanmar. Myothit is south of Thanan, around 10km through the mountain routes from Phaikoh. "In the past six months, the number of valley-based insurgents in Myothit has risen. Some of them even carry Myanmarese citizenship and are taking advantage of the porous border," said a senior security officer.

Natural resources like areca nut

YEAR OF VIOLENCE

MAY 1, 2023-APRIL 12, 2024

WEAPONS STOLEN

6,003

WEAPONS SEIZED

1,990

DRUGS SEIZED

₹56.89
CRORE

DEATHS

CIVILIANS

203

SECURITY PERSONNEL

14

SUSPECTED MILITANTS

4

INJURIES

CIVILIANS

1,432

SECURITY PERSONNEL

125

INTERNALLY
DISPLACED PEOPLE

60,000+

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.
RESEARCH NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

SOURCE
MANIPUR POLICE, SECURITY FORCES

and teak are in abundance in the fields across the unfenced border, which attracts not only refugees, but also insurgents and smugglers. This makes the economics of border management a critical aspect of security. Contraband items like heroin and methamphetamine worth ₹6.7crore were seized from this particular border stretch in the past few months. But this is only a drop in the illegal drug economy of Manipur. Official figures with THE WEEK reveal that the total value of drug seizures in the local market was ₹56.8 crore between January and December last year. The amount is sold for ten times in the international market.

As Myanmar shares an international boundary with four Indian states—Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh—the cross-border routes for smuggling drugs and weapons are many. These are from Tamu, Tahan, Somrah, Chikha, Khampat, Bokan and Dhella in Myanmar into Moreh, Kamjong, Behiang, Tusom, New Somtal and Sajik borders in Manipur. From here, the consignments go on to Churachandpur and Imphal, then to Assam, Mizoram, Nagaland and the rest of the country.

For the longest time, the close ethnic bonds between the population on both sides of the border belied the importance of guarding this strategically significant stretch. Over the past few seasons, though, the entry of illegal immigrants, arms and drugs and threats from insurgents have been supplemented by fast advancing rebel forces in Myanmar and a looming China, making it one of the most critical yet neglected international boundaries in the country.

Oblivious to the tensions building on the ground, some of the Myanmarese hutments on the Indian side are buzzing with entertainment. On a good day, the refugees watch local



LIFE IN LIMBO

A camp for Buddhist refugees from Myanmar in Shangkalok village in Manipur's Kamjong district

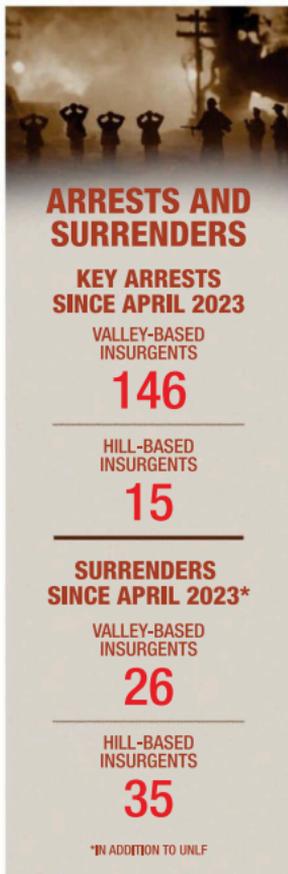
OVER THE PAST FEW SEASONS, THE ENTRY OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS, ARMS AND DRUGS AND THREATS FROM INSURGENTS HAVE BEEN SUPPLEMENTED BY FAST ADVANCING REBEL FORCES IN MYANMAR AND A LOOMING CHINA, MAKING IT ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL YET NEGLECTED INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARIES IN INDIA.

channels using cable television dishes installed on some of the thatched huts, when the Indian side provides uninterrupted power supply. On quieter days, you can find

youngsters on hammocks reading books under the vast sky and bright sun. The children of conflict, however, are staring at an uncertain future. Nengngaithem, who came on a bike with her husband from Myanmar, is expecting a child. "My husband was a farmer, but when our house got bombed a year ago we came here," she said. "I do not have any money. But I will deliver my child."

Predictably, the Indian population is outnumbered along

this long border stretch. Phaikhoh has a school where local children stand in two rows during a physical training exercise; the refugee children stand in 10. The humanitarian crisis brewing here has brought church volunteers and civil society groups like the Kuki Students Organisation to help provide education to the children. Mangcha, a KSO volunteer from Chassad village in Manipur, said they charge only ₹100 as admission fee. "It is a one-time fee," said the history graduate from Imphal. "More than 50 per cent children came in last year and the numbers increased until January this year. I hardly get any remuneration, but I feel I am doing some meaningful work." He smiled indulgently at his class. "The Myanmar kids are good at mathematics, obedient, but show little interest in learning English. The local children are difficult to handle in comparison. We do not have enough infrastructure to accommodate all of them at the same time, so



we divide them in shifts.”

I asked Mangcha if he learnt anything from the children? He laughed. “The Burmese script is very different,” he said. “It is not easy. Even though I tried, I could not pick up their language.”

The refugee camps in Phaikoh housing Kuki-Chin refugees are close to the Buddhist refugee camps in Shangkhalok in Ramphoi village. Both communities are on opposite sides in the Myanmar war, and though these are helpless refugees

who are not expected to foment trouble, Indian forces have kept them apart to avoid any potential conflict. “We have come here [to India] for the first time but we have heard about the Buddhist culture and how it has spread from India to the world,” says Pying Khant Zaw, 21, who was studying engineering before his family fled to safety. “I had to leave my studies. My dream is to see my family safe and pursue my studies once again. I want to be successful so that I can travel the world. I want to see many more countries.”

A panoramic view of the landscape shows a telling contrast—bamboo huts of the Indian villagers that will not blow away easily in a storm interspersed with thatched huts of the refugees. They belong to the same tribes and the population has mingled so much that geographical lines do not matter any more. The refugees have even found ingenious ways to construct wells where both Indian and Myanmar draw water and make use of a row of common makeshift toilets along the border pillars. “You could not stand in this area earlier when the refugees first started coming in,” remarked an Assam Rifles officer. “There were no toilets and the population swelled, creating a miserable situation.”

In February, the Union home ministry suspended the Free Movement Regime—which allowed cross-border movement up to 16km without a visa—to ensure internal security and maintain the demography of the border states. However, the decision needs to be followed up with strict implementation as well as talks with the Myanmar authorities, confessed a security officer.

Assam Rifles officers admitted that missing border infrastructure like roads, border outposts, fencing and shortage of boots on the ground



ACROSS THE DIVIDE
A view of a rice mill in Myanmar from within Indian territory

makes their task as the first line of defence a huge challenge. “The border is not formally demarcated, some of the border pillars are missing and there is lack of coordination between state governments on the issue of demarcating the international border,” said Lt Gen (ret) Rameshwar Roy, former director general of Assam Rifles.

The process of officially demarcating the porous stretches of the India-Myanmar border is yet to



THE PROCESS OF OFFICIALLY DEMARCATING POROUS STRETCHES OF THE INDIA-MYANMAR BORDER IS YET TO BEGIN. SENIOR HOME MINISTRY OFFICIALS SAID THE SURVEY DEPARTMENT WILL BE ROPED IN AND CONSULTATIONS WILL BE HELD WITH ALL STAKEHOLDERS BEFORE FENCING WORK BEGINS.

begin. Senior home ministry officials said the survey department will be roped in and consultations will be held with all stakeholders, especially state governments, before the fencing work begins. It is an uphill task as critical border roads are missing in Manipur and in the absence of easy access to these stretches and adequate deployment of border troops, the construction of a fence without

men to guard it could be a futile exercise. "The border outposts are also required to be interconnected with good surface and electronic communication," said Roy.

The dynamics in the region are volatile as the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isak-Muivah), the biggest insurgent group in the northeast, holds sway among many valley-based insurgent groups that are learnt to visit the NSCN(IM)'s covert base first before moving towards their own hideouts. Battle-hardened groups like the People's Liberation Army of Manipur and United National Liberation Front have carried out

fatal attacks on the Assam Rifles troops in the past. A major chunk of the Kabaw valley also shares a border with Churachandpur, the hill district where the Meitei-Kuki ethnic violence first began. “Any deployment for effective border management will require a linear deployment along the border as the first line of defence,” said D.K. Pathak, former director general of the Border Security Force, which guards the international border with Pakistan and Bangladesh. “But it must be backed by strong support bases at intermittent distance a few kilometers behind the first line. In view of the virtually nonexistent road infrastructure in the entire area, the troops deployed in the first line will run the risk of being overrun by insurgents if support bases are not established to send reinforcements in crisis situation. These bases will also keep the supply line to the posts on the first line.”

If the border is a cause for concern, then the year-long ethnic conflict within Manipur is also dire. The valley-based Meiteis do not set foot in the hills and the Kukis do not cross the so-called “buffer zones”, created to deploy central paramilitary forces to rein in violence. There exist islands of peace on both sides—children go to school, shops are open and crowds throng the farmer markets. But beneath the veneer of peace is the unpleasant reality of around 60,000 internally displaced people, who continue to live in uncertainty in relief camps on both sides. Every night, young boys step out to guard their villages in the hills and the valley against unknown threats.

Jenevy, 21, who stays at the relief centre on a college campus in Churachandpur, is a village volunteer who goes on “duty” at night. “My house got burnt when I left Leisang (in the hills),” he said. “I saw mortar shells coming towards my village. Even if I do not live there today, I have to guard it.”



BENEATH THE VENEER OF PEACE IS THE UNPLEASANT REALITY OF AROUND 60,000 INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE, WHO CONTINUE TO LIVE IN UNCERTAINTY IN RELIEF CAMPS ON BOTH SIDES. EVERY NIGHT, BOYS STEP OUT TO GUARD THEIR VILLAGES AGAINST UNKNOWN THREATS.



