

RAHUL'S BATTLE IN RAE BARELI BJP'S JATLAND CHALLENGE THE PERFORMANCE VOTE IN UP

THE WAR OF THE IMAGES A TALE OF TWO NOMINATIONS REMEMBERING SUSHIL MODI

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Narendra Modi, Eknath Shinde and  
Devendra Fadnis on a roadshow  
in Mumbai, May 15, 2024



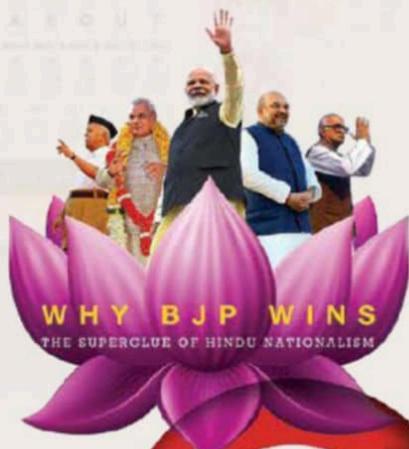
## A MEASURE OF MUMBAI

WHY THE MANDATE OF INDIA'S FINANCIAL CAPITAL MATTERS

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## LETTER OF THE WEEK

Amethi and Rae Bareli, longstanding political battlegrounds, face shifting dynamics as BJP challenges Congress' stronghold in Uttar Pradesh (UP) ('The Smriti Surge', May 20, 2024). The Gandhis have been dependent on the benevolence of the party in power in the state for long but this changed in 2017 when BJP won an absolute majority. In 2014, Rae Bareli and Amethi were the only seats that Congress won.

But in 2019, BJP leader and Union Minister Smriti Irani defeated Rahul Gandhi. This time, Congress has decided to field Gandhi loyalist Kishori Lal Sharma from Amethi. Since filing her nomination, Irani has not minced her words and stated that no member of the Gandhi family contesting from Amethi in the Lok Sabha election is in itself an indication that Congress has accepted its defeat. Despite Congress' historical prominence, its electoral prospects in UP have dwindled. The phrases "pocket borough" and "bastions" are used casually for the two seats even though the ground has been shifting for a long time. Now, with Rahul Gandhi seeking a mandate from Rae Bareli and BJP's renewed focus on the seat, the battlelines are drawn.

KT Gopalakrishnan



If Pitroda aims to disrupt Congress' momentum in this campaign season and put it on the backfoot, then he is doing a great job. It's difficult to gauge if the comments have hurt Congress, but come June 4 when the Lok Sabha results are out, the answer will be clear.

S Venkataraman

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### BSP IN SLOW GEAR

The crucial third phase of the ongoing elections was marked by the near-absence of BSP, which once dominated the political landscape of Uttar Pradesh ('Lotus in an Elephant Trunk', May 20, 2024). The lack of a spirited campaign or any visible publicity by BSP reflects a larger challenge it faces—erosion from UP in the face of the spectacular rise of BJP which has been governing at the Centre since 2014 and in the state since 2017. BJP's rise can be attributed to BSP's inability to capitalise on the foundation laid by Kanshi Ram. The Mayawati-led party is faced with corruption allegations, an exodus of its senior leaders to

other parties, and the near-decimation of its organisation on the ground. It seems like BSP is sitting out this election and that disappoints us.

Sukriti Yadav

### PITRODA PITFALL

Congress was again in hot water thanks to Sam Pitroda's remarks ('Loose Talker', May 20, 2024). Pitroda's worldview is incorrect. India is the only large country which continues to have indigenous populations. Pitroda lives in Chicago and describes himself as a "telecom inventor, entrepreneur, development thinker and policy maker". He has links to Congress dating back to the 1980s and is considered as a part of the Gandhi coterie.

### THE MUSLIM VOTE

Muslims in UP have traditionally oscillated between the Samajwadi Party and BSP as they seem wary of a division of votes ('Mapping the Muslim Mind', May 20, 2024). The All India Majlis-E-Ittehadul Muslimeen, which has formed an alliance with Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), does not appear to be a serious contender in most seats. The buzzword among Muslims in this election remains "change". Most Muslim voters believe that they got nothing in return for supporting the traditional parties as no one voices their concerns. They are likely to vote differently this time and will not allow anti-BJP votes to go to waste.

Ayyub Minz

# OPEN DIARY

*Swapan Dasgupta*

THE SOCIAL WORLD of India is divided into many thousands of little compartments. Many are exactly like others in terms of class or even profession but separated on account of geography and language. Sociologists often try to club these groups into more manageable categories and students of politics are inclined to see convergences on the strength of voting behaviour. Of course, if the search is conducted for unitary threads, groups in India very often transcend region, language, income and, in rare cases, the Hindu-Muslim faultline.

These days, thanks to the mushrooming of social media, people are connected to each other on newer and newer bases. Speaking personally, my wife and I together must be members of at least 25 WhatsApp groups, some hyperactive and others that come alive seasonally. These range from the usual, such as neighbourhood groups, workplace groups, multiple groups formed based on shared political preferences and alumni groups, to unusual ones, such as a group formed by the mothers of those who had been in school some 15 years ago.

I am unsure as to whether I find membership of these groups rewarding or mildly irritating. I recognise that each group comprises some very dedicated members who are never wanting in offering their opinions or posting links of articles that they consider useful for others. Whether that is due to the surfeit of post-retirement leisure time or a way out of loneliness is a matter of conjecture. All I can say is a lot of people must be finding the WhatsApp groups useful, otherwise these cyber communities wouldn't have been mushrooming. The revolution in communications has created a virtual level playing field where everyone has acquired the facility of being heard.

The only time the opinion of every



individual acquires the same value is during election time. As an observer of politics, I tend to attach greater significance to all opinions—both logical and ill-informed—than I would at other times. After all—unless muscle power rules the roost—these opinions provide invaluable clues to the voting behaviour of individuals. Equally, they are also a guide to what has come to be known as group-think.

Many members of one of the groups I belong to have gone apoplectic over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election speeches. In their perception, Modi has lowered the level of Indian politics with his attacks on those who breed generously, on Muslim reservations and on Muslim illegal immigrants from neighbouring countries. According to them, this is against the Model Code of Conduct and violates the spirit of the Constitution. Since the Election Commission has so far not taken any action against the prime minister, apart from urging overall restraint, they appear to have concluded that the Election Commission members have ceased to be neutral umpires and have been put in their positions to facilitate the victory of BJP. The extent of their anger has reached such a pitch that public figures don't balk from calling the prime minister names. Admittedly, they are members of the Old Establishment, the ones

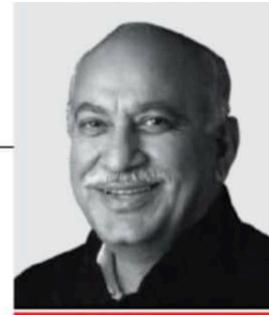
dispossessed from power and influence after Modi won power in 2014. All the same, the vitriol is quite disturbing.

The over-reaction is quite striking. As it becomes more and more apparent that BJP is going to form the next government with a reasonably comfortable (if not a steamroller) majority, sections of Modi-haters are going into a state of denial. They are detecting a reverse swing based on the prime minister's 'body language' and the Supreme Court verdict on Arvind Kejriwal. This reverse swing has been detected in many elections before but almost invariably it has failed to materialise. In 2019, the pundits were seriously embarrassed by the fact that their anecdotal evidence bore little relation to the votes. This is not surprising since the anecdotal evidence (apart from the mandatory views of the taxi drivers of election tourists) are from compartments that resemble the WhatsApp communities. You can get made-to-order views if you know which group to tap.

Then comes the question of history. Modi is by far the most aggressive election campaigner who has made it to the top job. Jawaharlal Nehru was a pontificator who knew that Congress was unassailable. Indira Gandhi's reputation was more formidable than her oratory. And Rajiv Gandhi was never entirely comfortable in Hindi, although he wasn't half as convoluted as his son. As for Manmohan Singh, he was normally kept away from campaigning.

Of the non-Congress lot, Atal Bihari Vajpayee was past his prime by the time he became prime minister. In fact, in 2009, the BJP leadership was petrified that he would commit some major gaffe.

It is Modi's out-and-out political thrust, plus his ability to speak about himself in the third person that has broken all earlier assumptions. ■



# A Proverbial Guide to the Polls

## Check the cheese and ignore the bombast

**M**Y CONTRIBUTION TO the science of deciphering election campaigns is a puzzle composed of Russian proverbs. All clues are hidden in one or more of them. Do the math. Those in fewer traps will limp, fatigued but delighted, towards the victor's altar on June 4.

- A spoken word is not a sparrow; once it flies out it can't be caught.
- One old friend is better than two new ones.
- The past is a lighthouse, not a port.
- If you chase two rabbits, you won't catch either.
- Don't run from a wolf into a bear.
- If you wake up without pain, you are dead.
- Don't go to another monastery with your own rules.
- You can't bite your own elbow.
- Better to be slapped by the truth than kissed by a lie.
- The only free cheese is in the mousetrap.

**I**F YOU WANT to check the state of play, ignore the bombast of self-proclaimed analysts, most of whom have just emerged from a long conversation with their mirror. Check the cheese.

When cheese moves up on the agenda, you can be sure it is a sign of nerves. A political party suddenly announces mid-campaign that every woman will get ₹1,00,000 annually if it wins. No one, naturally, cares to explain how this will be funded. Given that there are roughly 500 million women voters in this election, and many more claimants outside the voting list, this particular election bait adds up to an expenditure of a number of crores beyond my comprehension of arithmetic. Indians will be smoking their currency if this is funded by a laissez-faire treasury rather than tax revenue. But there is little real cost to such bizarre promises because all that is on offer is illusion. Only the faithful nod their heads. The majority of voters are interested in tested value, not hokum.

**S**RINAGAR HAS REGISTERED its highest voter turnout in nearly four decades. Thirty years ago in the 1990s, the city was floundering in the squelch and blood of unprecedented violence, while secessionist slogans echoed across the skies from hardline minarets. Today, there is an uprising in Muzaffarabad, capital of the part of Kashmir illegally occupied by Pakistan. Kashmiris across Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir (PoK) want freedom from deprivation, from injustice, from a shattered economy, from the fog that clouds their future. Pakistan has taken food off the plates of children, denied them a decent education, and replaced democracy with an army-controlled oligarchy. This is the Pakistan that Muhammad Ali Jinnah, in collusion with the British, carved out of united India with a brutal knife.

Here is some news for Pakistan from the streets of India. For 75 years you have fattened



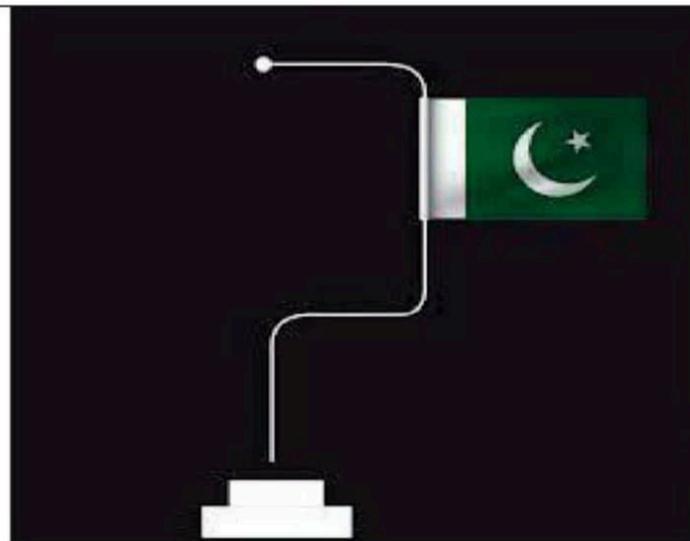
your army at the expense of the people by using the fraudulent excuse that India is an existential threat. The news from the 2020s is that no one in India wants this septic geography back. The only sympathy Indians have is humanitarian, for the ordinary, misled people of Pakistan, who have become the greatest victims of an evil canard, a preposterous lie, perpetrated in 1947. The elites who created Pakistan continue to fatten on the crust of a sinking economy, beneficiaries of history's most exploitative rip-off.

I have described Pakistan as a jelly-state in my book *Tinderbox*; a country which, like jelly, can neither be stable nor melt and disappear. Pakistan is being drained in a trap of its own making. To escape this self-inflicted haemorrhage, it will need a leader with more vision and greater courage than visible now. Perhaps she is still anonymous among the masses. But she will have to accept one truth. Pakistan cannot find a future until it corrects a basic anomaly from its past and reinvents itself as a modern state rather than one tethered to political ideologies that have long crossed their sell-by date.

**N**AMES BELONG TO parents, not children. Children are gilded with the loving aspirations of their procreators. The immortal philosopher PG Wodehouse noted wisely that all babies look alike, and he was not being complimentary. But all parents glow at the sight of the fresh bundle and award their child the grandest name in their imagination, beginning with the nomenclatures of god. More modest types stick to nature, but go for the finest: the prettiest flowers, etc. You might think that an Elon Musk is being different when naming his children after the alphabet, but he is making them commanders who will lead tomorrow's odyssey towards unknown galaxies.

The most honest name I have seen is the one given by a certain Bhavesh Bhide of Ghatkopar, currently in police custody. He called his advertising agency Ego Media Pvt Ltd. Ego is synonymous with candour.

Bhide is a temporary guest of Mumbai Police because two years ago he erected a massive billboard, through the usual help of corrupt elements in the city's legislature and



Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

administration, that broke all regulations. For two years the authorities could not see this massive billboard that was searching for a place in a book of records. A fortnight ago, the police sent him a notice, which Bhide ignored with the impunity of those who have kept influential friends happy and well fed. He might have got a follow-up notice in 2026, if a storm had not sent the billboard crashing, killing 16 innocents and injuring 74 (at the time of going to press). The number of casualties is evidence of the level of corruption.

Why is an election victory for the Mumbai municipal corporation prized higher than that for Parliament? Because of billboards. There is more money to be made from a seat in Mumbai's corporation than in Delhi's Parliament.

Bhide was transparent. His company was called Ego, and ego is what he thrived on. Perhaps he rose from what is often described as a humble background, but humility does not take you far in the business of Mumbai's illegal billboards. Ego does. Ego brings municipal councillors into your pocket, from where they take their pickings. Which brings me to another proverb: pride comes before a billboard fall.

**T**HE CLEVER BOYS in multinational marketing have floated yet another new word, currently seeking attention: 'spaving'. It means, or hopes to mean, spending in order to save. A trick word, then, to justify the fraud of getting a fourth cake of soap free if you buy three. No one from the national or multinational tells you that the price of every cake is a massive rip-off. 'Spaving' might make sense during high inflation when the value of money has dropped while the usefulness of the product remains stable. The word could also enter a pessimist's dictionary; or interest an economist in search of a book. There might also be a legitimate place for 'spaving' in electoral politics. Spend on donations now in order to save on the cost of getting decisions through later. Every democracy, whether in America, Europe, Africa or India, is lubricated. The methods vary, but the purpose does not. There is nothing secret about this.

**L**ET US, THEREFORE, end with another Russian proverb: *Three people can keep a secret if two of them are dead.* There are no secrets in a democracy. ■



# OPENINGS

IN MEMORIAM

## A Politician and a Gentleman



GETTY IMAGES

**SUSHIL KUMAR MODI**  
(1952-2024)

**S**USHIL KUMAR MODI possessed a lively and wry sense of humour that was never long absent, irrespective of the current turn in his fortunes. His irreverent wit permitted a more meaningful appraisal of events and people than is often the case with politicians who tend to be self-absorbed. His mild and unhurried manner could be deceptive though. An unbroken stint in politics since his university days and the demanding assignments he handled is evidence of a sharp analytical mind capable of shrewd estimations. Just as he was perceptive, he was dogged and courageous, taking on powerful opponents and unmasking corruption. When he succumbed to cancer on May 13 at age 72, not only did the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) lose an exceptional leader but public life stood depleted by his untimely departure.

Despite his obvious talents, Modi had his share of struggles, some within the party he represented. He was at times accused of being “too close” to Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and might be the only BJP leader to be subjected to a confidence test by the party national executive. He keenly felt the unfairness of the charge but submitted to a party inquisition during a meeting held in the Parliament House Annexe in Delhi. The truth is that he understood the need to sustain BJP’s alliance with Kumar’s Janata Dal (United) and believed acrimonious statements would only help the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Lalu Prasad, whose vice-like grip on Bihar had once seemed unshakeable. Aware the BJP-JD(U) alliance is a delicate balance of castes and interests that are not always aligned, Modi felt self-inflicted wounds are avoidable.

It was Modi, as leader of opposition in the Bihar Assembly

from 1996 to 2004, who filed cases in the Patna High Court in what came to be called the “fodder scam” and led to an investigation by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The court-ordered CBI probe resulted in a major crisis for the United Front (UF) government as the agency moved to arrest Lalu, then the powerful chief minister of Bihar. Then Prime Minister IK Gujral and senior Janata Dal leaders persuaded Lalu to step down and appoint his wife Rabri Devi as chief minister. Rabri Devi was chief minister from July 1997 till March 2005, but RJD lost ground and was finally supplanted by a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by Nitish Kumar in 2005. It was a momentous event as Lalu’s Mandal politics that rested on a Muslim-Yadav (MY) vote bank was undermined by the desertion of a significant section of non-Yadav OBCs disillusioned with the leader.

The social engineering brought to fruition the decision of Nitish Kumar and George Fernandes to part ways with the Janata Dal in 1994 and ally with BJP in the 1996 Lok Sabha election. The formation of a government in Bihar gave BJP and its Hindutva politics a boost and though its articulation remained a source of tension, Modi’s presence as deputy chief minister ensured the coalition survived the bumps and jerks. Modi took governance seriously and was passionate about improving the lives of people in Bihar. He showed a taste for grappling with complex issues and headed the empowered committee of state finance ministers on the Goods and Services Tax (GST) replacing West Bengal’s Asim Dasgupta. He displayed the capacity to work with other state ministers and helped resolve sticky conflicts over taxation and state-Centre relations. Later, after GST was implemented, he headed a group of ministers to solve information technology issues that threatened to derail the ambitious tax reform. He was at the centre of discussions to rationalise GST rates and the process of fitting services and goods into various slabs. It is in this context that Prime Minister Narendra Modi noted his active role in the implementation of GST.

BJP’s long partnership with Nitish Kumar ended ahead of the 2014 Lok Sabha polls with the JD(U) leader refusing to endorse Narendra Modi’s candidature for prime minister. The setbacks suffered by JD(U) and RJD in that election brought them together and BJP faced the mighty Mandal duo in the 2015 state poll and lost. Sushil Modi bore the brunt of the defeat though he could not be solely blamed for BJP’s miscalculation that the election could be won by reminding voters about the “jungle raj” that marked Lalu’s term in office. Modi, however, did not give up. He soon brought up incriminating evidence of a “jobs-for-land” scam when the RJD leader had been railway minister in the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Modi had an ally in then Finance Minister Arun Jaitley with whom he enjoyed

a good equation. Jaitley saw merit in the cases and soon Modi was hammering away at Lalu and his family members for their alleged complicity in the scam, raising the heat for Nitish Kumar who had begun to fret under the overbearing ways of his new ally. The railway jobs scam was the principal trigger for Kumar to dump RJD and renew his vows with BJP in July 2017. Modi was back as deputy chief minister and remained so till 2020 when the BJP-JD(U) alliance returned to office. However, in a surprise move, BJP did not renominate him to the job.

Modi was perplexed by the decision to replace him as chief minister and worried about the inability of the state party to maintain relations with Kumar and JD(U). In the event, Kumar did yet another flip-flop and allied with RJD a second time in August 2022. While Modi had his concerns about BJP-JD(U) relations, he knew this was not the main reason for Kumar’s opportunistic behaviour and severely condemned the chief minister. After moving to Rajya Sabha in 2020, Modi’s erudition was often on display with BJP fielding him to speak on important matters of the economy. He could present BJP’s views on issues like Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in a cogent and effective manner. It is a testament to his dedication to the job on

hand that Modi prepared in detail for speeches in Parliament or Assembly. In fact, he would politely turn down requests from the media for off-the-cuff responses. Asked about his views on the significant aspects of the BJP National Council held earlier this year in February, Modi said he would get back after some thought. He did so, and answered the question about the viability of the prime minister’s call for 370 Lok Sabha seats with counter-questions: Was there any strong reason to vote for the opposition? Was there any reason to vote out the Modi government? He concluded by asserting that it might be difficult to predict where the BJP

tally will stop. It might well surpass conventional expectations. Ahead of Kumar’s latest U-turn, Modi anticipated his return to NDA, noting no door is closed permanently. Again, he understood the utility of a BJP-JD(U) alliance and the blow Kumar’s exit would be to the opposition’s I.N.D.I.A. project.

Sushil Modi was, above all, a fine human being with a genuinely helpful and sincere nature. He saw merit in moderation without compromising on his fiercely held ideological beliefs. He never forgot friends and his associations across all sections of society went back to when he was a student leader and later a BJP functionary involved in organising yatras of party stalwarts like LK Advani and being part of political campaigns. His questioning gaze and the slight smile that often played across his face will be missed as much as his insights on politics and public life. ■

**Modi brought up incriminating evidence of a ‘jobs-for-land’ scam when Lalu Prasad had been railway minister in the UPA government, raising the heat for Nitish Kumar who had begun to fret under the overbearing ways of his new ally**

**By RAJEEV DESHPANDE**

PORTRAIT • CHATGPT-40

# INTELLIGENT FUTURE

## OpenAI's all-knowing app shows striking improvements in generating content

**E**VER SINCE THE launch in November 2022 of its ChatGPT generative AI app, the Sam Altman-owed, Microsoft-backed OpenAI has become a synonym for mass generation of content, be it text, audio or video, from prompts. The smarter your prompt, the better the result.

GPT stands for Generative Pre-Trained Transformer and is a Large Language Model (LLM), which, according to the technology think tank Gartner, is a specialised type of AI trained on vast amounts of data to understand existing content and generate new content. This means you give a prompt and LLMs use existing data to produce answers, including essays, documentaries, and speeches. They are also trained to recognise emotions from texts, goes another claim.

OpenAI has since late 2022 updated its LLMs starting from GPT-3, then GPT-3.5, GPT-4, GPT-4 Turbo—and now GPT-4o (where o stands for omni).

When this writer checked out the latest version—ChatGPT-4o—and compared it with ChatGPT-4, the version launched last year, there were striking improvements in content generation. According to an OpenAI blog, as measured on traditional benchmarks, GPT-4o achieves GPT-4 Turbo-level performance on text, reasoning, and coding intelligence, while setting new high watermarks on multilingual, audio, and vision capabilities.

