

ELECTIONS
2024

**PUNJAB'S FOUR-WAY FIGHT
MANN TO WATCH**

**NORTH EAST DELHI
THE ACTOR VS THE CHARMER**

JOURNALISM WITH A HUMAN TOUCH

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CARL-GUSTAF**

JUNE 2, 2024

THE WEEK

UP

IN THE AIR

Why it is an intense battle in
Uttar Pradesh



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UP FOR GRABS

Despite its monotony, the Lok Sabha election in Uttar Pradesh is interesting in parts. The BJP is banking on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity, the *sanatan* stance of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and an improved law and order situation. The Samajwadi Party and the Congress are fighting together as part of the INDIA bloc. And, the Bahujan Samaj Party is locked in a battle for survival. But this election is of narrow margins—both in victory and defeat.

PLUS

◆ When voting, Ayodhya has always looked at issues beyond the Ram Mandir

◆ In Varanasi, the youth's preference for modernity over the carefree essence of the past is likely to guarantee Modi's win

◆ Priyanka wants Rahul to lose: Keshav Prasad Maurya, deputy chief minister

◆ Voting has been low because the opposition has been unable to enthuse its voters: Brajesh Pathak, deputy chief minister

◆ The tally in Uttar Pradesh may trigger changes that would impact key leaders in both the BJP and the INDIA bloc



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Nancy Tyagi is blowing up big right now. It's a Cinderella story of the best kind... except this

young girl is her own fairy godmother and her own Prince Charming.

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If anyone can breach the chasm between chef and actor, it is **Ranveer Brar**

COVER ILLUSTRATION BINESH SREEDHARAN

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Crucial battle

Your assessment that unimaginable scenarios are playing out across Maharashtra was absolutely correct ('Wrest assured', May 19). I will go one step further—the alliance that sweeps Maharashtra will win Delhi. The rifts and the splits in the NCP and the Shiv Sena have definitely left the voter dissatisfied, disgusted and angry. But, I feel all that will surface in a bigger way in the assembly elections scheduled for later this year. In the Lok Sabha polls, people will either vote for the NDA or the INDIA alliance. The future looks bleak for those factions of the NCP and the Shiv Sena that will end up on the losing side.

Prashant Asthana,
On email.

Farmer issues have always dominated the electoral battle in Maharashtra, and it will remain so. Eknath Shinde and Ajit Pawar will pay a heavy price for taking their vote bank for a ride. After a few months, the BJP will surely

pressure Shinde to quit the chief minister's chair, and Ajit will see political oblivion. The people of Maharashtra will teach these politicians a lesson.

Vasudha K.,
On email.

Uddhav Thackeray is to be blamed for all the confusion in Maharashtra politics today. He should have been wiser in 2019. How could he even think of joining hands with the Congress and the NCP, only because he wanted to be the chief minister? The assembly poll verdict in Maharashtra was clearly in favour of the BJP, and Uddhav should have accepted the post of deputy chief minister. He was over-ambitious and that spoiled everything. Uddhav should have realised that things are not how they used to be under Bal Thackeray, and there was no harm in playing the second fiddle to the BJP in the state. We all move with the times.

Radheshyam Chavan,
On email.

Election outcomes can be as erratic as a new blockbuster. Any candidate can make a 360-degree turn, regardless of the political party they belong to. Like politicians, the general public also say one thing and do just the opposite when they cast their vote. Freebies and sweet

talk triumph over loyal leaders.

Praveen Thimmaiah,
On email.

Rahul could lose

Rahul Gandhi may not win Rae Bareilly; even if he wins he will win by a narrow margin ('Shaky stronghold', May 19). Rae Bareilly owed its identity to the Gandhi family once upon a time, but that is no longer the case. The Gandhi family should get into a redemptive mode. They should spend more time in Amethi and Rae Bareilly. People should feel connected to them. I wish Rahul the best. May democracy win.

Gaurav Malhotra,
On email.

Rahul may have won from Rae Bareilly if he had not contested from Wayanad. The BJP candidate in Rae Bareilly is strong. Rahul should have opted out of Wayanad, and focused only on Rae Bareilly.

If Rahul continues to fight from Wayanad, the impression in the north Indian states, which have more seats, would be that he lacks the courage to take on the

HOW TO REACH US

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Te: 0481-2563646
REGIONAL CO-ORDINATING OFFICE
Tej Building, 1st Floor, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi 110 002.
Te: 011-23354920, 23354921, 23359541, 23355801, 23356537
Fax: 43541354

EDITORIAL
Manorama Buildings, P.B. No. 4278, Panampilly Nagar, Kochi 682036, Kerala, India.
editor@theweek.in
<http://www.theweek.in>
+91 484-4447888
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Email: magazineads@mm.co.in





Suffering from Resistant Hypertension?

Renal Denervation is here to help.

Hypertension is a very common medical problem affecting nearly one third of the adult population in India. Studies over the years have shown that reducing the BP does reduce the events of heart attack, stroke and death. Lowering the blood pressure by 5 mmHg is shown to reduce stroke by an estimated 34%, ischemic heart disease by 21% and death by 13%.

The right combination of drugs is important for the management of hypertension. Sometimes despite the right combination of drugs and compliance with medications and lifestyle, blood pressure remains high for few patients. For these patients who also have ruled out other secondary causes of hypertension, a newer treatment modality has emerged called **Renal denervation (RDN)** and has been proven to reduce blood pressure in studies.

What is renal denervation and how is it performed?

The renal denervation (RDN) procedure is a minimally invasive technique that targets nerves near the kidneys that can become overactive and the main reason for elevated blood pressure. In this procedure, a small catheter (wire like device) is inserted through a tiny puncture into the right groin artery and is taken up to the kidney artery. The doctor then uses the catheter to calm the excessive activity of the nerves connected to the kidney. The tube is removed, leaving no implant behind. The procedure is very safe and can take up to

1 hour. The patient can be discharged the next day and can go back to normal life as before.

What are the benefits of renal denervation?

RDN is highly effective in controlling blood pressure and more importantly the number of antihypertensive medications come down significantly after the therapy. The results of RDN therapy are long lasting with continued benefits as long as 10 years post therapy.

Who is an ideal candidate for RDN?

1. Patients with resistant or uncontrolled blood pressure despite taking multiple medications.
2. Patients with high blood pressure and are unable to take medications due to adverse effects of drugs.



Dr. Refai Showkathali

MRCP (UK), FRCP (Lon), CCT in Cardio (UK),
FACC (USA), FESC (Europe), Fellowship in TAVI (Lon)
Senior Consultant Interventional Cardiologist
Adjunct Professor, Apollo Hospitals Educational &
Research Foundation
Apollo Hospitals, Thousand Lights, Chennai

Apollo Hospitals

21, Greams Lane, Off Greams Road, Thousand Lights, Chennai - 600 006
Ph: 044 4040 1066 | E : infochennai@apollohospitals.com

BJP there. No sensible Indian politician would want to have that kind of perception.

Vismay Kapur,
On email.

CPI and CPI(M) should merge

These so-called fiery young candidates of the CPI(M) cannot revive the party in West Bengal ('Red shoots rising', May 19). There is an urgent need for the CPI(M) to reinvent itself. In Kerala, the CPI(M) is turning into a commercial entity, and it does not address the concerns of the marginalised sections of society. I feel the CPI and the CPI(M) should merge to save the communist movement in the country.

Tanushri Nagaraj,
On email.

Don't divide us

I was hurt after reading 'Growing north-south divide' ('Manifesto', March 17).

Mani Shankar Aiyar said that India would have become the fifth largest global economy if the north had matched the south's rates of economic growth, and that our per capita income levels would have been much higher if the north controlled its population growth.

The columnist has left no stone unturned to praise the development and the progress that

the southern states are showing. It clearly shows that he has ill will towards northern states and the rest of the country. Lakhs of people migrate to southern states for better jobs and livelihood. But they also contribute in taxes, work force, labour, and other human resources.

The columnist should remember that a major part of wheat comes from Punjab and Madhya Pradesh. Jaggery and sugar come from Uttar Pradesh. The columnist said that the southern states are severely discriminated against in the distribution of tax revenue.

He said that the taxpayer in states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala average ₹20,000 a year in contributions to the national tax kitty, but the average contribution of the Bihar taxpayer is a measly ₹4,500.

The columnist has made us feel ashamed about our identity. He feels that India is not a developed country because of the incompetency of people from certain parts of the country.

If he feels that there is a bias against the southern states, he should start a movement to stop it, and not tarnish the image of the northern states.

Bhaskar Gangwal,
On email.

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I am a newspaper addict. In fact, I get irritated when I don't get my newspaper early in the day. I read four newspapers a day. Books, I finish two to three of them a week easily. I read biographies, history, if it is interesting, crime thrillers for entertainment, and read classics. I have a fairly wide range of interests in books.

Ruskin Bond, author

He has become so greedy for the post of the chief minister that he is trying to link his predicament with me. People of Delhi felt relieved when Arvind Kejriwal was in jail as their 'cough' had subsided.

Yogi Adityanath, on the Delhi chief minister

[Trinamool Congress MP] Abhishek Banerjee is intelligent and focused, and the way he leads the party is extremely different from how it used to be done earlier. However, he should let people touch him..... Didi [West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee] is approachable, but can be fooled.

Dev Adhikari, Trinamool Congress MP

I would never want to say sorry on my death bed about some five shots that I missed. No question about it. That is one moment where I want to look up into the eyes of God and I hope I did well..... Not that everybody likes my work, but they care for me because of that love for one shot.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali, filmmaker

I am a director's baby, and the first thing I see is who is the director and what are they going to do with me, because they are the people who live, breathe and eat that vision. And my fuel is to surrender to that vision, to be present, and to absorb and to do work from there.

Aditi Rao Hydari, actor



AMEY MANSABDAR

WORD PLAY

Dinkwad is the abbreviation for dual income, no kids, with a dog. It is a lifestyle trend, popular among millennial and Gen Z couples.

MILESTONES



AP

FOUR CONSECUTIVE TITLES

Manchester City won a fourth consecutive Premier League title after it beat West Ham United 3-1. This was for the first time in the league's history that a club won four consecutive titles. With the victory, Manchester City has won six out of the last seven titles.



PTI

GOLD MEDAL

Sumit Antil won the gold medal in the men's F64 javelin event at the World Para Athletic Championships in Japan. Antil threw 69.50m to finish at the top. Last year, he had clinched the gold medal at the Hangzhou Asian Para Games.



PTI

FIRST INDIAN TOURIST IN SPACE

Gopichand Thotakura, an entrepreneur and pilot from Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh, became the first Indian to travel to space as a tourist. Thotakura was part of the select crew of Blue Origin's New Shepard-25 mission, which had six members.



Searching for Surjeet

Ever since the British left us to our fate, freedom and franchise, many Indians have yearned for a two-party system like the way they have it in England—a neat polity where two parties contest for power, and the loser would shadow the ruler. They forget that we got our freedom when a third party came to power on its own in the UK.

A few of us are also fascinated by the American way, where two parties fight for the top job in a neatly choreographed election where everything, except the winner, is pre-determined—the term of office, the date of polling, the date of counting, the date of inauguration, everything. The Ram Nath Kovind committee has prescribed something of that kind for us, boring to the core, but in a multi-party order.

Yearning for a two-party polity is one thing, but getting it is another. It ought to evolve. We can't will it into being or wish it into existence. Why should we? Ours is a multi-culture society where our myriad political wills and electoral wishes can't be force-packed into a bland political binary.

Yet, like it or not, we seem to be evolving into a two-front polity. West Bengal and Kerala had in effect been two-front polities since nearly half a century, though the warriors on the fronts have changed. Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand have become two-party polities; Maharashtra has become a two-front polity.

At the federal level, we have been evolving into a two-front polity since the collapse of the Janata experiments of the late 1990s. This election has catalysed the process. Narendra Modi's NDA has remained more or less solid for the last several years; now the opposition, which fought as disparate elements in the last two rounds, has consolidated over

the last few months. There still are sulking truants like Mamata Banerjee, but it looks like the contours of both the alliances have more or less consolidated.

Would the fronts hold fast after the polls, especially if neither front makes it to the halfway mark, as many are predicting? The answer is difficult. It would all depend on who gathers more of the fortune-hunting freebooters, and who can lure more quislings from the other side.

The early bird will get the worms. The Congress learnt it the hard way in Goa and Manipur in 2017, and in Meghalaya in 2018. By the time the final count was out, the BJP, which won fewer seats, had more MLAs to take to the governor. The story could be the same in Delhi this time, if neither front is sure of a clear win. The game could already be afoot. Who makes the next government will be decided after the last vote is cast on June 1, and the first vote is counted on June 4.