HOMES AWAY FROM HOME

Internally displaced Manipuris at a temporary settlement in Imphal; (left) Myanmarese refugees in Phaikoh village show their identity cards

No one discloses where they get the arms from, but the Manipur Police have a record of 6,003 weapons being looted from across the state in the past year. "It may not be an exaggeration to call it an armed society," said a senior police officer. Official records show that 1,990 arms have been seized, which still leaves around 4,000 arms floating around in the state.

"We are making all attempts to recover the missing arms and to ensure that peace prevails," said Manipur Director General of Police Rajiv Singh.

There are unprecedented challenges for the local police, which has been trying to insulate the uniformed men from the ethnic divide. Such times call for fresh ideas. And so, when new entrants were joining last year, the state police held a video meeting of the Kuki and Meitei newbies. The next challenge came when the training session was to

be held. The neighbouring Assam Police were requested to allow their Manipur counterparts to use their training facility. At the moment, Kuki and Meitei policemen are training together in Assam, understanding each other day by day. They realise that the journey back to Manipur is not easy, but not impossible.

The Biren Singh government is between a rock and a hard place as vigilante groups in the valley—citing threats from the influx of migrants—are picking up arms. "It is true they are armed but they are not doing it as anti-nationals," said the chief minister. "If we are able to provide full security and normalcy returns, then there will be no more youth bearing arms. We are also carrying out operations to recover arms from both the valley and the hills."

The state police are in a quandary over how much force to use to disarm the population. Any operation in civilian areas requires the cooperation of the public, but the society does not seem ready to trust its administration yet. "Till the time this trust deficit is not bridged, the cracks in the society cannot be filled up," said G.K. Pillai, former Union home secretary. Whether interests of all sections of society are protected equally remains crucial in such circumstances. Pillai said the healing touch has to begin with those who have survived the strife and continue to live in the hope of returning home one day.

"The local administration is giving us food and our children are going to school. But we do not expect peace to come anytime soon," said Lethkohou Khongsai, 31, from the hilly Chandel district in Manipur. "The big question is, will we return home?"

The disillusionment runs deep in the relief camps in the valley. As the sun goes down, displaced families in dimly lit rooms get busy preparing meals. Men and women wash

ACTIVE INSURGENT GROUPS

After the United National Liberation Front signed a ceasefire agreement with the Union and state governments on Nov 29, 2023, there are now 33 active outfits in Manipur, some of which have bases in Myanmar

Valley-based: 15

Includes the UNLF (Koireng), the People's Liberation Army of Manipur, the Kanglei Yawol Kanna Lup, the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak and the Coordination Committee (alliance of six groups)

Hill-based: 18

Includes 10 Naga insurgent groups like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Isak Muivah, the NSCN (Khaplang), the Zeilangrong United Front and the Manipur Naga Revolutionary Front, and 8 Kuki insurgent groups like the Kuki National Front-Nehlung, the Kuki National Army and the Kuki Independent Army

UP IN ARMS
Armed Kuki youth
guarding their village in
Churachandpur district

clothes in open drains and children open their books to learn new lessons. The beds are divided by long sheets on poles and a few community halls have blood pressure machines and broken stretchers lying around; these are for when doctors visit. "Even the poor have dignity. But to be living as a displaced person

in your own country is the biggest nightmare," said Poornima Lasihram, 38, who fled Moreh last May 3.

She demanded an answer from the politicians seeking votes in the Lok Sabha elections. For the first time, Manipur set up special polling stations for "internally displaced people". Surprisingly, the turnout



was good. "We are not asking for any special favour. We are asking for our rights," said Poornima. Babby Sorisan, the convener of the Wangkhei Apunba Nupi Lup relief camp in Imphal, said seven NGOs have come together to improve the condition of women who are worst affected by the violence. "Women have been at the receiving end of the ethnic clashes in the past one year. We want the pain to end and we will do whatever it takes to bring these women out of misery."

With the dawn of each new day, there are new hopes and aspirations that keep the human spirit alive. Surjit, who cast his vote at the Trade and Expo Centre Complex in Imphal, said compassion and unity have to be the way forward. He left behind Kuki and Naga friends in his village when he took shelter in Imphal. "My friends are not picking up my calls now. Some of them blocked my number," he said. "But I know we will talk again. We have always been united and we will ensure Manipur stays united, not just territorially, but also community to community and heart to heart."

With his words in mind, we journeyed south from Imphal to the hill district of Churachandpur to reach the last border village of Behiang. A Meitei Muslim driver took us there. On the way, we crossed Bishnupur, once chosen by the British for its advantageous location and today being misused by militants to launch attacks on security forces. On April 28, militants killed two Central Reserve Police Force personnel, demonstrating that peace can be shattered any moment in these areas. A few Assam Rifles vehicles and illegal Myanmarese entrants pass us by as we reach Behiang. The Assam Rifles have an advantage here as their post overlooks several Myanmarese

ON THE FENCING

Fencing from Border Pillar-79 to BP-81 (9.214km) completed

Fencing from BP-35 to BP-43 (20.862km) delayed as survey work for land acquisition is facing resistance from local population

Detailed project report prepared for fencing from BP-61 to BP-75 (42.286km)

Identification of new stretches—55.41km—ongoing

villages up to Tiddim. Aerial surveillance using quadcopters and thermal imagers make up for the shortage of boots at the loosely scattered border pillars hidden on top of several hills.

Behiang has a floating population as most villagers go out for work and travel miles on foot, bikes and vans to meet their loved ones across the border.

A 100m climb near border pillar 42 at Behiang takes you into a busy Myanmar village whose chief likes to seek out the Assam Rifles when there

is trouble. Once, a village chief's son got locked inside the hut and despite several efforts they could not open the door. A call went to the Indian side for help, and the boy was freed.

There are many stories about how the hearts in the hills have been beating together despite the imaginary fence. On Tiddim road, we met a happy group of travellers who were returning from Myanmar after visiting their loved ones. Having travelled on these stretches for decades, they barely knew the difference between the two countries, which explained why they had no idea that the Free Movement Regime had been frozen.

However, villagers on both sides of the border, looking for sustenance and survival in these difficult mountain terrains, are aware of the buzzing trade that has been taking place in Moreh, a more accessible, motorable and prosperous region in comparison. A 10km border stretch here has been fenced. "If the border fencing allows trade like in Moreh and brings business, then we do not mind fencing," says Naihath, a 38-year-old native of Behiang. The sentiment is echoed by Myanmarese refugees in Phaikoh as well. Currently, Moreh is the only feasible cross-border trade route between India and Myanmar, and other southeast Asian countries and the Indian government are keen on making border villages like Behiang another trade corridor once the fencing is done. It is a tall order, but a start has to be made somewhere. Building new fences and removing imaginary ones is the only way forward for Manipur as the Union home ministry increases efforts to ward off threats to people of India. This might require North and South Block to go back to the drawing board to map out once again where they need to climb up or down to set things right. ●

CURRENTLY, MOREH IS THE ONLY FEASIBLE CROSS-BORDER TRADE ROUTE BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR, AND THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT IS KEEN ON MAKING BORDER VILLAGES LIKE BEHIANG ANOTHER TRADE CORRIDOR ONCE THE FENCING IS DONE.



SPOTLIGHT ON THE SENTINELS

Manipur government wants the Assam Rifles replaced, but the Union home ministry is focused on upgrading infrastructure and connectivity before deciding who guards the state

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA

The generals, men in khaki, bureaucrats and kurta-clad politicians have all put on their thinking hats to reevaluate the role of the Assam Rifles in Manipur. The two-century-old force, which is called the ‘Sentinels of the Northeast’, is now facing what some may term an existential crisis.

The Assam Rifles came into being in 1835 as a militia called the Cachar Levy. It was formed with 750 men, mainly to protect British tea estates and settlements against tribal raiders. Later, it was renamed the Frontier Force and its role was expanded to carrying out “punitive expeditions” across the borders of

Assam. The force was merged with three Assam military police battalions in 1870. It saw action during World War I—around 3,000 men were sent to Europe and the Middle East—and got its current name in 1917. Its strength today stands at 46 battalions and the primary role has evolved into counterinsurgency in the northeast and security along the borders with Myanmar under control of the Indian Army (it is headed by a lieutenant general rank officer, with sector headquarters commanded by brigadiers).

The Manipur violence has led to heated debates between the critics and supporters of the paramilitary

force. Multiple options are now being considered. Should the Assam Rifles be relieved from the Myanmar border and tasked only with counterinsurgency? Or vice versa? Or, should there be a radical change in the form, shape and control of the force? These are some of the questions before the authorities.

There is a demand from the Manipur government to replace the Assam Rifles with a new, dedicated border force for its districts lying near the Myanmar border. The Biren Singh regime wants this new force to have a proper chain of border outposts so as to act as the first line of defence against rampant cross-border smuggling of drugs and weapons by insurgents and the entry of illegal immigrants from Myanmar. The state security officials say that if the Centre deploys a dedicated border force, then the state’s own police units will become the second line of defence,



SALIL BERA

TOUGH POSITION

Assam Rifles personnel at Behiang, a village in Manipur near the Myanmar border

the cabinet committee on security, during the NDA and UPA regimes, seeking to replace the Assam Rifles with either the Indo-Tibetan Border Police or the Border Security Force. Both these central armed police forces are under the home ministry's control, but, these ideas were shot down following the intervention of the generals.

In 2019, then Army chief General Bipin Rawat told Defence Minister Rajnath Singh that the Assam Rifles must be strengthened to respond to border threats and counter armed insurgents who are active in Manipur and have operational bases in Myanmar.