ChatGPT platforms of the San Francisco, California-based AI company that set off the new AI boom, currently attract 100 million weekly users. GPT-4o, according to analysts, is two times faster and 50 per cent cheaper than GPT-4 Turbo. As of now, free users in India can only access ChatGPT-3.5, and subscribers (who pay nearly ₹2,000 per month) can access ChatGPT-4 and ChatGPT-4o.

To measure the difference between ChatGPT-4o and the previous version, I gave a prompt: what is the latest situation in Gaza? Clearly, the new version was much faster and brought out more specific numbers compared with the earlier one. The content from the older version was not bad, but the latest one was much better and more formatted—compared to earlier versions, both even offered links for further references, drawing from five or six reputed news websites as sources.

Let's look at a demo by Corbin Brown, who describes himself as an AI developer and entrepreneur behind the vision of Webcafe AI. He gave the same prompt to ChatGPT-4 and ChatGPT-4o. "What is news about the apple stock I should be aware of[?]"

ChatGPT-4o returned the answer in 10 seconds as opposed to ChatGPT-4, which took 14 seconds. The latter did not give a stock analysis and searched one less site.

In a video, Brown shared a PDF file of a research study on the impact of sugar on the human brain and body to understand the key takeaways. "What is the biggest fact that supports the thesis in this PDF?" was the prompt. Brown concluded that in ChatGPT-4, formatting was bad and the results were not up to the mark.

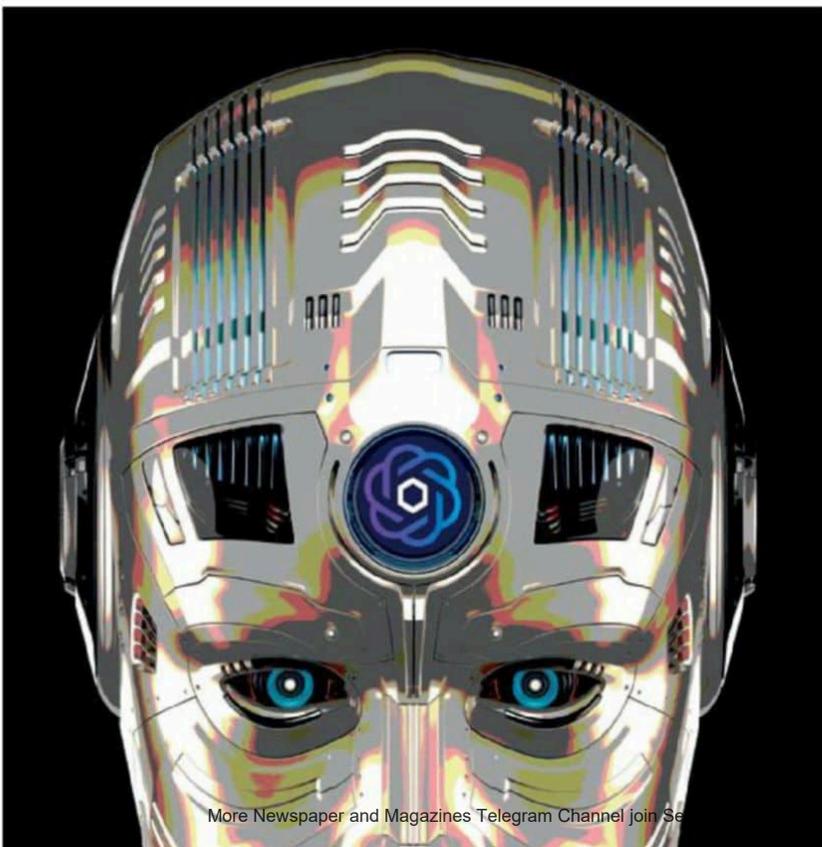
The new model also supports over 50 languages, including Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu. OpenAI has pitched GPT-4o with an ambitious pronouncement: It "is a step towards much more natural human-computer interaction—it accepts as input any combination of text, audio, image, and video and generates any combination of text, audio, and image outputs. It can respond to audio inputs in as little as 232 milliseconds, with an average of 320 milliseconds, similar to human response time in a conversation".

Gary Marcus, an American cognitive scientist, has some quibbles somehow. He agrees that on GPT-4o, speech synthesis is terrific, and it reminds him of Google Duplex (which never took off).

But he was expecting more: "If OpenAI had GPT-5, they would have shown it. They don't have GPT-5 after 14 months of trying." And, as always, some people have lined up quirky errors from prompts.

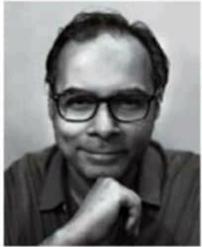
But thanks to most Fortune 500 companies zealously employing OpenAI tools instead of AI products from any other rival to ensure that their activities, including drafting of reports, are less cumbersome, ChatGPT-4o is destined to be in the spotlight. ■

By ULLEKH NP



ANGLE

## FALL OF A HOARDING



The human hand behind disasters wrecked by nature

By **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**

**T**HERE IS NO escaping forces of nature when they get angry, but what human beings have been able to do is adapt and mitigate the damage. How good a functioning system is depends on how this equation plays out. And it played out very badly this week in Mumbai when people who had gone to fill fuel at a petrol pump suddenly saw a giant hoarding fall and crush them, along with their vehicles. The count so far is 16 dead and many more injured. The immediate reason was an unexpected thunderstorm that saw wind speeds of 96 kilometres per hour, much above normal. It was sweltering summer and what happened was unexpected, and one could argue that these are contingencies that can't be planned for. Except that once you remove the layer of what can't be controlled, like a rotten onion, peel after peel of human responsibility becomes evident.

There is a maximum limit to how tall hoardings can be. It is set by the civic body, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). This one was three times that size. But it was in plain sight, so its illegality was wilfully ignored. BMC said it stood on land in the possession of the government railway police and passed the buck to the railways. The owner of the agency that put up the hoarding turned out to be someone with a number of criminal cases against him. He was absconding but predictably got caught because when the government really wants to do something, it will. Only when it comes to the regular

oiling of the wheels does everyone in the system feel they have a right to cut corners. Every once in a while, the corruption has consequences serious enough to stare you right in the face. As when a 250-tonne sheet of metal comes crashing down.

When systems get ossified then it becomes near-impossible to change them. BMC is a good example of it. The contracts it gives out for road works and repairs, for instance, have been riddled with corruption and incompetence for decades. Contractors get caught and blacklisted, their names announced in newspapers, and then you find they are back again and the roads remain pockmarked with potholes that multiply after every rainfall. For decades, octroi was the biggest money-spinner and it could never be fixed. The corruption ended when octroi itself disappeared after GST came into force. That is the only way to make government bodies accountable, to whittle away their powers so much that there is very little left for them to do. Instead, what happens after such a tragedy is for the government to take more power onto itself, using the same crisis that they themselves had a hand in creating. Now that the hoarding has fallen, they are asking an engineering college to find out how it happened. But what are the odds of such an unusual accident to ever repeat again, especially given how diligently safety rules will now be enforced? Instead the next one will come from some other corrupted corner. ■

IDEAS



Courtesy Jonathan Yeo Studio

## PAINTING

Painting a portrait is no easy task. It isn't just about capturing an individual's likeness. A good portrait will draw the character of the subject, but also bring something of the painter's individualism with it. Painting a monarch's portrait, one that will be scrutinised and hung for posterity, is all the more difficult. What has made it even more difficult is the presence of social media. This became evident when King Charles revealed his latest portrait by Jonathan Yeo, the first since he became king, and the artwork became instantly polarising. The painting depicts Charles in his Welsh Guards uniform, his entire body bathed in a striking deep red. Some were impressed. But many, especially on social media, were far more scathing. The comments went from saying the painting looked like it showed the king was "burning in hell" to comparing it to the haunted painting depicted in the *Ghostbusters* sequel. ■

WORD'S WORTH

**'Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter'**

**OSCAR WILDE**  
IRISH WRITER

# INSIDER

## WELFARE FOR ALL



Illustrations by SAURABH SINGH

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's categorical statement that he will not play the Hindu-Muslim polarisation card has sent BJP's adversaries into a fresh tailspin. While many of them, including commentators and activists, are accusing BJP of doublespeak, Modi has drawn a fresh line on the polarisation debate. By stating he was referring to infiltrators rather than the Muslim community in the context of his remarks that the fruits of reservation were being diverted from the truly deserving, Modi distanced himself from the charge that BJP was singling out Muslims. He reiterated that the Central government's welfare schemes did not discriminate on any ground. The sub-text of the prime minister's remarks seems to be that the references to reservation were essentially an attack on Congress and its politics of 'appeasement'. Modi has spared no effort in castigating Congress as a modern-day Muslim League in its bid to cater to sectional identities. Hence, the allegation that Congress is creating unconstitutional quotas based on religion for Muslims, which are at the cost of the backward classes. Home Minister Amit Shah addressed the question saying the contents of the manifestos of Congress and the I.N.D.I.A. bloc parties were divisive and required a discussion when voters were making their choices. He said Congress' promises to ensure minorities a share in areas like public contracts were pretty much the redistribution of national resources. BJP has sharpened its attack on Congress as the opposition party has been unable to come out with categorical statements on the Ram Mandir and is dogged by the refusal of its leaders to attend the consecration ceremony of the temple. Congress has responded by stating that it has always said it will abide by the court verdict and termed Modi's allegation that the party will put a "Babri lock" on the temple as untrue. The problem is that Congress' dilly-dallying on Hindu issues and the promises of radical steps to address inequality have given BJP the opportunity to go for the kill.



## Mayawati Shields Her Nephew

**M**ore on Mayawati and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). BSP continues to struggle in the triangular contest in Uttar Pradesh with BJP and the Samajwadi Party-Congress combine seen as the main rivals. But stories continue to circulate about the abrupt fall from grace of Mayawati's nephew Akash Anand whose status as the leader's political heir has been withdrawn, or at least suspended. One explanation is that Mayawati was upset with the direct and untampered criticism of BJP and Modi which she perhaps feels is counter-productive. A more subtle, if speculative, assessment is that she wants to shield Anand from a likely adverse poll result. The story is that BSP felt it was on a strong footing at the start of elections, but this has changed as polling progressed. Even her loyal Jatav vote bank is dispirited about BSP's prospects and some have considered alternatives. Concerned that Anand's first exposure to a high-stakes campaign may be underwhelming, she has used his speeches as an excuse to remove him from the frontline. Observers point out she herself has been quite unsparing in taking on BJP, even if she has avoided harsh adjectives.

## The Maliwal Question

**T**he Delhi election is in focus with Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal getting relief from the Supreme Court and AAP's chief campaigner back in action. But soon after the AAP ranks felt encouraged by the presence of Kejriwal, a fresh storm hit the party with Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal allegedly assaulted by the chief minister's staff at his residence. Maliwal apparently made two emergency calls to the police following which the local SHO hot-footed to the chief minister's residence. However, the MP was not seen and has not been out in public since. It is believed that the physical altercation may have had something to do with Maliwal's initial absence when Kejriwal was arrested. Questions were raised about the absence of some key AAP figures at the time. The chief minister did not offer any comment in the immediate aftermath of the incident though AAP obliquely admitted that Maliwal was at the centre of the incident. Ironies abound as Maliwal headed the Delhi Commission for Women and has often been involved in sharp exchanges with BJP over various issues, including the safety of women. BJP candidate for New Delhi Bansuri Swaraj was quick to take up the matter, saying Maliwal must clarify what happened while expressing concern over the MP's well-being.

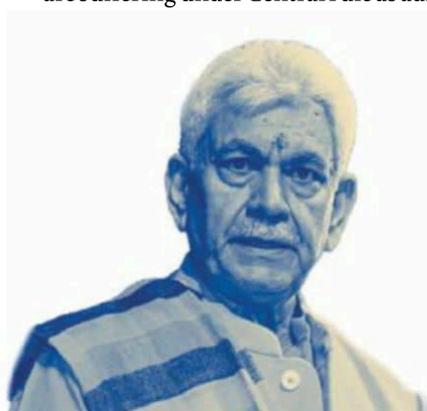


## Will Lotus Bloom in Telangana, Andhra?

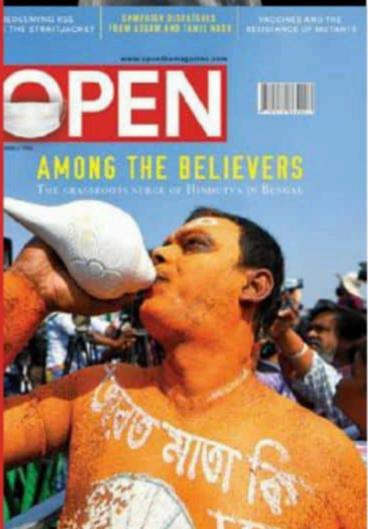
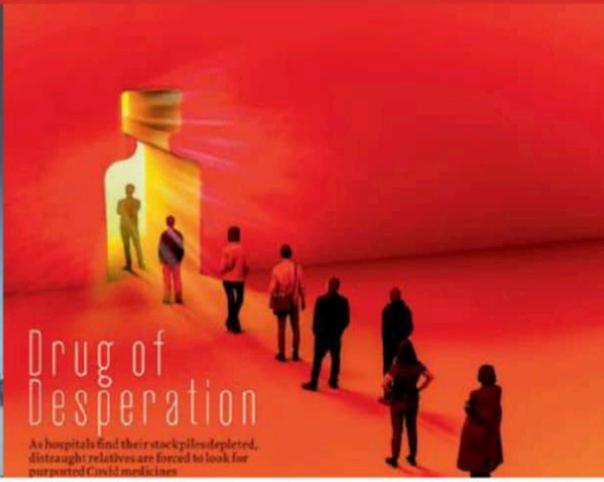
**B**JP's hopes are rising in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, the latter having voted recently. BJP leaders have received positive feedback from Telangana where the party is seen as the main rival to Congress, recovering its challenger status it had squandered ahead of the state polls last year. The party is also set to do well in Andhra Pradesh in the company of ally Telugu Desam Party (TDP), which appears to be on a comeback trail. Though BJP is the junior partner and TDP leader N Chandrababu Naidu is very niggardly in sharing spoils with allies, the party should get a toehold in the state's politics, perhaps winning half of the six seats it is contesting. YSRCP, led by Jagan Mohan Reddy, is banking on generous welfare spending but faces questions about its success in the development of the state and a lack of opportunities. The ruling party has failed to satisfactorily solve the issue of a state capital and its advocacy of three capitals has not worked, and further deepened the financial mess around the stalled Amravati city project. Reddy is an energetic and decisive leader but is also something of a loner and can be mercurial.

## Valley Chooses the Ballot

**T**he increased voting percentage in Srinagar and the evident public participation in the electoral process in the Kashmir Valley has displeased a section of the commentariat that has opposed the scrapping of Article 370 and argues that the people in the region are suffering under Central rule as administered through the Lieutenant Governor



Manoj Sinha. Sinha, on his part, is concentrating on ensuring that the polls remain incident-free and draws comfort with the vigorous campaigning by all parties. Detractors claim that the turnout is evidence of public anger. But even if this were the case, the fact that people are expressing their opinions through the ballot is a big achievement. Meanwhile, the contrast with the situation in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, where the populace is up in arms over high inflation, provides an effective contrast with the calm on the Indian side of the Line of Control.



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# A Tale of Two Nominations

Modi's basket of guarantees and Rahul's consolation prize

By RAHUL SHIVSHANKAR



IN THIS AGE OF the viral Insta-image, illusions evoked by optics can change the course of destiny, cloud the face of vanity, or simply disguise reality. Examples abound.

There are no better conjurers of illusion than politicians. Consider the photograph of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's casually placed arm over Yogi Adityanath's shoulder. Were the optics illuminating a succession plan? The debate is still raging inconclusively after the image was placed in the public domain.

That was then. Now, many moons later, in the midst of a political Mahabharat with seven acts, could two images have the same enigmatic effect?

Modi basking in the reflected adulation of mesmerised believers in the crucible of *bharatiyata*—Varanasi. And the recalcitrant scion, Rahul Gandhi, sneaking almost unannounced into his family fief to file his nomination. While Modi demands what he believes is a well-earned reward for “transformative” work, Rahul hopes for benefaction to secure his family's future.

Politics is played in the shadows but practised in public.

Modi's show of strength in Varanasi evolved from the public expression of a backroom tactical political imperative. The need to project invincibility in the public domain. That demoralising jack knife that combatants unsheath to bleed confidence out of their opponents. Of the notion or belief that they stand a chance.

With a lot still left to fight for in this election, Modi is hoping that images of him grateful to be drowning in the sea of support, of him being held up as NDA's totem by a close-knit assembly of influential allies, and his oversized projection by an indulgent media, will underline his stranglehold on the contest. Maintaining the aura of Modi's dominance is vital to BJP's campaign. Let's not forget that the party has this time round put all its eggs in the Modi basket of guarantees.

A war wherein one side is convinced of its inferiority and the other down on hope is never going to be an even contest. The weaker side can only at best hope to negotiate a peace

and at least get to set some of the terms of the surrender.

Of course, the other side, in this case Congress, vehemently disagrees. And the party's top faces have expressed their derision in public for all to note.

Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has, for one, dismissed Modi's Varanasi theatrics as the vainglorious performance of a flailing prima donna refusing to accept that the curtain is coming down.

While Priyanka Gandhi Vadra has focused on the person, Congress' lead spin doctor, Jairam Ramesh, has focused on the props. Which, according to him, are the totems of Hindutva

(the weaponised 'Jai Shri Ram' slogans and muscular religiosity) that have chopped India into a million enmities.

But however hard Congress may try to puncture the Modi propaganda balloon, it can't obscure the optics.

The optics. Rahul Gandhi being dragged to the altar of public judgment in Rae Bareilly only for the sake of making a contest out of it is an acknowledgement that the election was over even before it began.

Perhaps the dynast, for all his delusions, knew this well before April 19 when the battle began. Which explains the torturous humming and hawing over taking the fight to Modi's northern citadel.

Which explains why he chose not to pick up Smriti Irani's audaciously thrown down gauntlet in Amethi. And which also explains the sullen final nod to the pleadings of hangers-on to contest from Rae Bareilly.

When a forced truce is installed on June 1 as the last vote impresses itself upon the microchip of the EVM, Rahul Gandhi will hope that his efforts (or lack thereof) will at least win him the consolation prize. The face-saver of ensuring the Gandhi family's unwavering grip on the grand duchy of Rae Bareilly.

Are these two images—Modi in Varanasi and Rahul in Rae Bareilly—then the final two acts of the election archived for posterity?

Or are we being cuckolded by the artful illusion of optics? ■



Rahul Shivshankar is Consulting Editor, Network 18



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

# The War of the Images

Why the General Election is no longer about competing narratives

By Badri Narayan



THIS IS AN election of images. And in this election of images, it Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image that is central. Most of the electorate has already voted or going to vote for or against the image of Modi. Images of other leaders, those from other political parties, seem to lag far behind Modi's image in Elections 2024.

Roaming in and around the *khet-khalihan* (farms and barns) of North Indian states like Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, one may observe that people, especially those in rural areas, converse about images and not about narratives when they discuss the Lok Sabha polls. They talk about leaders like Modi, Rahul Gandhi, Yogi Adityanath, Mayawati, Nitish Kumar, Tejashwi Yadav, and Arvind Kejriwal, or about the symbols of the parties, for example, kamal (lotus), bicycle, hathi (elephant), haath (hand), etc. Such images occupy an important place in people's political imagination in almost every election. In this General Election, the images have acquired significance due to the enhancement of the image capital of Prime Minister Modi in recent years. Modi has evolved into an influential picture in people's minds across India. Even in the interior regions of the country, I have heard people talk about this being "*Modi ka election* (Modi's election)". When I asked them what they thought of the ongoing polls, then too, some of the respondents exclaimed: "Election! It is Modi ka election."

What does this mean? It means the prime minister's popularity has reached such a level that it has emerged as a synonym for the General Election itself in the hearts and minds of illiterate and marginalised people living in India's rural interior. Popularity of that order tends to produce, after the lapse of some time, visual symbols that have the capability of capturing our imagination and orienting our political attitude and behaviour. Such popularity enhances public appreciation of such leaders and their work while minimising the scope for criticising them. In this election, pursuing my field work in different parts of the country, I found that people

**THE PRIME MINISTER'S POPULARITY HAS REACHED SUCH A LEVEL THAT IT HAS EMERGED AS A SYNONYM FOR THE GENERAL ELECTION ITSELF IN THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF ILLITERATE AND MARGINALISED PEOPLE LIVING IN INDIA'S RURAL INTERIOR. POPULARITY OF THAT ORDER TENDS TO PRODUCE, AFTER THE LAPSE OF SOME TIME, VISUAL SYMBOLS THAT HAVE THE CAPABILITY OF CAPTURING OUR IMAGINATION**

had no complaints against Prime Minister Modi. Even many of those who were/are going to vote against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) could be found praising Modi.

The images come to us through various kinds of orality and perceptions, electronic and print media, as well as social media. We consume them, recreate them, and then distribute them among more people. We distribute the images via the same mediums—oral, visual, aural—by which we receive them in the first place. There are two types of images—those with a shorter lifespan and those with a longer shelf life. Images with a long life may sometimes be transformed into symbols, with constant additions, deletions and other modifications. I would like to emphasise here that the politics that was being observed and analysed in the media and in the political sphere as an 'age of narrative' is now being turned into an 'age of images'. As it happened, the narrative which had remained central to politics in this decade has now acquired a supplementary status and contributed as a constituent to the politics of image-making.

Images work in mobilising the public in democratic elections by re-forging their inherent ties with the trust of the people. The public develops a deep trust in the positive images of political leaders. This trust mobilises them for political support.

Moreover, images have a long-lasting impact on people's memories. These memories are activated by image-based narratives and persuasive discourses through rallies and media appearances used to garner electoral support in favour of parties and their leaders.

This election is going to be a contest of images, mainly among those of three leaders at the national level—Narendra Modi, Rahul Gandhi and Arvind Kejriwal. With this as the core of image politics, the images of many regional leaders are also contesting that of Modi's in various opposition-run states to counter the political influence of Brand Modi.