Indeed, moves made in such interregnums can go wrong. Political lore has it that, though fighting each other in Karnataka, H.D. Deve Gowda had assured P.V. Narasimha Rao of the support of his Janata Dal in case Rao fell short of MPs in

1996. But how the table turned! After the polls, Rao was forced to lend his many Congress MPs as outside supporters to Gowda's few MPs who sat on the treasury benches. That was when Pramod Mahajan made the famous joke about how he had to tell his Chinese hosts about the largest party sitting in the opposition, the second largest party sitting outside the government, and the smallest of the three in the government.

That miracle was made possible by a crafty communist, one who spurned kingship for himself or any of his partymen, but loved making others kings. His name: Harkishan Singh Surjeet.

Does India or INDIA have one like him now?



Management of Diabetes during summer

Summer can make it harder to manage diabetes because of heat-related health problems. As the sun shines brighter and temperatures rise, individuals with diabetes face unique challenges in keeping their blood sugar levels stable. With the right strategies and a little extra care, you can still enjoy all that summer has to offer while effectively managing your diabetes. High temperatures may affect insulin absorption rates, making it crucial to adapt dosages accordingly.

Dehydration becomes a significant concern during the summer months, as excessive heat can cause fluid loss through sweating. This poses a risk for diabetic individuals, as dehydration can lead to spikes in blood sugar levels and potential complications. Additionally, staying cool while also ensuring proper hydration presents a delicate balance that requires attention.

The temptation of sugary treats and indulgent beverages often heightens in the summer, posing a challenge for those with diabetes trying to stick to a balanced diet plan. Resisting these temptations while still enjoying seasonal delights can be tricky but essential for maintaining optimal health throughout the sunny days ahead.

Tips for managing blood sugar levels during summer

Managing blood sugar levels during the summer can be tricky, but with some simple tips, you can stay on track.

One key tip is to stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water throughout the day. Dehydration can affect blood sugar levels, so it's essential to keep fluids flowing.

Opt for hydrating foods like watermelon, cucumbers, and lettuce to stay cool and maintain proper hydration. These foods are not only refreshing but also low in calories and high in water content. Incorporate fibre-rich options such as whole grains, legumes, fruits, and vegetables into your meals to help

with blood sugar control. Fibre slows down digestion and helps prevent spikes in glucose levels after eating.

Avoid sugary drinks like soda and fruit juices which can cause rapid blood sugar fluctuations. Instead, opt for unsweetened beverages like water or herbal teas or buttermilk to stay hydrated without affecting your blood sugar levels.

By being mindful of what you eat and drink during the summer months, you can better manage your diabetes while enjoying a healthy lifestyle regardless of the rising temperatures.

Another helpful tip is to check your blood sugar more frequently than usual in hot weather. The heat can impact how your body responds to insulin and food, so keeping a close eye on your levels is crucial.

Moreover, staying active during the summer months is important for managing diabetes. Incorporate regular exercise into your routine but choose cooler times of the day to avoid overheating. Staying active during the summer is crucial for managing diabetes. When it comes to exercise, choose activities that you enjoy and can easily fit into your routine. Opt for early morning or evening workouts to avoid the peak heat of the day. Swimming is a fantastic option as it keeps you cool while providing a full-body workout. Walking in shaded areas or indoors is also beneficial. Remember to wear breathable fabrics and comfortable shoes to prevent blisters and discomfort.

Always carry water with you to stay hydrated during physical activity, especially in hot weather. Monitor your blood sugar levels before and after exercising to ensure they stay within a healthy range.

Consult your healthcare provider before starting any new exercise regimen, especially if you have underlying health conditions. Listen to your body and take breaks when needed. Regular physical activity not only helps manage diabetes but also boosts overall well-being during the summer months.



Dr. V. MOHAN, M.D., Ph.D., D.Sc.,
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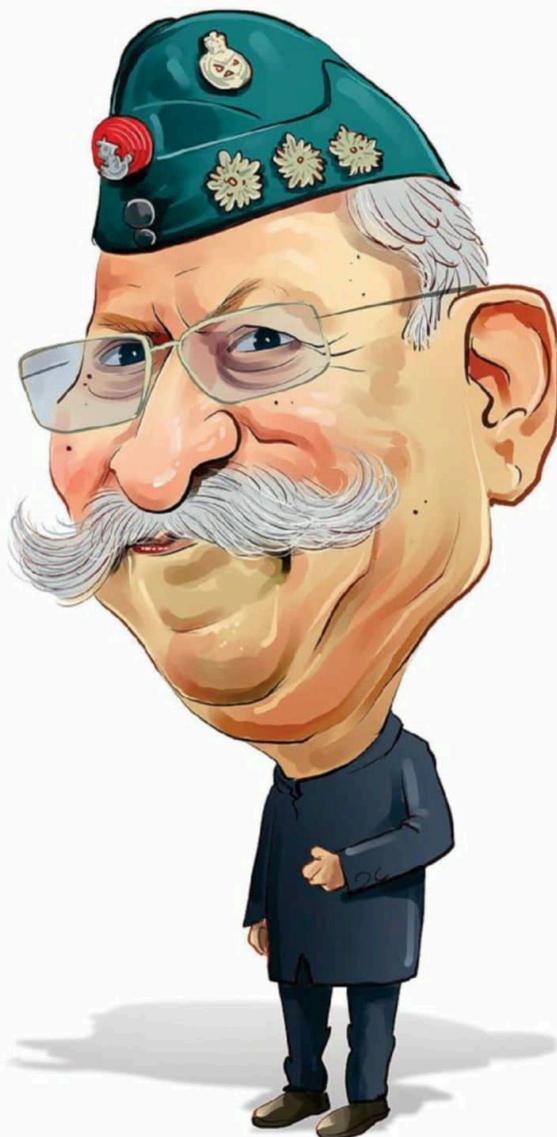
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Contact: +91 89391 10000
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Managing medications and insulin during hot weather is crucial for individuals with diabetes to maintain optimal health. The heat can affect the efficacy of medications, especially insulin, making it essential to take extra precautions.

It's important to store insulin properly, ensuring it remains at a stable temperature. Keep your insulin refrigerated at home and when traveling, use a cool bag or pouch to prevent exposure to high temperatures.

Be mindful of how the heat may impact your blood sugar levels and adjust your medication doses accordingly under the guidance of your healthcare provider. Remember that extreme heat can alter how your body processes medications.

Enjoying a healthy and safe summer with diabetes is all about being proactive, informed, and prepared. By staying on top of your blood sugar levels, staying hydrated, eating well-balanced meals, adjusting your insulin as needed, staying cool in hot weather, recognizing low blood sugar symptoms, and taking necessary precautions when traveling during the summer months - you can ensure that you have a enjoyable and worry-free season. Remember to prioritize your health and well-being so that you can make the most of the sunny days ahead while managing your diabetes effectively. Stay safe and have a fantastic summer!



AWKWARD MOMENT

The bureaucracy in South Block and the armed forces have their moments of unease once in a while. Arunachal Pradesh Governor Lieutenant General K.T. Parnaik (retd) seemed to have unwittingly triggered such a moment last week. At a lecture organised by the Army and the United Service Institution of India, a think tank, the governor said: "The armed forces gracefully accepted civilian control since independence.... However, over a period of time, this has turned into a bureaucratic control...." It left many babus as well as officers a little ill at ease.

WHO IS THE DICTATOR?

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that his work would help India for a 1,000 years to come, opposition parties had found similarities between his words and those of Adolf Hitler, who said that Nazi Germany would last a 1,000 years. Trinamool MP Mahua Moitra had even shared a post with Modi's words and the photo of an old *The New York Times* report about Hitler's prediction. The BJP's West Bengal president Sukanta Majumdar responded by calling Mamata Banerjee the biggest dictator in the world. "She does not hesitate to jail a person for drawing a little cartoon," he said. "On the other hand, when the opposition mocked Modi ji and made memes, he took it sportingly."

ILLUSTRATIONS JAIRAJ T.G.

DIVINE AFFIRMATION

When the going gets tough, some *netas* invoke deities and attribute their decision to rebel to them. K. Raghupathi Bhat, former BJP legislator from Karnataka's Udupi, was denied a ticket to contest in the MLC elections on June 3. He is now preparing to contest as a rebel. He said he had the blessings of two deities and their positive response to his decision to contest as a rebel had given him encouragement and assurance.



THE GEHLOT TOUCH

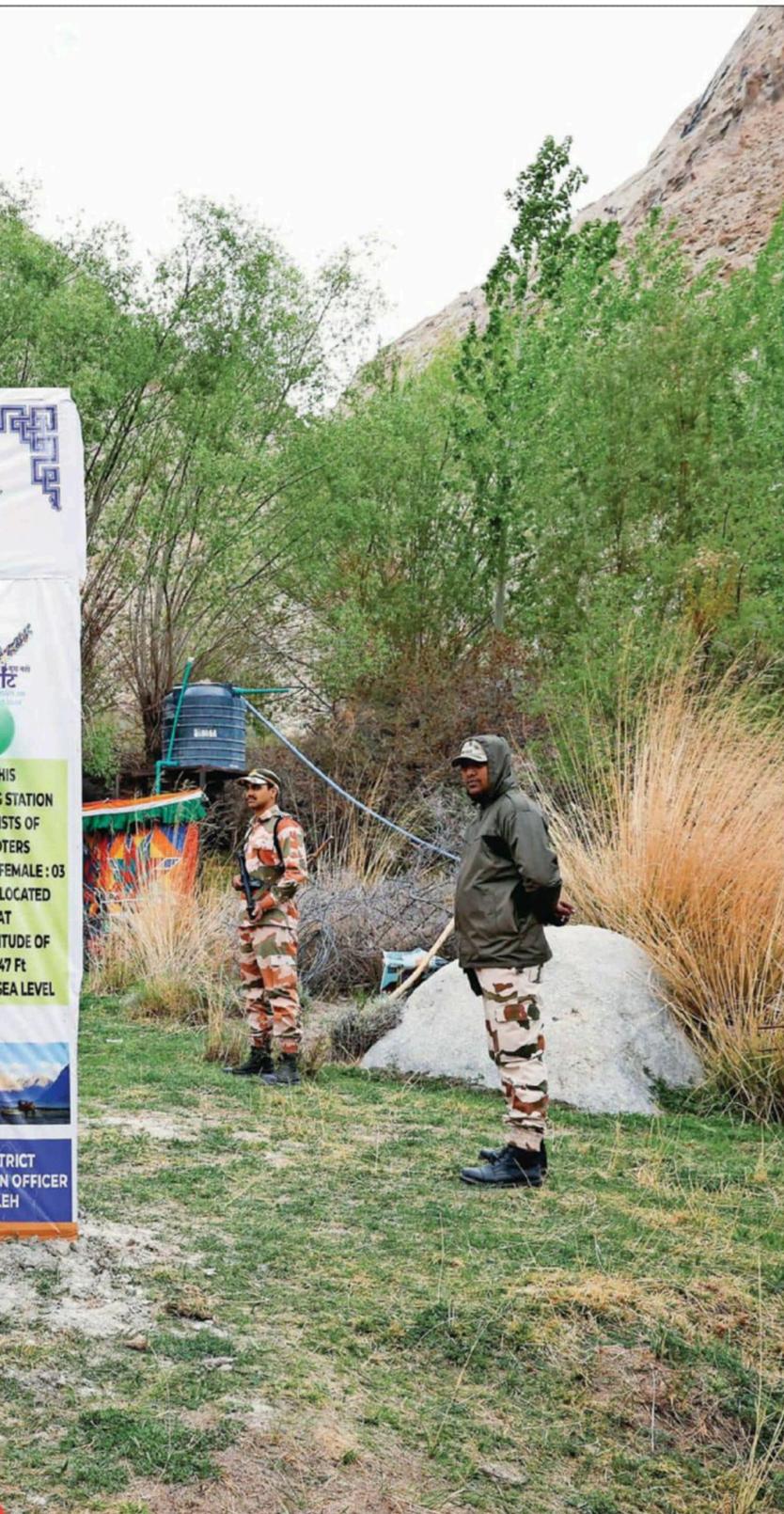
The Congress campaign in Amethi had a distinct Rajasthani flavour, thanks to former Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot. The party's observer in the high profile seat, where Gandhi family loyalist K.L. Sharma took on the BJP's Smriti Irani, Gehlot deputed senior leaders from his state, including sitting and former MLAs, to coordinate the campaign. The presence of the Karni Sena, a group that represents the Rajput community in the constituency, has also been attributed to Gehlot. The Karni Sena has been mobilising the Rajputs to vote against the BJP.