While the home ministry has long felt the need to implement the Kargil Review Committee's recommendation of "one border, one force", there is a realisation now that a more holistic approach is needed to enhance national security, both along the border and internally.

"There has to be effective coordination between the state government and the border guarding forces," said retired Lt Gen Shokin Chauhan, former director general of the Assam Rifles. "Each force needs to build its capability to tackle threats ranging from law and order to counterinsurgency. The strength of the Assam Rifles needs to be doubled because the force needs to be in full strength if it has to be on the frontline like the BSF and other central armed police forces. We are not dealing with cattle smugglers here."

The home ministry realises that before it takes a call on which force will guard the vulnerable international border in Manipur, it first has to build all-weather roads and create border outposts at an interval of 10km-15km so that security personnel can cover

the area by foot or mobile patrolling. A senior home ministry official said that the local villagers must be included in the security plans to elicit their support in establishing the outposts and for area domination in times of crisis. "As many as 46 border outposts will be needed, which means doubling the strength of the border guarding force to man these posts," the official added.

When it comes to the state police forces, their vulnerability in conflict zones has been seen many times in Jammu and Kashmir and north-eastern states. "The survivability of a state police post with a dozen men is near-impossible in these areas as they can be overrun by a group of guerrillas (insurgents) anytime," said Lt Gen Chauhan. Also, state police forces often feel the pulls and pressures of their political bosses, thereby constraining their growth. This is why the central armed police forces or the Army step in. Manipur is no different.

At the same time, creating an effective border infrastructure in such tough terrain is not a day's job. It takes several initiatives and work can take years to complete. After all, the neglect has gone on for decades.

The police infrastructure in the hills need immediate attention and so does road connectivity and basic facilities in border villages.

Bringing telecom companies to instal towers in the vicinity of outposts and asking the state police to create contingency plans to provide assistance in times of crisis are the next steps.

The violence in Manipur may not be a direct outcome of external pulls and pressures, rather an assertion of ethnic identities that fear a slow erosion of their roots. But, between the fear and the fight, there is now a realisation that violence makes the border state more vulnerable. Especially when drones and gunshots fly within Myanmar and insurgent groups are coming out of hiding. ●

A SENIOR HOME MINISTRY OFFICIAL SAID LOCAL VILLAGERS MUST BE INCLUDED IN SECURITY PLANS TO ELICIT THEIR SUPPORT IN ESTABLISHING OUTPOSTS AND FOR AREA DOMINATION.

thereby strengthening the security grid.

In the current scenario, though the Union defence ministry, through the Army, has operational control of the Assam Rifles, the Union home ministry has administrative control. Turf wars between the ministries have led to several draft notes reaching

Assam Rifles not trained to guard borders; need separate force for Manipur border

BY NAMRATA BIJI AHUJA/IMPHAL

Imphal is blanketed in darkness. The sun has set a little too soon in the valley, but N. Biren Singh is yet to call it a day. His pet Chester—a French bulldog—oblivious to human conflicts, walks up to be petted by the many visitors thronging his residence during the Lok Sabha polls. Singh looks fatigued, but he has not given up. It is a litmus test for the Manipur chief minister who sits over a divide that is complete after one year of ethnic clashes between the valley-based Meiteis and the hill-based Kuki-Zo ethnic group.

Today, the general public is living in islands of peace that exist within the hills and the valley. Manipur has become a tinderbox of multiple pulls and pressures not just within but also on its borders. Government-owned arms have gone missing, and there are fears of a revival of insurgency, with more than half a dozen Indian insurgent groups taking shelter in Myanmar and lending covert support to the internal strife in Manipur. Even as Singh looks to the Centre for long-term solutions, the next step to bridge the divide on ground will have to come from the state government. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ It is one year since violence gripped Manipur. How do you see the security situation today?

A/ The security situation has improved, but around 50 companies of paramilitary forces were withdrawn from the state due to elections, causing a vacuum in some vulnerable areas. But no major untoward incident has taken place in the last four to five months, and I can assure you that peace is returning.

Q/ Looking back at the year gone by, do you have any regrets?

A/ The general public impacted by the violence is innocent. They misun-

derstood the state government in the beginning and blamed it for the violence. From the time the violence began on May 3 until around August last year, we have mostly been busy managing the situation, putting the displaced in shelter homes and relief camps and making security arrangements. From September onwards, we resumed gathering data and visual proof of poppy plantations, creation of unnatural villages and of illegal smuggling on borders

and presented it before the public. The public now understands that the crisis Manipur is facing today has not happened overnight. Over the years, indigenous people have lost their rights, and they have come under threat from drugs even as ecological concerns multiplied with forest lands being grabbed for illegal activities.

Q/ What do you mean by unnatural villages?

A/ The Indo-Myanmar border in Manipur is 398km long, and there was no fencing at all. In the past, attempts were made to fence around 4km, but even that could not be completed.... Under the BJP tenure, we fenced around 10km of the border, and work will begin to fence another 21km. But the fact is that the border is porous and totally unguarded, and people have been coming and going at will. The Kuki-Chin population is living on both sides of the border with close ties. The Free Movement Regime enacted in the past was brought in to facilitate their easy movement. But taking advantage of this facility, people came and settled down here illegally. The economic situation in Myanmar cannot be compared with the Indian side. So, settling down here is far more advantageous, and



SALLI BERA



they get free ration, water, electricity and schools. Since the language, ethnicity, religion, community are same on both sides, it is difficult to identify the outsiders. A peculiar entry in the list of Scheduled Tribes of Manipur called 'any Kuki tribe' also enables them to get access to benefits of tribals. In the last 20 to 30 years, a huge population has entered Manipur creating an alarming situation today.

Q/ You were in the Congress earlier. What did you do about it then?

A/ Yes, I was an MLA in the Congress in 2013 and I had warned the then government about people coming in from Myanmar and their demands for a separate state. My vision was not heard because of appeasement policies. I left the Congress and joined the BJP and raised the same issues with the prime minister and then BJP president Amit Shah.... I asked for extension of the Inner Line Permit system to Manipur.

Q/ But the large population that has already entered over the years cannot be pushed back.

A/ Why not? We should push them back. Under the Inner Line Permit guidelines, we have kept 1961 as the base year to segregate indigenous and non-indigenous population. We have begun taking data.... Approximately 2,400 persons who came earlier and nearly 7,400 new entrants have been identified, and we have started the process of deportation from Chandel, Chura-chandpur and Moreh. If all of them are accommodated, where will the indigenous people go? This is also one of the reasons for the resistance to the state government's policies.

Q/ How do you see the Assam Rifles' role in guarding the border?

A/ The Assam Rifles is not a border guarding force; it is a counterinsurgency force. The entire border is open.

Q/ Are you saying the Indo-Myanmar border needs a special force to guard it?

A/ The Assam Rifles are not trained for guarding borders, which is why we have requested the Union home ministry to deploy

a separate force to guard the border. The Assam Rifles is not operating on the border line; it is sitting around 15km inside Indian territory. Can an international border be guarded like this?

Q/ Which insurgent groups are active in Manipur today?

A/ There are a handful of insurgent groups like PLA (People's Liberation Army) or PREPAK (People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak) that remain a concern. After 60 years, we began peace talks with the UNLF (United National Liberation Front) and hundreds of cadres came on board. We are also trying to talk to other insurgent groups.

Q/ Is the present crisis in Manipur fuelled by insurgent groups taking shelter in Myanmar?

A/ Those who entered Manipur are (from insurgent groups) and those who are fighting the junta (in Myanmar) also belong to them. So, it is all related. The movement of arms across the border, the threat from the Golden Triangle, extending from Myanmar, Laos, Thailand into Manipur, with 60 to 70 per cent poppy plantation taking place here made the situation worse. The jungles were cut down to give way to these illegal activities in Churachandpur, Kangpokpi, Kamjong, Ukhrul. Due to strict action, such activities have come down in parts of Churachandpur and Kangpokpi.

Q/ There are reports that youth vigilante groups and indigenous people in the valley have picked up arms.

A/ It is true that they are picking up arms, but they are not doing it as anti-nationals. They have done it for self-defence and protection of their people against illegal immigrants who resorted to killing and burning down their homes. If we can provide full security and if normalcy returns, then the youth will not bear arms.

We are also carrying out operations to recover arms both from the valley and the hills.

Q/ Who is supplying arms to these groups in the valley?

A/ The arms were looted from police armouries. Some of them have been recovered, but it also depends on public cooperation. We cannot use too much force against people, but we are making constant efforts. When they feel fully secure, we hope to recover all the arms. But the recovery of all arms is crucial for peace to return in Manipur.

WE WILL FIND A VIABLE SOLUTION TO BRING BOTH COMMUNITIES TOGETHER....THE CENTRE HAS MADE IT CLEAR THAT WITHOUT TOUCHING THE TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY AND UNITY OF MANIPUR, WE WILL HOLD PEACE TALKS.

Q/ From which areas were the arms looted in the valley and the hills?

A/ On May 3, arms were looted from Churachandpur, Singngat and Kangpokpi police stations, and two days later from the police armoury and training centre in Imphal valley.

Q/ There are concerns outside Manipur that the Christian community was targeted?

A/ We are all one and we cannot be divided. We have to live together. Those who are living here need not

fear. The state government is only identifying illegal entrants and acting against the drug problem, which impacts all communities alike. We have already begun talks with Kuki-Zo and Meitei brothers, Nagas and civil society organisations. There is no threat to Christians, Hindus, Meiteis, Kukis or any other community based on religion. Around 300-400 churches are there in the valley. The attacks that happened were carried out by mobs. We want everyone to live together peacefully.

Q/ When the Union home minister says the government will talk to both sides, how will it happen when both communities are divided?