Modi's image has evolved with constant additions of various kinds of image capital which emerged from his political and governance styles. It



PRIME MINISTER MODI'S IMAGE IS FARAHEAD IN COMPARISON TO THOSE OF HIS RIVALS. HE HAS NOT ONLY EFFECTIVELY BUILT UP HIS POLITICAL IMAGE BUT ALSO EVOLVED THAT IMAGE BEYOND THE POLITICAL. PEOPLE BEGAN BELIEVING IN HIM AS THEIR PROBLEM-SOLVER EVEN IN THEIR SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS LIVES

Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

started evolving after 2005 when Modi was chief minister of Gujarat. It created public trust in Modi as a visionary leader who was dedicated to development. After becoming prime minister, his image got a big boost and added to itself new image capital, such as a leader who delivers, who crafts his politics to make India *viksit* (advanced or developed) and strong, etc. He won a huge trust capital at the grassroots level. And, after the inauguration of the Ram Mandir, his image got another big boost, deepening his admiration among a broader section of Hindus belonging to various castes and social groups. A meticulous analysis would show that Modi's image has evolved by the cohesive combination of his *vak* (orality), political actions, and governance decisions, and from his visible presence in real as well as virtual public life. There are no contradictions among these ingredients of image-formation in the public imagination. Any imbalance, or contradiction, thereof would create ruptures in the impact of the image. It's difficult to find any ambiguity in the messages conveyed by Modi's image.

Thus, Prime Minister Modi's image is far ahead in comparison to those of his rivals. He has not only effectively built up his political image but also evolved his image beyond the political. People began believing in him as their problem-solver even in their social, cultural and religious lives. Modi's innumerable engagements with the public through programmes like *Mann ki Baat* and *Pariksha Pe Charcha*, his presence at religious and spiritual sites, etc. have further helped him gain such trust.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi also uses similar strategies of image-building, such as influencing the public imagination through orality, political actions as well as media visibility. He has also gained a certain amount of trust

among a section of people and has succeeded in diluting his negative image prevalent on social media. But we can observe two problems in his case. First, the element of inconsistency; second, contradictions among the various constituents of his exercise in image-building. For example, sometimes his abrupt absence from the field creates hurdles for increasing his trust capital. Some of his statements contradict and hinder the growth of his image. His recent statement about the youth of Varanasi generated a lot of criticism and ruptured his image as a youth icon or leader.

Kejriwal's image entered this battle only recently. However, the Delhi chief minister has also earned his image as a 'doer', a leader who fulfils his commitments substantially. But after his arrest by the Directorate of Enforcement (ED), a twofold reaction emerged among the public. There was sympathy for him among one section but in places far from Delhi and Punjab, where his party is stronger, he is being criticised. A section of the public finds a gap between his *kathani* (words, statements) and *karani* (deeds). As we know, such gaps disrupt the image-building of a leader.

It is interesting to witness the image battle among these leaders in the ongoing parliamentary election. It is not difficult to see a big lead for Modi against his rivals. The only thing we need to watch is the extent to which such image-impacts translate into votes. We have to also see how the cadres belonging to these leaders' respective parties work strategically to use their images to mobilise people and get them to cast their votes. ■



Badri Narayan is a director and professor at GB Pant Social Science Institute, Prayagraj. He is the author of, among other titles, Republic of Hindutva

# Under Western Eyes

How to counter a civilisational subversion

By SANDEEP BALAKRISHNA

IN THE CLOSING PAGES of the final volume of his monumental *History of the Dharmasastra*, Mahamahopadhyaya PV Kane memorably captures the foundational essence of the Sanatana civilisation: “Our ancient sages laid the foundation [for philosophical and social harmony] by insisting... that there is and must be harmony between man’s spirit and the spirit of the world and man’s endeavour should be to realise in his actions and his life this harmony and unity... social reforms and politics have to be preached through our age old... philosophy. *If our leaders and people throw away or neglect religion and spirituality altogether, the probability is that we shall lose both spiritual life and social betterment.*” (Emphasis added)

Clearly, about four generations of our political leaders after independence not only axed these spiritual foundations but ensured that engineering social disharmony was a fecund vote-getting method. We can leave it at that.

Essentially, our rishis had realised that a conscious and lifelong cultivation of an inner spiritual culture was the failproof method to refine the mind which, in turn, would sculpt the external life. To strip this to the bare minimum, it means this: how one regards life itself.

Sanatana civilisation and society are built on the edifice of regarding life as a celebration in all its multifaceted aspects—just as joy, sorrow, too, is celebrated as a Great Cosmic Drama of the Unmanifested Brahman whose Lila (sport) is this physical world. The Veda has a profusion of hymns praying to the Devatas to grant abundance and enjoyment without violating Dharma. For example, in the celebrated ‘Chamaka Prashna’, the rishi asks the Devatas to grant a whopping 143 items of tangible and intangible enjoyments. And one of the great messages of Vedanta is the quest for immortality via transcendence of death. The Kathopanishad in which the eight-year-old boy Nachiketa confronts Yama and asks him to teach him the secret of immortality is one of the most lasting gifts of philosophy Bharatavarsha has given the world.

Thus, in both the sacred corpus and literary lore of Sanatana culture, we find no mention of lines like “Death lays his icy hand on kings:/ Sceptre and Crown/ Must tumble down”. While this is quite beautiful in itself, it leaves one wanting. That want is filled, for example, by Bhartrhari whose grand verse *Maatar-Medini, Taata Maruta* is the philosopher-poet’s outpouring that occurs after he has realised within himself the highest spiritual truth. In the verse, he offers a moving and heartfelt oblation to

all the elements of creation (earth, air, sun, etc) that have made his realisation possible. There is no mention of death but Bhartrhari’s merging with Parabrahman. This is the Sanatana spirit and method.

All of this reveals another central feature of Bharatavarsha’s philosophical underpinnings: the total absence of pessimism. Happiness and sadness are but mere phases, which realisation is rooted in the Sanatana conception of time as cyclic. The foregoing exposition offers an essential backdrop to re-examine India’s current position as a civilisation in an age rife with mass epidemics like wokery and Islamic terror.

As Bharatavarsha, postcolonial and post-Congress India is the only surviving and unbroken non-Abrahamic, ancient civilisation and culture. More important, this civilisational flow has pretty much been maintained intact in almost all realms of our national life. In passing, it is worth quoting KM Munshi’s brilliant assessment in this regard: “I have seen and felt the form, continuity and meaning of India’s past. *History, as I see it, is being consciously lived by Indians... The role of alien invasions in the history of India, hitherto exaggerated, deserves to be reduced to its appropriate proportions... But during all this period, the vitality of the race and culture... expressed itself with unabated vigour. The history of India is not the story of how she underwent foreign invasions, but how she resisted them and eventually triumphed over them.*” (Emphases added)

We need to emphasise the phrase that Bharatavarsha is the “only surviving non-Abrahamic, ancient culture and civilisation.” S Radhakrishnan, in his preface to PV Kane’s aforementioned work writes: “True religion should have three sides to it: (i) State of Mind (ii) Relationship to reality and (iii) A way of life.” This threefold precept is a handy model to show how both Abrahamic systems—Islam and Christianity—are conspicuous in sharp contrast to Sanatana Dharma.

We can consider two elements first. The first is Radhakrishnan’s “relationship to reality”, and the second, the fundamental conception of life mentioned earlier. While Christianity regards birth and thus life itself as sinful, the core doctrines of Islam in this regard are quite radical to say the least. The great incentive to commit ceaseless jihad is the notion of a glorious Jannat, which is the promised and only reality for the believer. In contrast, Sanatana Dharma regards all life as sacred, a veneration

that extends to all of nature—the profound and ancient tradition of tirtha-kshetras is rooted in this sanctity.

Given such a fundamental incongruence, it remains a travesty to witness the nonchalant manner in which Sanatana Dharma and Abrahamic belief systems are clubbed together as ‘religion’ in our public discourse for the last eight decades. The falsehood has almost become received truth. It is a tragedy that breeds itself. And the path that led us to this



Illustration by SAURABH SINGH

plight necessitates a slight historical detour.

In the 1950s, RC Majumdar wrote how “real history... teaches us that the major part of India lost independence about five centuries before, and merely changed masters in the eighteenth century.”

A primary difference between the protracted Muslim rule in India and British colonialism is the fact that while Muslim rulers settled in India, the British never made India their home.

From the very early days, the British constantly kept reminding themselves that they would have to pack their bags and leave one day. But the cultural destruction they inflicted has today become almost impossible to repair. This began with the well-known introduction of English education, which was simultaneously accompanied by the comprehensive destruction of our traditional modes of learning. Concomitant with this was the impetus given to Christian missionaries who, not coincidentally, came to monopolise the educational space. It is a dominance they retain to date.

It is worth recalling Ananda Coomaraswamy’s early warning that an English-educated Indian would be permanently sundered from his roots and become an “intellectual pariah who does not belong to the East or the West, the past or the future. The greatest danger for India is

the loss of her spiritual integrity. Of all Indian problems the educational is the most difficult and most tragic.” When we trace the history of the ideological battles being fought in the educational sphere since the 1950s, we notice how this malaise has become a monster.

There was another handmaiden of English education. This was the growth and expansion of the discipline of Indology, which began making major forays into higher education and bureaucracy when British rule was at its peak. The biggest ‘contribution’ of Indology over the last two-odd centuries undoubtedly is the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) which ranks as one of the world’s greatest intellectual hoaxes in the service of colonialism. Over time, AIT has been repeatedly shown to be false. However, far from this acting as a deterrent, the same phenomenon has clothed itself in newer attire. The power centre has shifted from Britain to America. Current offshoots of Indology include the ongoing attempts to politicise and offer spurious interpretations of the Vedas, epics, Puranas, the Sanskrit language, folklore and, indeed, anything that can be considered ‘native’, indigenous and useful for multi-pronged Western interventions in India. The two pathbreaking books, *Breaking India* and *Snakes on the Ganga* are alarming exposés of how this colonialism-impelled design against India operates in our age. In other words, the West never gave up studying Hindu Dharma in all its aspects—philosophy, literature, culture, society, traditions, and Hindus as a people. Agenda-driven American scholars continue to undertake this kind of study whose findings will be used by the foreign policy machinery of America.

Two examples from recent history serve to illustrate the fatal consequences of not erecting unbreachable safeguards against such mischief. The Philippines, which for all practical purposes is still an American colony. It is not coincidental that its Magsaysay Award has been behind much of the sustained actions to disrupt India using Indians. East Timor (Timor-Leste), a former ‘pagan’ nation, was systematically infiltrated by Christian missionaries, leading to a full-blown civil war. Christianity gained a new country for itself—in the 20th century.

Both countries have now become mere Christian outposts of powerful nations of the West.

It is clear that Bharatavarsha is the last non-Abrahamic bastion to be subverted and conquered by the West—bloodlessly if possible, but rarely has such conquest been bloodless. Do we want Sanatana Bharatavarsha to undergo a similar fate? ■

*Sandeep Balakrishna is founder and chief editor of The Dharma*



*Dispatch. He is the author of, among other titles, Tipu Sultan: the Tyrant of Mysore and Invaders and Infidels: From Sindh to Delhi: The 500-Year Journey of Islamic Invasions. He has also translated SL Bhyrappa’s Aavarana from Kannada to English*



By **BIBEK DEBROY** and **HINDOL SENGUPTA**

# THE THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

*Freedom and fearlessness in the time of disruptions*

**O**VER DINNER AT a literature festival in Goa, the conversation turned to the projects we were working on. It so transpired that Hindol was working on a book on the experience of reading the Ashtavakra Gita during a time of immense personal turmoil including, though not at all limited to the Covid-19 pandemic, and requested Bibek if he, as the preeminent living translator of Hindu spiritual texts, and the only person ever to have completed the translation of both the Ramayana and the Mahabharata in their lifetime, might consider doing a new translation of the Ashtavakra Gita. “The two texts, the translation by Bibek, and the contemplative journey of reading the Ashtavakra Gita by Hindol, could then be combined into one unified project”. Between the same covers, the reader would not only be able to go on a journey of the experience reading the Ashtavakra Gita but would also be able to read a fresh translation of the remarkable original text and discover their own path through the immortal words.

This combined text—the translation, and the experience of reading the text from a non-monastic, though deeply reflective, perspective—hopes to encourage many new readers to approach the eternal lessons of the Ashtavakra Gita with the fearlessness that it advocates to embrace the freedom it promises.

## WHAT IS THE ASHTAVAKRA GITA?

The Ashtavakra Gita tells us nothing about the sage Ashtavakra. Whatever we know about Ashtavakra comes primarily from the Mahabharata.

The Mahabharata is divided into sections, known as *parvas*. The word *parva/parvan* means division or joint and the Mahabharata is divided into such *parvas*. Most people know that the Mahabharata has eighteen *parvas*. In this list of eighteen *parvas*, Vana Parva or Aranyaka Parva, is the third. This is the book of the forest, so to speak, when the Pandavas have been exiled to the forest. It is the longest of the eighteen *parvas*. Vana Parva is divided into other *parvas* or sub-divisions. One such sub-division is Tirtha Yatra Parva. The sage Narada arrives and tells the Pandavas to visit *tirthas*, sacred places of pilgrimage. In Tirtha Yatra Parva of the Mahabharata, we learn about Ashtavakra.

There are three chapters about Ashtavakra. In the course of their travels, the Pandavas met the sage Lomasha. Lomasha pointed out the hermitage of Shvetaketu, Uddalaka’s son. Lomasha told them, the foremost exponents of Brahman were Shvetaketu and Ashtavakra, Kahoda’s son. Kahoda was Uddalaka’s disciple and married Sujata, Uddalaka’s daughter. Sujata conceived. While he was still inside the womb, the child corrected his father’s studies. Angry at this, Kahoda cursed him, “Since you spoke while you were still inside, you will be crooked in eight ways.” *Ashta* means eight while *vakra* means bent or crooked. Kahoda’s curse referred to a physical deformity and that is how Ashtavakra was born, bent in eight parts of his body. Obviously, there are no paintings of Ashtavakra that go back to that period. There are contemporary paintings and those show Ashtavakra to be crooked, physically



**WHILE ASHTAVAKRA WAS STILL INSIDE THE WOMB, THE CHILD CORRECTED HIS FATHER'S STUDIES. ANGRY AT THIS, KAHODA CURSED HIM. ASHTA MEANS EIGHT WHILE VAKRA MEANS BENT OR CROOKED. KAHODA'S CURSE REFERRED TO A PHYSICAL DEFORMITY AND THAT IS HOW ASHTAVAKRA WAS BORN, BENT IN EIGHT PARTS OF HIS BODY**

deformed. Shvetaketu and Ashtavakra were of the same age. There was a king named Janaka, the king of Mithila. Janaka had a scholar brahmana in his court and his name was Bandi. Bandi was fond of debating with other scholars. Once defeated, the vanquished would be drowned in the waters. Much before Ashtavakra was born, Kahoda went to King Janaka's court and was defeated by Bandi in this way.

This was kept a secret from Ashtavakra and Ashtavakra grew up thinking that Uddalaka was his father. He got to know the truth when he was twelve years old and he and Shvetaketu journeyed to King Janaka's court, to witness a sacrifice King Janaka was performing and to debate with Bandi. The gatekeeper wouldn't allow them in and there was a discussion-cum-debate between Ashtavakra and Janaka, with King Janaka speaking through the gatekeeper. Impressed with

the learning, Ashtavakra was allowed to enter and there was a debate between Ashtavakra and Bandi. With Bandi defeated, Kahoda was rescued and Kahoda, Ashtavakra and Shvetaketu returned to their hermitage. The Mahabharata doesn't tell us anything more about Ashtavakra. Nor does it say anything about King Janaka accepting Ashtavakra as a guru.

There is a stray mention of Ashtavakra in the Valmiki Ramayana too. The Valmiki Ramayana is divided into sections known as *kandas* and there are seven *kandas*. The sixth is Yuddha Kanda, the section that deals with the battle between Rama's army and Ravana's army. When the battle was over and Ravana and the rakshasas were destroyed, as a result of Shiva's favours, Dasharatha appeared before Rama and said that he had been saved by Rama, just as Ashtavakra had saved a brahmana (meaning Kahoda). There is also the Adhyatma

Ramayana, sometimes regarded as part of Brahmanda Purana. In Aranya Kanda of the Adhyatma Ramayana, there is a reference to Ashtavakra. When Rama and Lakshmana were wandering around, looking for Sita, they came upon Kabandha, a rakshasa. Kabandha actually means a headless torso and this rakshasa was gigantic. Naturally, Rama asked him about how he came to become a rakshasa. Kabandha used to be a gandharva. Proud of his beauty, when Kabandha saw the malformed Ashtavakra, he laughed at him. Ashtavakra

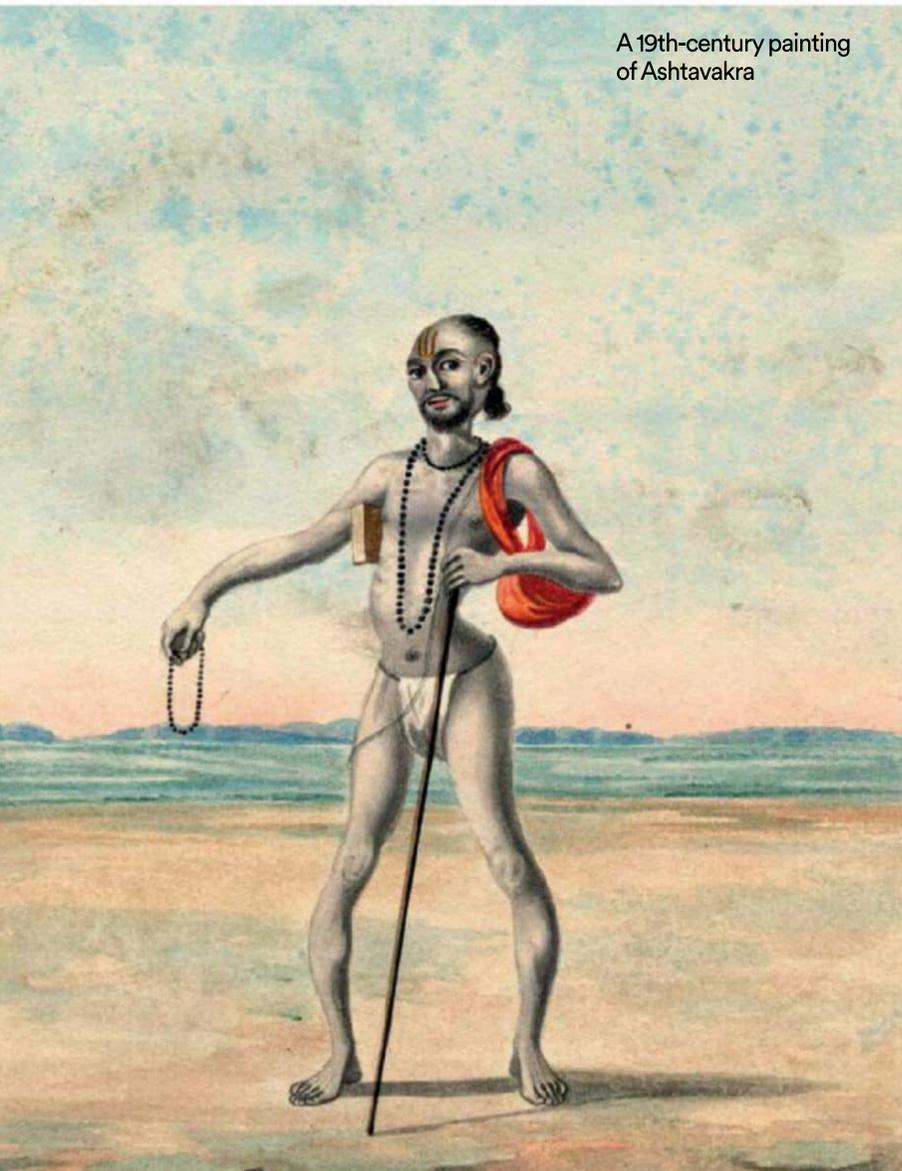
cursed the gandharva that he would become the rakshasa Kabandha. However, Ashtavakra was also full of compassion. Therefore, when the gandharva prayed for forgiveness, Ashtavakra gave him the boon that when Rama cut off his arms, he would become a gandharva again. Finally, there is Bhavabhuti's *Uttararamacharita*, written much later, about Rama's later life. In the initial part of this play, specifically the first act, Ashtavakra comes to visit Rama and Lakshmana from rishi Rishyashringa's hermitage. Ashtavakra has no special role, beyond that of conveying messages and there is no reference to his being special, or his being malformed.

The Ashtavakra Gita is a straight dialogue between Ashtavakra and King Janaka. Dialogue is the right word. To suggest that Ashtavakra is the guru and Janaka is the shishya is not quite correct, since beyond a point, it is a dialogue among equals. There is no prologue and no prelude. We aren't given any background to the conversation. The conversation just starts and in 20 chapters and 285 shlokas, the level of dialogue is raised higher and higher, reaching a zenith in the 18th chapter.

**By Bibek Debroy**

**THE ASHTAVAKRA GITA IS A DEFINITIVE TEXT OF THE ADVAITA VEDANTA PATH OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY. ADVAITA MEANS NOT TWO, OR MORE COMMONLY, NON-DUAL. ADVAITA VEDANTA TEACHES THAT THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL SOUL AND THE UNIVERSAL CONSCIOUSNESS, BETWEEN THE ATMAN AND BRAHMAN**

A 19th-century painting of Ashtavakra



## THE ROPE AND THE SNAKE

I spent four months, during the Covid-enforced lockdown, reading the Ashtavakra Gita every day. During this time, every few days I read parts of the book, first from the beginning to the end. Then, as it is a short book, I went back and read different portions again and again. It is, I felt, impossible to read the Ashtavakra Gita only once. It is a book that never really finishes. The Ashtavakra Gita is too simple. Therein lies its profundity. When you read the Ashtavakra Gita, if you read it with care, it is almost like listening to your soul. You might feel, as I did, that there had never been a time when I did not know what the book had to say. When I started to read it, it seemed a bit abrupt. Says the Ashtavakra Gita, if you detach yourself from the body (and therefore in turn from the crests and troughs of feelings) and rest in 'Intelligence' (meaning the higher intelligence, consciousness, God, use the term that appeals to you), "you will become happy, serene and free from bonds".

Detach from the body? That is all very well to say, I thought to myself, but I was homebound in a manner I had never been in my entire life; more than ever, I was aware of, and not detached, from my body. Shorn of the daily routine of activity, my body felt heavy, even lost. In those early days of lockdown, I wondered whether to step out for walks. I worried not only about my own body, its

discomfort at the sudden somnolence of house arrest, but also the bodies of my parents. But the body is an illusion, the Ashtavakra Gita seemed to be telling me. The body is a vessel of emotions. The emotions are traps. “Dharma and adharma, happiness and unhappiness, are attributes of the mind,” I read, “They are not yours. You are not the agent who does. You are not the one who enjoys the fruits. Thus, you are always free.”