CALL TO CASTE

Sangam Lal Gupta, sitting MP and the BJP candidate from Pratapgarh, burst into tears at an election rally. His pain was triggered at being opposed for his caste (Teli) by the Kshatriyas who are big players in the constituency. Gupta's pitch was baffling—that candidates from the Kshatriya caste use Patel as their surname when asking for votes but lapse into their high ways once elected. Gupta, who described himself akin to the dust of the voters' feet, might have earned the ire of the Election Commission by talking openly about caste.





— APERITIF —
THE BIG PICTURE

FAMILY AFFAIR

Rinchen, 23, leaves with her father, Konchok Rabgais, 42, after voting in Ladakh's remote Warshi village on May 20. Warshi, which is around 170km from Leh, is home to just one family with five eligible voters. Polling officials travelled seven hours to reach the polling station near Siachen as part of the Election Commission's effort to ensure maximum participation.

PHOTO BY REUTERS

MANN IN A



CORNER



AAP OR DOWN?

Bhagwant Mann with Arvind Kejriwal during a roadshow in Delhi after the latter got bail in the liquor policy case

REUTERS



In a four-cornered contest, the division of votes might work to the advantage of the Congress. It could also help the AAP, which is fighting massive anti-incumbency, save face

BY PROF PRAMOD KUMAR

The parliamentary elections in Punjab are not in sync with the national political narrative of *kamandal* (Ram Mandir) and Mandal (OBC census). There is also not the seriousness to herald any change in the development paradigm or any political will to resolve the farmers' grievances. The elections, instead, have become a theatrical battle royal of false claims and empty promises.

The electoral outcomes of the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary and the 2022 assembly elections showed that the voters were no longer bound by any political party, and in fact, functioned largely as footloose voters. For instance, in the 2014 elections, the AAP won a surprise four seats and 24 per cent vote share. But in the 2019 elections, the AAP's vote share decreased to 7 per cent with one seat, the Congress vote share increased to 41 per cent with eight seats, the Akali Dal's vote share was 28 per cent with two seats, and the BJP vote share was 9 per cent with two seats. Whereas, in the 2022 assembly elections, the AAP resurged with more than 40 per cent vote share and 92 seats. Surprisingly, immediately after this landslide victory, it lost the Sangrur Parliament byelection on a seat vacated by the sitting chief minister.

NO EXCLUSIVE VOTE BANKS

Historically, Punjab has had no exclusive vote banks based on religion or caste, unlike in many other states. The religio-caste categories are intermeshed. For instance, scheduled castes constitute more than 32 per cent of the population and are segmented into Mazhabis, Chamars, Ad-dharmis and Balmikis. They are not represented in politics by any caste-based party. The long-term implications of the community finding representation in mainstream Punjab has been that the Bahujan Samaj Party's vote share has been continuously declining. It has come down from 8 per cent in 2004 to 3.5 per cent in 2019.

It is relevant to point out that the scheduled castes got representation in all political parties, including the Jat-dominated Akali Dal. This has meant that a majority of the scheduled caste legislators were



HELPING HAND
 Congress candidate Gurjeet Singh Aujla campaigns in Amritsar

elected from parties other than the BSP and the left parties.

DERAS AND DRUGS—CURRENCIES TO BUY VOTES

Furthermore, the sub-castes are intermeshed with the *deras*, which are shrines of the saints operating outside the ritualistic domain of the institutionalised religions. These *deras* have acquired moral superiority by liberating their devotees, by and large, from vices like drugs and alcohol, and have efficiently provid-

ed access to health care and subsidised food. Many of the devotees who belong to the scheduled caste community are affiliated to competing *deras*; for instance, a majority of the Ravidasias are with the Dera Ballan, and a section of the Mazhabis are with the Dera Sacha Sauda. The blind faith of these devotees is traded as votes by the self-styled god-men.

Politics over drugs has become more serious than the problem itself. Instead of addressing the issue, more focus is on sending political adver-

saries to jail and fabricating a false narrative to settle personal scores and to harvest votes.

LOCALISED CASTE AND RELIGIOUS FLAVOUR

Punjab has added its own regional flavour to caste and religious identities. This can be attributed to the role of religious reform movements, particularly Sikhism, Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj. This weakened the orthodox behavioural aspects of caste and inter- and intra-religious practices. The Hindus have dominant traits of Sikhism, normative behaviour influenced by the Arya Samaj and rituals of *sanatan dharma*. For instance, in the 2014 parliamentary elections, the BJP could not garner the votes of urban Hindus even when the hindutva wave was sweeping other parts of the country.

Punjab's electoral politics has shown signs of blurred religious and caste fault-lines. To mobilise the people as exclusive categories, like Hindu Banias or scheduled castes, might not bring the desired electoral results, unlike in other Indian states. There is no concept of ideological puritanism. At the village level, factions shift their loyalty in opposition to the other.

MERGERS, ELECTORAL ALLIANCES AND COALITIONS

Given this background, the electoral politics of Punjab has a history of mergers, electoral alliances and coalitions with even diametrically opposed political parties. Even the Congress and the Akalis merged in 1937, 1948 and 1956.

In reorganised Punjab, between 1967 and 1980, four post-election coalitions were formed between the BJP/Bharatiya Jana Sangh and the Akali Dal. And in the post-terrorism phase, the Akalis and the BJP formed three pre-election coalitions. The logical inference can be drawn that the voters do not see political parties

as antagonistic. Most people keep both the blue turban (Akali symbol) and white turban (Congress symbol) ready to wear as per the opportunity. However, the Congress remained capable of forming a government on its own, averaging above 30 per cent of the votes, while the Akalis needed a coalition partner to be electorally viable and politically stable.

Similarly, the BJP does not have an exclusive vote bank to win majority on its own. In the parliamentary elections between 2004 and 2019, the BJP in alliance with the Akalis could win two or three seats, with around 10 per cent vote share.

The alliance between the BJP and the Akalis became strained as the former did not conform to alliance dharma. For instance, in the 2017 assembly elections, an unusual understanding between the BJP and the state Congress, led by Captain Amarinder Singh (who later joined the BJP), to defeat the AAP changed electoral dynamics. It was “unusual” as there was a formal alliance with the Akalis. This can be easily discerned from the shift in the urban vote share, which is the BJP’s traditional vote bank. The urban vote share of the Congress went up from 43.5 per cent in 2012 to 49 per cent in 2017. And, the urban vote share of the BJP declined from 28 per cent in 2012 to 19 per cent in 2017. It can be safely concluded that the understanding between the Congress and the BJP helped the former.

In the 2019 parliamentary elections, there was no pact between the Congress and the BJP. The urban vote share of the BJP increased from 19 per cent in 2017 to 27 per cent in 2019. And, the Congress’s urban vote share declined from 49 per cent in 2017 to 45 per cent.

Ironically, in the 2022 assembly elections, the BJP entered into a pre-election alliance with the breakaway groups—the Punjab Loktantrik Congress (Amarinder)



We are anticipating more than eight seats

BY MOHIT SHARMA

Congress veteran Partap Bajwa is confident that his party has the edge in the four-cornered contest in Punjab. “Our party will bring minimum support price if given a chance,” he said. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ Which party will benefit most from the four-cornered contest?

A/ There was a recent survey in Punjab which had the Congress’s chances at 30 per cent, the Aam Aadmi Party’s at 27 per cent, the BJP’s at 18 per cent and the Shiromani Akali Dal’s at 16 per cent. The Congress clearly has the edge.

Q/ Are you trying to reap the benefit of farmers’ sentiment against the BJP?

A/ We don’t want to reap the benefit. We honestly stand with the farmers.

Q/ The Congress and the AAP are allies in Delhi and are fighting each other in Punjab.

A/ From the outset I have opposed any kind of tie-up with the AAP in Punjab. [I told] the central leadership: the AAP is in the government; we are the main opposition. If today we come together, the major beneficiary would be the AAP. They will take most of our cadres. Besides, they lack leaders. A lot of their candidates are former Congressmen.

Now I think the national leadership agrees that my stand saved the party in Punjab.... I feel the AAP is just an aberration. And Bhagwant Mann is a bad choice [as Punjab chief minister]. He is not in [AAP leader] Arvind Kejriwal’s control. When [Kejriwal] was imprisoned, Mann thought he would

become the national convener, but Kejriwal’s wife came to the limelight. They (the AAP) also realise that they have made a bad choice in Mann.

Q/ There is talk that the Congress lacks star campaigners. Does it affect campaigning?

A/ Am I not a star campaigner? I am the senior-most politician in the state.

Q/ How many seats are you confident of winning? Mann is raising the 13-0 slogan.

A/ Mann will lose even Sangrur (the seat he had held before becoming CM). He lost Sangrur in the bypoll three months after winning the assembly elections.

Congress candidates are winning the polls hands down. We are anticipating more than eight seats. ●



REACHING OUT
 BJP candidate Taranjit Singh Sandhu during a door-to-door campaign in Amritsar

PTI

and the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD Sanyukt)—and not with the Akalis. The BJP won two seats with around 7 per cent vote share. The Akalis had not allied with the BJP because of the farmers’ protest. Both parties faced their worst-ever defeat.

This was mainly because the Sikh Jat peasantry lost its hegemonic control on politics, as well as on the economy. In the agricultural economy, it has moved from the seller’s to the buyer’s market. And in politics, the Jat Sikh peasantry support base became fragmented between competing political parties and the urban Hindus and the scheduled castes aspired for a greater share in power. Interestingly, between 1997 and 2022, the representation of farmers in the state legislature reduced from 42 per cent to 18 per cent and in the state cabinet from 40 per cent to 26 per cent.

These developments have taken Punjab from a two-party rotational system to multiparty contests leading to the crowding of the electoral space. Its cultural terrain and unique religio-caste fault lines have made the urban Hindus and the scheduled castes the game changers.

FOOTLOOSE VOTERS AND PARTY-HOPPING LEADERS

Elections have been reduced to a ritual of democracy and just a matter of perceptions and popularity ratings of the leaders, though not of the political parties. And, the only slogan audible is *badlaav* (change). Change for whom and for what remains ambiguous.

Having shed their ideological positions, a culture of personalised politics is being nurtured and even institutionalised. For example, for prominent Congress leader Nav-

jot Singh Sidhu, [Former Pakistan prime minister] Imran Khan became ‘Farishta’ (angel) and Rahul Gandhi, ‘Captain’. In anti-Badalism, he moved from the BJP to the Congress. When in the Congress, he talks 2002 (Gujarat riots), and while in the BJP he remembers 1984 (Delhi anti-Sikh riots). He is an ideologically free and politically mobile leader. This is applicable to many politicians and political parties that have been reduced to *dharamshalas* (resting places).

DEROGATORY LANGUAGE

The electoral discourse as usual shows that there has been an erosion of ideological support bases, a deficit in political leadership and an absence of a transformational agenda.

Along with this, the use of derogatory language has also become a norm. If we look back at the 2019 parliamentary elections, most of

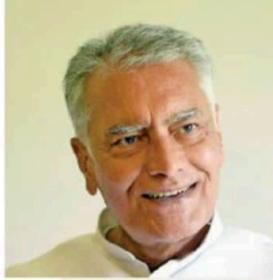
the remarks made about the candidates were sexist, misogynistic and communal. This time, too, there have been demeaning remarks. For example, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann of the AAP likened Congress leader Partap Singh Bajwa to a '*class ka nalayak baccha* (useless student)'. He also called opposition leaders opportunist turncoats who shed crocodile tears. During a discussion on the Centre not releasing funds, Mann said Governor Banwarilal Purohit was "*vela baitha* (sitting idle)' and kept sending 'love letters'. Sidhu uploaded an old picture of Mann touching his feet on stage with a comment, "*Bhai Bhagwant, santra kitna hi bada ho jaye, rehta tehni ke niche hi hai* (No matter how big an orange grows, it still hangs under the branch)."

WHERE ARE THE PUNJAB ELECTIONS HEADING?

The AAP created a new binary in the 2022 assembly elections—traditional parties versus 'a party for change'. It claimed all the traditional parties were looters and corrupt, and created an aura of freshness around itself. The AAP did not have historical baggage. But now, after two years in power, the party appears to have lost the plot. The multifaceted development promise remained visible only in advertisements, to the dismay of the electorate, said Ronki Ram, a professor of political science at Panjab University.

Its performance in the elections would largely depend on its paternalistic welfarism. For instance, how far would the implementation of free electricity for all up to 300 units benefit the AAP? Chief Minister Mann has claimed that his government had worked for the people by opening mohalla clinics, schools of eminence and free *teerth yatra* (pilgrimage), and this would help his party sweep the elections.

However, Manjit Singh, a sociolo-



Mann is mortgaging Punjab's future for votes

BY MOHIT SHARMA

Farmers' anger is impacting the BJP campaign in Punjab, says state party president Sunil Jakhar. "There is a need to find a holistic solution, and exploiting the situation for political reasons should not be done," he told THE WEEK. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ You are not in alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal. Has it made things tough for the BJP?