A/ We will find a viable solution to bring both communities together. Talks have already begun.... Manipur was a kingdom before it came under the ambit of the Indian Constitution. More than 35 tribes live here and just because one says it cannot live with the other does not mean the state should be divided. The Centre has made it clear that without touching the territorial integrity and unity of Manipur, we will hold peace talks.

Q/ Why is there a need for ST status for the Meitei community?

A/ The indigenous people have concerns around job reservation and land rights. So, all the nitty-grities must be discussed before a decision is taken on the ST status for Meiteis. The decision should not be taken forcefully, but with consensus. Whether it is through the ST status or not, the Meiteis definitely need protection under the Constitution. It is a micro population. How can it compete with 100 crore of more advanced people? For example, there is restriction on land [ownership] in the hills. Let us give similar protection to the people of the valley. ●



Modi and the Muslim syndrome

I have long been intrigued by the prime minister's desire to hug every passing sheikh and sultan and his contrasting contempt for the ordinary Indian Muslim. The contempt becomes particularly evident at election time when the audience are invited to identify the transgressors by their dress (*libhaz*), the numbers of their children, or as infiltrators and traitors (*ghuspait/gaddaar*). Where any other party leader would immediately be pulled up, the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) does not appear to apply, in the eyes of the Election Commission of India as presently constituted, to the prime minister. Secular fundamentalists like me are outraged but clearly the general electorate, especially in the Hindi heartland, are only amused by these sly inuendos. Muslims—at any rate, Indian Muslims, it seems, are fair game—but woe betide any opposition candidate or leader who dares step on what passes for “Hindu sentiment”. Then the knives are drawn (in some cases, literally) and “appeasement”—bashing comes into its own. Reinforcing this contempt for the Indian Muslim is the portrayal of Pakistani Muslims as secessionists-turned-terrorists. Thus are the Indian and Pakistani Muslim linked together in the *sangh parivar* imagination as the “enemy”.

And, thus, is carried forward the Savarkar-Hedgewar-Golwalkar thesis that the Muslim and the Christian can never be true Indians because while they may be birth and ancestry belong to the “*pitra bhoomi*” (the fatherland) of Bharat, this land can never be their “*punya bhoomi*” (sacred or holy land) because their land of worship is located to the distant west of the sub-continent. Regarding Muslims as essentially invaders from outside, the race theories of Hitler and his ilk held a special appeal for the leaders of the RSS. To imported Nazi notions of “race purity”, they added the fascination for violence that B.S.

Moone brought to Nagpur from a visit to Mussolini's fascist Italy. It gave organisational structure to Savarkar's belief that the “Hindu discovers himself only in violence” (cf. Vinayak Chaturvedi's defining study of hindutva).

In the eyes of hindutva bhakts, it is the ineluctable presence of a 200-million strong Muslim community in Bharat that comes in the way of the realisation of a Hindu rashtra, while the slightly larger number of Muslims in breakaway Pakistan makes impossible the realisation of a Hindu rashtra in 'Akhand Bharat'. On the other hand, the Muslims of the Gulf region, and West Asia and North Africa in general, are in their own

punya bhoomi and hence of no concern to the Hindu rashtra that the *sangh parivar* aims at securing in the *pitra-cum-punya bhoomi* of Bharat. Hence, hugs and kisses on the cheek for the rulers of Muslim lands but subversion of identity for the Indian Muslim; demonisation as “*tushtikaran*” (appeasement) of measures of compassion for a wretchedly deprived minority, economically, socially and educationally, as revealed by the Justice Rajinder Sachar Commission; fierce opposition to the hijab and a personal civil code for the minorities; perversion of

history leading to the avenging of real and imagined happenings in the mediaeval past; rejection of our composite culture and the syncretic heritage of our great civilisation to which all communities have contributed, more often than not in creative partnership, in language, literature, poetry, music and song, dance, painting and architecture; threats to the security of life and limb for Muslims; the bulldozer for their humble dwellings; harassment and discrimination in their everyday existence; sneers for their clothing and way of life; obstacles in their places of worship and burial grounds; all of this leading to lynching, cow-protection related vigilante violence, rape and mass murder.

So, it is not Islam or the Muslim ummah to which the BJP objects. It is just to them being here!



Aiyar is a former Union minister and social commentator.

Understanding business cycle investing

BY DHANYA V.R.



EVERY NEW YEAR brings with it untold opportunities and possibilities in every realm of life and the investing

sphere is no different. While you may have tried your hand at a variety of investment styles such as value investing, growth investing, dividend investing, and index investing among others, have you ever attempted business cycle based investing? If not, then 2024 could be a great year to try this probabilistic analysis based investing strategy which is slowly yet steadily picking pace in the economic ecosystem.

What is business cycle investing?

Investors who practice business cycle investing tend to keenly observe the ebb and flow of economic activity, known as the business cycle, while adjusting their investment strategies accordingly. This involves tweaking sector exposure within their portfolios based on prevailing economic conditions—for instance, during economic expansions, certain industries thrive, whereas others fare better during contractions. Therefore, the business cycle—tracking a nation's economic expansion and contraction phases—mirrors the fluctuations in gross domestic product (GDP) and overall economic activity, which tend to be impacted by everything from workforce productivity, population growth, and technological advancements to external events.

Cycles and sectors at play

While business and market cycles

are often used interchangeably, they measure distinct aspects; the former assesses overall economic health, while the latter gauges stock market fluctuations. The business cycle operates in stages, spanning periods of expansion and contraction, with the four primary stages including recession, early cycle, mid-cycle, and late cycle. Each phase, with varying durations, presents unique challenges and opportunities for investors. Industries react differently to these phases, with certain sectors demonstrating resilience or prosperity. For instance, sectors such as health care, consumer staples, and utilities tend to weather recessions well due to constant demand, while early-cycle expansion sees growth-oriented sectors like retail, construction, and financial services thrive, buoyed by increased spending and borrowing.

Is it right for you?

Now that you know the concept of business cycle based investing, we come to the question of whether or not this strategy is the right fit for your requirements. Business cycle investing entails predicting shifts in the business cycle and adjusting asset allocation accordingly, aiming to capitalise on assets' performance across different phases. Investors who follow this strategy might purchase stocks during economic expansions and divest before the peak in anticipation of a downturn.

While potentially lucrative, this active approach demands constant monitoring of economic indicators and market trends, as timing the market accurately poses challenges. Therefore, this strategy is best suited

for investors with the time and risk tolerance to navigate market cycles adeptly. Conversely, a long-term buy-and-hold strategy, preferred by some, eschews market timing, emphasising minimal portfolio adjustments over time. This strategy, while less hands-on, prioritises stability and may be better aligned with the risk preferences of investors.

Business cycle investing in 2024

Business cycle investing is a suitable strategy for 2024 and beyond as this investing style adopts a top-down approach, analysing how broader economic cycles impact markets, sectors, and individual stocks. Over the next half-decade, and probably further, chances are high that central banks, and their monetary policy movements, will likely steer markets, underscoring the significance of macro-oriented investing. The importance of top-down investing became apparent in the past two decades, with a global liquidity surge lifting stock markets from 2003 to 2007, followed by the global financial crisis causing a sharp downturn. In India, the government's response to the 2008 crisis initially spurred growth until 2012, but it eventually led to challenges like high inflation, currency depreciation, and a cycle of non-performing assets (NPAs), persisting for years.

Across these and more such scenarios in the future, business cycle investing has the potential to ensure portfolio robustness, as investors pay more attention to the macros at play and pick stocks based on their ability to perform optimally even amid economic shocks.

Dhanya V.R., CFP, is MD,
Wealth Plus Financial Solutions.



Lone voice of dissent

I am keen to invite Parakala [Prabhakar] to Mumbai... What do you think? Do you know him?" A friend asked. No, I don't know the man. And no, it is not a good idea to invite him, unless you want to invite trouble, I replied. Parakala is 'the' man right now. Possibly, the only man boldly standing up for his beliefs. An outspoken public intellectual, Parakala is logically and fearlessly taking apart those in power and being widely applauded for saying what millions dare not. This has made him a folk hero at a time when there is a dearth of any heroes. That Parakala happens to be the estranged husband of Nirmala Sitharaman, Union finance minister, makes him doubly fascinating for millions of fans hailing him as the voice of the voiceless, an anti-establishment figure, articulating the concerns of countless citizens. His flatly stated, highly critical views, calling out Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his political colleagues, have found many takers, mainly because his interviews are not rants. He makes sense, speaks calmly and answers without waffling. Given his impressive academic credentials, it is difficult to fault his cogent arguments as he holds forth on specifics without resorting to sensationalism and name-calling.

But it is equally his rather unique position vis-a-vis his powerful wife that attracts extra attention as analysts attempt to deconstruct the marriage and read between the lines. Nirmala and Parakala have been married for 38 years and are parents to a daughter named Parakala Vangmayi, who is married to Pratik Doshi, a key aide of Modi—the guessing games continue. Parakala's "outbursts", publicly slamming his high-profile wife as he tore into the Union budget, are dubbed the story of every home by amused outsiders. Nirmala has maintained a stoic silence, which is just as well,

or else we would have witnessed a full-scale soap opera, a domestic slugfest with gloves off.

Now that Parakala has been positioned as the lone voice of dissent, that too, during such a sensitive election, he finds himself in the spotlight, not always for the right reasons. On a podcast, he went ahead and called Modi a "dictator", adding, "He's not a democrat." These sort of comments have found a niche audience with fans hailing Parakala as an iconoclast, risking personal safety while defending free speech.

Parakala comes from a staunch Congress family, with both parents active in politics. His books and essays reflect his own political thinking in unambiguous terms. Parakala's critics are quick to dismiss him off as an oddball who is capitalising on the mood of the nation and being an agent provocateur with a hidden agenda.