The Ashtavakra Gita is a definitive text of the Advaita Vedanta path of Indian philosophy. Advaita means not two, or more commonly, non-dual. Advaita Vedanta is part of the many traditions of the Vedanta, one of the six astika schools of philosophy. Advaita Vedanta teaches, in simple terms, that there is no difference between the individual soul and the universal consciousness, between the atman and Brahman. As feeling of this separation is really an illusion; therefore, the famous Advaita Vedanta lesson that all that the eye sees is not the reality—it is merely a sensory experience. The reality is that which is seeing the eyes see—the unchanging seer which is witness to birth, growth, and death of the body, and itself remains unchanged.

In my meditation practice, I had consistently read and heard the urging to ‘simply observe’. Observe the way in which I breathe, observe the sensations in my body, observe what is happening beyond my plans and my trying-s. And in that observance, recognise that, as Ashtavakra says, “You alone are the one who witnesses everything. You are almost always free. This alone is your bondage, that you look at the witness as someone else.” There are many ways to talk about this subtle but all-important shift of perspective, of gaze, as it were, brought about by the quietening of the mind. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali talk about *chitta vritti nirodha* or the purpose of yoga is to quieten the mind, make it still. The beauty of this mind stillness appears everywhere as, in a sense, a final goal.

I had for a few years before the lockdown tried, intermittently, to build a meditative practice. It had not been easy. The thoughts were too plentiful. The mind too excited, too anxious. There were too many goals to achieve, disappointments to overcome. More than anything else, my path was littered with the anticipation of the future. I always knew (or so I imagined) what was coming, what was going to happen, and my role in making it happen. The future had become the great obstacle in the path of my staying in the present.

The Covid-19 lockdown broke my attachment to the future. For the first time in my adult life, and indeed for the first time in my fifteen-year career, I found myself unable to, with any degree of confidence, answer what might happen in six, even three, months to my career, or even life. This was, at once, immensely anxiety-inducing, and, from time to time, oddly liberating. There were reasons too many to count for the anxiety; for the liberation, there was one primary cause: there was nothing left to lose.

“In this world,” says Ashtavakra, “all that is manifest is like the conception of a snake in a rope. You are bliss and supreme bliss. You are understanding. Be happy.” I was far from happy.

**ASHTAVAKRA CURSED THE GANDHARVA THAT HE WOULD BECOME THE RAKSHASA KABANDHA. HOWEVER, ASHTAVAKRA WAS ALSO FULL OF COMPASSION. THEREFORE, WHEN THE GANDHARVA PRAYED FOR FORGIVENESS, ASHTAVAKRA GAVE HIM THE BOON THAT WHEN RAMA CUT OFF HIS ARMS, HE WOULD BECOME A GANDHARVA AGAIN**



A circa 16th-century painting in the Kodandaramaswamy Temple at Ayodhyapatnam depicting Rama and Lakshmana seated on Kabandha's arms

But such was the uncertainty of a collapsing world that, in moments, the anxious thoughts of losing everything, material and emotional, to an invisible disease, grew so fervent that imagining them beyond a point, curiously, made me feel free.

What, it occurred to me while reading the Ashtavakra Gita in my fevered meditations, would really happen if I lost everything? It would, ironically, be a fresh start free from every burden of expectation—most of which I had placed upon myself. I would have nothing to prove in such a world. No desire or ambition to be measured against. No material possession which I would be anticipated to possess. I would be, at least I could be, utterly free.

**By Hindol Sengupta**

*This is an edited excerpt from Life, Death and The Ashtavakra Gita by Bibek Debroy and Hindol Sengupta (Grin Media, 215 pages, ₹699). Debroy has translated the Mahabharata and the Valmiki Ramayana to English. Sengupta is the author of, among other titles, Being Hindu*

# A MEASURE



Narendra Modi,  
Eknath Shinde and  
Devendra Fadnavis  
on a roadshow in Mumbai,  
May 15, 2024

# OF MUMBAI

**HOW INDIA'S FINANCIAL CAPITAL  
VOTES HAS AN OUTSIZED  
INFLUENCE ON NATIONAL POLITICS.  
MODI LEAVES NOTHING TO CHANCE**

**By LHENDUP G BHUTIA**

**N**OT FAR FROM Powai Lake, a pickup truck fashioned into an election rath is crawling through a humid afternoon. In two days' time, a dust storm will blow through this area and other parts of Mumbai, bringing with it a heavy downpour, cancelling or curtailing many election programmes. But today, there is little that portends such an event. A scorching sun beats down on the road, as the rath inches through. Beside the driver, a lean man in a pastel shirt, is screaming into a microphone. "Iss election ka sab se qualified candidate, Kasab ko phansi dene wala, Advocate Ujjwal Nikamji, (This election's most qualified, who got Ajmal Kasab hanged, Advocate Ujjwal Nikam)," he goes on. Above him, at the centre of a little group atop the rath is Nikam, waving or joining hands in a greeting. Occasionally, a group of women waiting to perform aartis or men holding garlands will surround the rath and a wave of irritation will pass through Nikam's face. He will refuse to step down, and the people will either give up, or climb aboard the rath to garland Nikam or perform aartis.



We move this way, creaking inch by creaking inch, Nikam's face shifting from the manufactured agreeableness of politicians during elections to surly disaffection every time someone requests he step down from the rath, as beside us the neighbourhood changes, from slums and low-income localities tucked away in one corner to the upper middle-class enclaves of Powai and Chandivali.

"You see this love," Nikam turns around to tell me. "I used to see love from people, when I came out to the roads after working on a big case. And, when I filed my nomination, I suspected I would get some love. But I did not imagine it would be this big," he says. "Just look at this. Never."

Nikam is dressed in a dark blue safari suit. He looks considerably older from the time he appeared before TV cameras to declare the proceedings of the case against Kasab. His hair has thinned and greyed, and he moves more gingerly. He still speaks in the kind



A BJP rally, May 15, 2024

**THIS ELECTION IS  
EXCEPT FOR MUMBAI  
HAS FIELDED  
MOST OT**



LIKELY TO BE FAR CLOSER THAN THE ONES WITNESSED EARLIER IN MUMBAI. NORTH, WHICH TENDS TO VOTE FOR BJP AND WHERE THE PARTY PIYUSH GOYAL THIS TIME AGAINST CONGRESS' BHUSHAN PATIL, HER SEATS ARE EXPECTED TO GO DOWN TO THE WIRE



NCP chief Ajit Pawar campaigns in Shirur, May 9, 2024



**THE UNDIVIDED SHIV SENA BUILT ITS POLITICAL FORTUNES AROUND URBAN MARATHI THE PARTY, HE DID SO CLAIMING HE WAS CARRYING WITH HIM THE PARTY'S ORIGINAL IDEOLOGY. HOWEVER, HAS HELD ON FIRMLY AND MANY BELIEVE HIS EMOTIONAL APPEAL THAT**



Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde at a rally in Dharavi, May 14, 2024

Photograph by RAJNEESH LONDHE



Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray at a rally in Chembur, May 12, 2024

**VOTERS. WHEN EKNATH SHINDE SPLIT ORIGINAL IDEOLOGY. UDDHAV THACKERAY, HIS PARTY WAS TAKEN AWAY FROM HIM**



NCP (SP) chief Sharad Pawar campaigns in Baramati, May 6, 2024

of stock phrases one hears in old Bollywood potboilers—calling, at one point, his rival in the Mumbai North Central constituency Varsha Gaikwada a seasoned politician, but saying he is no *kachcha khiladi* (novice) himself—but his voice has thinned and carries with it the quality of someone at the end of a long day of arguments in court.

“I have been in law for decades, doing some big cases. But I always wanted to do more,” he says, as he explains his reasons for contesting the elections this time. “And this is a very important election. And I really admire what our honourable prime minister has done. So I look at it as a kind of duty to stand for elections,” he says. He looks around, casting waves and namastes towards the windows of old, decrepit buildings that rise from some of these localities. “Also, I feel I need to stand from here. This place—Mumbai—is like my *karmabhoomi*.”

The rath moves slowly through this dense locality that straddles the eastern and western suburbs of the city, even as the afternoon is giving way to the evening. A little distance away, the sides of Powai Lake are beginning to fill with families and youths looking for some respite from the relentless day.

It is difficult to miss the election spectacle in Mumbai. Scheduled for May 20, the city is covered in hoardings and the sound of campaign speeches and rallies resonate from different lanes and corners. Some contestants have been campaigning for quite a while, but many candidates had their names announced late, either because of the hard negotiations going on internally among allies or the doubts about their popularity among voters, and now as the campaigning in the city reaches its final stretch, they are pressing harder, trying to make up for lost time.

After Independence, Maharashtra and by extension Mumbai remained almost totally a Congress redoubt all the way up to the late 1970s, but the seeds for opposition space were sown early when the Jawaharlal Nehru government wanted it to be a separate city-state. It would culminate in the Samyukta Maharashtra movement, in which Bal Thackeray’s father would be a prominent leader. This then would shape Thackeray’s own politics and lead to the creation of the Shiv Sena as the voice of the native Maharashtrians under threat from migrants. At the centre of this churn was Mumbai, from where the Sena drew its lifeblood and resources.

Other political forces too were being unleashed nationwide that saw their resonance in Mumbai. Communism and socialism also vied for the opposition space and a big blow to the Congress monopoly came in the form of George Fernandes, a socialist and trade union leader, defeating Congressman SK Patil, known as the uncrowned king of Mumbai, in the 1967 Lok Sabha election from the Mumbai South constituency. Patil was until then thought to be unbeatable. For a brief while, it was uncertain who would eventually triumph among the opposition until the Sena prevailed with its Marathi *Manoos* ideology. The co-option of Sena by businessmen as a force against the unions, the covert support from Congress thinking the party wouldn’t be a challenge, and Thackeray’s own ability to conjure up new threats like South Indians and Muslims led to the Sena becoming increasingly powerful. Once *Hindutva* took off, Thackeray capitalised on it, and made an

alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that lasted so long as the Sena would be the senior of the two. Mumbai remained the Sena's core bastion throughout even as it rode to power in 1995. His death and BJP's increasing popularity in Maharashtra meant the Sena would have to reconcile to being the junior partner. Its unwillingness to do that can now be seen in the confusing electoral scene in the city.

Mumbai only sends six MPs to Lok Sabha, but the city tends to have an outsized influence on the political landscape. It is the financial nerve-centre of the country, and any party that wishes to form a strong government at the Centre needs to have more than a toe hold here, either directly in power or in alliance with someone. Since the city is also a magnet that draws Indians from across the country, they carry their politics and aspirations with them. And that is probably why the election results in the city tend to mirror the broader patterns of what is happening politically in the country. Do well in Mumbai, and more often than not, you tend to do well in the rest of the country too.

**T**HIS ELECTION, HOWEVER, is likely to be far closer than the ones witnessed before. Except for Mumbai North, which tends to vote for BJP and where the party has fielded Piyush Goyal this time against Congress' Bhushan Patil, most other seats are expected to go down to the wire. Uddhav Thackeray and Congress, along with the Sharad Pawar faction of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), have stitched together what many feel could be a formidable alliance of Marathi and Muslim voters in the city. The opposing camp also has its own vote banks. "The transferability of votes is going to be a big factor. Will Congress be able to transfer its votes like the Muslims to Uddhav Thackeray's Shiv Sena? And vice versa. Will BJP be able to transfer its traditional voters like Gujaratis and Marwaris, say in constituencies like Mumbai South, to Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena?" asks Surendra Jondhale, a political commentator and professor of political science at the University of Mumbai.

At the centre of the puzzle is which way the Marathi voter will swing. The undivided Shiv Sena built its political fortunes around urban Marathi voters, giving voice to their aspirations and fears. When Eknath Shinde split from the party, taking with him not just much of the party's senior leadership and organisational strength but also its name and flag, he did so claiming that he was carrying with him the party's original ideology and viewpoints. Thackeray however has held on firmly, and

many believe his emotional appeal of having his party taken away from him, and the discourse he has built around industries and jobs moving away from Mumbai to Gujarat, is finding resonance among urban Marathi youth. "Nobody believes them," says Arvind Sawant, the former minister and MP from Uddhav's Sena who is seeking re-election from Mumbai South, when asked whether the Eknath Shinde faction of the Sena will find appeal among Marathi voters.

"They may have the party flag and name. But everyone knows who the original Thackeray is." Sawant, one of the few senior leaders who stayed with the Thackeray faction of the Sena, believes the election in the city and the rest of Maharashtra will finally reveal which among the two factions, in voters' eyes, is the real Sena. The Shinde faction however likes to point to the party's original vision and claims it is they who are carrying forward its true legacy, not one watered down by alliances with Congress and Sharad Pawar's NCP. "I think voters are smart that way," says Krishna Hegde, a former Congress MLA who is now part of the Eknath Shinde faction. "Marathi voters know who is carrying forward the original vision of Balasaheb Thackeray. Also, people want to vote in favour of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and are happy with the kind of work Eknath Shindeji has done as chief minister, the kind of infrastructure projects undertaken and various other things, along with our two deputy chief ministers." This

Photos GETTY IMAGES



Shiv Sena (UBT) candidate Arvind Sawant campaigns on April 29, 2024

**Nobody believes the Eknath Shinde Shiv Sena. They may have the party flag and name. But everyone knows who the original Thackeray is"**

ARVIND SAWANT, Shiv Sena (UBT) candidate from Mumbai South

aspect of which way Marathi votes go is particularly important because much of the fight from the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) coalition—comprising Congress, Uddhav's Sena and the Sharad Pawar faction of NCP—is based around Uddhav's Sena. Apart from two seats where Congress has put up its candidates, Uddhav's Sena is contesting four, three against candidates from Shinde's Sena and one against BJP. What adds to the intrigue is Uddhav's cousin Raj Thackeray, who is popular with the urban Marathi youth, having thrown his lot in with the Mahayuti alliance of BJP, Shinde's Sena, and the Ajit Pawar's NCP.

In Parel, not far from a rally that has made its way into a large old building, populated mostly by Marathis, a small group of old locals are watching the scene unfold one morning. "We always vote for the *dhanush baan* [the bow and arrow, the symbol of the original Sena, now with the Shinde faction]. But it is confusing this time," one of them says. "On one side we have Balasaheb's own son. And the other side has all the big leaders, saying they are the original Sena."

So which way will you vote?

"We are undecided, but most of us can't bear to see Uddhavji humiliated this way," another adds.

In a bit, a cyclist delivering pavs for breakfast that morning stops by. He identifies himself as a Muslim, and when asked which way he will vote, he has no reservations saying his vote will be for

Uddhav's Sena candidate. "Maybe in the past, I wouldn't have voted that way. But that is a long time ago. The Sena does not talk like that now [against Muslims]," he says.

The support from Muslims that Uddhav's Sena is banking on this time, a group that the Sena built itself railing against from the 1980s onwards, is one of the ironies of this campaign. Sanjay Patil, a researcher and political analyst in Mumbai who has tracked the Sena, believes this is part of a larger strategy of Thackeray's store fashion the Sena and broaden its electoral base. "He has been trying to distinguish his Hindutva from BJP's, claiming his Hindutva is more inclusive and accommodative," Patil says.

Whether this will pay dividends, we will know shortly. But some of this reshaping of the party has also been forced. The city's demography has undergone massive change. In the past, Marathis dominated several parts of Mumbai, in particular the central and southern stretch of the city in places like Dadar, Parel, Lalbaug and Girgaum. It is from this population that the original Sena drew much of its power. But as chawls and mills in this area have given way to swanky high-rises, their numbers have come down considerably. They have been pushed to the city's peripheries, even as the numbers of Gujaratis, Marwaris and North Indians, communities believed to be the traditional base of BJP, have gone up considerably. To win more seats from Mumbai, it is now increasingly important to cast your net wider.

Not far from South Mumbai, although it may appear a world removed, is the locality of Dharavi. It is a crucial area that will decide which way Mumbai South Central, where a lot is at stake, given the presence of Sena's headquarters Sena Bhawan, will swing. According to a 2008 survey, the slum had around 58,000 homes and 13,000 commercial units, but everybody believes the number will be significantly larger. Today, much of the discussion in the area is around its proposed redevelopment and fears of displacement. The MP from this area, Rahul Shewale, seeking re-election from the Shinde faction, has claimed all eligible locals will be rehabilitated in-situ, but this hasn't allayed the fears of many locals. "Look at what's going on," says Raju Korde, the founder of a group, Dharavi Redevelopment Committee, which is highlighting concerns over displacement. "Dharavi has a total area of 600 acres. But for rehabilitation, the developer is seeking to acquire land almost double the size with large tracts in Govandi, Mulund and salt pan lands elsewhere. It feels like the ultimate aim is to have us all settled elsewhere, so they can have Dharavi for themselves." Concerns about Dharavi's large population base being resettled elsewhere, such as Mulund, has led to protests in those areas too.

Korde is the kind of enterprising



BJP's Ujjwal Nikam campaigns in Andheri, April 30, 2024

**This is an important election. I admire what our prime minister has done. So I look at it as my duty to contest. Also, I feel I need to stand from here. This place—Mumbai—is my karmabhoomi”**

UJJWAL NIKAM, BJP candidate from Mumbai North Central

Photograph by RAJNEESH LONDHE



**WHICH WAY MARATHI  
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MUCH OF THE FIGHT  
FROM THE MAHA  
VIKAS AGHADI  
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COMPRISES  
CONGRESS, UDDHAV'S  
SENA AND THE  
SHARAD PAWAR  
FACTION OF NCP—  
IS BASED AROUND  
UDDHAV'S SENNA**

individuals you find in Dharavi. Unlike others in his family, he completed his education, eventually earning a degree in law while trying out various professions, from opening a telephone booth, later a printing press where he published a neighbourhood paper, to dabbling in Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) projects. “Every time there is an election round the corner, candidates come promising many things. But this time there is real fear,” he says. Rajamani Nadar, who runs a farsan manufacturing unit in Dharavi, expresses the same concerns. “We have tried to approach various parties and bureaucrats. They listen to us. But what they really have in mind, no one can tell,” he says.

**WE** ARE MOVING on a rath now in an old neighbourhood of Parel. It is Sunday, and Sawant has spent much of the early morning trying to connect with the voters of South Mumbai, seeking out people on morning walks on Marine Drive, parks, and various clubs and gymkhanas. “Sunday morning walks are the best time to connect with people from affluent backgrounds in South Bombay. And it’s very important to tell them who we are,” says a member of Sawant’s campaign team, referring to the political disinterest and often cluelessness of the South Mumbai voter. Having completed that, Sawant is now moving aboard a rath, and sometimes on foot, canvassing for votes in what he believes is his stronger voter base of Marathi residing in Parel. Around us, old buildings and chawls appear, ringed in by the many skyscrapers transforming this locality.

South Mumbai is arguably one of India’s most famous pin codes. At one end are areas like Malabar Hill and Altamount Road where the majority of the country’s billionaires live, and elsewhere like Parel, the beating heart of the city’s politics. Sawant has won this constituency two times in a row, defeating (then) Congress’

Milind Deora on both occasions. When I asked Deora during the campaigning for the last election what he thought about his chances against Sawant again, he had said, “In 2014 people held their noses and voted [in favour of Modi]. How do you otherwise explain a Shiv Sena fellow winning from Mumbai South?” Sawant however went on to win, with a considerable margin.

“Backstabbers,” Sawant says. I have just asked about his opinion on BJP. “Traitors,” he responds, when asked about Shinde’s Sena.

Sawant is speaking only in monosyllables, as the rath lurches through Parel, vast crowds jostling about to get closer to him. It continues this way for much of the day. Later, as the jostled windles, he speaks in longer sentences, talking about the issues plaguing Mumbai, betrayal by his former colleagues and the intolerance being exhibited by the BJP government.

The stand against intolerance from a member of the Sena is yet another irony evident in this election. Just a few days before, in a hall outside Churchgate station, Sawant was one of many candidates invited by a newspaper and an NGO to speak about their constituencies. He spoke about how democracy is under threat because of the present government. Adding on to what Sawant had said, someone from the audience mentioned instances where students were expelled by institutions because they spoke against BJP, and asked, if it would be any different under an administration of Sawant’s party? And since democracy is connected to freedom of speech whether he would accept criticism of Uddhav Thackeray and Bal Thackeray? Sawant responded by saying he must say “Balasaheb Thackeray”. The questioner wasn’t cowed down and asked whether he would be allowed to say Bal under Sawant’s regime. Sawant said no, making a case against what he had himself said just a few minutes ago. ■

*With Madhavankutty Pillai*



# GUARDING THE

UNION MINISTER PIYUSH GOYAL SWAYS NORTH MUMBAI, A



# CITADEL

TRADITIONAL BJP BASTION, REPORTS **MADHAVANKUTTY PILLAI**



Piyush Goyal on a roadshow in Mumbai, May 13, 2024

Photograph by RAINEESH LONDHE

**I**N A SPORTS club in the suburb of Borivali, members are outside awaiting Piyush Goyal. A line of cars comes into the small lane and he strides out followed by an entourage of local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) workers. They head to the first floor where a small banquet hall is filled to capacity. Goyal is contesting in the Mumbai North constituency in which this club falls. Seated next to him is the outgoing local MP, Gopal Shetty, whom Goyal is now replacing for the ticket. Borivali is in a belt of Gujaratis, traditionally voters of BJP and they also form a large component of the club. An office bearer, while introducing Goyal, says that including families they make up 20,000 voters and are all for him. He also slips in a request that they have been trying to increase the floor space index (FSI) to expand the premises but aren't making headway with permissions. When Shetty comes on the dais, he talks about running against a wall with the state government about the FSI and adds now that Goyal will be elected, they will hopefully listen. Goyal interrupts Shetty to ask for the logic for the denial of the FSI. "Only the government knows," he replies.

When it is Goyal's turn to speak, it is something of a surprise that he knows many here by first names and professions. He grew up in Mumbai but this constituency was not his home turf. Eventually, he turns to the FSI issue. He explains that the land of the club is probably marked as a recreation ground in government plans and so those rules have to be followed, the reason for the difficulty. He explains that there is a system to how governments take decisions but he still keeps the door open. He asks whether it is possible that along with the increase in FSI, the club can also give free admission to poor children living in slums. Then there would be a larger public interest involved and something could possibly be worked out. He is both managing expectations while

**MUMBAI NORTH IS AS SAFE A SEAT AS IT CAN GET BUT GOYAL'S CAMPAIGN IS NOT LEAVING MUCH TO CHANCE. HIS NOMINATION WAS UNEXPECTED FOR VOTERS OF THE CONSTITUENCY AFTER THE MODI GOVERNMENT DECIDED THAT MINISTERS MUST ALSO GET INTO THE HEAT AND DUST OF CONTESTING A GENERAL ELECTION**

not disappointing the audience. There is nothing to indicate that this is Goyal's first Lok Sabha election.