A/ Of course, it is a challenge. We have been dependent on the SAD for far too long.... Because of the tie-up with the SAD, there was no organisational structure for the polls. But people in Punjab are ideologically aligned with the BJP. Such people can be found in every household. We are trying to mobilise that support.

Q/ Your alliance used to be in national interest and brought two communities together. Has it left the space open for other parties?

A/ The basis of this alliance was national interest and communal harmony.... Irrespective of whether we are in alliance or not, I believe that a strong SAD is essential for peace in Punjab.

Q/ Is farmers' issue impacting the BJP's chances?

A/ The issue is having an impact; BJP candidates [are] not being allowed to campaign in some areas.

Q/ Can the Congress's guarantee on minimum support price help it in Punjab?

A/ How does it help the farmers? Which farmer is ready to give up growing paddy for a guaranteed MSP? Nobody answers this question. Pad-

dy is a water-guzzling crop; not fit for the climate. If *jawar* gives you ₹100 per acre, and paddy gives you ₹200, which farmer will give it up? These issues need to be addressed holistically.

Q/ The Aam Aadmi Party is replicating the Delhi model of freebies in Punjab. Can that benefit them? And how do you respond to Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's 13-0 slogan?

A/ Nobody takes Bhagwant Mann seriously. He comes from a theatre background. He was good at cracking jokes, but what he is doing in the government is a cruel joke. Since Mann took charge, he has been raising debt of ₹130 crore every day, which will have to be paid by somebody. A child born today will grow under a mountain of debt. He is mortgaging our future for votes. ●

gist and farm activist, said, “The AAP has lost its sheen both in the urban and rural areas because of the recent farmers’ wrath and two years of accumulated anti-incumbency.”

INDIA VERSUS NDA

The alliance between the AAP and the Congress could not be finalised as the latter’s Punjab unit opposed it. The state Congress believes it has a substantial support base and it would be political suicide to barter its support base for a short-term advantage at the national level.

Mann, on the other hand, compared the Congress to an “old model of a Fiat car”, and dared Bajwa on the floor of the house to tell Sonia and Rahul Gandhi to break the pre-poll alliance in Delhi, Gujarat and Haryana.

Notably, the Congress has suffered a double disadvantage. First, the AAP lodged a number of corruption cases against former Congress ministers. Second, the alliance talks between the AAP and the Congress weakened the position of the Congress as the main opposition party. The question is, will the Congress gain from the anti-incumbency against the AAP?

Arpan Kaur, a student from Sangrur, said, “There are no jobs. Our youth have to migrate to other countries and face challenges. I have nothing to say about the AAP, but Rahul Gandhi should be given an opportunity this time.”

On the other hand, Sonu Verma, a businessman from Fazilka, said there was infighting within the Congress, and that he did not trust either the Congress or the AAP, as they were in alliance outside the state.

The only major Punjab-based party in the fray, the Akali Dal, has lost two successive assembly elections. The party, under the dynamic leadership of Sukhbir Singh Badal, is in revival mode. It is making efforts to occupy the regional political space, fighting for greater autonomy for the states



THE HOMEGROWN FORCE
 Shiromani Akali Dal president Sukhbir Singh Badal with party candidate N.K. Sharma during a roadshow in Patiala

and asserting a moderate Sikh identity. It has the historical advantage of fighting for the cause of Punjab and having contributed to the development of the state by building premier education and health institutions, and other infrastructure. It also helped the state get surplus power and was known for its citizen-friendly governance. Angrej Singh, a school

clerk in Tarn Taran, said that the Akalis had done better compared with the AAP and the Congress. “At least people received rations as the local municipal councillor ensured doorstep delivery,” he said.

Verma agreed: “Akalis did good work in terms of roads and citizen-friendly governance reforms.”

The BJP, on the other hand, is overconfident because of its religio-corporate mixed worldview, though the same has failed to find many takers in Punjab so far. It does not have a Punjab-specific agenda, particularly for the Punjabi Hindus who do not suffer any minority persecution. And merely implanting turbaned Sikh leaders might not transform it into a Punjab party. However, it has the advantage of having Sunil Jakhar—a pro-Punjab, no nonsense

The Akali Dal, the only major Punjab-based party in the fray, is fighting for greater autonomy for the states and asserting a moderate Sikh identity.



Our main strategy is to keep BJP from forming government

BY MOHIT SHARMA

Sandeep Pathak, the Aam Aadmi Party's national general secretary in charge of organisation, was instrumental in leading his party to victory in Punjab in 2022. "No one should play politics over issues like farmers' protest," he says. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ Punjab is an AAP stronghold. What is your strategy in the state?

A/ Our strategy is very clear. We will talk about the work that has been done ever since the Bhagwant Mann government took over. We will explain how we managed to give the people free electricity, how their irrigation system was improved, and schools and hospitals became better. We will ask for votes on the basis of the work we have done. Besides, we will tell people about the way the Central government is holding back ₹8,000 crore that belongs to Punjab.

Q/ You are going it alone in Punjab and has allied with the Congress in Delhi. Is there a difference in strategies in both the states?

A/ The main strategy is to keep the BJP from forming government. And we will do whatever it takes to do that. Of course, for different states we have devised different strategies.... The BJP's hatred is not limited to Arvind Kejriwal, but is spilling over to the people of Delhi and Punjab.

Q/ Any specific reason why the farmers' protest was not as impactful in 2024 as it was in 2021?

A/ Issues like farmers' protest and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act are very sensitive. No party should play politics over such issues. The BJP's culture has been to bring such matters to the forefront during elections and fight on their basis. Such issues should be discussed threadbare with all stakeholders, and decisions should be taken based on what is right and wrong. Had the Union government handled the issue with an open mind and heart, there would have been a solution. On both occasions, the government came down heavily on farmers. This is not acceptable. 🗳️

leader—as the party's state president. He was earlier the state Congress president.

"The farmer's protest leaders are using the youth of Punjab as fodder," said Jakhar. "We assure the farmers of Punjab that if they give us the list of crops they would like to grow, legal guarantee shall be given for those crops."

The political narrative on the eve of the elections will influence the results. The AAP is losing its sheen, the Congress and the Akalis are struggling to reclaim their electoral space and the BJP is hoping to be an accidental beneficiary of this flux. But, in a four-cornered contest, the division of votes might work to the advantage of the Congress. It could also help the AAP, which is fighting massive anti-incumbency, save face.

—The writer is chairperson, Institute for Development and Communication, Chandigarh.



The actor and the charmer

It is a battle of two Biharis in North East Delhi, which highlights the importance of the Purvanchali vote in Delhi politics

BY SONI MISHRA

Manoj Tiwari, 53, the sitting MP from North East Delhi, has been on a relentless campaign for more than a month now. It is a high-octane espousal of issues such as nationalism and Ram Mandir, and it is centred on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's image as a leader who has delivered on his promises.

AMPLIFYING MODI

BJP's Manoj Tiwari during his campaign in Timarpur

As Tiwari's road show enters a narrow lane in Burari, his entourage plays the song '*Ram ke the, Ram ke hain, hum Ram ke rahenge* [We were, are and will be Ram's]' that he had sung to commemorate the inauguration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. The actor-singer turned politician waves to people gathered on balconies and terraces and appeals for their vote with folded hands. The two-time MP also reminds them about his own track record as their representative and claims to have undertaken works to the tune of ₹14,600 crore in the constituency.

Religion though dominates Tiwari's campaign, and his Lord Ram song is played wherever he goes. His speeches are replete with references to the Ram Temple, and he rounds them off with the slogan of '*Jai Shri Ram*.' The youthful spiritual leader



KRITAJNA NAIK

INTERVIEW

MANOJ TIWARI,
BJP CANDIDATE, NORTH EAST DELHI

KANHAIYA IS A CHALLENGE FOR HIS OWN PARTY

Q/ How do you assess the challenge of Kanhaiya Kumar?

A/ He is a challenge for his own party. As soon as he came here, the party broke into pieces. The state unit president resigned and left. The party's state unit chief leaves, its former MLAs leave, then what is left? How can he be a challenge to us?

Q/ You have spoken about certain statements he allegedly made. But he says the court has said he made no such statements.

A/ If the court gave him a clean chit, why did he mention in his nomination that these cases are going on? The case is going on, and I believe the law will punish him.

Q/ How do you view the impact of the Congress-AAP alliance in Delhi?

A/ The BJP's vote share will go up because people are disappointed with both the Congress and the AAP. Their party workers ask them 'who is the prime ministerial candidate?' The response they get is 'we are not contesting elections to make a prime minister but to remove a prime minister'. Nobody will vote for a *majboor* [helpless] government.

Q/ Communal riots took place here in 2020. What have you done to bridge the divide and provide relief?

A/ Relief is a state subject. But we were definitely concerned that the families who have faced loss of life

and property be given relief. The mastermind of the riots turned out to be an AAP councillor, Tahir Hussain. For votes, they use caste, religion. I tell people with folded hands they should not forget who masterminded the riots. Manoj Tiwari is known for removing hatred and bridging divides.

Q/ The BJP has been accused of polarising the elections.

A/ Did anything I said convey anything like that? I am talking about removing hatred and bridging gaps. But the Congress says in its manifesto that they will distribute the property of Hindus among poor Muslims. If we are creating awareness about this, it is not polarisation. The day the slogan '*Bharat tere tukde honge* [India, you will be cut into pieces]' was raised in JNU, Arvind Kejriwal and Rahul Gandhi both went to meet Kanhaiya Kumar. Rahul Gandhi's party supports antinational forces, and Arvind Kejriwal takes funds from antinational forces.

Q/ The BJP swept the Lok Sabha elections in Delhi, but Assembly polls were a different story.

A/ We accepted the verdict of the people. We did not find fault with the electronic voting machine. We have faith in the people. Delhi gave the AAP two terms. When the state elections take place, the people will repose their faith in the BJP and give it a third term.●

BY SONI MISHRA

Q/ Is North East Delhi witnessing a mini Bihar battle?

A/ This is an election of the nation. How can we limit it to Bihar? And Bihar can never identify with a person against whom a case is going on over his intent to break the country into many parts. He [Kanhaiya Kumar] had contested from Bihar. He did not even get cadre vote.

Q/ The contest does show the growing importance of Purvanchalis in Delhi politics.

A/ If you talk about that region, there cannot be a bigger honour [than the fact that] the BJP has given ticket to Manoj Tiwari for the third time in a row. But I will still say we do not see people in terms of caste, state, language. We believe in *sabka saath, sabka vikas* [all together, development for all].

of Bageshwar Dham of Madhya Pradesh, Dharendra Krishna Shastri, held an event in North East Delhi bang in the middle of election season, and Tiwari was on stage, seeking his blessings.

Up against Tiwari is the wild card entry, Kanhaiya Kumar, 37, of the Congress, who has moved fast from student politics to electoral politics at the national level. For him this election could be a stepping-stone to a bigger role in Delhi politics. Kanhaiya's *padyatras* are accompanied by slogans in praise of Lord Krishna, his namesake. Kanhaiya and the local leaders and workers accompanying him hand out the party's guarantee cards. He touches the feet of elders, poses for selfies with youth and urges people to vote for change.

At a corner meeting in Braj Puri, Mustafabad, Kanhaiya engages with people, telling women that it is not enough to listen to the speech and that they have to go back home and tell their families to vote for the Congress. "I am the poorest candidate in Delhi. I don't have a helicopter. I am not even married that my wife can go and campaign for me. So all of you have to campaign for me," he tells the crowd. And then, pointing to a group of youth who had approached him for selfies, he says, "Make me win. I will be here for five years. You can then click selfies with me five times a day." His speech is peppered with potshots at Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah.

North East Delhi is witnessing a contest between two Biharis, one a popular Bhojपुरi actor-singer and the other an upcoming leader known for his oratory, making it the most keenly watched electoral battle in the capital. The constituency has a large population of migrants from Purvanchal—parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar—and Jharkhand, which explains the choice of candidate for both the BJP and the Con-

INTERVIEW

KANHAIYA KUMAR,
 CONGRESS CANDIDATE, NORTH EAST DELHI

BEING CALLED ANTINATIONAL IS FREE PUBLICITY

BY SONI MISHRA

Q/ How do you view your chances in North East Delhi?

A/ I am not banking on chances because I have nothing to lose. When you look at my opponent, his entire campaign is based on abusing me. There is no such attack in my campaign. I am telling people that 10 years have passed, and I am standing before them as an alternative.

Q/ You come from Bihar, and your opponent is also Bihari.

A/ I am not campaigning on the basis of identity. But when he

called me an outsider, I said if I am an outsider, then what are you? Modi ji was not born in Banaras. All the stalwarts were not born where they contested from—Sushma Swaraj was not born in Madhya Pradesh, Lal Krishna Advani was not born in Gujarat, Atal Bihari Vajpayee was not born in Lucknow.