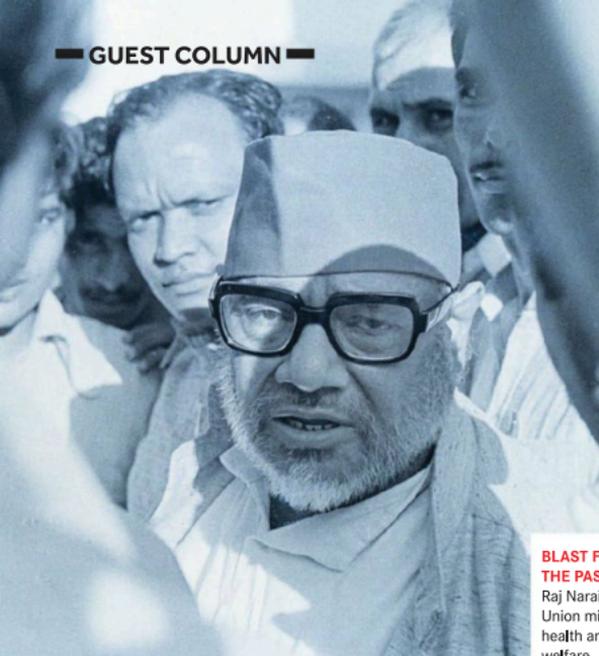
Well, so far his agenda remains under wraps, as observers figure out his motives and moves. The fact that no known attempt has been made to muzzle him, displays enormous confidence, especially since many young folks and stand-up comics have been warned to zip up or else.

India could do with many more Parakalas, but that's a tall order. His brilliant mind is hard to match. It is not important to agree with his viewpoint. But it is important to recognise his right (and the rights of others) who

are challenging the status quo. Once the elections are behind us, perhaps, Parakala will not be as urgently needed and public discourse will resume its old course. Dissent and democracy go hand in hand. More voices need to be heard. In Parakala an unlikely hero has been created, all thanks to unprecedented political developments in the country. When my friend was advised not to invite Parakala to Mumbai, it wasn't his safety that caused concern, it was hers.



Parakala Prabhakar



GETTY IMAGES

BLAST FROM THE PAST

Raj Narain, former Union minister for health and family welfare

Brash and raw

When I chanced upon Raj Narain, who humbled Indira Gandhi

BY K.C. VERMA



I WAS A young assistant superintendent of police in 1973 when the Banka by-election was announced. The Lok Sabha constituency was a part of Bihar's Bhagalpur district and the district magistrate (DM), Bhagalpur, was the returning officer. One morning, Wati Ao, the DM, curtly called me to his office. "Jaldi ao," he shouted in his heavily Naga-accented Hindi. I scurried over to the DM's office which was just 50 yards away.

A bizarre sight met my eyes in the DM's chamber. There was a sizeable

crowd in the room and the DM sat in a corner with a resigned expression. Sprawled on the large office table was an unkempt man with a green bandana on his head! I was about to scream at the kurta-pyjama-clad man, but Ao's expression made me hesitate. Politely, I asked the man what he thought he was doing. He said he was on satyagraha. He complained that the DM had deputed an official to the treasury to deposit the security amount for Shakuntala Devi, the Congress candidate, when she came to file her nomination. He demanded that he should be extended the same courtesy. I assured him that I would get it done for him and asked

him his name.

Surprised, he said, "You mean you don't know who I am?"

"No, sir, I don't! And I don't care. But I need your name for filling the treasury *challan*," I said.

My youthful brashness seemed to amuse him as much as his antics amused me. "Write down," he said, "The name is Raj Narain." Lying on the table, he took out a bundle of currency notes from his pocket and gave it to me. He clambered off the DM's table only after the treasury counterfoil was brought, which he submitted with his nomination papers.

Later, when the polling date approached, the district superintendent of police fell ill and I had to take charge of the security arrangements for a difficult election. It was indeed a clash of titans. Shakuntala Devi of the Congress treated Banka as her pocket borough and was confident of winning. The Communist Party of India (CPI) had fielded one of its giants—Tarni Mandal, who is now quite forgotten. Madhu Limaye, who ultimately won the election, was a towering leader of one socialist party. The enfant terrible of the pre-Emergency days, Narain, represented another socialist party. There were also other less well-known candidates.

It was a remarkable election for several reasons. Even though many bigwigs came, and the contest was keenly fought, the election concluded peacefully. Many said it was the fairest election that they had ever witnessed and, unbelievably, the ruling party nominee forfeited her security deposit! In 1973, this was unprecedented. For me, however, the most memorable event was my encounter with Narain. In my mind's eye today, more than 50 years later, I can still see him stretched out on the DM's table in a pose reminiscent of Lord Padmanabha reclining on the serpent *sheshanag!*

Verma was the director of Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW).

ADANI PORTS

PUTTING INDIA ON THE INTERNATIONAL MARITIME MAP

25 years ago, the Adani Group developed its first port at Mundra in Gujarat – marking the beginning of a historical journey, not only for the group but also for the India's international maritime trade. Today, Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Limited (APSEZ), a part of the globally diversified Adani Group, has evolved from a port company to an Integrated Transport Utility providing end-to-end solution from port gate to customer gate.

APSEZ is the largest port developer and operator in India with seven strategically located ports and terminals on the west coast (Mundra, Tuna, Dahej, and Hazira in Gujarat, Mormugao in Goa, Dighi in Maharashtra and Vizhinjam in Kerala) and seven ports and terminals on the east coast of India (Haldia in West Bengal, Dhamra in Odisha, Gangavaram and Krishnapatnam in Andhra Pradesh, Kattupalli and Ennore in Tamil Nadu and Karaikal in Puducherry). It represents 27% of the country's total port volumes, thus providing capabilities to handle vast amounts of cargo from both the coastal areas and the hinterland. The port facilities are equipped with the latest cargo-handling infrastructure, which is not only best-in-class, but also capable of handling some of the largest vessels on Indian shores. The ports can handle a diverse range of cargo.

Over the years, APSEZ has grown to become a provider of integrated port infrastructure services and Mundra SEZ in Gujarat is a landmark. Spanning over 8,000 hectares, the Mundra Economic Hub offers investment options as the largest multi-product SEZ, Free Trade and Warehousing Zone (FTWZ) and Domestic Industrial Zone. The company's integrated services across three verticals, i.e. ports, logistics and SEZ, have enabled it to forge alliances with leading Indian businesses making APSEZ an undisputed leader in the Indian port sector.

Through its subsidiary, Adani Logistics Limited, APSEZ operates three logistics parks at Patli in Haryana, Kila-Raipur in

Punjab and Kishangarh in Rajasthan. With the ability to handle 500,000 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) annually, the Adani logistics business is growing at a rapid pace. APSEZ's ports-to-logistics platform comprising port facilities, integrated logistics capabilities, including multimodal logistics parks, Grade A warehouses, and industrial economic zones, puts it at an advantageous position as India stands to benefit from an impending overhaul in global supply chains.

Adani Ports has expanded its presence globally through acquisitions and partnerships, particularly in key regions such as Middle East and Indian Ocean. These international operations position it as a key player in the global maritime industry. Outside India, APSEZ operates Haifa Port in Israel, and it is also developing a transshipment port at Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Recently, U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) had announced that it will be funding, to the tune of USD 553 million, in the

Colombo West International Terminal Private Limited (CWIT) – a consortium of Adani Ports and SEZ Ltd., Sri Lanka's leading enterprise John Keells Holdings (JKH) and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority. The port of Colombo is the largest and busiest transshipment port in the Indian Ocean. It has been operating at more than 90% utilisation since 2021, signalling a need for developing additional capacity. The new terminal will cater to growing economies along the Bay of Bengal, taking advantage of Sri Lanka's prime location on the major shipping routes and its proximity to the expanding markets.

The Adani Group's vision extends beyond mere business pursuits to encompass nation-building efforts. Through initiatives like skill-building programs and the development of quality infrastructure, the group aims to contribute to the long-term development and sustainability of the nation. By aligning with the objectives of local governments, they seek to ensure that their endeavors benefit communities and facilitate holistic growth.



Representative Image

CEPA and beyond

Bilateral trade between the UAE and India has grown almost 16 per cent year-on-year, touching \$84.5 billion

BY AMBASSADOR ABDULNASSER ALSHAALI



THE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and India has never been stronger.

At the heart of the flourishing relationship lies the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). This week marks the second anniversary of the implementation of an agreement that has bolstered bilateral trade and investment by slashing tariffs, streamlining cross-border trade, broadening market access for services, instituting dispute settlement mechanisms, and safeguarding intellectual property rights.

The numbers speak for themselves. Bilateral trade has reached historic highs, growing from \$72.9 billion to \$84.5 billion between the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 fiscal years—an almost 16 per cent year-on-year increase. The UAE has also emerged as India's fourth-largest foreign investor, with \$3.3 billion in FDI inflows during the 2022-2023 fiscal year. This remarkable progress is a testament to the shared vision of our two nations to harness the power of economic integration to deliver mutual prosperity.

Building upon this success, the two nations have elevated their collaboration by inaugurating the UAE-India CEPA Council (UICC) this year. This high-level body brings

together government officials and private sector leaders from both countries to identify new avenues for collaboration and ensure the agreement continues to deliver tangible results. The council's work has already yielded dividends, with several Indian companies engaging with key stakeholders from the UAE to address business issues and establish a presence to leverage our strategic location as a global hub.

The UICC has emerged as a pivotal driver in fostering closer ties and fortifying the partnership between the two nations. Looking ahead, the potential of the UAE-India economic partnership remains vast. Both countries are committed to harnessing innovation, sustainable devel-



REUTERS

**FROM STRENGTH
TO STRENGTH**

Narendra Modi and
Sheikh Mohamed bin
Zayed Al Nahyan

Bharat Mart is empowering Indian firms to tap into new markets and expand their global footprint. Similarly, the India-UAE rupee-dirham direct trade agreement has played a pivotal role in facilitating seamless and cost-effective transactions, thereby strengthening the export capabilities of Indian products.