This meeting is happening on April 11, almost 40 days before the election. Mumbai North has been a BJP stronghold long before the party became the dominant force in Indian politics. It is as safe a seat as it can get but Goyal's campaign is not leaving much to chance. His nomination was unexpected for voters of this constituency after the Modi government decided that ministers must also get into the heat and dust of contesting a General Election. As far back as mid-March, Goyal's name was announced. By the beginning of April, he was already campaigning in a seat that almost everyone thinks is already won.

In one corner of a McDonald's, Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray, or UBT) leader Sanjay Raut is sitting with two men. A steady line of people come and greet him, some take a selfie. At the door of the outlet, a group stands to attention. They are party

workers, and not just of the Uddhav Shiv Sena alone. Some tables have other leaders. There are also regular customers, the usual yuppies and students, and they make a contrast with the gritty look of the political workers. The McDonald's is at the beginning of a flyover that leads to the highway across the railway tracks. It is also right round the corner to the campaign office, which is about to be inaugurated, of the man standing against Goyal—Bhupen Patil, the Congress nominee. Raut and other leaders from the I.N.D.I.A. bloc, like the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) of the Sharad Pawar faction, are here in solidarity. So is Ramesh Chennithala, the senior Congress leader from Kerala who is the party's in-charge for Maharashtra. The spectacle that is a necessary accompaniment to Indian election campaigns must be created with both personalities and pomp. So in the courtyard of the building where the office is, there are two drummer bands, one doing a Maharash-

trian tempo and another made up of a bare-chested Malayalees, flown in from Kerala presumably to impress Chennithala. The heat beats down hard and the sweat rolls off the backs of the drummers as they build up to a martial fervour. There is a small stage and the speeches begin. The thrust of what is said is also the strategy against Goyal. Patil is repeatedly referred to as the *bhoomiputra*, the son of the soil. Raut says that the "parcel" from Peddar Road must be sent back there. He turns to Chennithala and says that only those the Shiv Sena supports in this constituency wins. The date is May 7 and there are only 13 days left for the election and while former US President Bill Clinton once said no election is unwinnable, 13 days is really cutting it fine. In fact, it was only in May that Patil's nomination was announced, which means he has had less than three weeks to campaign. He maintains he will win and the one-point optimism is based on his being rooted in this constituency. "I am a local. I am doing social work here for 32 years. I connect with the people here. My opponent has never stood for an election. He doesn't know the problems of the common man," he says.

Among the people on the stage with Patil, Raut and Chennithala is Vinod Ghosalkar, a veteran Sena leader who has for years been nurturing the Assembly constituency



Congress' Bhushan Patil (centre) before filing his nomination for the North Mumbai seat, May 2, 2024

of Dahisar which falls in Mumbai North. He had left the ground connect to his son Abhishek, a former corporator. The young man had borne the mantle well. In the next corporation, or perhaps, the Assembly election, he was expected to be in contention. He was adulated even among middle-class Christians, not the typical Sena voter, in a locality called IC Colony. In their Facebook group, they would write about issues, ranging from crime to garbage disposal, and almost inevitably there would be a response from Abhishek that he had followed up and addressed the problem. Then in February, an aspiring politician named Mauris Noronha, aka Maurisbhai, who had once had a dispute with Abhishek and then publicly made peace, called him to his office for an event. It was telecast live on Facebook. In the middle of Ghosalkar speaking to the camera, Maurisbhai took a gun and shot him dead and then ran up to the mezzanine floor and shot himself.

Abhishek's killing left the locality stunned. Soon after the announcement of Goyal's nomination, there was news that the opposition was considering Vinod Ghosalkar to stand against him. He had sympathy for his son's death, had a base and an organisation. It was the only moment when BJP would have thought it had a serious fight on its hands. But then, for reasons unknown, not only did Ghosalkar not contest but the ticket went to ally Congress. Bhupen Patil is a local politician but is relatively unknown, with his claim to fame having been losing an Assembly election here once.

**T**HE ONLY TWO times Congress managed to wrest this seat in the last 35 years was as part of the two United Progressive Alliance (UPA) victories. The first time in 2004 film star Govinda, who was at the peak of his popularity, won and then in the next election it was Sanjay Nirupam, a former Sena leader who had switched to Congress then. In 2014, Shetty defeated Nirupam by 4.46 lakh votes. Nirupam is now with the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena, which means on the side of BJP. In 2019, Congress put up film star Urmila Matondkar and Shetty increased his margin of victory to 4.65 lakh votes.

A week before the election, the Goyal campaign is relentless and clinical. It is a huge constituency. Every morning and evening there is a route laid over for Goyal to traverse, usually on the top of an open truck, or rath, as they get called during elections. Often he gets off and walks on foot to meet people. There are very few corners of the constituency where he does not show himself at least once. There are two events planned for Monday, May 13. One is a rally in Dahisar, starting off near a subway at 5PM. Later, there is a public meeting where Chief Minister Eknath Shinde will be present.

**THE ONLY TWO TIMES CONGRESS MANAGED TO WREST THIS SEAT IN 35 YEARS WAS AS PART OF THE TWO UPA WINS. IN 2014, BJP'S GOPAL SHETTY BEAT SANJAY NIRUPAM, THEN IN CONGRESS, BY 4.46 LAKH VOTES. IN 2019, CONGRESS PUT UP FILM STAR URMILA MATONDKAR AND SHETTY INCREASED HIS MARGIN OF VICTORY TO 4.65 LAKH VOTES**

Before the evening rally, the weather shows a hint of playing truant. Half the sky becomes overcast with thunder and lightning while the other half is sunny. But it does not rain. The numbers in the crowd start going up as they wait for Goyal. There are drummers, old men, children, more women than men. On the other side of the road, from the opposite end, a thin line of people come with tall flags that have a clock on them. It is ally NCP's (Ajit Pawar's faction) workers joining in. The drummers turn the crescendo up. And the flags start waving to and fro. At the other end, BJP workers start waving their flags in tandem, reminding you of synchronised dances. Standing on the side in a grey jacket is the elderly Ram Naik, former Union minister and former governor of Uttar Pradesh. He is one of the earliest BJP leaders of Mumbai. He says, "I first won from the Borivali Assembly seat in 1978. I won the Assembly seat three times. Then

I won the Lok Sabha seat from here five times. After me, Gopal Shetty won twice from here and both times with the highest vote difference in Maharashtra. BJP is strongest in the state in this constituency. Piyush Goyal is from Mumbai. He has handled several ministries and his performance has been excellent. Take railways. You can see the difference at Mumbai train stations and it is because of him. He will win with the most votes in Maharashtra."

The beat of the drums increases in intensity and then Goyal walks in, speaking on his mobile and then goes up to the rath. Naik joins him. There are the local MLAs of the party there too and the vehicle starts moving. It is at the back of the procession, the long line of party workers ahead of it. The rally winds slowly through streets as people lean in from the windows of buildings to see what is happening. Goyal waves at them. An announcer walks alongside, talking about how Goyal has come to seek the blessings of the people. He lists Goyal's educational qualifications—he is a rank holder in both Chartered Accountancy and Law. At a turning, a cannon shoots red paper chips that look like rose petals. In between, the BJP Yuva Morcha's national president Tejaswi Surya hops on and stands next to Goyal. He is part of the many national leaders coming to this constituency to campaign. Periodically, a bunch of people representing housing societies stand waiting on the road and Goyal stops, leans down from the vehicle and puts his hand out, and they put a vermilion mark on the back of his closed fist, a substitute for the forehead. He is garlanded and garlands them in turn, all this while he is up on the rath. The numbers in the crowd keep increasing. By late evening it takes over an entire street of a main market where the fervour ratchets up and then dials down as it moves again to side roads and little colonies, the energy waning and waxing according to the location and no one sure just where they are going but still walking on. ■

# REAPING TH

Welfare schemes and improved law and order have consolidated BJP's social coalition in eastern Uttar Pradesh, reports **RAJEEV DESHPANDE**

**A**NURAG YADAV HAS missed school due to a pain in his neck and is a lone presence on the approach to the village of Rampur Lala in Deoria district, a little more than an hour from Gorakhpur. A confident kid, he shares that he attends a private school that costs more, since unlike students in government schools, textbooks need to be purchased. But the Class 6 student says he likes school and denies missed schoolwork might be the reason for his not being in class. Asked about the way to the Dalit quarter of the village, it takes him a little time to figure out the query till it is reframed in terms of Jatav homes, readily leading the way to a sprawl of 35-40 houses. The residents are initially hesitant to discuss the forthcoming election and refer questions to former village pradhan Chanda Devi who also wonders at the midday intrusion but agrees to sit down and talk about how the village has fared.

In front of Devi's house is a newly fitted tap and the village's narrow pathways bear evidence of fresh digging to lay water supply pipes that connect to all the residences. "A water tank is being constructed nearby and should be ready soon. It will bring water to all the houses here," Devi says. Asked about the source of the water, she says a borewell has been sunk—a steady supply is available at depths of 400-500 feet—and will be pumped to the overhead tank. Asked about the loyalty of Jatavs, the caste she and other Dalits here belong to, for the 'elephant' symbol of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), she agrees this has been the case in the past. She is not so forthcoming about the current election where BSP's campaign presence seems to be flagging. The polling here is due on June 1 and maybe it is a little early for electioneering to reach this part of the district, she reasons. Her son Narsingh, who has been watching from the window of his shop, comes over and joins the conversation. He points to improvements in living conditions, saying the law and order situation, which used to be uncertain, is much better. Chanda Devi and other women gathered around nod in agreement. "Yes, there is no fear now. People feel safe," she says. Narsingh says the response to the police emergency number is quick and usually the police try to see if a dispute can be resolved.

But if differences linger or a criminal case is made out, an FIR is duly registered. The case is the same with the ambulance service, with calls to a dedicated number not only responded to but followed by inquiries whether the emergency services reached and transported the patient to hospital.

Narsingh and other residents of the Dalit quarter say they will make up their minds closer to election day, with discussions within the community and the views of the current pradhan taken into account as well. But they may consider the Modi sarkar's performance in light of less well-off sections getting facilities like cooking gas, rations, the annual ₹6,000 farmer's stipend and services like assured electricity. The 'ration galla (free wheat)' is distributed without hitches, and this along with the produce from family farms, takes care of a household's requirements and even extended families. "We have to see who has worked for the poor," says one of those gathered. The conversation turns to the consecration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and evokes unhesitant approval. "This is a good thing that happened. The mandir is important to the entire Hindu samaj which was waiting for a long time," says Narsingh. Though Dalits here have been BSP voters, efforts to present the mandir as an upper-caste project appear to have passed them by. The fly in the ointment amid a general sense of well-being is the Sahara chit fund case where lakhs of investors, many of them low-wage earners, were left high and dry after the scheme collapsed amid scandal and ignominy. The return of funds has been slow even though claimants have filed applications at the tehsil office seeking reparation.

It is time to leave the village as Anurag leads the way out having been a silent listener all along. The newly laid water supply pipes can be seen to complement drain water channels that do not allow waste water to accumulate. The pathways are clean and though almost every house has cattle, the animal sheds are clean and the cows and buffaloes are in good health. Anurag's house, which has the name 'Kailash Yadav' written on it, is soon reached and he says his mother will take him to a doctor to get some medicines after the heat subsides. The sun has climbed high in the sky and the indoor shade brings welcome relief. Just outside the village,



# E REWARDS



Ramdev Yadav is supervising the efforts of two men cutting down a large branch of a tree that is obstructing the growth of crops around it. It takes a little persuasion but he reveals his preference for the Samajwadi Party (SP)-Congress alliance and says the fight in Deoria is tight. The men sawing the tree are Rajbhars, listed as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in the Central and most state reservation lists, and are not so sure. Though they do not give full voice to their disagreement, they say the poor have benefitted. "People are likely to consider the work that has been done rather than promises that may never be fulfilled," says Nand while his fellow labourer agrees.

Like Rampur Lala, the village of Dumari lies a few kilometres off the Gorakhpur-Deoria road, but is much bigger with a few hundred houses. Ajay Kushwaha, who studies at a nearby Industrial Training Institute (ITI), is returning with Najim, a municipal employee, riding pillion. As he stops to talk, he is soon joined by other village residents, including the local school teacher Wahid. Najim says the village is part of the nagarpalika (municipal council) and has been allotted a ward number. He feels the status of the village has risen and cleanliness programmes are making a difference and points out that there is a facility for in-situ disposal of waste water, which was not the case before. Wahid is critical of the Union government and is unhappy with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's speech on Muslim quotas while campaigning in Rajasthan. He had not seen Modi's more recent television interview denying having made the references and asserting he does not want the election campaign to run along communal lines. Even so, Wahid agrees Dumari has received a face lift. Ajay and some others from the Kushwaha community, who like the Rajbhars of Rampur Lala, are OBCs in most states, say that while schemes for housing, food security and banking were initiated by previous governments as well, the Modi government has added to and improved them. Ajay refers to the role of the Yogi Adityanath government too, saying, "*Prashasan ne schemes ko tight kar diya hai* (The administration has tightened the delivery of schemes)." The increased efficiency and improved coverage of the welfare net are showing results, cementing the loyalty of communities like Kushwahas that are instrumental to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) rise in Uttar Pradesh (UP). The roads leading to the village and within are concrete and Bichandi Kushwaha, who has joined the discussion, says the contrast with the past is self-evident. Prior to the school teacher's arrival, Najim ventured that a section of Muslims will support Modi and BJP, claiming the abolition of triple talaq (instant divorce) has helped prevent the break-up of families. The voting patterns of the community do not support Najim's hopes and Wahid's views seem more representative, indicating a preference for the I.N.D.I.A. bloc. Ranjana Kashyap is walking by with her children returning from school. Asked about her views, she is appreciative of the improvements in the village and looks forward to the installation of water taps. But she complains at being overlooked for assistance under the PM Awas (housing) scheme and blames a previous councillor for the exclusion. She is receiving teacher's training and is particularly pleased at the better law and order situation that allows her to get around without any bother.



Residents of Nathanpur village in Kaiserganj discuss the election

## IN THE VILLAGE OF CHAMARAN PURVA, WHICH THEIR OPTIONS. A YOUNG COUPLE EXPRESSES ADITYANATH'S DECISION, GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS AT CHAMARAN PURVA SHOW THEIR READING

Voter responses in Kaiserganj, Gonda, Deoria and Kushinagar indicate that BJP's social coalition—that saw it record impressive victories in UP in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha polls and the state Assembly elections of 2017 and 2022—is intact and may be strengthened by the party's alliances and the view that the opposition SP-Congress poll pledges are not feasible. The widely held view about Congress' promise of a caste census and ₹1 lakh annual handouts to youth and women, even among voters opposed to BJP, is one of scepticism and doubt. There seems to be a growing awareness that profligate spending is unsustainable and will lead to debts that reduce resources for welfare. This is quite remarkable as the lure of freebies has been a powerful inducement in elections. A contributing factor to such promises losing their sheen might be greater faith in the Modi government's schemes based on effective and transparent delivery. BJP's alliances with the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD), Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party, Apna Dal (Soneylal) and the Nishad party are contributing to a convergence of votes and shoring the caste coalition that has expanded BJP's reach well beyond the upper castes. There are constituency-specific factors, such as unhappiness with sitting BJP MPs who are accused of being inaccessible and intra-party equations. The presence of former SP leader Swami Prasad Maurya's Rashtriya Soshit Samaj Party might cause some division in the Kushwaha vote, it is felt. Yet, as election day nears, the choice of voters is likely to become more concentrated, resulting in a sharp binary between BJP and SP-Congress in many places. SP's appeal among Yadavs and Muslims remains strong and the party is the option for other voters who do not support BJP. But there is a lack of movement from BJP constituencies towards the opposition. The prevailing stasis in the opposition ranks and popular endorsement of Modi's leadership is a 'pull factor' in favour of BJP rather than a TINA (there is no alternative) syndrome. In the 2019 election the 15 seats won by the SP-BSP alliance mapped the demography of its vote base. Both won in patches of northwest and eastern UP which have a higher



Chamaran Purva village in Deoria has seen improvements in access to welfare schemes



Mewati Devi (foreground) in Batrauli, Kushinagar wants enhanced health insurance under Ayushman Bharat which will cover medicines

## AS PART OF THE KAISERGANJ LOK SABHA SEAT, JATAV HOUSEHOLDS ARE CONSIDERING SATISFACTION WITH THE GOVERNMENT SCHOOL THEIR CHILDREN ATTEND. AS PER OFFER ENGLISH AS A SUBJECT FROM THE PRIMARY LEVEL AND THE CHILDREN TEXTS FOR MIDDLE SCHOOL AND SAY TEACHERS ARE REGULAR AND DILIGENT

Muslim population. This time round, BJP has the opportunity to further tighten its grip on the state.

The Kaiserganj constituency lies to the northeast of Lucknow and requires a sharp detour from the highway to Gorakhpur. The seat is in the news as it is represented by six-time BJP MP Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, facing trial for alleged sexual misconduct against some of India's top women wrestlers. Singh is not standing but his son Karan Bhushan is and the campaign has made it to the national headlines. But for many of the constituency's voters, Singh's legal troubles and the charges levelled against him are not a factor. His record of being available to his constituents who hold him in good stead is aiding his cause. On the way to Nathanpur village, Hari Shankar Mishra, seated at a small tea and general store, is quick to complain about the state of the patchy, bumpy road. The road's condition is indeed a surprise as most villages have good connectivity with concrete roads constructed as part of the PM Gram Sadak Yojana. His gripe is shared by others at the shop who are Vermas—in this case OBCs akin to Kurmis. At a time when SP boasted of important leaders from various castes, Beni Prasad Verma was regarded as an influential Kurmi leader and held cabinet posts in the United Front government. They, too, are upset by the road's state of disrepair but remain, like Mishra, BJP supporters. Their views are shaped by the advantages of Union and state schemes and a reluctance to consider SP as they do not see the party aligned to their interests. "There is no discussion on the MP's cases. There is no effect here," says Mishra. Kamlesh Verma agrees and the talk moves on to other aspects of their lives, such as the better rates for wheat from private buyers and the less welcome effect of monsoon flooding. Rahul Yadav (name changed), who is visiting and sitting at the hutment adjoining the shop, does not hesitate to announce his allegiance to SP although he does not appear to bear animus towards BJP. He has received a call to attend a meeting organised in support of Karan Bhushan and while he plans to go, he is not voting BJP.

"See, Yadavs are with SP. This is as simple as that," he says, adding that he does not want his name revealed. It is, of course, unlikely that any seasoned BJP leader would expect Yadavs to vote BJP but parties are clearly hunting for votes. Some way farther on, in the village of Chamaran Purva which falls in Gonda district but is part of the Kaiserganj Lok Sabha seat, Jatav households are considering their options. As evident elsewhere too, they are troubled by the perception that BSP is lagging and while not explicit about whether they will look elsewhere, a young couple speaks of regular rations under the public distribution system (PDS) and expresses satisfaction with the government school their children attend. As per Adityanath's decision, government schools offer English as a subject from the primary level and the children at Chamaran Purva show their reading texts for middle school and say teachers are regular and diligent.

The road from Deoria to Kushinagar leads to the Ramabhar Stupa that marks the spot where the Buddha was cremated. A site of considerable reverence for the Buddhist world, its nearby areas have been developed with Buddhist temples built by the government and Sanghas from Thailand, Vietnam, Japan and China. The stretch of road has become a tourist attraction with charters regularly flying into the Kushinagar airport. Members of the Thai ruling family arrive every year in February for elaborate rituals at the temple which contains a relic of the Buddha. The buzz quiets as the road winds past the temple mile. Nearby villages like Batrauli have a contented air despite some grouses. Mewati Devi is a senior citizen and unhappy about the cost of medicines, saying the Ayushman scheme covers hospitalisation but not regular ailments. Zebunissa feels development has received a boost, but argues the schemes were initiated by the previous SP government. The rest of the assembly does not have any substantial complaints and most of them, Patels or Kurmis by caste, are supportive of BJP. Going by the weight of opinion, BJP looks set to retain its dominance over eastern UP's political landscape. ■

# BACK TO THE

How safe is the safe seat for Rahul Gandhi?

**I**T IS LESS THAN 48 hours to go for the deadline to file nominations for the Rae Bareilly Lok Sabha seat in Uttar Pradesh (UP). At a sweet shop, on the outskirts of town, as he awaits his morning customers, Santosh is hoping Congress will field party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra from the seat. What if it is her brother Rahul Gandhi? He smiles. A day later, in the midst of the afternoon rush at the shop, Santosh is too busy to indulge in a conversation on politics. By then Rahul Gandhi was all set to file his nomination from Rae Bareilly. “*Priyanka nahi to Rahul hi sahi* (If not Priyanka, then let it be Rahul),” he again smiles and gets back to attending to a customer.

About an hour’s drive from state capital Lucknow, Rae Bareilly is bustling with political activity, bringing traffic to a halt, with both Gandhi and the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) Dinesh Pratap Singh set to file nominations. Outside the Congress office, party workers wait for their candidate, holding placards with images of both Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi, as on the hoardings and nomination van. Till the night before, it was being speculated that Priyanka would make her electoral debut from Rae Bareilly, the Nehru-Gandhi pocket borough, from where former party president and her mother Sonia Gandhi had been a four-time MP. With Sonia moving to Rajya Sabha, there was uncertainty as to who Congress would field. Voters in the constituency were oblivious to the identities of the Congress and BJP candidates till 17 days before the polling date. The grapevine had thrown up various possibilities—that neither of the Gandhi siblings would contest from either Amethi or Rae Bareilly, that Gandhi might again fight in Amethi and his sister in Rae Bareilly, or that neither would contest in Amethi, the other family bastion which BJP’s Smriti Irani conquered in 2019.