Q/ Would you have preferred to contest from Bihar?

A/ In politics, you cannot do things based on your personal preference. You take decisions based on the situation. Last time when I contested, I did not live in Begusarai; I was living in Delhi. I was studying here.

gress as also the growing importance of the Purvanchali vote in Delhi politics.

The constituency was carved out of East Delhi in 2008, and has around 24 lakh voters spread across 10 Assembly constituencies. The Aam Aadmi Party has eight MLAs here, and the BJP two. Majority of the unauthorised colonies in the capital are situated in this area, which borders Uttar Pradesh and Haryana. There are some pockets that might qualify as middle class or upper middle class, but most of the people are poor or lower middle class. The constituency has a large number of slums, with narrow roads, overflowing drains and poor garbage disposal.

Around 40 per cent of the population comprises migrants from the Purvanchal region. Around 21 per cent are Muslims and 16 per cent are scheduled castes, followed by around 12 per cent Brahmins, 8 per cent Gurjars, 5 per cent Vaishyas and 4 per cent Punjabis.

Tiwari had won the seat in 2014, defeating the AAP's Anand Kumar by 1,44,084 votes. He increased the victory margin to 3,66,102 votes in 2019, defeating former chief minister Sheila Dikshit of the Congress. Tiwari polled a whopping 53.9 per cent of the vote share, with Dikshit getting 28.85 per cent and the AAP's Dilip Pandey just 13.06 per cent. The result here mirrored the overall mood in



KRITAJNA NAIK

mer Delhi Congress chief Arvinder Singh Lovely leave the party.

A/ He had left the party earlier, too. I was not even in the Congress then. People are not leaving because of me. They have their own reasons. Then people can say that Jyotiraditya Scindia left because of me or the others who have left have done so because of me. They were in the Congress when it was in power, and they left when it wasn't.

Q/ Your opponent talks about statements you had allegedly made while in Jawaharlal Nehru University. Does it hurt when you are called antinational?

A/ They have been saying this for eight years. The home minister says 'tukde-tukde gang'. When an RTI query was made to the ministry, they said there was no such gang. When a question was raised in Parliament, they said there was no such thing....

Hardik Patel was also called 'tukde-tukde gang'. He joined the BJP and became an MLA. The wife of their own MP has said on camera that Kanhaiya was not there; no

If you go by preference, then people will say that I should not have been in politics at all.

Q/ Your rival says your entry into the fray has made people like for-

the capital, with the BJP making a clean sweep of all seven seats and getting 56.5 per cent votes. The Congress got 22.5 per cent, while the AAP secured 18.1 per cent. Congress and AAP leaders say that the 2019 result was because of a Modi wave, which is missing this time, and by allying, the two parties have prevented a split in the anti-BJP vote.

The BJP has sought to project Kanhaiya as an outsider here and talks about Tiwari's work in the last 10 years. Tiwari has also been highlighting the controversial statements allegedly made by Kanhaiya when he was president of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union.

In response, Kanhaiya has pointed

out that Tiwari, like him, comes from Bihar, and that by raking up old allegations, he was trying to divert attention from the issues that mattered, which included the Modi government's failures and his own shortcomings as MP.

The assessment of the Congress and the AAP is that the alliance has a chance in Delhi in the wake of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest by the Enforcement Directorate in an excise policy case. Kejriwal has, upon his release from jail on interim bail, campaigned for the alliance candidates, including Kanhaiya.

On ground, public opinion is split. What works for Tiwari is a general feeling that Modi is still the best bet

such slogans were raised. And now, the JNU vice chancellor has also given a statement that no such thing happens in our university.

You run a fake video of 10 or 12 seconds, but the people are listening to the full 10-minute speech. Had they not made the allegations against me and put me in jail, do you think a person like me, the kind of background I come from—my father was a daily wage labourer and my mother an *anganwadi* worker—would have twice contested elections? Initially, I felt bad. Now I don't. I feel it is free publicity.

Q/ Does your candidature show the growing importance of Purvanchalis in Delhi politics?

A/ My party did not decide my candidature on that basis. Delhi is important. It is the national capital. I have been made a candidate so that there is a good fight.

[They say] a person from Bihar is made to contest in Delhi because of his Bihari identity and that it would be better to make him contest in Bihar itself. But our party does not decide on that basis. ●

to lead a government at the Centre. "Modi has enhanced the country's pride. There is no alternative to him at present," said Sushil Kumar, a resident of Milan Vihar.

However, there are many people who openly say they will vote for a change this time. What is helping Kanhaiya is the palpable discontent against Tiwari, with people saying he has not been accessible and has rarely visited the constituency.

"Kanhaiya is talking about the right issues," said Manjulata Devi, another Milan Vihar resident. "Price rise is making it difficult for us to afford even vegetables and *dal*. We want good education and jobs for our children." ●

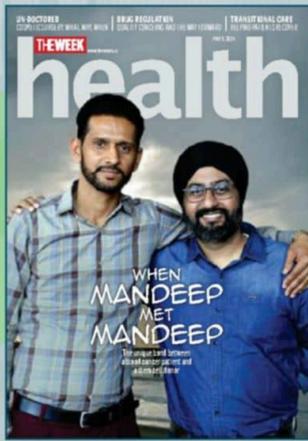
THEWEEK

When you are touched by our stories, so are our writers



NIRMAL JOVIAL

While working on the cover story on stroke care, I realised that inequality in access to health care is one of the most overlooked forms of inequality. Many lives, especially in rural areas, are lost to stroke simply because we lack a robust system capable of delivering the right care within the right time. This concern is amplified by the increasing number of young stroke patients. So much human potential is wasted owing to a condition whose ill-effects can be minimised if treated promptly!



It was overwhelming to encapsulate the emotional journey of the two Mandeeps, unconnected by blood but connected by destiny. Cancer made its presence in the lives of both, although in different ways, and changed the course of their lives. How one Mandeep saved the other from the brink of death became my most loved story to work on. And, it gave me lessons in life I will carry with me forever.



POOJA BIRAIA JAISWAL



PUJA AWASTHI



The initial idea behind our cover story on air pollution was to examine if its impacts went beyond the lungs. That 'if' was not just a resounding but an astounding 'yes'. Though recorded evidence is not aplenty, correlations of air pollution's ill effects on the entire human body are too alarming to ignore. From our mental health to our skin, every bit of the body bears the brunt of the air we breathe, besides a reduction in the quality and years of life. Through its impact on fertility and the foetus, this is a generational worry. The time to tackle it was yesterday, for tomorrow might be too late.

Battle of the exes

As former spouses take on each other, Bishnupur is witnessing a personal as well as political fight

BY NILADRY SARKAR/BISHNUPUR

On the banks of the once-untamed Damodar lies the Bishnupur Lok Sabha constituency, encompassing six assembly seats in Bankura district and one in Purba Bardhaman district.

The constituency, named after the historic temple town, is rich with Archaeological Survey of India sites. Today, however, it is in the news because of the fascinating electoral contest between two former spouses, Saumitra Khan and Sujata Mondal. The BJP has renominated Khan, the 43-year-old incumbent who has won twice from this constituency reserved for scheduled castes. Mondal, 38, is the Trinamool Congress candidate.

Bishnupur, which goes to the polls in the sixth phase on May 25, has emerged as a key constituency for both parties. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Bishnupur to campaign for their own candidates, recognising the importance of the constituency.

Khan and Mondal's love story be-

gan during the days of the left rule in West Bengal. Their paths crossed for the first time in 2010 when Khan was with the Congress. A year later, he was elected to the assembly from Katulpur in Bankura district when the Trinamool dethroned the left with the help of the Congress. As the Congress-Trinamool alliance broke up in 2012, he switched sides and joined Mamata's party.

In the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, the Trinamool fielded Khan from Bishnupur, which was a CPI(M) stronghold for more than four decades. Despite the left losing 20 seats across West Bengal in the 2009 Lok Sabha polls, signalling a major political shift, Bishnupur had remained a red zone. But Khan ended the CPI(M)'s dominance, winning the seat by more than a lakh votes.

Despite his meteoric rise in the Trinamool, Khan felt sidelined in the party. Alleging favouritism and corruption, he quit months before the Lok Sabha elections in 2019 and joined the BJP, which fielded him from Bishnupur. Soon came allegations that he had taken bribes,

promising people government jobs. The Calcutta High Court banned him from entering Bankura district.

But it did not affect his electoral prospects as his wife had taken care of everything. A primary school teacher, Mondal believed that she was performing her dharma as a woman. She went door to door, seeking "justice" as a wife who had been forced to live apart from her husband. Bishnupur listened to her pleas, and Khan won by more than 75,000 votes.

A year and a half later, Mondal upset the political dynamics of Bishnupur by joining the Trinamool ahead of the 2021 assembly polls. Khan filed for divorce and the couple officially separated in February 2023.

"He has cheated me and the people of Bishnupur," Mondal told THE





SALLI BERA

JOINT EFFORT

Sujata Mandal with Mamata Banerjee during a public meeting in Bishnupur

WEEK on the sidelines of a roadshow. “He has not done anything for the constituency. He never visits Bishnupur and leads a luxurious life in Delhi. He is a liar and a womaniser. Getting him elected was the biggest sin I committed and I believe people will give me the chance to atone for my sin by defeating him.” She accused him of lacking in integrity and alleged that with him as their representative, the women of Bishnupur did not feel safe. “He is a characterless MP. I just want my mothers and sisters to be safe,” she said.

Khan, however, is confident about his hat-trick win. “Elections are not contested over trivial and baseless issues, but over developmental issues. It is not our personal battle,” Khan told THE WEEK in his hotel room in

Bishnupur after a long day of campaigning. But he could not avoid discussing Mondal. “I was in shock for a few days [when she joined the Trinamool]. But the past is past and I have moved on,” he said. “My life has been full of struggles and diverse experiences. My [old] relationship [with Mondal] was also an experience. I am over it now. I am newly married and life does not stop for anyone.”

On his campaign trail, Khan’s focus is on attacking the Trinamool over allegations such as corruption and the sexual exploitation in Sandeshkhali. Hindutva is another significant theme. “We had to leave our homeland in Bangladesh for one reason. The same is happening in Sandeshkhali now. Hindu

sanatanis have to unite to save the temple town of Bishnupur,” Khan

said at a small gathering outside a temple in Khandaghosh, one of the seven assembly segments in Bishnupur.

More than outlining his own work as a two-time MP, Khan highlights the achievements of the prime minister. “Modi ji is the god whom we worship. Like Swami Vivekananda promoted Hinduism worldwide, he is promoting India,” said Khan. “We want him as prime minister for development and for ending corruption. See how many Trinamool leaders he has put in jail. We have to remove Mamata Banerjee. She has finished everyone,



SALIL BERA

CHANGING COLOURS

BJP candidate Saumitra Khan campaigning at Khandaghosh in Bishnupur

including Hindus and Muslims. Now she is destroying the lives of women in Sandeshkhali.”

Khan also highlighted the violence BJP workers faced in West Bengal in the aftermath of the 2021 assembly elections. Of seven assembly seats in Bishnupur, the BJP won five. In the two seats which the Trinamool won, Khan said his supporters were beaten up and were evicted from their homes.

“Our motto is *chup chap kamal-e chhap* (press the lotus symbol silently). Since 2021, we have not been able to identify ourselves as BJP workers. All our activities have stopped,” said Snehasis Hajra, a BJP worker in Khandaghosh.

Mondal, meanwhile, is seeking votes in the name of her local roots, Mamata’s popularity and the state government’s welfare schemes, especially those aimed at women. “I am the only woman candidate in this constituency. Didi has fielded me so that I can be the voice of women in Parliament for the entire Bankura district. Every single woman has

benefited from Lakshmir Bhandar, Kanyashree and other programmes of didi,” she said.

Both candidates have brushed local issues under the carpet. Bishnupur has always faced water scarcity. Poor irrigation facilities have forced farmers to use submersible pumps, resulting in further depletion of groundwater. Khan conceded that water scarcity was a major issue, but blamed the state government. “Despite receiving funds from the Centre for supplying piped water to every household, the state government has failed. This project has to be done entirely by the Centre. Otherwise, there will be pipes, but no water,” said Khan.

Mondal, however, underplayed the crisis and said the Trinamool government had almost solved it. “The Mamata Banerjee administration is supplying water to the region from the Damodar. In some pockets there is a water crisis and we are arranging for more submersible pumps,” she said.

But the Damodar itself is facing an

existential crisis. Water pollution and the growing sand mafia menace have devastated the river ecosystem. Khan said the mafia operated under the Trinamool’s patronage. “I plan to undertake at least two projects to build water storage capacity,” he said.