A prime illustration of how the CEPA is fostering transformative and future-focused collaboration is evident across the food and renewable energy sector, where the UAE and India are already engaged in ambitious projects. Most recently, during the Gujarat visit of His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the UAE, several MoUs covering a range of sectors were exchanged between the UAE and India, reflecting the nations' shared commitment to fostering collaboration and achieving ambitious goals.

The MoU in food park development emphasised the importance of the India-UAE food park project, aimed at enhancing food security by strengthening food supply chains and promoting trade in food and agriculture between the two nations. The MoU on investment cooperation in the renewable energy sector highlighted the potential for joint efforts in implementing renewable energy projects. Earlier this year, our two nations unveiled a groundbreaking agreement to establish a large-scale green hydrogen plant in the Emirates—a venture that will capitalise on Indian expertise in renewable energy technologies and the UAE's exceptional infrastructure and natural resources.

The significance of the UAE-India CEPA extends into broader realms beyond the economic sphere. By introducing transparent competition and facilitating smoother cross-border transactions, the CEPA fosters an environment conducive to cultural exchange and social integration. It builds on the UAE's unwavering

devotion to pluralism and India's multiplicity, strengthening people-to-people connections through deepened economic ties.

Cultural and social integration has always stood as a cornerstone of this robust partnership, stimulating synergies and producing the conditions where diverse communities thrive. The UAE's commitment to creating a welcoming space for varied cultures echoes India's age-old tradition of honouring its rich diversity. The seamless experience for Indians travelling, conducting business, and thriving in the UAE underscores the mutual trust and respect shared between our nations. This mutual embrace of pluralism has become a defining element of the UAE-India relationship, encouraging an atmosphere where innovative ideas, entrepreneurial vigour, and collective prosperity flourish.

The success of the UAE-India CEPA is a tribute to the depth of our strategic relationship, and the power of economic integration to drive broader societal and geopolitical transformation. And the journey ahead is an exciting one. By unlocking the full potential of the CEPA, the UAE and India not only realise their own economic ambitions, but also set a global standard for how nations can collaborate to create a more integrated, innovative, and sustainable world.

In the years to come, the UAE-India partnership will continue to grow from strength to strength. By deepening our economic ties, we will also strengthen the cultural, diplomatic, and people-to-people connections that have long defined this relationship. Together, we will forge a new era of progress, innovation, and global influence—one that benefits not just our two nations, but the entire world.

The writer is the UAE ambassador to India.

opment, and advanced technologies to drive future growth. Emerging sectors, including renewable energy, agri-tech, and digital services hold immense promise and will be a key focus under the CEPA framework.

The integration propelled by the agreement has made it easier for businesses to operate across borders and has boosted trade, as evidenced by initiatives such as the India-UAE rupee-dirham direct trade agreement and the launch of Bharat Mart. The Bharat Mart project, a flagship project conceived under the CEPA framework, is poised to become a significant distribution hub for Indian enterprises in Dubai. Leveraging the UAE's strategic location and top-tier logistics infrastructure,

CALL OF THE WILD

Tejas Thackeray, the younger son of former Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray, shares his passion for wildlife conservation and photography

BY POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL



A

t the Amboli wildlife reserve in Maharashtra's Sindhudurg district, a tiger attacked and killed a cow at midnight last December. Chances were high that the big cat would return to claim its prey, which was lying off the road that ran along the reserve. Tejas Thackeray,

the younger son of former Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray, crouched not too far from the carcass to capture the moment on camera. But there was no sign of the tiger.

By 6am, Tejas was told that the tiger had killed two more cows around midnight. Maybe it had its stomach full and did not need this one, after all. Only then did Tejas go back to his cottage. "That kind of mad passion for wildlife is normal for

TT," said one of his fellow wildlife enthusiasts. Tejas, 28, is 'TT' for his close friends.

When Tejas embarked upon his first herping trip to Amboli in 2012, looking for amphibians and reptiles, he was just a teenager. He discovered a new species of fish during that trip, which was later named *Schistura hiranyakeshi*. "It was a freshwater fish way smaller than our little finger and was easy to miss," said Tejas. "It

was ethereal and beautiful, unlike anything I had ever seen." He returned to Amboli in 2017, with all necessary permits to document the fish. Tejas made public the entire process during the Covid lockdown in 2021. The pond at the Shiva temple in Amboli where he spotted the fish got the 'Schistura hiranyakeshi biodiversity heritage site tag' when Uddhav was chief minister.

Tejas has to his credit a crab, a snake and a gecko that he named after his family. He has discovered nearly 60 species so far, a result of his extensive travels. "I have lived in all border areas of India, except the Pakistan border," he said. "I once spent 99 hours on a boat to spot a tigress in the Sundarbans, I have lived on the Dri River in Arunachal Pradesh to spot Mishmi takin, a goat-antelope. I have been to the Sandakphu mountains in Nepal to see the red pandas in the snow. I have visited almost all national parks, wildlife reserves and other habitats in India. I have known the country as a traveller and an explorer."

Speaking with THE WEEK at Matoshree, the family home of the Thackerays in Mumbai, Tejas said that despite being a member of an illustrious political family, he had been largely successful in staying out of the limelight and following his passion. "I have been at every Dussehra rally. I have toured all of Maharashtra, but people would never notice me," he said.

More than the crowds and the rallies, Tejas loves the jungle. During one such trip to Amboli, after discovering three new crab species, Tejas said he realised the limitless potential of what more could be done. "If I could discover three new species during a fun trip with friends, how much more can we achieve with a properly planned, concentrated effort on the freshwater crab diversity of Maharashtra?"

The last person to work on the freshwater crabs of Maharashtra was an Indian-born British naturalist, Alfred William Alcock, back in 1909. "These crabs were seen for the first time after 1909. So I thought we should rediscover them. I spent almost five back-to-back monsoons in Koyna, Radhanagari, Satara, Sangli, Raigad and Konkan and ended up discovering 20 species of



Cnemaspis thackerayi, a species of gecko endemic to India



Sahyadriana thackerayi, a new genus of freshwater crab

crabs and also one new genus, which was named *Sahyadriana thackerayi*," he said.

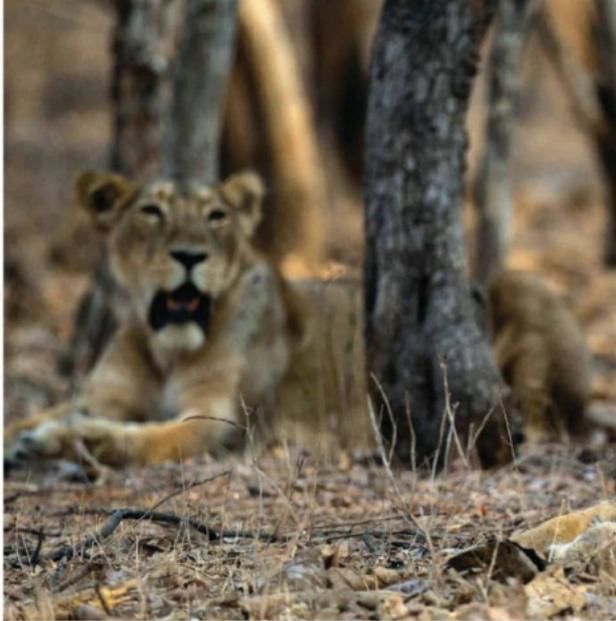
Tejas is also curious about fishes, geckos and snakes. After his initial adventures, he got more people to join him, setting up the Thackeray Wildlife Foundation in 2019.

What began as a hobby gradually turned into a mission, requiring funds, permits, researchers, experts and much more.

On running the TWF and making it a full-time career, Tejas said a lot of people try to advise him. "But this is my baby. Let me have my own philosophy for it. Even though I have not been in politics, I come from a political family. I have seen my father and grandfather run the party. I have seen them nurture it. There has always been a philosophy and vision for the party, both short-term and long-term. And that is how I look at the foundation."

Tejas developed an interest in geckos in 2015, when he went to Anamalai in Tamil Nadu for the first time. It was September, and the monsoon was about to end when he found his very first *Cnemaspis*, one of the most diverse geckos. "I was a random teenager walking in the dense rainforest. The canopy there was so dense that it was difficult to guess the time of the day. It was in the thick and dense leaf litter where one looks for geckos," he said. While trying to find the *Cnemaspis*, Tejas almost stepped on a hump-nosed pit viper, which was completely camouflaged, looking like dry leaf. Once the visibility was so poor and he found himself face to face with wild elephants. He also encountered a tigress and her cubs. "Those tigers were quite different from the ones you find in other national parks in India as they have never seen any human beings in their lives," he said. "Despite all these adventures, we could not collect the *Cnemaspis* because we did not have the required permits." Tejas got the permits a few years later, and he submitted the details of his findings earlier this year.

There are many reasons why Tejas has chosen a career with a difference. "I was not the best when it came to academics. I was an average student, my maths skills were terrible," he said. "But I always had a good understanding of the relationship various species had with their habitats."





(Clockwise from left) Primates from Africa; *Schistura hiranayakeshi*, a new species of fish; Asiatic lions at Gir Forest in Gujarat; *Boiga thackerayi*, a new species of medium-sized snake

In the years that followed, Tejas went from the Sahyadris to the Eastern Ghats, the northeast, the Andamans, the Malayan archipelago, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. "Everything in the tropics is interlinked," he said.