On the scorching afternoon of May 3, the enthusiasm of Congress workers, relieved that a Gandhi has been fielded from Rae Bareilly, is palpable. Rahul Gandhi is expected any time to return from Amethi, his old seat, where he has gone with Congress’ new candidate Kishori Lal Sharma, a family loyalist, for filing his nomination. Amidst the Congress banners are some of Samajwadi Party’s (SP), which has entered into an alliance with Congress, offering 16 of the 80 seats to the party in UP. On a parallel road, Singh, a minister in the Yogi Adityanath government, who had given Sonia Gandhi a fight in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, holds a roadshow, a day after his candidature was announced.

“Sonia Gandhi brought AIIMS (All India Institute of Medical Sciences) here and Congress had set up several factories. But Rae Bareilly has still not risen to the expectations of a high-profile constituency,” says Anoop Shukla, who runs a shop selling police material, near Congress’ district committee office where Priyanka’s image dominates all others.

Anand, who runs a paan (betel leaf) shop, is of the view that Congress might have risked losing the seat if it hadn’t fielded a Gandhi. “There was talk of Priyanka Gandhi contesting from here. That would have been even better. Anyway, this is their turf, so Rahul Gandhi has an edge.” For him, the Ram Mandir is a matter of faith but has nothing to do with elections.

With Amethi slipping out of its hands in 2019, Congress is leaving no stone unturned



Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi campaigning in Rae Bareilly, May 13, 2024

# FAMILY TURF

AMITA SHAH captures the mood in Rae Bareli



to hold on to Rae Bareilly, its other bastion in UP, politically the most crucial state with 80 Lok Sabha seats, the highest in the country. While BJP is counting on the Narendra Modi government's welfare schemes, the Ram Mandir and Hindutva, in Rae Bareilly, Congress is relying on the past—decades of its emotional connect with the Nehru-Gandhi family, besides projects like AIIMS, a rail coach factory and the ring road that came about during Sonia Gandhi's tenure in the constituency—to save itself from losing its last stronghold in the state.

Both AIIMS and the rail coach factory have been bones of contention between the two sides. In 2019, seven years after inaugurating the ₹2,500 crore rail coach factory, Sonia Gandhi, raising the issue in Lok Sabha, opposed its corporatisation, saying it was one of the most efficient PSUs. Congress had been demanding early completion of the AIIMS project, inaugurated when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) was in power at the Centre, and has accused the BJP government of bringing down its capacity from 960 to 600 beds. In 2018, at a time when BJP had set the two Gandhi bastions as its targets, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath had reviewed the implementation of the project. Two months ago, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while virtually inaugurating five AIIMS, including Rae Bareilly's, said he had kept his promise to the constituency.

Priyanka Gandhi, who had accompanied her mother when she laid the foundation stone for the state's first AIIMS in 2013 and is spearheading the Congress campaign for her brother in Rae Bareilly, has accused the BJP government of closing it down. Camping in the constituency, where her brother joins her around 10 days later, the Gandhis are reminding people of the association of four generations of their family with the constituency, right from the time of the 1921 Munshiganj massacre when Jawaharlal Nehru had stood by the farmers, underlining that it goes back 100 years. But the bigger challenge before the Gandhis is to convince people that they will stand by them in future, to counter BJP's narrative that they will abandon the constituency. With Rahul Gandhi, an MP from Kerala's Wayanad, having fought again from the safe southern seat five years after being defeated in Amethi, the question Congress is faced with is: If Rahul wins both Rae Bareilly and Wayanad, which seat will he abandon?

**I**N A CONSTITUENCY held by the Gandhi family since Feroze Gandhi won it in 1952, Priyanka seems more popular than her brother who is 15 years her senior in electoral politics. "People like Priyanka Gandhi a lot. She connects well with people. But Rahul Gandhi also stands a good chance," says Gunjan Tiwari, who runs a tea stall at Basrama village.

According to Raj Kumar Singh, who has retired from the Army, if Priyanka had stood she would have swept the seat. "Rahul Gandhi's image has been blemished by BJP. In the villages and particularly among the old, there's still a lot of support for the Gandhis, but there will be a fight," he says.

Unlike in the past, the Gandhis can no longer take things

## PRIYANKA SEEMS MORE POPULAR THAN HER BROTHER IN A CONSTITUENCY HELD BY THE GANDHI FAMILY SINCE 1952.

CONGRESS IS RELYING ON THAT PAST—DECADES OF ITS EMOTIONAL CONNECT WITH THE NEHRU-GANDHI FAMILY—TO SAVE ITSELF FROM LOSING ITS LAST STRONGHOLD IN THE STATE



BJP's Dinesh Pratap Singh campaigns in Rae Bareilly, May 3, 2024

for granted in the heart of the Hindi belt where Hindutva has resonance and BJP holds 62 of the 80 seats against Congress' sole Rae Bareilly. Rahul Gandhi's defeat in Amethi broke the spell that the voters would remain loyal to the Gandhis even amidst political winds of change. In Rae Bareilly, Sonia Gandhi's vote margin had fallen to 1,67,178 in 2019, when Singh was BJP's candidate, compared to 3,52,713 in 2014 when Ajay Agarwal, a lawyer-turned-politician, was fielded by BJP, and 3,72,165 in 2009 when Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) candidate RS Kushwaha, who has defected to SP, lost to her and BJP's RB Singh came third with 25,444 votes. Congress also lost in Rae Bareilly's Assembly segments in the 2022 state elections. SP, which now holds four of the five Assembly segments—Bachhrawan, Harchandpur, Sareni, and Unchahar—of the Lok Sabha constituency, has not put up candidates against the Gandhis although there was no state-wide alliance with Congress in past Lok Sabha elections. The fifth Assembly segment, Rae Bareilly, is with BJP. Mayawati's BSP, which had entered into an alliance with SP in 2019, had also not put up a candidate in Rae Bareilly that year. This time, Rahul Gandhi and SP chief and former Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav—who has entered the fray from Kannauj, his family bastion lost in 2019—are holding joint rallies.

After filing his nomination papers from Rae Bareilly, flanked by Sonia Gandhi, party chief Mallikarjun Kharge and Priyanka, just hours before the deadline, Rahul Gandhi held a roadshow and posted on X (formerly Twitter): "It is with great confidence



GETTY IMAGES

educated youth supplying water at shops in Rae Bareilly, complains of joblessness and asks why the Agnipath scheme, under which youngsters can be recruited into military service, is just limited to four years.

In the Modi wave of 2014, Congress had managed to retain Rae Bareilly and Amethi, but lost the latter in 2019 when BJP fielded actor-turned-politician Smriti Irani. With her star power, fiery oratory and frequent visits to Amethi, she has positioned herself as the antithesis to Rahul Gandhi whom she has been dubbing as “*lapata* (absconding)” MP. BJP’s Rae Bareilly candidate, Singh, who had a more formidable opponent in Sonia Gandhi, is a grassroots politician from UP. He began his political career in 2004 with SP when he contested the Vidhan Parishad election, and three years later, he contested as a BSP candidate from the Tiloi Assembly seat, which falls in the Amethi Lok Sabha constituency, but was defeated. He later joined Congress, which he quit in 2018.

In its two pocket boroughs, Congress has been banking on Brahmin, Dalit and Muslim support. In Rae Bareilly, Scheduled Castes (SCs) constitute 14.5 percent of the town’s population as per Census 2011. With BJP reaching out to non-Jatav Dalits and non-Yadav Other Backward

Classes (OBCs), caste equations have altered in the Hindi belt. However, the tie-up with SP would ensure Congress the Yadav support. Interestingly, this time Mayawati has fielded a Yadav candidate, Thakur Prasad Yadav, from the seat.

Congress has won Rae Bareilly in 18 of the 20 Lok Sabha elections held for the seat since Independence, with BJP and the Janata Party winning once each. Of the Congress victories, a member of the Gandhi family has won half the time. Despite being a Congress fortress, Indira Gandhi faced defeat in the seat when she was prime minister at the hands of her old rival, the Janata Party’s Raj Narain in the 1977 election after Emergency.

Journalist and writer Rashid Kidwai says, quoting a biography of Raj Narain, that while delivering his thanksgiving speech at Rae Bareilly, he told the audience that they should not come to him for favours—as they could get someone like Indira Gandhi defeated, how could they value him? This indicated his distrust of the constituency’s electorate. Indira Gandhi, elected from Rae Bareilly twice, again won in 1980, defeating Vijaya Raje Scindia, who was in the Janata Party then. But having tasted defeat in 1977, she had also fought from a southern seat—Medak in Andhra Pradesh—which she retained, resigning from Rae Bareilly.

Another Gandhi is now in the fray from Rae Bareilly. As he watches Singh’s roadshow in Rae Bareilly sitting at his bookstore, Alok Pande says there will be a fight. “Both names were announced at the last minute. Let’s see what happens,” he says. ■

that my mother has given me the responsibility to serve the Karmabhoomi of our family.” But in neighbouring Amethi, where he was MP for three terms, Congress supporters are upset that he has given up on the seat. Brought into the Rae Bareilly battlefield at the last minute, left with a fortnight to campaign for the May 20 election, Rahul has a daunting task before him.

“Sonia Gandhi had been MP here for 15 years. You see Etawah and compare with Rae Bareilly. If an opposition MP is unable to do developmental work, then we should vote for BJP to ensure the double-engine government delivers,” says Ghan Shyam Awasthi, as he breaks ice to put into a glass of lassi for a customer at his shop along the highway. He was referring to the SP stronghold in which Mulayam Singh Yadav’s native village Safai, with its sprawling sports complex and modern structures, falls. However, BJP wrested the Etawah Lok Sabha seat in 2014 and held it again in 2019. Near his stall, Ashok, who is making *tikkis* (potato cutlets), says Rahul Gandhi is an outsider while Dinesh Pratap Singh belongs to Rae Bareilly.

The political heat is rising in the constituency. At Dariiba village, some farmers, all over 50, discussing politics sitting at a dhaba on the roadside, say there is no “Modi *leher* (Modi wave)” in Rae Bareilly. But Tushar, a student, does not share the views of the die-hard Gandhi supporters. He praises the Ayushman Bharat card, a health insurance scheme for the poor, and says that though this is a Gandhi stronghold, the Ram Mandir and the fact that Singh is a minister in the state government will have an impact. Akhilesh, an

# REVELATIONS IN JATLAND

Can BJP overcome the resentments of the Jat community in Haryana?  
SIDDHARTH SINGH travels across the state to find out

**M**OHLA IS A village at the edge of Hisar Lok Sabha constituency. The village is sandwiched between the Sonipat, Rohtak and Hisar parliamentary constituencies. As one enters the village, one can see a tractor ploughing an empty field. The wheat crop has been harvested and the farmer on the tractor is doing something else. But one thing is noticeable: at the front of his tractor is a large flag with Congress' hand in the middle of it. This farmer's political affinities require no elaboration.

Hisar is witnessing an interesting contest in which three members of the Chautala clan—one of the powerful political families of the state—are pitted against each other. The fourth key contender is Jai Parkash, or JP, a Congress veteran. On one side is Naina Singh Chautala, the mother of former Deputy Chief Minister Dushyant Singh Chautala. Another contender is Sunaina Chautala of the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) and, finally, Ranjit Singh who is contesting on the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ticket. The Chautalas hail from Sirsa district but are fighting from Hisar. Sirsa is a reserved constituency. The constituency polls on May 25 in the sixth phase of the Lok Sabha polls.

At his home, Sunil Luhach, one of the panches of Mohla, explains the political situation to *Open*. The village has some 2,200 voters. Fifty per cent of those voters are Jats while the rest are Dalits, Dhanaks (weavers) and Brahmins. This time, the Jats have made up their mind to vote against the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) and BJP and in

favour of the Congress candidate Jai Parkash. JP is a three-time MP from Hisar and was an MLA from Kalayat constituency from 2014 to 2019.

"There is anger against Dushyant Chautala and JJP. The mandate given to him in 2019 was not to align with BJP. But he did that. Now he has resigned from the government but no one believes his actions. This looks like a 'fixed match'," he says.

What about Ranjit Singh, the BJP candidate? Here, Luhach narrates an interesting story: "Ranjit was in this belt around May 6. His original plan was to visit Puthi and Sisar, two nearby villages. He was shown black flags at Puthi and was not allowed to enter Sisar. On his return he decided to visit Mohla. While there were no protests on his visit here, he did not attract a large crowd as the timing of his visit was not convenient."

On the face of it, Jat ire against BJP and JJP, the ruling parties of Haryana, seems generalised and vocal to the point that it seems detrimental to their fortunes. But scratch the surface and you see wheels within wheels. Another notable in Mohla gives a different spin to the story. "The effort now is to ensure that the Jat vote does not get splintered. But that is easier said than done." Mohla, like most villages in North India, is faction-ridden and Jat factionalism—in Punjab and Haryana—is infamous for its feuds. Then there is another "complication" he says: "Jats don't make any bones about their political choices. Look around you and you will

see flags of Congress. But this puts off 'others'—Brahmins and Dalits—and there is no way of knowing what choices they will make. They simply go to the polling booth and press the button. They don't discuss anything with us (Jats)."



Haryana Chief Minister  
Nayab Singh Saini and his  
predecessor Manohar Lal Khattar  
in Chandigarh, March 12, 2024



**BJP HAS NEVER DONE CASTE POLITICS. IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN EASIER TO GOVERN HARYANA HAD BJP APPOINTED A MEMBER OF THE DOMINANT CASTE AS CHIEF MINISTER. BUT THAT WOULD HAVE ENDED UP ERODING ANY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BJP AND OTHER PARTIES THAT DO CASTE POLITICS OVERTLY**

It is in the interplay of these forces and countervailing forces that BJP and other parties have a chance and Congress' chances could get spoiled. Unlike an Assembly constituency where one dominant caste or a swing in key villages and townships can make or break a party's chances, different forces even out in a parliamentary constituency. Hisar has nine Assembly segments. Mohla falls in the Narnaund Assembly segment on the eastern edge of the district. This belt (running north to south) from Uchana, Narnaund and Hansi segments is dominated by Jats. But on the western side, especially in the Adampur Assembly segment, castes such as Bishnois have a large presence. Then there are pockets with a large Dalit presence as well.

In Hisar city, Shakti Singh Lather, a farmer-cum-businessman

who is also an observer of local politics tells *Open*, "There are efforts to consolidate the Jat vote behind a 'winning candidate' and that person is thought to be Congress' JP. But the fact of the matter is BJP's winning margin was huge last time (in 2019). It is hard to turn that advantage into an outright loss. In spite of the voices against BJP, chances are that the party will scrape through but with greatly reduced margins."

Barely 13 kilometres from Mohla lies Julana, a market town with a large grain market where farmers from nearby districts gather to sell their produce. Julana lies in Jind district but falls in the Sonipat parliamentary constituency. There are two other Assembly segments of the district—Jind and Safidon—that also fall in the Sonipat Lok Sabha constituency. Much like Hisar, Sonipat,

**CHAUTALA'S BASE WANTED HIM TO QUIT NDA, SOMETHING HE DID NOT DO UNTIL VERY RECENTLY, ON THE EVE OF THE LOK SABHA POLLS. THAT 'TIMING MISCALCULATION' HAS NOW LED TO CHARGES OF A 'FIXED MATCH' BETWEEN HIM AND BJP, A CLAIM VENTED REGULARLY BY CONGRESS**



Dushyant Singh Chautala campaigns in Gurugram, May 1, 2024

too, has its mix of political attitudes. In recent days, the BJP candidate Mohan Lal Badoli has faced black flags in villages he has toured. But in Julana, the political situation is somewhat different.

Pradip Kumar is an *arhtia* (grain commission agent) in the Julana mandi. He tells *Open* that protests are now a regular feature of the political landscape in Haryana. “The kisan andolan (farmers’ agitation) has had a lingering effect here and these farmers unions have been active in persuading farmers to vote against BJP. *Par Punjab mein aur Haryana mein zameen asmaan ka antar hai* (There is a world of difference between Punjab and Haryana). Our unions are relatively weak and their staying power is low.” He adds that a lot of work has been done in Sonapat constituency and that has been “noted” by farmers here.

“Dalits, OBCs and other non-Jat castes are in favour of Narendra Modi. They will vote for him.” By Kumar’s estimate, 10-20 per cent of the Jats in Julana are against BJP and that is due to the lingering effect of the farmers’ agitation. “But it is not true that all Jats are against BJP. A part of the anti-Modi sentiment is due to the ‘herd effect’ created by (Bhupinder Singh) Hooda. Ninety per cent of Dalits, Brahmins, Dhanuks and other castes will go with Modi. There is a 50-50 split in the trading community,” Kumar adds. While these numbers ought to be taken with a pinch of salt, they give a sense of the ‘direction’ prevailing in Julana.

In Rohtak, Congress has an edge of sorts. Last time, the Congress candidate—Deepender Hooda—lost by a narrow margin of 7,503 votes to his BJP rival Arvind Sharma. This time a ‘wind’ or sorts is blowing in favour of Hooda who is contesting again on the Congress ticket. Hooda is the son of former Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda and the family is influential in Rohtak. Hooda Sr’s constituency—Kiloi—lies to the northwest of Rohtak town. Their village, Sanghi, lies nearby. This is the ‘Hooda belt’ where the influence of the clan is the strongest. On the other side of Rohtak, to the south and southwest, their influence wanes.

This time, however, things are changing. At Maroudi village in Kalanaur Assembly segment, an area not quite a Hooda stronghold, too, is witnessing a wave in his favour. Ajmer ‘Fauji’, an ex-serviceman, who is an activist for Dushyant Chautala’s JJP, says he is having a tough time convincing people in his village to fall behind JJP. “It is difficult. Even if people shy away from openly opposing my party, I know they are going to vote for Deepender (Hooda),” he says. The same situation prevails on the other side of the district, in the Meham Assembly segment. *Open* spoke to a number of people; some of them openly spoke in favour of Hooda and others, while not being categorical about their choices, did not find anything favourable to say about other parties like BJP and JJP.

**B**JP HAS BEEN in power in Haryana for a decade now. In Lok Sabha, the party has similarly dominated the scene in the state since 2014. In 2014, it won seven of the 10 parliamentary constituencies and in 2019 it won all 10. The interplay between the state and national dynamics is interesting—as the

## BJP HAS BEEN IN POWER IN HARYANA FOR A DECADE. IN LOK SABHA, IT HAS DOMINATED THE SCENE SINCE 2014. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN STATE AND NATIONAL DYNAMICS IS INTERESTING—AS BJP HAS GONE FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH IN LOK SABHA, ITS HOLD IN THE ASSEMBLY HAS WEAKENED

party has gone from strength to strength in Lok Sabha, its hold in the Assembly has weakened over time. In 2014 it won 47 of the 90 seats in the Assembly, forming a government on its own, something considered unthinkable at one time. In 2019, its tally came down to 40, necessitating a coalition with JJP that had 10 seats. JJP, seen as a successor to INLD, had nowhere else to go. While Congress managed to increase its tally to 31 seats (up from 15 in 2014), it was inconceivable that Dushyant Singh Chautala would go anywhere close to Congress for that would be the very antithesis of regional Jat politics in Haryana.

That tie-up was smooth until the farmers’ protests erupted in 2020. At that point, Chautala’s base wanted him to quit the alliance with BJP and go on his own, something he did not do until very recently, on the eve of the Lok Sabha polls and just months away from the Assembly election due later this year. That ‘timing miscalculation’ has now led to charges of a ‘fixed match’ between him and BJP, a claim that has been vented regularly by Congress in this part of Haryana. That has created problems for JJP. It is interesting to note that people rank JJP and BJP very differently. In Mohla, for example, when asked about how people differentiated between BJP and JJP, Sunil Luhach said the anger was much greater at JJP. “(Ranjit Singh) Chautala is only standing for the first time as an MP. But Dushyant knows the ground situation. That is why he is facing protests,” he said.

BJP is in a different situation. Through the thick-and-thin of Haryana’s ‘rough’ politics, the party has not given in to doing caste politics. Some would say that it would have been easier for the party to rule the state had it appointed a member of the dominant caste as chief minister. But that would have ended up eroding any difference between BJP and other, regional, formations that do caste politics overtly. The 2016 riots in the state were in no small measure due to the ire against a non-Jat chief minister at the helm of the state. These facts are discounted by ‘analysts’ of Haryana’s politics but they are obvious to anyone with even a passing familiarity with what goes on in the state.

What will determine outcomes this time is not very different from what did so in the past—the relative distribution of Jat versus non-Jat votes and rural versus urban votes. What is different is the overt antipathy of Jats towards JJP and BJP. Congress hopes to somehow ‘bridge’ these differences and ensure that Jats vote ‘strategically’. ■

# Manthan on the French Riviera

A WAVE OF INDEPENDENT  
FILMS SWEEPS OVER THE  
77TH CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

By **Kaverie Bamzai**

**I**N 1976, SMITA PATIL and Shabana Azmi walked the red carpet clad in handloom sarees, accompanied by their director Shyam Benegal. The film being premiered was *Nishant*, the second in Benegal's village trilogy. Manya Patil Seth, Smita's younger sister, remembers the actor preparing for the Cannes Film Festival.

Ten years later, Patil was dead, from complications in childbirth. Yet says Manya, she is always amazed at how Smita's "name has an enduring life in our collective memory for the extraordinary films and the people who were her comrades". This week, as Manya, her sister Anita Patil-Deshmukh, a public health advocate; Smita's son, actor Prateik Babbar; actor Naseeruddin Shah; Verghese Kurien's daughter Nirmala; and film archivist Shivendra Singh Dungarpur walk the red carpet at the premiere of *Manthan*, they will celebrate a remarkable actor in a film that has been restored painstakingly over 18 months. Benegal, 89, and on dialysis, won't be attending.

*Manthan*, funded by 5,00,000 dairy farmers of Gujarat who contributed ₹2 each, tells the story of the cooperative milk revolution in Sanganva, Gujarat, through the eyes of a veterinarian (the late Girish Karnad, playing a version of Kurien) and the villagers led by Bindu (Smita Patil) and Bhola (Naseeruddin Shah). Its print, restored by Dungarpur's Film Heritage Foundation, will be one of seven films from India at the festival, marking a change from recent years where fashion influencers and brand ambassadors overshadowed cinema.





Scenes from  
1. *All We Imagine as Light*;  
2. *Santosh*; and  
3. *Sister Midnight*



The star of the indie invasion at the 77th edition of the Cannes Film Festival (May 14 to 25) from India is Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light*, which is in Competition, the first Indian film to break a 30-year jinx in this section. Kapadia, daughter of artist Nalini Malani, has been to Cannes before, with her documentary, *A Night of Knowing Nothing*, loosely based on protests at her alma mater, Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune. It won the Golden Eye for Best Documentary at Cannes in 2021. Meenakshi Shedde, independent curator, who has been working in South Asian programming with the Berlin, Toronto and Mumbai film festivals, is all praise for Kapadia, who she says is emblematic of the new indie wave.