Lack of employment opportunities is another major concern. Ganesh Bairagi, who was stuck in a traffic jam—caused by one of Mondal’s rallies—with his grandson said the child was likely to follow in the footsteps of his father, a migrant worker in Noida. “When the Bishnupur industrial park was set up in 1987, we thought there would be jobs. But the truth is there for everyone to see,” said a disappointed Bairagi. The industrial park is in a dilapidated state with only a handful of factories working. Both candidates said they would revive the park.

“I will bring more companies and rebuild the industrial park,” said Mondal, while her former husband said he would see that Bishnupur became an IT hub like Hyderabad and Bengaluru. ●



STILL VOTERS RUN DEEP

THE BJP IS RELYING ON MODI AND YOGI, THE SP IS TRYING TO SHED ITS OLD IMAGE, THE CONGRESS SEEMS ABSENT ON THE GROUND, AND THE BSP IS IN A BATTLE FOR SURVIVAL. THE MOST PROMINENT FEATURE OF THESE ELECTIONS, THOUGH, IS SILENCE

BY PUJA AWASTHI

A loud silence is the most deafening noise this election has created in Uttar Pradesh. It is a puzzling poll; not expected to flummox, but likely to checkmate popular perceptions.

The BJP is banking on the popularity of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the unapologetically *sanatan* stance of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the vastly improved law and order situation, and women's security. The Samajwadi Party and the Congress are fighting as part of the INDIA bloc, displaying their pulling power with joint rallies. The Bahujan Samaj Party is locked in a solo battle for survival, and it seems to be frittering away its chance.

But 'seems' is as good as a poll prediction gets in Uttar Pradesh. Every ques-

tion—Why is the BJP fighting so hard if it is assured of a win? Do crowds at rallies really translate into votes? How far would a party go to survive?—holds its own answer, and spawns some more questions.

There is no wave, no rallying slogans. Phase after phase, the message has changed. And in every phase, the silent voter has turned out a tad less than s/he did in 2019.

Of the state's 80 seats, 62 are with the BJP. The Congress has one; the SP, five; and the BSP, 10. The shadow of these elections will stretch to the state polls that are three years away.

Badri Narayan, director of the Govind Ballabh Pant Social Science Institute in Prayagraj, said this was an election of narrow margins—both in victory and defeat.

PT

DOUBLE ENGINE

Modi with Yogi Adityanath during a roadshow in Varanasi

“There are three broad themes of the election,” he said. “An undercurrent of Modi’s popularity, the crucial role that the BSP will play in deciding margins, and the staunch opposition of Muslims that will benefit the Congress-SP.”

Modi’s popularity is an undercurrent because while one might be unable to say why one likes him, it is just as challenging to say why one should dislike him. This election, despite its monotony, is interesting in parts.

Take the case of Sultanpur, where the BJP’s Maneka Gandhi is fighting for her ninth term as MP. The BSP’s Chandra Bhadra Singh ‘Sonu’ was her closest rival in 2019, polling 4.4 lakh votes to her 4.5 lakh. Singh (not a candidate this time) is close to Adityanath and had not opposed Maneka openly. But a day before campaigning was to end, he joined the SP.

Elsewhere, Anupriya Patel, Union minister of state and president of Apna Dal (S), which is an ally of the BJP, is struggling from her two-time constituency, Mirzapur. Her rival is Daulat Singh Patel of the Apna Dal (K), a party run by her mother, Krishna, and sister Pallavi. In that profusion of same surnames, in a constituency that banks on Kurmi votes, Anupriya’s challenge is her sister, who has declared in election rallies that her party does not look at Muslims as merely a vote bank. This is a sore point for the BJP.

Tariq Shafique, an Azamgarh-based social activist, said the divide between Muslims and the rest ran deep. “Candidates here have not even bothered to go to Muslim-dominated villages,” he said. “People are united in their problems, but politics splits them apart.”

In Azamgarh, Dharmendra Yadav—the cousin of SP president Akhilesh Yadav—is challenging the BJP’s incumbent Dinesh Lal Yadav ‘Nirahua’, a Bhojपुरi actor and



PAWAN KUMAR

singer. Nirahua, voters said, had not done anything for the constituency (among his many promises was a film city), but is solely banking on Modi’s brand value. As are the 40-odd MPs whom the BJP has retained to fight this election.

The state’s silence has been made deeper by the absence of the Ram Mandir from issues that the electorate talks about. It is now a given. Just as beneficiary schemes are. The question—what beyond these?—has no clear answers.

The joint campaign of the Congress and the SP has been marked by apparent good cheer. The former, however, works with a weak on-

ground organisation. In constituencies this correspondent visited, the party’s banners were missing from even its election offices. One candidate’s home-cum-office had a sticker that read, ‘*Mera ghar Rahul Gandhi ji ka ghar* (My home is Rahul Gandhi’s home)’, but the contestant had no campaign schedule. Uninterested party workers milled over lunch.

Chandra Prakash Rai, head of the state’s Congress media committee, admitted that a certain listlessness and lack of enthusiasm was to be expected in a party that had been out of power in the state for more than three decades. Yet, the party



COMMON GOAL

(From left) Priyanka, Sonia and Rahul Gandhi with Akhilesh Yadav

There is an absence of the Ram Mandir from issues that the electorate talks about. It is now a given. Just as beneficiary schemes are. The question—what beyond these?—has no clear answers.

was putting up a good fight, he insisted. “This constant hammering of Modi, Muslim and *mandir* has bored the voter,” he said. “Does this country have nothing else to talk about?”

Rai, who has been a witness to electoral politics since 1977, likened the election to post-Emergency, when people were eager to listen to and debate issues of national significance.

While the mainstream media might not have given space to the INDIA bloc (a charge Akhilesh Yadav made in an earlier interview with THE WEEK), social media, YouTubers and influencers have

been talking about the real issues of the youth, of farmers, of the environment and the like; and getting lakhs of views. “They will play a role in this election,” said Rai.

The SP is burdened by its image. When attendees ran amok at Akhilesh’s recent rally in Azamgarh, climbing atop poles and bringing down loudspeakers, it was held as a precursor to what the party’s strengthening could look like. The focus of its election manifesto is the *pichda* (backward), dalit and adivasi, but the memories of the party opposing the bill for SC/ST reservation at the Centre in 2012 have not been washed away. Former chief

minister Mulayam Singh Yadav had called it ‘unconstitutional’. The party was also opposed to the initial calls for women’s reservation in electoral politics. However, that does not mean the electorate does not remember the SP government’s schemes, such as pension for women. Kiran Saran, who works as a domestic help in Sitapur, said, “*Akhilesh ka vote bahut padega* (Akhilesh will get a lot of votes)”. She said the BJP had lured people like her with false promises. “They said we will get free electricity, but are now getting bills that run into thousands of rupees,” she said. “How are we supposed to pay when everything is so expensive?”

The alliance combine has also made smart candidate selections. For the last three phases (41 seats), for example, there was just one Muslim candidate. Where candidates are popular—such as in Unnao where Annu Tandon, a former Congress MP, is fighting (on an SP ticket) the incumbent Sakshi Maharaj

of the BJP—a sprinkling of local issues in election speak will sway the floating vote.

Manoj Paswan, the national general secretary of the SP’s student wing, was formerly with the BJP. The framed photos of Bhim Rao Ambedkar—which Akhilesh and Rahul Gandhi held up at a joint rally in Kanpur—were the ones Paswan had gifted Akhilesh in April.

He said that people joining the BJP to seek space and social justice in Indian politics was a ‘momentary’ event. “The BJP’s true face is opposed to women, dalits and backwards,” he said. “Akhilesh Yadav’s politics is new after the BJP came

to power. He has made structural changes in the party to show his commitment to social justice and also took a backseat in the party's earlier alliance with the BSP."

This is borne out by the appointment of a dalit as the president of the Lohia Vahini, the party wing that propagates the socialist ideas of Ram Manohar Lohia. "This is not just an election for seats, but also about protecting cultural distinctiveness and diversity," said Paswan.

The appending of 'Bhagwan' to the name of tribal leader Birsa Munda is just one example of how the BJP appropriates icons as its own for electoral gains. Unemployment and price rise are two overriding local issues. But voters said these were general worries. More state-specific issues such as sugarcane prices are brushed away as 'not Modi's fault'.

One of the most unexpected turnabouts of this election was made by the BSP when Mayawati pulled her nephew Akash Anand off the campaign. Anand, the party's national coordinator, had been designated by Mayawati as her successor in December 2023. This election was his most public outing before he was officially removed from the campaign on May 7. In a post on X, Mayawati wrote that this was in the larger interest of the party and the movement; and because Anand was yet to attain "maturity".

This is a crucial election for the BSP. In 2019, the year of a *mahagathbandhan* with the SP, it polled 19.4 per cent of votes and won 10 seats. In the 2022 assembly elections, it was limited to just one seat.

Anand, in his many caustic speeches, had gone as far as saying that he felt like hitting the BJP with *chappals* and *lathis*. With his removal, the most obvious conclusion was that Mayawati was loathe to take on the BJP—an impression



PHOTOS PTI

'Akash Anand's acceptability by the public has been tested. Mayawati gave him the opportunity to gain experience, but also shielded him from any taint.'

—Ajay Kumar, assistant professor, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University

she strengthened by saying that the SP was a bigger enemy of the dalits. This, however, is not a new statement. Yadavs are a powerful land-owning caste whom the landless dalits view as their tormentors.

Ajay Kumar, assistant professor in

the department of sociology at Lucknow's Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, said that Anand's removal should be viewed as strategy. "He was exposed to the public for a while but was taken back so that the BSP's loss could not be attributed to him," he said. "His acceptability by the public has been tested. Mayawati

gave him the opportunity to gain experience, but also shielded him from any taint."

The BSP cannot be written off just yet. Prashant Trivedi, social scientist at the Giri Institute of Development Studies, said, "The party is fighting



FAMILY MATTERS

(From far left) Mayawati has pulled her nephew Akash Anand from the campaign

to maintain its space. Mayawati is still the tallest dalit leader. When the BSP vote shifts, it will do so as a bloc. That is unlikely to happen just yet.” When that happens, it would mark a big change in the state and in national politics.

The BSP has turned the election into a three-way fight in over a dozen constituencies. Where it has changed candidates, it was accused of doing so to help the BJP. But there is perhaps a larger plan to these flip-flops. In Jaunpur, for instance, where local strongman Dhananjay Singh’s wife, Shrikala Reddy, was the party’s initial choice, the BSP replaced her with Shyam Singh Yadav, banking on the constituency’s more than two and a half lakh caste votes. On the face of it, this seems to eat into the SP votes, but locals say that Singh would have joined

the BJP after winning the election. Some days after his wife’s ticket was cancelled (and her nomination rejected), he did exactly that. That is the kind of risk that the party—half of whose sitting MPs have joined the BJP—cannot take.

Dharamveer Chaudhary, former BSP spokesperson who joined the BJP, said that Mayawati had erred in not forming an alliance. “Behenji has forgotten that she became chief minister with support from other parties,” he said.

BSP politicians are notoriously difficult to speak to on record. One senior party member said that Mayawati was getting wrong advice from those closest to her. The party’s strength was that, lured by its core Jatav support, other parties asked for alliance; but in this election, the party has found it difficult to pick candidates.

This is also an election which the BJP is fighting with the force of 10 years of accumulated strength. This force matters even in safe seats. In Varanasi, Shyam Sundar, a comic, tried to file his nomination. “Others like me were led astray by the BJP,” he said. “The waiting lines were made longer by those submitting their papers [just for the sake of it]. When we were allowed to file our nomination on May 14 (the last day

and when Modi filed his papers) it was after 3pm.”

Sundar, better known by his stage name Rangeela, had his form rejected for being incomplete. Had his papers been accepted earlier, he would have had the opportunity to make corrections, he said. There were 38 others whose papers were not accepted.

Rangeela’s comedy career hit a wall in 2017, when he mimicked Modi on a television show. His content was not political, but just an acting-out of how Modi or Rahul would talk at a *chaat* stall. His career never recovered, and he is limited only to social media as television channels either do not approach him or stall after initial conversations. “Good or bad, comics just do not want to talk about politics,” he said. “When I pranked some of them through phone calls in the prime minister’s voice, they insisted I delete the recordings.”

In Uttar Pradesh, putting a seat tally against party names is a perilous stance. In a silent election, doubly so. But it is safe to hazard that this election will broadly stick to the state’s current seat distribution pattern. It is only in the finer details of that distribution that this election will make sense. ●



PAWAN KUMAR

**SAFFRON
TIDE**

Supporters during Modi's road show in Varanasi on May 13

AS LUCKNOW WOULD HAVE IT

The Uttar Pradesh tally could trigger changes in BJP and INDIA bloc

BY PRATUL SHARMA

UTTAR PRADESH IS a crucial test for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. It has been 10 years since Modi became Varanasi's MP. The constituency has elected him twice, and he has rewarded it with the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, besides consecrating the Ram Temple in Ayodhya. Modi has not just carved his place in history, but also cemented support from his core constituency.