In 2017, Tejas took a break after his graduation and

travelled extensively, which included a 14-day trek to the Chinese border in Arunachal Pradesh, following the Dri River and camping in freezing cold to photograph Mishmi takin. He was accompanied by nearly 40 guards. That was when the Doklam conflict with China happened. But it did not stop him. "When TT is on a trip, he is in the zone. We eat, sleep and stay in the jungle. He leaves his phone behind and walks with locals. In some places, it is just impossible to have 40 security guards around; the forest department would not let us carry out the research," said Akshay Khandekar, a colleague.

Tejas found inspiration from his father to pursue a career in wildlife. "When I was growing up, my grandfather was at the peak of his political career. And my dad was into politics, but he loved photography and wildlife more," said Tejas. "He used to travel a lot to the tiger reserves in Kanha, Tadoba and Bandhavgarh. He would go into the wild to shoot the photos of lions and tigers. He was crazy. I would keep saying that I wanted to accompany him, but I was too small."

Tejas still remembers how his father would pick up one wildlife book for him from every store he visited. He now has a whole library filled with books his father bought for him. "My dad sparked interest for the whole thing in me," he said. "Then we started going out together looking for tigers, but eventually my interest turned towards the smaller biodiversity."

What does his father have to say about his passion now? "He says what I do is crazy and I tell him that what he is doing is crazy. So we reach a common ground—let us do our own thing." But it does not mean that Tejas is completely cut off from politics. People recognise him more these days, as his presence has grown on posters and on the party's [Shiv Sena (UBT)] social media handles. "Yes, they have started putting my pictures on posters and I don't quite enjoy being in the limelight. If it was in my hands, you still would not see me much. But then I cannot really disappoint my family either. It is always an act of carefully balancing between what I want and what I am duty-bound to do. Being a son, I am always there for my father."

Yet, nature remains his first love. "I am a nomad at heart, I am made for the jungles," said Tejas. Even when he is in a room with his party workers, his heart is where the next species can be found. ●

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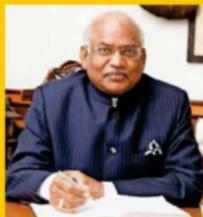
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Shri J. C. Jain

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MOVE AWAY, MARY!

**In many parts
of the world,
unique names are
becoming popular**

BY ANJULY MATHAI

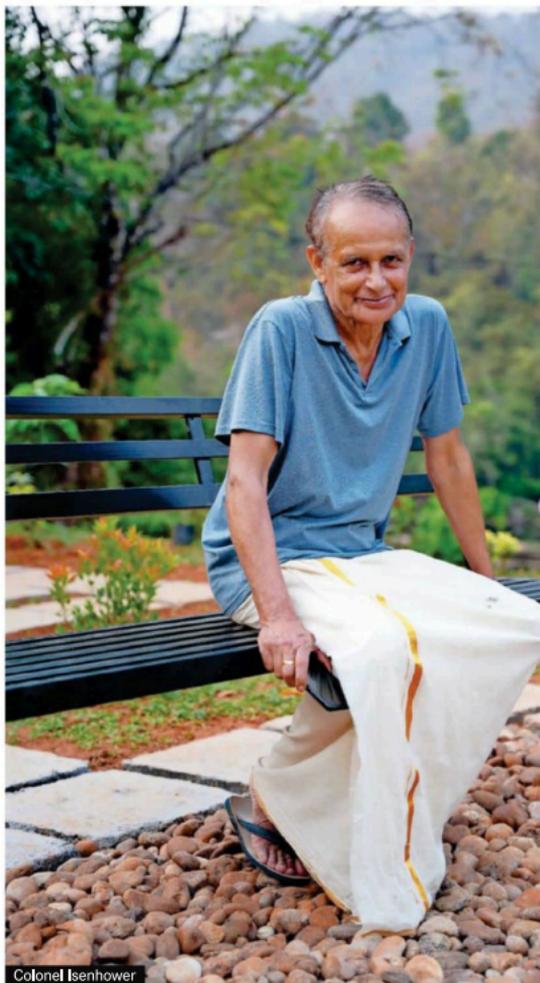
**IN THE RIGHT
DIRECTION**
Kim Kardashian
with daughter
North West



On June 6, 1944—otherwise known as D-Day—the biggest seaborne invasion in history took place in France’s Normandy, when the Allied forces retook it in an operation codenamed Neptune during World War II. The operation made Major General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who commanded it, an overnight sensation. He would go on to become the 34th president of the United States. Exactly 11 years after the D-Day in Normandy, another kind of D-Day was happening to a Christian couple thousands of miles away. On that day, unbeknownst to President Eisenhower, his namesake was born in Oonjapara, a small agricultural village in Kerala.

So how did a Malayali boy get named after the American president? Some might call it a tale with a twist. When he was studying in the first standard, the boy, who was baptised as Issac, would bawl during attendance because his teacher, Varkey saar, would not call out his name. Not that he himself was sure what his name was. As punishment, an older student was asked to carry Issac home every time he started crying. This, however, only raised the decibel level of his wails. Fed up with all the ruckus during roll call, the teacher finally asked Issac why he was crying. “Because you don’t call out my name,” he replied. Varkey saar immediately took corrective measures and put down Issac’s name in the first standard register as ‘Isenhower’, who was the most powerful man in the world then and who had visited India a few months before his namesake joined school. The name stuck. Little Isenhower had no problem with it. He thought it was the English version of what he was called at home—‘Ise kunjū’.

Years later, in 1966, when Isenhower got admission to a Sainik School, his father went to collect his Transfer Certificate, and was alarmed to see his son’s name printed as Isenhower in the document. He tried to tell the headmaster that the boy’s real name was Issac K. Joseph. “The name has been recorded in the list sent to the Assistant Education Officer and cannot be changed without



Colonel Isenhower

a formal application, which might take some time,” the headmaster told him. And that’s how Issac officially became Isenhower, and, some time after he joined the Army, ‘Colonel Isenhower’. He says he has checked in the population register; he is the only one with this name in the country.

“The only pitfall is that I have no surname,” says Isenhower. “So, to buy train tickets and fill application forms, I use my rank—‘Colonel’—as



Very few people know how to pronounce my name correctly. I've been called 'Ringly' quite a few times. Still, I like my name as it makes me feel unique. I don't know of anyone else with my name.

—Rinklet Varghese



my first name. Another problem with having a unique name is that everyone wants to know the story behind it. So, this must be the two thousandth time I am repeating my story.”

His story might be unique today, just like his name, but soon, it might no longer be. We might be approaching a day when Isenhowers will be the rule and Issacs, the exception. This is happening already. In many parts of the world, it is raining babies with unique names. Take Scotland, for example. 2023 was a record year for unique baby names. According to the National Records of Scotland (NRS), there were a record 2,362 boys with unique names and 2,983 girls with the same last year. Boys were named ‘Boy,’ ‘Demigod’ and ‘Howl,’ while girls got stuck with ‘Costly,’ ‘La,’ ‘Na,’ and ‘Pasty.’ Neither are babies ‘Banksy,’ ‘Jihad’ and ‘Alloy’ likely to have it easy in life.

Similar trends are being observed in Japan and the UK. Last year, *The Japan Times* published a piece on baby names getting more creative. “Do more unique monikers mean Japan is becoming more individualistic?” it asked. In the UK, Sophie Kihm from Nameberry (a website devoted to baby names), told *Metro*, “Years ago, parents may have chosen a name because they liked the sound or it had a family connection, but today more than ever, baby names are seen as an opportunity to showcase style, culture, and hopes and dreams parents have for their child.”

So, how do unusual names impact a child's personality? Surely, Baby Jihad could not go through life without at least one ‘What happens when a terrorist walks into a bar’ joke being lobbed at him. Experts, however, say it might not all be doom and gloom with unusual names. In fact, the opposite might be true. According to one study conducted at the

Arizona State University, CEOs with unique names were found to be more creative and confident than their peers. Other research suggests that a person's name can influence what job they get, who they marry, where they settle, and even what stocks they invest in. One study even concludes that we look like our names. Professor Anne-Laure Sellier and her team asked subjects to pick a name from a list of four or five options for the photo of a person that they showed. The subjects chose correctly more times than was likely to be accounted by the law of chance. To belong to their “tribe,” people tend to align themselves—through their clothes, glasses, tattoos, and hairstyles—to what they think someone with their name would look like, felt Sellier.

Unlike in the west, where names are chosen for their individualism, originality, and simplicity, in India, names are deeply rooted in custom, culture and ancestral roots, says Professor M.J. Warsi, chairman, department of linguistics, Aligarh Muslim University, and president of the Linguistic Society of India. “Children's names in India are determined by several variables, such as cultural and religious customs,” he says. “Names express ideals, beliefs, and heritage, and are frequently associated with religion and caste. To pay tribute to family legacy, children are frequently named after grandparents or other elders. Family history and origin play a major role.”

On the other hand, in the west, parents



GETTY IMAGES

MAMA'S BOY

Mariah Carey performs with son Moroccan

name, so I was stuck with it. During my MBBS, people used to call me 'Loosy Loose'. Even now, there are those who call me 'Loose' (a slang for mentally unstable in Kerala)."

Names with a negative connotation can have a permanent impact on people since you tend to remember negative incidents more, says clinical psychologist Anita Rajah. "It is a survival mechanism of the brain," she says. "Every time you are slighted, you tend to remember previous incidents of being slighted. Names are connected to emotions in a big way."

Once upon a time, giving unusual names to their children was the preserve of celebrities. Naming their children 'Sunday' (the daughter of Nicole Kidman and Keith Urban), 'Wolf Webster' (the son of Kylie Jenner and Travis Scott), 'North' (the daughter of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West), 'Blue Ivy' (the daughter of Beyonce and Jay-Z) and 'Moroccan' (the son of Mariah Carey and Nick Cannon) was just another working day in Hollywood. In fact, *The New York Times* carried a piece in 2006 titled 'Why Stars Name Babies Moxie, Moses and Apple.'