Shedde says, "The reason there is a relatively stronger presence of Indian and South Asian films at a lot of A-list festivals, including Cannes, is that the younger generation is not only very talented, working in diverse regional languages (for instance, Payal Kapadia is from North India, but her film *All We Imagine as Light*, is in Malayalam); many know how to work the international lab/script mentor/co-production

circuit, that smoothenes the way for festival selection; many have an awareness of what Western festivals look for, and some, like Payal Kapadia, have smartly even listed a distributor, international press agent and French press agent, before Cannes began."

Add to that, boundaries are blurring. Konstantin Bojanov, a Bulgarian director, has made a film, *The Shameless*, in Nepal, with mostly Indian actors, which features in the Un Certain Regard category. Mita Vashisht, who plays a strong-minded matriarch in it was filming in Varanasi when she got a call about *The Shameless*. She spoke to Bojanov from a funky cafe in Varanasi (which in hindsight looked a lot like it could be in Kathmandu, with even a bicycle hanging on the wall) and agreed to read the script. She liked what she read but had a few suggestions. "I was surprised that Konstantin was open to making the changes even though he had started filming," she says. Vashisht has been acting since 1987 when Yash Chopra cast her as Sridevi's friend in *Chandni* and has worked with an array of formidable filmmakers from Mani Kaul to Kumar Shahani. But this is her first trip to Cannes and she is excited, proving that talent has no sell-by date.

Auroshikha Dey, who plays one of the five main women in *The Shameless*, is the new entrant to the brothel. An actor who has done work in independent cinema and television, she says when she first heard the news from her director and producer, she was numb "for a fraction of second and was trying to search for the perfect expression". "This is a dream come true. I feel ecstatic," she says. She has already decided what she will wear, couture by Priyanka Raajiv. Her co-star Tanmay Dhanania had written an impassioned post on Instagram on a lack of sponsors for those representing movies being shown at the festival, in contrast with celebrities who have little to do with cinema. He noted, "Talking to cast and crew, everyone seems to be scrounging around to get the money together to go to Cannes. Even with help from production (who are stretched thin as it is), it is hard to get the cash together....It hurts nonetheless, knowing that people who have nothing to do with the festival, who have no films there, who don't know what cinema means, let alone indie cinema, will get



Smita Patil and Girish Karnad in *Manthan*

**MANTHAN IS ABOUT THE COOPERATIVE MILK REVOLUTION IN SANGANVA, GUJARAT, THROUGH THE EYES OF A VETERINARIAN (GIRISH KARNAD PLAYS A VERSION OF VERGHESE KURIEN) AND THE VILLAGERS LED BY BINDU (SMITA PATIL) AND BHOLA (NASEERUDDIN SHAH). ITS PRINT, RESTORED BY FILM HERITAGE FOUNDATION, WILL BE ONE OF SEVEN FILMS FROM INDIA AT THIS YEAR'S CANNES FILM FESTIVAL**

“The reason there is a relatively stronger presence of Indian and South Asian films at a lot of A-list festivals, including Cannes, is that the younger generation is not only very talented, working in diverse regional languages (for instance, Payal Kapadia is from North India, but her film *All We Imagine as Light*, is in Malayalam), but many also know how to work the international lab/script mentor/co-production circuit”

**MEENAKSHI SHEDDE** film curator and critic



sponsored to go there, to walk the red carpet, to dress up, prance around, and make reels.” He compared it to sponsoring a circus troupe to go to the Olympics, while leaving the athletes behind. Dhanania says he still hasn’t found a sponsor but he will be going for the premiere.

The festival is also an opportunity for actors to walk the carpet for their cinematic work rather than their brand value. Shahana Goswami, for instance, has done excellent work since 2006 in movies/series such as *A Suitable Boy* and most recently *Zwigato*. She will be walking the red carpet for British Indian Sandhya Suri’s *Santosh*, where she plays a widow who is given her husband’s job in the police. *Santosh* is in the Un Certain Regard section of the festival. Ditto for Radhika Apte, who will be in Karan Kandhari’s *Sister Midnight*, to be screened at the Directors’ Fortnight, who will play Uma, a young woman who is married to a wimpish man in Mumbai and makes the best of living in a slum with little hope and no means.

**A** DD TO THIS *IN RETREAT*, directed by Syed Maisam Ali Shah, which tells the story of a man who returns to his hometown after many years. The film is set to be screened under the Association for the Distribution of Independent Cinema Section. There is also the Kannada short film *Sunflowers Were the First Ones to Know* the only Indian film selected in the La Cinef section of Cannes. The film is among 18 shorts selected from the 2,263 entries submitted by film schools from all over the world. It has been directed by FTII student Chidanand Naik.

There are three other films officially selected at Cannes in various sections from India and South Asia/of Indian origin/India related. Shedde says, “This is a huge achievement on many levels. For one, the number of films selected is large given the fierce competition at a top festival like Cannes. Two, there are three women directors selected—Payal Kapadia, Sandhya Suri and Mansi Maheshwari’s short *Bunnyhood*, in Cinefondation. Three, Indians and South Asians are doing unusual international collaborations: Payal Kapadia’s *All We Imagine as Light* is a France-India-Netherlands-Luxembourg co-production. But there’s also Indian writer-director Tushar Prakash, who is co-director with Anna Hints for *Sauna Day*, an Estonian short in the Semaine de la Critique/

Critics’ Week special screening. Tanveer Hossain of Bangladesh is a producer on Filipino short Arvin Belarmino’s *Radikals*, in Critics’ Week Competition, in a Philippines-Bangladesh-France-US co-production. Next, many of the younger generation of filmmakers have smartly got their strategy sorted out in advance: Payal Kapadia is backed by French producer Petit Chaos on board (they had also produced her *A Night of Knowing Nothing*); the Cannes website already lists her distributor, international press agent and French press agent, before the festival began. That’s really being fully prepared to do business at Cannes in a way that few Indian films manage.”

What’s more, one of the pioneers of the indie movie industry in India, cinematographer and director Santosh Sivan will be the first Indian filmmaker to receive the Pierre Angénieux prize for career achievement in cinematography.

It’s not to say that the cinema-less celebrities will not be visible on the red carpet. Their publicists are already breathless with excitement. We are being told that Kiara Advani will make the country proud at the Women in Cinema Gala dinner, hosted by Vanity Fair. That fashion influencer and wardrobe consultant Kinnari Jain will attend the Cannes Film Festival, where she will “support” Benegal’s *Manthan*. And that Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, Aditi Rao Hydari and Sobhita Dhulipala will also walk the red carpet to the Palais des Festivals (the first two for L’Oreal and the last for an ice cream brand).

Author and filmmaker Bhuvan Lal has been to the Cannes Film Festival almost every year for the past 29 years. He says, “I have watched the Indian filmmaking community in Cannes feeling left out, struggling everywhere, rushing nowhere, barely written about, and occasionally getting some minor limelight in a sidebar. This time there is finally hope that Indian cinema will once again be of consequence as it was from the 1950s to the 1980s in Cannes.” Yet, he points out, India has never won the Palme d’Or, the top prize in Cannes. “One victory at Cannes can change everything, just as *Lagaan*’s Oscar nomination did for mainstream Indian cinema,” he says. Perhaps 2024 and Kapadia will be that change.

For now though, Kani Kusruti, who stars as one of two roommates in *All We Imagine as Light* as a nurse from Kerala, is concentrating on completing her shoot for a Malayalam movie, packing her bag, and getting ready for her close-up at Cannes. ■

# TAYLOR MADE

THE INDIAN SWIFTIES  
ARE A MULTIPLYING FORCE  
AND AS PASSIONATE  
AS THE POP ICON'S FANS  
ELSEWHERE

By Madhavankutty Pillai

**K**USHI MAYUR remembers being 10 or 12 when she heard her first Taylor Swift song. A friend in school introduced her to it and the connection was instantaneous. She was soon listening to all her songs. A decade later, the 21-year-old is still listening. The reason, and why she thinks of herself as a Swiftie, as fans of the singer across the world call themselves, is simply that it makes her feel happy. The songs talk to her. “She reinvents herself. She doesn’t stick to one genre. The kind of music she makes, everybody can

relate to it,” she says.

Last year, Taylor Swift went around the world giving concerts. It was called The Eras Tour. The closest she came to India was Singapore leaving fans here wanting. But what the singer also did was make a movie about the tour that was aired in Indian theatres. Kushi, who is a copy editor in Mumbai, bought a first-day-first-show ticket at a theatre in Palladium Mall in Lower Parel. She found the theatre filled to the brim, and when the movie got rolling everyone inside started dancing. For all the

Swifties there it was almost the real thing. “Everybody loves her and everybody is in the same room and then they’re all getting up and dancing to the songs. And it makes you feel like you’re in the concert,” she says.

Swift is the most popular singer in the world today. When *Tortured Poets Department*, her latest album with 31 tracks, came out last month, sales clocked more than two million in two weeks, and it was her eleventh album to cross two million. The music app Spotify posted on X that there were over a billion streams



Taylor Swift  
at The Eras Tour,  
Kansas City

GETTY IMAGES

in a week. In every era there is one singer or band who becomes a defining cultural phenomenon jumping across borders. This is the Swift era. In India too, the generation that spans from 10 to the mid-thirties makes up the Swifties.

Dotted across India they are coming together to form communities and groups. There are Delhi Swifties, Kolkata Swifties and so on. In Kerala, it was Levi Vaguez, based in Kochi, who initiated the Kerala Swifties. Thirty-one years old now, he started listening to Swift in 2009 when he was 16. What

really turned him into a fan were the lyrics of the fourth album that he found very powerful. In 2018, he formed a WhatsApp group along with someone who he had met at a wedding where together they had got the DJ to play a Swift song. "That's how we vibed," says Levi. "Our group remained small with about 10 members or so. Then the Eras movie came last November and



Friendship bracelet-making kit sold by Swiftie India

we started an Instagram page. Suddenly the numbers shot up to 250.” They followed it up by conducting two events. One was a bash for Swift’s birthday in December attended by about 30-odd Swifties. In February, they met again at a bar for an adults-only Swifties meet up and even more came and not just those who were in their group. Right now, Kerala Swifties has close to 300 members.

Someone who became part of the Kerala Swifties last year was Fathima Abdul Kader, a 29-year-old lifestyle and culture writer also from Kochi. She was around 15 when she came across Swift’s music, timed to the track ‘Fifteen’ by the singer. But in her early 20s, Fathima gravitated away from the music. She now wanted to be a hipster, and so she turned to alternative music and singers like Bon Iver. In 2020, she suddenly ran into a track ‘Exile’ where Swift was singing with Iver. She started listening to Swift again and became a full-on fan once more. “Her lyrical intelligence is what has always stood out for me from the get-go. Even when I was very young, what I loved was her songwriting. I thought Taylor Swift was average as a vocalist when she began, but her writing was great. But over the years she’s worked really, really hard and her vocals have become amazing now,” she says. She believes there has been an evolution of Swift through her music that fans have also been able to resonate with. Swift shares a part of her life through

her music that fans find very relatable. When they go through experiences in their life they identify with her music. “Every single pivotal moment that I’ve lived through, like a heartbreak, losing a friend, there are Taylor Swift songs that I resonate with. There’s also the fact that she literally writes about the community that loves her. Brings them into the fold. So there is a line from a song that says ‘make friendship bracelets,’ and people make friendship bracelets every time they go to Taylor Swift concerts and give them to each other. Even at the concert movie, we did that. I gave one to Levi the first time we met in person.”

Friendship bracelets are also one of the many things that Bengaluru-based 25-year-old Pratham Junius Ruffus sells in a business that he is creating around Swift merchandise. He has been a Swiftie for about seven years now. The idea for the business came to him when he was himself looking for merchandise of the singer, like T-shirts. Swift has her own official merch that can be bought from her website but Ruffus realised that it was both extremely costly and not very accessible. “Even a T-shirt would be like around 6,000, 7,000 bucks. It has to get shipped from the US, so including delivery fee and everything, you’ll end up spending ₹10,000 to get a very simple T-shirt and it takes almost a month or two to reach,” he says.

He found online stores selling merch but realised the goods

were substandard. Ruffus had started an apparel business in college before Covid, so he had the contacts. A consultant focusing on marketing for startups, he decided as an experiment to start Swiftie India, an online merch store. He spoke to friends who were Swifties to gauge demand and started off with T-shirts, hoodies and jackets. His most unique product is a friendship bracelet kit. “It is part of the lore for Swifties to make friendship bracelet kits. We have a special kit that has beads, threads, hooks and everything you need to make to make around 50 friendship bracelets,” he says. It is his bestselling product priced at ₹599. He gives free stickers along with products and even that borrows into Swift’s history. Because her music keeps evolving, it has been categorised into different eras. “Everyone has their own favourite era. So what we do is when someone places an order, we ask them what their favourite era is. And based on it, we send them a free sticker set,” he says.

USING ANOTHER ELEMENT of Swift, Pratham started an add-on service connecting Swifties to each other. “Those who come on our website will find a product called Swiftie Pal. You choose your favourite era and give us your email id. We will connect you with another Swiftie somewhere in India anonymously who also has the same like. We send a chat link where both are anonymous. They can access that link and no personal information is shared. If they hit it off then they can take their conversation to WhatsApp, Instagram, etc. We don’t charge for it and it has been very successful. Every day we get people signing up for it and we keep connecting them with each other.” His customers are diverse in age. Swifties are young but he finds a lot of parents buying merch for their children as gifts for occasions like birthdays.



“THERE IS A LINE FROM A TAYLOR SWIFT SONG THAT SAYS ‘MAKE FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS,’ AND PEOPLE MAKE FRIENDSHIP BRACELETS EVERY TIME THEY GO TO HER CONCERTS AND GIVE THEM TO EACH OTHER.”

FATHIMA ABDUL KADER  
Kochi-based Swiftie



**“EVERY SINGLE PIVOTAL MOMENT THAT I’VE LIVED THROUGH, LIKE A HEARTBREAK, LOSING A FRIEND, THERE ARE TAYLOR SWIFT SONGS THAT I RESONATE WITH. THERE’S ALSO THE FACT THAT SHE LITERALLY WRITES ABOUT THE COMMUNITY THAT LOVES HER”**

**FATHIMA ABDUL KADER**

**“EVERYONE HAS THEIR OWN FAVOURITE ERA. SO, WHAT WE DO IS WHEN SOMEONE PLACES AN ORDER, WE ASK THEM WHAT THEIR FAVOURITE ERA IS. AND BASED ON IT, WE SEND THEM A FREE STICKER SET”**

**PRATHAM JUNIUS RUFFUS**  
founder, Swiftie India



PHOTOS: SIVARAM V

**“OUR GROUP REMAINED SMALL WITH ABOUT 10 MEMBERS OR SO. THEN THE ERAS MOVIE CAME LAST NOVEMBER AND WE STARTED AN INSTAGRAM PAGE. SUDDENLY THE NUMBERS SHOT UP TO 250”**

**LEVI VAGUEZ**  
Kochi-based Swiftie



While the age demography spans decades, Swift’s fans relate to her music in different ways. In Fathima’s observation, the younger ones are more zealous and let it overtake their identity in some ways whereas for the older ones, it is just another aspect of their personality. This also plays some part when it comes to dealing with those who think that Swift is overrated. It can lead to fractious arguments. The Kerala Swifties have seen their group being invaded by trolls multiple times. Ironically, it gained in intensity after the concert movie because earlier there wasn’t so much awareness about Swift, her music and her fans. Her popularity, or the idea of her popularity, became suddenly mainstream as opposed to being the subculture that it was before. “People in Kerala or Tier 2 cities suddenly realised that there was a musician called Taylor Swift and there is a

fan base around this female artist. People also have an assumption that it is mostly young women and not just across all ages and genders. We had boys come into the group and say her music is terrible. We had somebody sending weird inappropriate messages. They were annoyed and basically acting out. They will say what they want to say. It’s fine. There are some fans who react. We don’t,” says Fathima.

Do Swifties eventually outgrow Swift? Fathima doesn’t think it is necessarily so because Swift herself changes. She takes her own example where from the age of 15 to 20 she was a Swiftie and then felt that the music was too mainstream. But then Swift’s music evolved. “It is one of the reasons I feel I came back into the fan fold because with folklore (that became part of Swift’s music), the things that she was talking about weren’t just rosy-eyed delusions of first love or heartbreak and

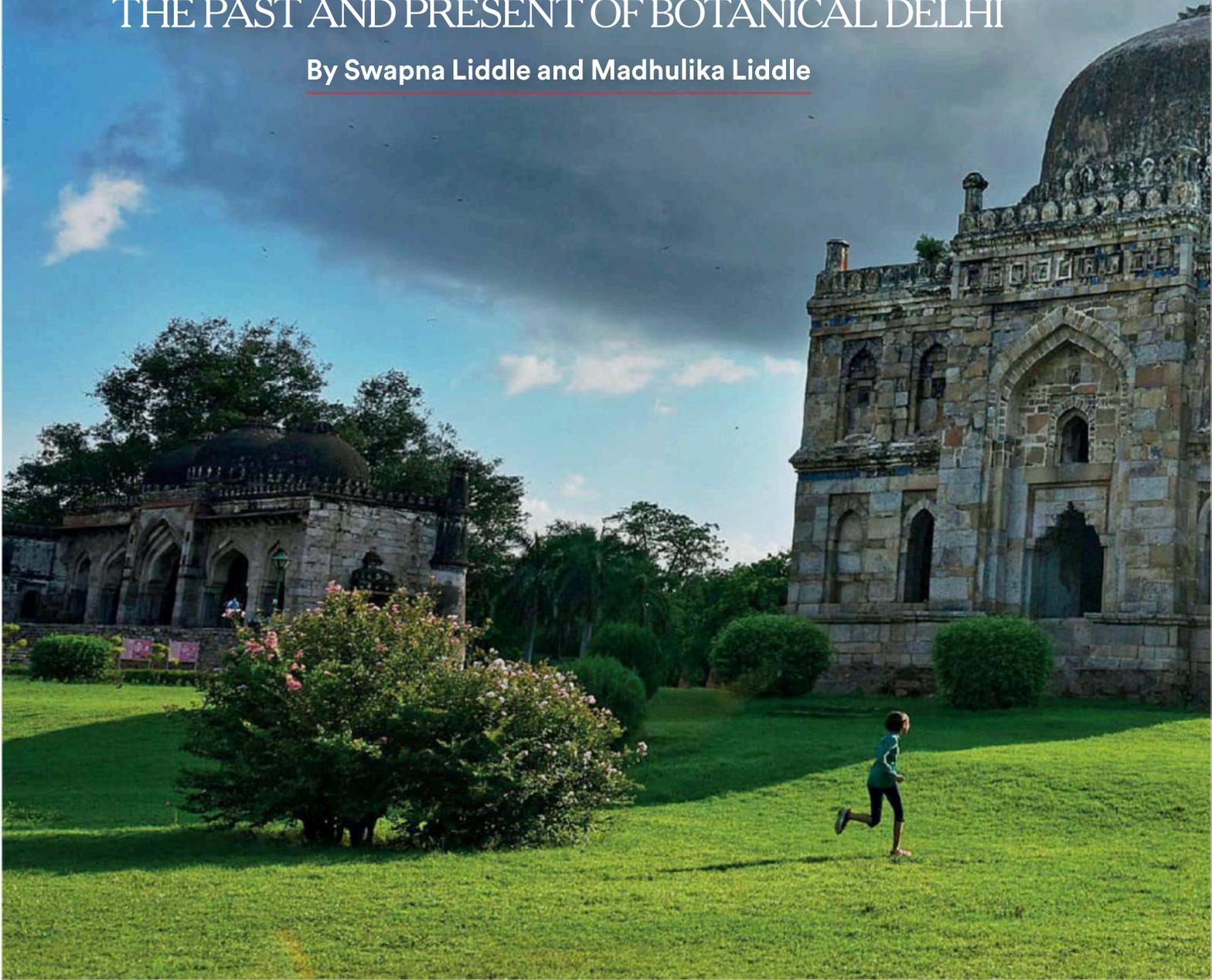
innocence. It was about being betrayed by people who you thought you could trust with your life, like your best friends. Or there is a song that’s an ode to her grandmother. So her tone and language matured as well. If she continues to mature with her albums like she is doing now, I feel I might grow with her music as well, provided I still resonate with it.”

Kushi too doesn’t think it necessary for fans to turn away from Swift just because they become older. “She will keep writing songs about her life as she gets older. When she gets married, she will write about that. She’ll have children and probably she’ll write songs about that. That’s what’s gonna make us listen to her. I think more than her music, I love her as a person. She has a way to connect with her audience. Even in a concert, she makes it feel like it is just us two in the room.” ■

# Garden Variety

THE PAST AND PRESENT OF BOTANICAL DELHI

By Swapna Liddle and Madhulika Liddle



**D**ELHI IS OFTEN remarked on for having an unusual amount of green cover for such a large urban agglomeration. This is, however, a relatively new phenomenon. Delhi's climate is not naturally conducive to lush vegetation. With a fairly low annual rainfall, which is moreover concentrated in the monsoon months, the natural vegetation of Delhi is described as 'semi-desert', with relatively few, rather thorny, medium sized trees.

This picture of a rather arid landscape is borne out by historical visual depictions too. A 16th-century painting in the *Akbarnama*, the history of Akbar's reign, shows the emperor

hunting in Palam. In this illustration, the landscape is dry and rocky, with a little scrubby vegetation and some stunted trees. Later depictions, for instance the sketches made by European visitors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and photographs from the latter half of the 19th century, are not very different. They typically show vast, practically treeless, vistas.

These historical images of open areas are of course in sharp contrast to the places where people actually lived. The very fact that the natural vegetation was sparse and the climate hot and dry, prompted those who lived in the Delhi region to cultivate trees and other vegetation to provide relief from natural



Lodi Garden

conditions. The very first humans who took up agriculture in this area were the inhabitants of Late Harappan villages such as Mandoli and Bhorgarh, inhabited around 2000–1000 B.C.E. They are likely to have planted trees for shade around their homes, carefully tending and watering them as they did their crops.

The Late Harappan sites have been revealed during archaeological excavations. No such evidence is available for a site that is by tradition believed to have existed in the area roughly around the Purana Qila, i.e. Indraprastha. Though positive identification of the site has not been made, the Mahabharata tells us that the Pandavas constructed a city around here, and also gives us many

details of what that city was like. Evidently it was surrounded by gardens, and the text gives us the names of several trees that were planted here: amarataka (hog plum), amalaka (amla), bakula (maulsari), atimuktak (gaub persimmon), and nagapushpa (cannonball tree) are among the species mentioned. Some, like the maulsari, amla and gaub persimmon, are still to be seen around Delhi, but a moisture-loving tree like the cannonball may seem an odd fit here.