"Modi's entry into Kashi was marked by enthusiasm among people. The second time, it turned into

trust. This time, when Modi went to Varanasi, there were scenes of reverence," said a BJP office-bearer.

The BJP's 'double engine' slogan is most visible in UP. Yogi has his stamp on the administration, particularly law and order. The police have had a free hand in reining in crime, and the deployment of bulldozers to deliver 'instant justice' has had other BJP-ruled states replicating it. The poll outcome would be a referendum on Yogi's seven-year rule.

"On one side, we have PM Modi

with his vision, commitment and strong implementation," said BJP spokesperson Gopal Krishna Agarwal. "Yogi has also ushered in transformation, improved law and order, created infrastructure and enhanced spiritual tourism—be it in Kashi, Ayodhya and now Mathura.... The world needs a strong leader who could address global geopolitical challenges. It is Modi, and UP is electing him again."

Across the state, multiple factors are at play. Talked-about issues include inflation, farmer distress,

stray cattle and general fatigue with a decade-old dispensation. The concerns are visible, but not the anger, which the BJP is trying to overcome with its massive grassroots reach. “There are challenges, given UP’s population and size,” said Agarwal. “We acknowledge the issue of employment, and are working to increase opportunities through various schemes.”

With two more phases of polling to go, Modi has already surpassed his 2019 tally of 142 poll rallies.

A.K. Verma, director of the Kanpur-based Centre for the Study of Society and Politics, said studies showed that Modi was getting higher approval ratings after each phase of polling.

“Akhilesh has been changing alliances every election, so people are yet to find an alternative model to Modi’s. The BJP is likely to retain its 2019 tally as Modi has crafted a constituency of his own that looks at him beyond the party and even the RSS,” he said.

The Union government’s scheme that provides free 5kg ration to the poor, which has come to be known as Modi’s scheme, has been a big soother in times of distress. Riding on it, along with Ram Temple, Modi’s charisma, Yogi’s appeal and the party’s organisational strength, the BJP hopes to better its 2019 tally of 62 of 80 seats.

Realising the popularity of free rations, the Congress has its own promise. “We will give 10kg rations free if we come to power,” Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge recently said in a news conference.

The INDIA bloc is trying its best to snatch seats away from the BJP. The bonding between Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi is visible. Rahul campaigned for Akhilesh in Kannauj, and Akhilesh addressed rallies in favour of the Congress in Amethi and Rae Bareli. Workers

INDIA bloc leaders have an ambitious target—40 seats. Their optimism is based on the electoral discourse on livelihood issues and the “lack” of a pro-Modi wave.

of both the parties are active in transferring votes to the alliance’s candidates.

The alliance is looking to consolidate Muslim and Yadav votes. The SP has fielded only five Yadav candidates, all from Akhilesh’s family. In the rest of the seats, it has tried social engineering—fielding candidates of other castes to expand its vote share. In Bihar, Rashtriya Janata Dal leader Tejashwi Yadav is employing the same strategy—‘sacrificing’ claims of the dominant Yadav caste to give representation to others and maximise vote share. Akhilesh is trying to move beyond his Muslim-Yadav base by including what he terms as ‘*Pichda*, dalit, *alpasankhyak*’ (backward, dalit, minorites).

INDIA bloc leaders have an ambitious target—40 seats. Their optimism is based on the electoral discourse on livelihood issues and the “lack” of a perceivable pro-Modi wave.

In 2019, the SP won five seats in alliance with the Mayawati-led Bahujan Samaj Party (10 seats) and Jayant Chaudhary’s Rashtriya Lok Dal. The Congress contested alone. This time, the INDIA bloc comprises the SP and the Congress. Their focus is on livelihood issues such as price rise and unemployment. They are also emphasising local issues, such as the stray-cattle problem,

police exam-related paper leaks and Rajput anger.

The BSP’s subdued campaign means the 19 per cent votes it polled in 2019 are up for grabs. Suspensions that Mayawati is being soft towards the BJP strengthened recently when she removed nephew Akash Anand as her political heir.

That Anand was

aggressively anti-BJP could send Muslims to consolidate behind the SP and send a section of dalits towards the INDIA bloc. Also, contest is keen in the 28 seats that, in 2019, had victory margins of less than one lakh votes. Of these 28 seats, 21 were won by the BJP.

The electioneering in Amethi and Rae Bareli provides a glimpse of how keen the contest is. Akhilesh and Rahul have addressed joint rallies, and Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi has been spearheading the campaign, ensuring equal participation of SP leaders and workers.

Rae Bareli, especially, has attained such significance that Union Minister Amit Shah recently said if the BJP’s target of winning 400-plus seats could, in its essence, be met with one seat, it would be Rae Bareli. Clearly, the number of seats won by either side in UP would decide the perceptual value of the overall mandate. The UP tally may also set off changes within the two blocs that would impact its key leaders.

“In the 2017 assembly polls, the SP-Congress alliance did not work that well, because workers of the two parties were not together,” said R.P. Yadav, SP leader in Rae Bareli. “This time, there is nothing to distinguish between us. We are fighting as one.”

—With inputs by Soni Mishra

INTERVIEW

BRAJESH PATHAK,
DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER, UTTAR PRADESHWE'RE BUILDING
A NEW BHARAT;
OPPOSITION
CAN'T STOMACH IT

BY PUJA AWASTHI

THE BUSTLING BRAJESH

PATHAK is lauded for being present everywhere and for his deep connections in other parties that brought in hundreds of their members to the BJP in the run up to the elections. He is the kind of minister who checks services at a government hospital's out-patient department one day and gives patients a lift in his car the next. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ Do you think the Congress-Samajwadi Party alliance is a bigger challenge this time because of their better coordination?

A/ In the first phase there was not a single joint rally of the INDI Alliance. In the second phase there was just a joint press conference. The public has rejected them. They have been unable to gather the strength to face the people. The Congress is moving towards its demise while the SP has been derailed. The alliance has no future; there is no question of coordination.

Q/ How have issues like electoral bonds and amendment of the Constitution impacted the chances of the BJP?

A/ These issues are only indicative



of the negative mindset of the opposition. They have no issues left so their leaders are giving unbalanced statements. They do not realise that the public is not interested and that it has decided to completely wipe them out.

Q/ What are the issues that are being talked about by the electorate?

A/ The far-sightedness of our prime minister, the vow for a developed Bharat, the unprecedented development works of our government, hundreds of welfare schemes, the growth of the economy, and the strict control over law and order. There is no difference in what we say and what we do. India is now highly regarded in the world. We are building a new Bharat. The opposition cannot stomach this.

Q/ Do you think that the Ram Mandir will sway voters?

A/ The mandir was our resolution. After 500 years of intense penance we have the *darshan* of Lord Shri Ram. It is a matter of our faith. A leader of the SP (Ram Gopal Yadav) recently criticised the mandir. Previously they would label it hypocrisy. Ram *bhakts* were shot at during the SP regime. The Congress has rejected the existence of Ram. Those who do not respect *sanatan* are now calling themselves *sanatani*. Shri Ram is in our hearts and minds.

Q/ Who is your core voter this time?

A/ The BJP is a party of everyone, of *sarva samaj*. Everyone has abiding faith in our PM. We are getting everyone's votes, hence our cry—400 *paar* (beyond 400). We will reach this goal because of the able leadership of our PM.

Q/ Will the multiple paper leaks not impact your chances in UP?

A/ Question papers used to be leaked during the SP government. Without any bias, we give jobs to the young according to their talent. Multiple schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Rozgar Yojana, Atmanirbhar Bharat Yojana, PM Mudra Loan Yojana, and PM Vaani Yojana have benefited crores of young people.

Q/ Were you expecting sharper polarisation of votes?

A/ We fight the election with impartiality and with a positive mindset. We talk about development and our work. Voting has been low because the opposition has been unable to enthuse its voters. Our voters are showing up at the polling booths, but the opposition's are not. The voters know that ours is a party known for development and thus are enthusiastic about voting for us. 🗳️

RAHUL AND PRIYANKA ARE OPPOSED TO EACH OTHER

BY PUJA AWASTHI

KESHAV PRASAD MAURYA is in a hurry, but hospitable, as he sits down for an interview. In his wood-paneled home-cum-office at Lucknow's Kalidas Marg, adorned by the photos of Lord Bajji, Ram lalla and BJP ideologues, Maurya asks if a spot next to a fish tank would be best for photos. This is his second term as deputy chief minister, and he is very well liked by the BJP leadership. Excerpts from the interview:

Q/ The level of the dialogue and the language used in this election has been dismal. As the ruling party, is it not the BJP's responsibility to maintain decency?

A/ That is not how it should be looked at. Understand it through the hidden agenda of the Congress. Look at history: to appease Muslims, the Congress got the country divided; brought Jammu and Kashmir under Article 370; made J&K the entry point for terrorists; gave Muslims the first right to the resources of the country; and kept Ayodhya, Mathura and Kashi simmering. This changed Congress is like the Muslim League. They think Muslims are their vote bank especially because the OBCs, SCs and STs



have slipped from their hands and... the general castes are with the BJP. Exposing this hidden agenda is my party's duty. We have to bring to the public their statements such as Pakistan has an atom bomb and that we must be scared of it. If Pakistan has an atom bomb, do we only have Diwali *pathakas* (crackers)? As for inheritance tax, will the laws of the US rule the country which is run as per Baba Saheb's Constitution?

Q/ But nowhere does the Congress manifesto explicitly say it will give the wealth of others to Muslims. It does not even talk of inheritance tax.

A/ The Congress has promised to do a survey of who has what resources/property in the country.

What is this survey? If Hindus are a majority in this country and they work, pay their taxes and contribute to the development of the country, then it is they who have property and resources. It is they who will be surveyed. On the basis of that survey, they (the Congress) will give first rights to Muslims.

Q/ Is there any substance to the fear that the Samajwadi Party will put a lock on the Ram Mandir?

A/ The Congress rejected the existence of Lord Ram in the Supreme Court. Their leaders said no to the invitation to the *pran pratishtha* ceremony. The SP sinned by ordering firing on unarmed Ram *bhakts*. They are filled with poison. Our former chief minister Kalyan Singh passed away and his body was brought to the Vidhan Sabha. Akhilesh Yadav was sitting 500 metres away, but he did not come to pay his respects. However, he travelled 500km to pray for Mukhtar Ansari. This is done so that Muslims are not offended. When the SP was in power, Muslim girls would get special scholarships, but not Hindus. That is why we say those who do the politics of Muslim appeasement and those who support Babar have the sinful thought of building a mosque in Babar's name if they ever come to power.

Q/ What are your thoughts on Rahul Gandhi's candidature from Rae Bareilly?

A/ Rahul was scared and ran away from Amethi. His sister, Priyanka, wants him to lose because he is not letting her fight the Lok Sabha elections. Congress insiders tell me that Rahul and Priyanka are opposed to each other. They are facing deep fissures and infighting. ❶

LURE OF FUTURE

In Varanasi, the younger generation's preference for modernity is likely to guarantee Modi's hat-trick win

BY PUJA AWASTHI

MEMORY IS A powerful thing. But so is identification. In Varanasi, the two are fused into a heady political brew.

An aching echo of the nostalgia of *Banarsiyat*—the lived, carefree essence of the city—is battling a younger generation's aspiration for modernity. In its clash is stretched a city, older than memory.

This friction of times is visible at the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, a project that has cleaned up the surroundings of the abode of Shiva that mythically rests on the middle prong of his trident. This abode was dotted by close-set old houses and small temples, yielding the devotee

a glimpse of the Kashi Vishwanath temple only from proximity. Now it is visible from afar, thanks to the corridor. The devout count the loss of smaller but significant temples and the inexplicable permission to operate cafes on the corridor premises as the unforgivable cost of newness.

Divraj Mishra comes from a family of *pandas* (religious guides). In his 30s, he is squashed between the generation which clings to recollections and the one that seeks the new. He said it was strange that a party which claimed dedication to the cause of *sanatan* was turning around the tenets of what was an

eternal religion. "Shiva does not reside alone. But when the corridor was built, his family members, including Ganesh (Shiva's son), were disregarded," he said. Mishra was particularly dismayed at the attempts to dislodge the tiny temple of Dundhiraj Ganesh, a deity who must be visited before paying obeisance to Shiva. A campaign to save the temple has protected it partially.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is seeking a third term from Varanasi, had vowed to turn the city into Kyoto, the cultural capital of Japan. But residents like Mishra wonder how destruction will ensue that.