"You're likely to be the only one in any normal-size group with that name," it quoted actor Penn Jillette, who named his daughter 'Moxie CrimeFighter'. "Moxie" is a name that was created by an American for the first national soft drink and then went on to mean 'chutzpah,' and that's nice. Everyone I know with an unusual name loves it. It is only the losers named Dave that think having an unusual name is bad, and who cares what they think. They're named Dave."

In a world in which everything celebrities do is increasingly cut, copied and pasted, Ms CrimeFighter might indeed have the last laugh. ●

frequently value unique names, he says, taking cues from literature, popular culture or individual tastes. Gender-neutral names are becoming increasingly common, indicative of changing attitudes on gender and identity. Surnames are used to identify families, with less emphasis on religion or caste.

Not that unusual names, religion and caste neutral, are absent in India. We have a cricketer named Napoleon Einstein and a Meghalayan politician named Adolf Lu Hitler Rangsa Marak. There is a Reddit thread on people with unusual names in the country, which includes a science teacher who named his three children 'Proton', 'Electron' and 'Neutron'. "My father gave me my name, but I don't know why. He didn't get it from a novel or anything. He told me: 'I just got this feeling to name

you Rinklet," says Rinklet Varghese, who works in real estate. "Of course, there are shortcomings with a name like mine. Friends used to tell me it sounds like something to eat. Also, very few people know how to pronounce it correctly. I've been called 'Ringly' quite a few times. Still, I like my name as it makes me feel unique. I don't know of anyone else with my name. It has given me a sense of confidence."

Not so lucky is Dr Loosamma Joseph, who says she hates her name. "It was supposed to be Lucy, but I studied in a convent school, where the nuns believed in adding 'amma' to girls' names," she says. "But I did not even realise that my name was spelled as 'Loosamma' until I saw my birth certificate just before taking my SSLC exams. Those days, there was no concept of changing your



Haute and sweaty

In Mumbai, where I live and work, there is a severe heatwave going on. The highest temperature this month has been 40 degrees, sweltering and humid for the coastal city. Of course this is a savage reminder of climate change, and how brutal even its early effects are. Even as some of us may be privileged to remain in air-conditioned environs of the home or the office, a majority of people in the city do not have access to climate control. They live in small, poorly ventilated and crowded rooms, and leaving home is usually an escape.

India has always been a hot and humid country. But how wonderful times may have been when we dressed for the summer. Even nobles wore soft, diaphanous muslin, Indian mulmul or its more sophisticated avatar of jamdani. This gossamer-like fabric was the specialty of Bengal and Bangladesh, and remains the finest fabric made by human hands. European colonisers found it shameless because of its transparent nature, and yet it is the only fabric they would wear to face our summers.

Humans have always dressed for the weather. But globalisation and industrialisation have wreaked havoc on our wardrobes. Clothing is expected to be mass produced, factory made and make fat profit by creating cheap, even unhealthy fabrics to dress a vast population. Thus polyester, nylon, and a whole host of flammable, heat-inducing and microplastic-filled fabrics now crowd our wardrobes. Don't even say fast fashion, Zara and H&M never claimed to give you quality clothing, just trendy stuff.

India has always been an agrarian country. Our villages created 'slow fashion' as we understand it today. Everything the villagers wore, and many continue to wear today, pays respect to the environment. They made clothes without electricity; looms still don't consume it, but work on mechanised levers—like hand pumps or bicycles do. A large frame 'builds'

the fabric, a long tooth comb separates the threads, and a mousey shuttle creates the warp and weft.

Thread was spun from rain-harvested plant fibre, fabrics were dyed using spices, fruit, vegetables, mud and soot. Clothing was made from nature. It was vibrant, and it was cooling.

Even winter wear came from sheep or animal hide. Nobody went out to kill an animal for its skin, animals were greatly respected for the food and milk they provided. Their carcasses were repur-

posed into gorgeous, functional and long-lasting leather, giving another example of how zero waste solutions have always existed.

There is an argument that handlooms are expensive. They don't have to be. A cotton sari costs a few hundred rupees. Moreover, if you buy an item from an apparel manufacturer or a fast fashion brand for ₹500, it has probably cost ₹80 to make and is filled with trashy bits. Like McDonalds, or your delicious streetside vada pav, you can't eat it every day or it will kill you.

Two amazing privately-owned brands—Anokhi and Fabindia—have found the sweet spot be-

tween natural fabrics and economies of scale. They have taught us that you can have your cake and eat it, too. You can dress daily from either of these two companies for as little as ₹2,000 a day. Whereas designer handlooms may cost ₹15,000 per outfit or more.

It has been shown that hand-loomed fabric (perhaps not hand tailored though) can dress a population, simply because lakhs of people are making it across India. Don't believe companies that tell you factories are the only means to dress people. They want fatter profits for themselves by selling you junk. They won't tell you they can still make a slightly smaller profit by selling you good quality natural clothing.



Handblock printed from Anokhi

PEO

Reunion time

Vir Das's directorial debut—*Happy Patel*—will have more than one *Delhi Belly* connection. One, *Happy Patel* is backed by Amir Khan, who co-produced the latter. Two, it will have Khan and his nephew Imran in cameos; both of them were also part of *Delhi Belly*. This will mark Imran's return to films. Das will play the lead in the quirky comedy. He is directing the film with Kavi Shastri—they first "met as background players in *Love Aaj Kal*". The Emmy-winning comedian will be touring Australia and East Asia in May for his 'Mind Fool' standup show.

Fab 50

Fifty years on screen is quite an achievement. And if it is the versatile veteran **Shabana Azmi**, all the more so. The New York Indian Film Festival will celebrate her 50 years in cinema at its 24th edition in May. Azmi will delve into her "remarkable journey, from her groundbreaking debut in Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* to her trailblazing roles that have earned her five National Awards and international accolades", read the NYIFF statement.



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Tune in

She's got zen in her name, but **Zendaya** doesn't mind making some noise, or rather music. The *Dune* actor revealed that she might release new songs one day. In 2011, she had released two singles—"Swag It Out" and "Watch Me". She signed with Hollywood Records in 2012, and a year later came out with her eponymous studio album. But, for now, she is making money—she scored her first big solo box-office opening with *Challengers* at \$15 million.

Another feather

Nicole Kidman became the first Australian actor to receive the American Film Institute Lifetime Achievement Award. Meryl Streep presented her with what the AFI calls the "highest honour in American cinema". The *Moulin Rouge* actor thanked all her directors "for making me better at my craft and giving me a place, however temporary, in this world". Her husband, singer Keith Urban, and her *Big Little Lies* costar Reese Witherspoon were among those who attended the ceremony.

Crooner's comeback

Pakistani singer **Atif Aslam** made his Malayalam debut with a song for the upcoming romantic film *Haal*. The 'Woh Lamhe' singer reportedly recorded the song in a studio overseas. The Malayalam track marks Aslam's return to the Indian film industry after almost seven years. Pakistani artistes were barred from working in India following the Uri attack, but the Supreme Court dismissed a plea seeking a ban on them last year. There were also reports that Aslam had performed at a pre-wedding bash of Anant Ambani and Radhika Merchant in London.



Ram temple not an issue in south

Much has been said this election season about the alleged north-south divide. There are those who believe there is a political line drawn across the map of India and those who believe that these are divisive ways to understand elections and the country.

As a Punjabi from Delhi, I have just driven through most of peninsular India. My election road trip series, *Dhabas of Democracy*—designed to discover all the resplendent flavours of India—began in Kanniyakumari and wove its way through Thiruvananthapuram, Coimbatore, Wayanad, Mysuru, Bengaluru, Kurnool, Hyderabad and onwards to Maharashtra.

I have discovered and loved *pazham kanji* (watery fermented rice with chili and onions), marvelled at the popularity of *kalaan* (Tamil for mushroom) served by the street side in a stir fry paste, stood in line to eat a butter *masala dosa* at Vidyarthi Bhavan, discovered what the history is of Mysore Pak, devoured the onion samosas of Hyderabad and eaten curd rice at every meal I could.

I have gathered some food for thought as well.

While I won't use the word divide—and normally I hate generalisations—the southern states did feel different. For starters their cities were cleaner and better planned and their surroundings were greener and more lush. The emphasis on education seems greater in many of these states. For instance, in Coimbatore, the high-profile seat of the BJP's Tamil Nadu chief K. Annamalai, two of the three candidates are IIM alumni (including Annamalai) and the third has a doctorate. I can't think of another constituency in India with a similar profile of contestants.

The other thing that struck me was the role of religion. I felt the physical presence of religion

and faith much more overtly in the south than in the north—temples, churches and mosques. In fact, elaborate wood carvings framed homes in villages, the temples are gigantic compared to the north and much more ornate and grand. And, yet, among everyone I spoke to across peninsular India, not one person mentioned the Ram temple in Ayodhya as an election issue. There was only one elderly gentleman in Kerala who referenced it. But other than that, it came up in conversation when I asked about its impact. Of course, despite the single-minded push by Narendra Modi in the south, the

BJP is, at the moment, playing to increase vote share rather than seats. It knows that with the exception of Karnataka, which it swept last time, any gains will be incremental. But, what's most important is that this response on the temple held true even among Modi voters and fans. In the urban pockets of these states I met many citizens who are big admirers of Modi. But when I asked them why

they were voting for the BJP, I often got the same answer—under Modi, India's standing in the world was stronger than ever before. Sometimes I would follow it up with a question on the Ram temple, and mostly the answer would be that it was of no or little consequence to their political choices.

Modi still holds the distinct advantage in these elections. And maybe the answers I will hear will be very different in the north. But my travels through two phases of the elections convince me that in the southern states there is no political surge around the temple despite religion being a more entrenched and visible part of daily life than in the north.



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