We must of course allow for a certain amount of hyperbole and literary embellishment. The text of the epic that is available to us today has been modified over the course of its

history, and the kind of gardens it describes may well be based on a later idealisation.

For later periods of history we have more concrete evidence, both in texts and in archaeology, of the settlements that developed in the area that we today call Delhi. The settlements included a series of capital cities—Lal Kot, Kilugarhi, Siri, Tughlaqabad, Jahanpanah, Firozabad, Dinpanah, Sher Garh, Shahjahanabad, and finally New Delhi. There were also important settlements outside these capitals, such as the suburban settlements of Nizamuddin and Jaisingpura, or the village of Najafgarh. We can presume that as each of these settlements developed, their inhabitants planted gardens in and around them.

While the remains of buildings from many of these areas of human habitation do remain, the gardens have by and large disappeared. This is because unlike brick and stone structures which can survive for centuries despite neglect, cultivated flora, even trees, eventually die if not tended, and/or replaced when they come to the end of their life span. For references to these gardens we must again turn to texts for stray references. For instance, we are told that in the last decade of the 13th century the emperor Jalaluddin Khalji laid out a garden between the river Yamuna and his fortified palace of Kilugarhi (located around present day Kilokri village). Nothing remains of either Kilugarhi or the garden planted in it. In fact even the river has now changed course.

The oldest garden of which some remains can still be found in Delhi, dates from the 14th century, when Delhi was ruled by the Tughlaq dynasty. Though the original horticulture of the garden has disappeared without a trace, we are lucky to have some physical remains of a terraced garden—probably the only such Tughlaq-era garden in existence. It lies inside a modern DDA park called Vasant Udyan, in Vasant Vihar. We can see the remains of a raised stone water channel, stone masonry wells, and small tanks. These are all that remains of an irrigation system that would have irrigated the garden. There are some other structures on the different terraces which still exist—a small mosque, and a large tomb, known as Bara Lao ka Gumbad, which was added to the garden in the 15th century. This garden from the Tughlaq era was not built in or next to a royal palace or even close to the urban settlement of that time. It was at a considerable distance from the city, which would have been Firozabad, around present-day Firoz Shah Kotla. It was probably laid out by a royal or other wealthy patron as a retreat for rest and recreation, maybe a halting place on a highway.

We have many more gardens surviving from the Mughal period, which was in a way the high point in the laying out of formal gardens. The Mughals in fact often camped in tents in gardens on their travels through the length and breadth of their empire, and in their capital cities, surrounded their palaces with gardens too. Some of the most important gardens laid out in this period were settings for tombs—Humayun's tomb, constructed in the mid-16th century, to Safdarjung's tomb built nearly two centuries later, being the most prominent of these. Apart from the architectural remains that have survived, we also have a good idea of the kind of plants that grew in Mughal



gardens: fruit trees such as mango, orange, lemon, and fig; ornamentals such as harshringar and cypress (the latter considered a symbol of mortality, and therefore commonly used in garden tombs); and an array of flowering plants: roses, red or pink oleander, hibiscus, and jasmine among them.

Our sources for this are mentions in texts, and also Mughal miniature paintings which give us a good idea of what a Mughal garden would have looked like. They show us formal gardens with water channels, pools and fountains, and plots filled with trees laden with fruits and flowers. Pavilions inside the garden provided a place in which to relax and socialise.

The next phase in garden landscaping in Delhi was inaugurated in the second half of the 19th century, under British rule. The earliest interventions came in the form of a reworking of the Mughal gardens. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolt of 1857 and the extinguishing of the Mughal dynasty, all the royal properties including the gardens were confiscated, and for several decades were allowed to fall into a condition of abject neglect and even wilful destruction. For instance, many of the trees in the garden surrounding Humayun's tomb were cut down, and the land let out for cultivation for some decades. Later in the century, some efforts began to be made to restore these gardens as places of recreation, but this was done using a markedly English aesthetic, where it was expanses of lawn rather than trees that came to dominate gardens.

The 20th century brought with it a significant round of garden-making, particularly when the British rulers of India shifted the capital of the country from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911. New Delhi, the new capital, was constructed on a plan that owed very little to the dense built-up areas typical of other British cities like Calcutta and Bombay. Instead, it



Sunder Nursery

incorporated more green cover generally, as well as specially landscaped parks and gardens. This pattern of city planning continued to be followed in the city after Independence, when many of the new housing colonies were built low rise, with trees in big and small parks as well as by roadsides. Significant gardens have continued to be laid out, right down to the early years of this century.

A long history of garden-making has given us a city that has a large number, and an interesting variety, of gardens. Some of them have a long history, some are quite new, for as the city has expanded, so have its gardens and green spaces.

## LODI GARDEN

Minhaj e Siraj Juzjani, a chronicler writing in the early 13th century, wrote that the sultans of Delhi used to receive foreign emissaries in the 'Bagh e Jadd'. This name, which means 'garden of bounty', has survived down to our time in the name 'Jor Bagh', borne by a colony in Central Delhi. What remains of the garden itself now goes by the name of Lodi Garden, which is next to Jor Bagh.

In Juzjani's time this garden would have had the advantage of a stream flowing through it, providing much-needed irrigation. Whether or not it had any buildings at the time, we do not know. The buildings that we see in it today began to be added from the mid-15th century. The first of these was the tomb of Mohammad Shah, the third ruler of the short-lived Syed dynasty.

In the absence of any concrete record, we can but speculate on why this spot was chosen as a burial site when Mohammad Shah died in 1443-44. It was not far from the *dargah* of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya, which gave the site sanctity. The garden setting, with the stream flowing

nearby, was also particularly appropriate for a tomb. Since in the Quran paradise is imagined as a garden, the locating of the mortal remains of the deceased in a garden suggest a similar garden setting in paradise for the eternal soul.

## SUNDER NURSERY

1947 was a landmark year for India, and also for Delhi. India attained its freedom from British rule, but then was immediately plunged into the disruption brought about by the partition of the country. As the capital, Delhi faced some unique challenges. For one, there was an explosion in the population in the city in the immediate post-Independence period. There was an influx of people displaced from the newly formed Pakistan, which led to a doubling of the city's population in the period between the census years of 1941 and 1951. At least some part of this increase was also due to an expansion of numbers employed in the government. The British colonial state did not concern itself with too many functions apart from maintaining law and order, extracting revenues, and developing infrastructure to help extract those revenues better. Contrary to this, the state in independent India aimed to undertake many other functions to promote welfare and development. As a result several new government ministries and departments were created.

To accommodate these increased numbers, new housing was created in the form of many of the colonies that we know today. All of these colonies needed greenery—in parks, in the form of avenue trees, and in the individual houses. To cater to this suddenly increased demand for plants, several new plant nurseries came up, of which the most prominent was Sunder Nursery, set up in the beginning of 1949.

The nursery was established on land that had a long human history. Ever since the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya had been buried in the vicinity in 1325, and his tomb had become a revered shrine, or *dargah*, many others had wished to be buried close by. This reverence for the saint's shrine continued down the centuries, and is indeed alive today. This is the reason why over time a large area around the *dargah* of Nizamuddin developed into a veritable necropolis—with tombs ranging from those in somewhat distant Lodi Garden, to Humayun's tomb and many smaller tombs and graves close to the *dargah*. Specifically, it seems that a number of tombs came up in the 16th century in the land on which Sunder Nursery now stands.

Sunder Nursery is a veritable treasure trove when it comes to botany: on the one hand, it is a showcase for several exotic species; on the other, it's a space where you can see trees and plants that are indigenous to India, but may not often be seen in Delhi. And it's a home for species that were once widespread in Delhi, but are now not often seen even in this city. ■

*This is an edited excerpt from Gardens of Delhi by Swapna Liddle and Madhulika Liddle; photographs by Prabhas Roy (Niyogi Books; 236 pages; ₹ 1,950). Swapna Liddle has written several books on the history of Delhi. Madhulika Liddle is a novelist and a naturalist*

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# Master of the Form

The Nobel laureate perfected the possibilities of a short story

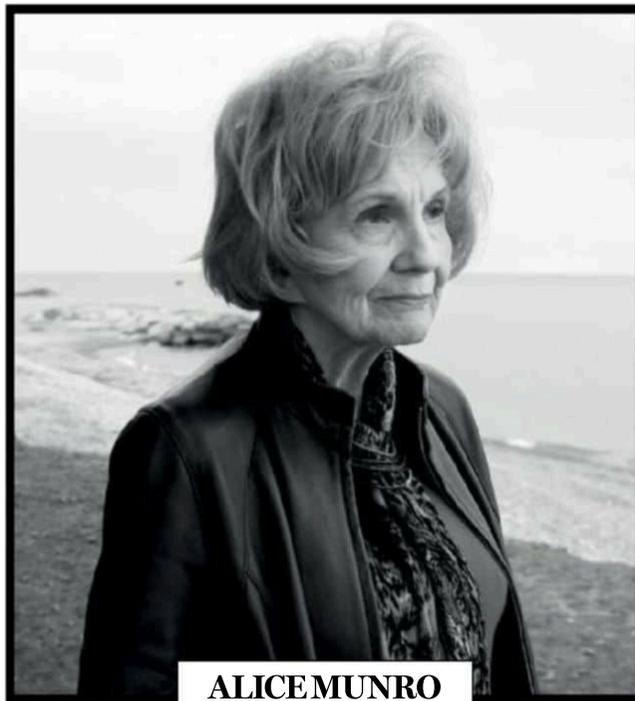
By Nandini Nair

**W**HEN IT COMES to origin stories, Alice Munro has one that would perfectly fit into a short story about the early stirrings of a writer. As a child Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* was read to her. She found the fact that the Little Mermaid did not get her Prince, even after making enormous sacrifices, desperately sad. She needed to do right by the Little Mermaid and so she wrote a story that would give the beguiling half fish-half human a happy ending. It did not matter to the child Alice that no one would read her story, but to her it was important that Little Mermaid got what she deserved.

This was the first story that Munro wrote. And it, perhaps, hints at the many achievements, and themes (from equality to salvation) that would follow her through her writing career, mainly from the 1930s to the 1980s. Canadian short story writer Munro's first collection of stories, *Dance of the Happy Shades* (1968) won the Governor General's Award, then Canada's highest literary prize. From the 1970s her fiction regularly appeared in the *New Yorker*. She would go on to win the Man Booker International Prize (2009) and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. While the list of her awards highlights her accomplishments, it doesn't tell us who she is.

Munro's fellow author and compatriot Margaret Atwood perhaps best understood her both personally and professionally. In *Alice Munro's Best: Selected Stories* (2006), Atwood writes an introduction which contextualises and humanises Munro. Munro belonged to Ontario, a large province of Canada, which Atwood describes as "an area of considerable interest, but also of considerable psychic murkiness and oddity." Here each family has "long memories and stashes of bones in the closets". It is these memories and bones that Munro plumbs in her stories.

While her parents read—her mother was a schoolteacher, and her father a fox and mink farmer—she was the only



**ALICE MUNRO**  
(1931-2024)

person she knew who wrote stories. On her long walks to school, she'd make up stories, just as she would later when her children were at school. In an interview to the Nobel committee, after winning the award, she said, "I'd no sense of inferiority being a young girl at all. Because I lived in Ontario where women did most of the reading and the telling of stories." This gave her a quiet confidence, which was shaken only later when she was submerged in the literary world. She got married at 20, before she finished college, and her first husband Jim gifted her a typewriter.

In 1963 the couple opened a bookstore called Munro's Books (which still

exists) in Victoria, Canada. During an interview, while signing autographs at the same bookshop, Munro said when it opened, the shop gave her more than a refuge. "I was a housewife, a writing housewife. And then with the bookshop there was this sudden wonderful chance to get into the world." In Munro's fiction a slice of Canada comes alive, or as Atwood says, it is "anatomized".

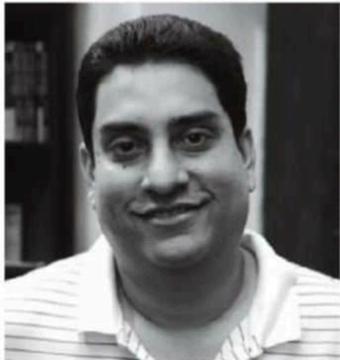
Her stories rattle the bones in closets, but they are also endowed with grace and salvation. Her characters are many things, but what they are most of all is authentic and honest, they have no "dreariness of spirit". Even when they are being shifty and slippery, they are aware of it. Munro said that while her early stories were flowery and ended happily, with time, and after reading *Wuthering Heights* she moved to more tragic affairs.

When she was asked by the Nobel committee if she ever thought she'd win the world's most prestigious literary prize, she laughed uproariously. And then added, "No. Because I am a woman." After a pause she continued that she knew other women have won it, and added, "Most writers underestimate their own writing..."

Munro will long be remembered and celebrated because in her stories, just as within a human heart, a reader can sense a kernel of truth shine through. ■

# 'We've Proved We Can Beat the Best'

*A conversation with Manika Batra in the run-up to Paris 2024*



**M**UCH WAS WRITTEN when Manika Batra and G Sathiyam failed to make it to the Paris 2024 Olympics in the mixed doubles discipline. While both have made it as part of the teams' event, failure to make the mixed doubles draw was a disappointment.

Batra needed to do something special to come out of this negativity. Redemption, as many would say. The Saudi Smash was exactly that. Playing the best she ever has, Manika made the last eight of the prestigious tournament, beating the World No 2 and the World No 14, and in doing so, has raised serious hopes about Paris 2024. Soon after the campaign, she spoke to me about what she did differently, how important it was and how she is planning to get ready for the Olympics.

**The Saudi Smash was a revelation. Tell me more about it.**

It is the best I have ever played. To be able to beat Wang Manyu, currently World No 2, was a dream come true. I had lost to her 0-4 in the World Cup and remember telling my coach that I had always sensed a chance, and if I get to play her again, things could be different. In the Saudi Smash, I managed to do it. The most important thing was I kept faith in my game and was perhaps the one who had control all through the match. This win has given me a lot of satisfaction.

**Having watched the match, what stood out for me was your ability to come back under pressure. You lost the first game and then managed to raise your game by a few notches. That's always difficult.**

Even in the first game, I was competing hard. When I was down, for example, I did not give up. Each point was hard fought and that's what had made me feel I could push her. And that's what happened in the next few games. When I put her under pressure, she wasn't able to deal with it. And once I had control of the match, I wasn't willing to let go. Like I said, it is one match I

will always remember and it has given me a lot of confidence.

**Winning one such match is always a huge thing. But then I have noticed that after winning a big match like this, players often lose the next one. It is because they are physically and mentally exhausted. In your case, you managed to retain the intensity and take out the World No 14 in the next match as well.**

I did not celebrate much after winning against Wang Manyu. Yes, I was very happy and I am not for once denying it. But the moment the match ended, my first thought was that the tournament wasn't over yet. I had to play the World No 14 next and it was yet one more opportunity. So, I had to focus hard. I wanted to go deep into the tournament and was determined to do so. That's what worked for me.

**Coming at the back of the disappointment of not being able to make the mixed doubles in Paris, this must have come as a big relief for you?**

Yes, you can absolutely say that. Sathiyam and I were playing well but then we both were unwell for a while leading into the qualifiers and weren't able to bring out our A-game in the competition. It was hugely disappointing for we had put in a lot of hard work and were much looking forward to playing the Olympics together. But that's how sport is. You can never plan much or plan ahead. Things don't always go to plan. The important thing is to stay grounded and keep working hard. That's what is in our hands as athletes and that's what we need to keep doing.

**What did you do differently in the Saudi Smash?**

The only thing I did, and I am being totally candid, is work the hardest. That's what I have been doing. If you keep working hard on your game, success has to come and that's what I will do in the next one-and-a-half months. After losing out on the mixed doubles qualification, there was a 10-12 day window and I remember telling my coach that I wanted to utilise every single day to get better. I trained the best I could and you can now see the results. If 10-12 days can give us these results, needless to say, a month-and-a-half of solid training can make me seriously competitive at the Olympics.



Manika Batra in action against Wang Manyu at the WTT Saudi Smash, Jeddah, May 6, 2024

GETTY IMAGE

**“WHEN I WAS DOWN, I DID NOT GIVE UP. EACH POINT WAS HARD FOUGHT AND THAT’S WHAT HAD MADE ME FEEL I COULD PUSH HER. AND THAT’S WHAT HAPPENED IN THE NEXT FEW GAMES. WHEN I PUT WANG MANYU UNDER PRESSURE, SHE WASN’T ABLE TO DEAL WITH IT”** MANIKA BATRA table tennis player

**Both men’s and women’s teams have made it to the Olympics in a historic first for Indian table tennis. Your win against Wang Manyu should encourage every player who will be competing.**

Yes, for sure. It is clear proof that we can and we are capable of winning at the highest level against the top-ranked players. We have been playing well for a while now. Sharath bhaiya had a very good run in the Singapore Smash, Sathiyana did really well in Beirut, I did well in Saudi, Ayhika and Sutirtha did superbly well in the Asian Games. So, overall, we have all been playing some really good table tennis. Now, we need to do so as a team in Paris at the highest stage of all. Playing the Olympics is always a dream for any athlete and playing as a team, more so. We will all give our very best in Paris 2024.

**Your career has always been a roller coaster. There have been controversies on the way. And yet you have managed to stay strong mentally. How important is mental health? Unless you are mentally there, you can’t be physically there as well. Isn’t it?**

It is the most important thing. You need clarity of thought. You need to be able to think clearly what you want to do, how you want to train, how you might need to move to Plan B in the course of a game. All of these things can only happen if you are mentally fresh. In my case, I was very disappointed after the mixed doubles failure. Negative thoughts were starting to take over. That’s when I worked the hardest. I made sure that I kept believing in my own ability. And now, I am mentally and physically right up there. I have to make sure that things stay the same going into Paris. If I am able to do that, there is no reason why Paris will not be great for us.

**Finally, have you got all your plans in place leading up to Paris?**

Yes, and I have been discussing them with my coach and my support team. We will make sure every detail is worked out and I am the best prepared. Attention to detail is key and preparation has to be at its best. That’s the only goal in the next month-and-a-half. ■

# STARGAZER

KAVEREE BAMZAI



## King of Franchises

He's become the king of franchises, with recurring roles in *Dream Girl 2*, *Stree 2*, and *Bhediya 2*. "It's both a challenge and a comfort," says Abhishek Banerjee, whose characters swing from extreme darkness to extreme light. "After Devashish Makhija's *Ajji*, though, nothing can be terrifying," says Banerjee of the sexually deviant character he played in the 2017 film. "You have to be a soldier of his vision. After *Ajji*, anything dark is easy. Playing funny and light is tough, especially if you're not feeling it." But Banerjee spans the spectrum. Stepping into a character he has played in the past is a bit like wearing an old shoe, he says, "You know where it pinches and where it doesn't." Banerjee will also be seen in Karan Tejpal's *Stolen*, where he plays a man who is mistaken for a child molester. "We were shooting in Pushkar and some villagers actually thought I was being lynched and tried to help me," he says, referring to the kindness of strangers. "Equally things can be dark sometimes," he adds, referring to an incident which took place once their car broke down on the way from Mangaluru to Goa. "Fortunately, some people recognised me and extricated me from the situation." Banerjee, an alumnus of Delhi's Kirori Mal College (KMC), also got an opportunity to work with another KMC alumnus Amitabh Bachchan. "We shot *Section 84* together and it was one of the most learning experiences. He is always on time, always there for his

co-stars, always happy to rehearse and always happy to give cues," he says. A lot of established actors don't do that in the industry. "You have to respect the scene," he adds. Banerjee describes himself as a talkative person and says his idea of renewal is to go to the Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamkot. "It helps you to focus and detaches you from the hustle culture of the industry," Banerjee adds.

## Tribute to Aparna Sen

Indian documentaries are having a moment across the world, with Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes* and Vinay Shukla's *While We Watched* winning Peabody Awards in the documentary section. The awards will be given away on June 9 in Los Angeles. Another documentary, of a different kind, will soon be screened at film festivals abroad, Suman Ghosh's *Parama: A Journey with Aparna Sen*. Ghosh, who teaches Economics at the Florida Atlantic University College of Business, has directed the tribute to Aparna Sen. From the stairs Violet Stoneham climbed in *36 Chowringhee Lane* to the house of *Paromitar Ek Din*, Ghosh takes Aparna Sen back to the scene of her cinema. Popularly known as Rinadi, Ghosh makes her talk about her full life, as an actor, director and person of conscience. He gives us not only an impeccable portrait of a truly liberated woman, but also an artist who has not stopped learning and looking. Ghosh is a worthy chronicler, a filmmaker who has made commercially successful feature films and critically

appreciated documentaries.

## Eye of the Cinematographer

"Song and dance has become almost like montage now in most movies," says Sanjay Leela Bhansali's long-time friend and cinematographer on five films, Sudeep Chatterjee. "So what he does is precious," adds Chatterjee. There is much to celebrate in *Heeramandi: The Diamond Bazaar* for India and the West. It is peak Indian aesthetic or Eastern exotic, embodied by Bhansali. "He will even examine at length the costume of the dancers seen in silhouette. He is open to all ideas in the service of the film and doesn't treat the script as sacrosanct," Chatterjee says. Chatterjee first met Bhansali when the latter was shooting the songs for Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *1942: A Love Story* (1994). Chatterjee was asked by Chopra to be his assistant after he saw his FTII song shot on Neena Gupta. "Vinod praised my work. He is very large-hearted. I remember Bhansali as quiet, serious. We would often share the auto back home, and he would sing," Chatterjee says. Chatterjee was originally meant to shoot two episodes of the Netflix series but ended up shooting for 275 days on the sets at Film City. The sets were covered so all the lighting was artificial. He has just completed shooting the upcoming biographical sport drama *Chandu Champion* with the director Kabir Khan, and is starting work on Karan Sharma's rom-com *Bhul Chuk Maaf*. "I like mixing it up. It's a quick 35-day shoot," says Chatterjee, who is from Kolkata and saw more of folk and traditional theatre growing up than Hindi movies. ■

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**For business queries, contact:**

Mohan Singh Bisht - National Head- Advertising;  
E-mail: [mohan.bisht@fortuneindia.com](mailto:mohan.bisht@fortuneindia.com); Mobile: 9818495334

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