Modi's association with Varanasi has flipped its tourist numbers. In the last two years, 13 crore people have come visiting. The increased number is in line with how Uttar Pradesh has performed overall. In 2021, the tourist arrival to the state was 10.9 crore. It 2023, it went up to 48 crore.

Beneath Varanasi's shiny sheath is a story of displacement and fear, said Ajay Rai, the Congress candidate. During the pandemic, FIRs were filed against journalists who wrote about poverty and want. Hundreds have been displaced for just being in the path of showcase projects like the Namoo Ghat. Old buildings like the Sarva Sewa Sangh (founded by Jayaprakash Narayan as a repository of Mahatma Gandhi's legacy) have been demolished to make way for a sprawling hotel. Cruises on the Ganga have scared away riverine life.

Rai, who is the state Congress president, said his party had opposed all the above. "But when you are threatened by bulldozers, what do you do?"

In 2014, Rai got 7.34 per cent of

The pride of being a 'VIP' constituency is an overriding factor in Varanasi. There is much to show for it, too, especially in terms of road and rail connectivity.

the votes, the Samajwadi Party's Kailash Chaurasiya 4.3 per cent and Modi 56.37 per cent. In 2019, Modi polled 63.6 per cent. And while the Congress and the SP also increased their tallies to 14.4 per cent and 18.5 per cent, respectively, this combined strength is not enough to dislodge Modi.

Asraf Ali, a weaver from the city's Madanpura area who attended Modi's road show on May 13, said, "The prime minister has given a lot to Varanasi and is constantly monitoring projects. But a true leader should bring people together." Munna Pandey is a trader of Varanasi's GI-tagged Banarasi weaves. He said he was a staunch supporter of the BJP despite the fact that he had to abandon all his 15 looms. This, he said, was because corporates had entered the weaving industry. "They paid the weavers more than what we were paying. So the weavers preferred to work with them, but now that the wages have been brought down, they have no choice."

A 300-loom Weavershala is among these corporate initiatives. Its objective is to modernise techniques and to give steady work to weavers. "But this takes away the freedom and choice of the individual weaver. He is reduced to being an employee. Companies like Tata and Reliance will slowly have monopoly over the craft," said Pandey.

In Varanasi, the pride of being a 'VIP' constituency is an overriding factor. There is much to show for it, too, especially in terms of road and rail connectivity. The dairy sector is another significant beneficiary with a new milk plant that has a daily capacity of four lakh litre, the installation of three lakh bulk milk coolers and an-

other first-of-its-kind biogas-based milk plant.

None of this takes away from Varanasi's knottiest problems, among them painful traffic jams. Some 20,000 battery-operated autos—locally called 'toto'—add to the crawl. The city's drainage system is ineffective and a single heavy shower is enough to clog the roads. In the low-lying area of the cantonment, which houses multiple hotels, rainwater can knock at the entrance. Despite the city drawing its water from the Ganga, supply is erratic.

According to the dashboard of the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MP-LADS), Modi had spent more than the sanctioned funds of ₹22 crore on his constituency, till January this year. Of 292 recommended works, 275 were completed. Note that the MP can only recommend projects, the implementing authority is at the district. Why would this matter? Well, consider another high-profile constituency, Rae Bareilly, represented by Sonia Gandhi. As per the latest update, of 243 recommended products, only 209 were completed. Against Modi's 94 per cent, this is 86 per cent. Thus, the might of an MP matters much.

It is this might that powers the identification Varanasi feels for its most famous MP. And for now, it will triumph over memory. ■

PERVASIVE PRESENCE

Narendra Modi's campaign signs on the banks of the Ganga in Varanasi



PAWAN KUMAR



NOT JUST IN THE NAME OF RAM

When voting, Ayodhya has always looked at issues beyond the temple

BY PUJA AWASTHI

FAITH—THAT WAVERING, amorphous being—is as difficult to describe as it is to tame. Think of it as a shape-shifter. In Ayodhya (Faizabad parliamentary constituency), a town of big faith and bigger mysteries, it has changed form swiftly. And in what might appear to be equal part disbelief and myth, Ayodhya does not vote solely in the name of its most loved son, Ram.

In its narrow lanes—resonating with the sounds of bells and conch

shells—along the drying Sarayu and under a cruel summer sun, the Ram Mandir is not ‘the’ roaring electoral issue. The loud excitement of January 22—the day of the *pran pratishtha* (consecration) of the idol of Ram—has settled into the monotonous twang of everyday living. For local residents, there are the huge crowds to grapple with. For Lord Ram, there is an unending stream of devotees, keeping him awake as he smiles at them beyond

the regular darshan hours. (There have been repeated appeals to delay visits till the crowds are more manageable.)

Ayodhya, which cast its vote on May 20, has not always favoured the stalwarts of the Ram Mandir movement. In this *nagri* (city) of tyaag (sacrifice), poor losers have been made out of giant winners. In 1998, instead of choosing Vinay Katiyar, founder of the Bajrang Dal, the constituency went with Mitrasen Yadav



SANJOY GHOSH

BUSINESS AS USUAL

Shops selling religious flags in Ayodhya

of the Samajwadi Party. A year later, Katiyar romped home. In 2004, he was out, and Yadav, who was then with the Bahujan Samaj Party, won. In 2009, the electorate went with Nirmal Khatri of the Congress. Lallu Singh, 69, of the BJP won the seat in the last two elections.

This time, the Congress-Samajwadi Party alliance has ensured a difficult contest. In 2019, Samajwadi's Anand Sen Yadav polled slightly over 4.63 lakh votes, while Khatri's vote count was just over 53,000. This brings it to 5.13 lakh votes, against the BJP's 5.29 lakh. It does not help Lallu Singh that the alliance candidate against him is nine-time MLA Awadhesh Prasad, 78, of the Samajwadi Party. Also, even as the Ram Mandir was becoming a reality, Singh's winning margin saw a dip. It was over 2.8 lakh in 2014, but fell to just over 65,000 in 2019.

Noor Alam, a furniture shop owner, said, "Ayodhya is peaceful. Conflicts belong to the past. We suffered because of road widening for a few months, but now things are better." His vote, he said, would go to a candidate who ensured the wellbeing of his community and development for the local residents, and not just tourists.

Mahant Nritya Gopal Das, president of the Shri Ram Janmbhoomi Teerth Kshetra, said Ayodhya was a *dham* (residence of the divine) that stood with the truth, not with power. He cited the example of Ram's younger brother Bharat, who eschewed the throne and ruled in his brother's name for 14 years. "Ayodhya will only accept an impartial candidate," he said. "Social solidarity is a pillar of Ram Rajya."

Lallu Singh has a politician's set reputation—accessible, but not necessarily receptive. When he was approached by the many people whose shops and homes were being razed, he made himself scarce. His home, despite standing on one of the widened roads, was not touched. But on the campaign trail, he endeared himself to women voters by asking for simple food—thick rotis and chutney.

Singh, the incumbent MP, said, "The last man standing has benefited from our welfare schemes. Ram *nagri* has become the centre of tourism for the world."

Many are unsure that Ayodhya's rising attraction as a tourist spot is an unvarnished success. Those living at a distance from the town, across the five assembly constituencies, are fearful that their lands, too, will be acquired as the temple town's growth pans outwards.

At Guptar Ghat, where Ram entered the Sarayu and was never seen again, stands the ubiquitous sign 'I love Ayodhya'. That declaration, where love is symbolised by a red heart, is what one finds across

countless cities. As elsewhere, it is a photo/selfie point (of which there are 13 in Ayodhya), and locals often complain about the poses being struck here or the reels being made. Some distance away is a statue of Maharana Pratap, atop his horse Chetak. Not one *pujari* (priest) in the temples along the ghat can deduce the relationship between the Rajput ruler and Ayodhya. One *pujari* wondered why a promised statue of Lord Ram had yet not materialised. "Politics is stronger than *bhakti* (devotion)," he said.

One oft-heard recollection by Ayodhya's sanyasis is that when the town was being given a makeover, a delegation went to meet Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath in Lucknow. Among the concerns was the razing of iconic landmarks such as the Hanuman Garhi gate. The chief minister offered the sanyasis lunch and sent them packing with the quip that he was doing their bidding when it came to the temple, thus their grouse was unfair.

There has been no construction yet at the five-acre site offered in lieu of the Babri Masjid, and in the din of campaigning, there is speculation that it is because of a wait for a return to the original plot of land. Athar Husain, spokesperson of the Indo-Islamic Cultural Foundation (the body responsible for the construction), said that the delay in construction of the complex was owing to a lack of funds.

"There is consensus among the clergy, too (on the acceptance of the Supreme Court verdict)," he said. "Statements to the effect that a lock would be put on the mandir are just politics in a Hindu-majority country. The mandir has never been an issue, as many political parties have been in power since the start of the movement."

And so it goes in shape-shifting Ayodhya, which might be defined by Ram, but is not limited to him. ❶

Boom in the heartland



After nearly 80 years in service, the Carl-Gustaf weapon system continues to be in demand globally. Now, the Indian infantry's go-to weapon will be made in Haryana

< BY SANJIB KR BARUAH >

Somewhere in Kashmir, near the Line of Control, an officer barked at his men: "Okay boys, time to take 'em out. Get the RL ready." It was the early 1990s and cross-border firing was frequent. The "RL" (rocket launcher) was an 84mm recoilless rifle.

Two soldiers got on the job. One positioned the weapon on his shoulder while another loaded it. A few seconds later, a boom was followed by a flash of destruction across the border. Plumes of smoke rose from what was a fortified bunker.

Carl-Gustaf, the Swedish-made, man-portable, recoilless rifle, was introduced in the Indian Army as an anti-tank weapon in 1976. It remains the go-to weapon for the infantry.

Brigadier Rumel Dahiya (retired) told THE WEEK: "Having used it so many times in exercises, field firings and competitions, what is

impressive about the Carl-Gustaf is its versatility." It can be fired from the shoulder, the air or a vehicle and can fire high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT), illuminating and smoke ammunition rounds. "It is light and packs quite a punch," he said. "To my mind, it is the ideal anti-tank weapon, up to about 500 metres. We also use the Russian RPG 7 (rocket-propelled grenade), but nothing to beat the much sophisticated Carl-Gustaf."

Carl-Gustaf shares its name with the king of Sweden—Carl XVI Gustaf. The weapon's name originates from the factory where its first version was made. (The factory was based in Eskilstuna, which received city privileges during the reign of King Karl X Gustaf.) It was introduced in Sweden in 1948. The most common version in use now—the M2—was introduced in 1964. The M4, the latest version (2014), is less than a metre long and weighs 7kg—the M2

is about 14kg and the M3 (1986) about 10kg. Every munition for the Carl-Gustaf has a calibre of 84mm and is compatible with every version.

Today, the Saab-owned Carl-Gustaf is used by 40 countries. The Americans have designated it M3A1, but often call it Gustaf (sometimes the Goose). In Norway, it is RFK (rekylfri kanon, meaning recoilless cannon), and in Denmark, it is Dysekanon (nozzle cannon). While Canadian soldiers call it Carl G, the Aussies have dubbed it "Charlie guts ache" and "Charlie Swede".

In India, the weapon saw extensive action in Sri Lanka when the Army was deployed for peace-keeping operations and then in the Kargil War. But, its widespread use began during the counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir and in the northeast.

"Carl-Gustaf was an effective weapon, especially when it came to blasting inside concrete build-



THE BIG GUN
A soldier holding
the Carl-Gustaf

CARL-GUSTAF M4

The Carl-Gustaf recoilless rifle is a man-portable, multi-role weapon system

It was introduced in Sweden in 1948, and is owned by Saab

It is used by 40 countries

The Carl-Gustaf's back-blast charges out in the form of a triangular cone, with gas, fire and blast elements expanding as they exit, to as far as 30 metres. The first 15 metres are considered a danger zone

FCD 558

FIRE CONTROL UNIT

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

WEIGHT
~7kg

LENGTH
<1m

MUZZLE VELOCITY
240m/s

SIGHTS
Fire control device, open, red dot and telescopic



FCD 558

New fire control device

Now the primary sight for the M4

Using a toggle, gunner can choose direct fire or air burst

Gunner can use the toggle to enter range to target

Has a ballistic computer that calculates best trajectory to achieve success

FIRING RANGE

Smoke and high explosive ammunition

1,000m

Stationary vehicles and bunkers

500m

Moving vehicles, including tanks

350m-400m

AMMUNITION

Every munition for the Carl-Gustaf has a calibre of 84mm and is compatible with legacy versions

ANTI-ARMOUR

HEAT 751



HEAT 551

HEAT 551C



HEAT 655 CS

MULTI-ROLE/ ANTI-STRUCTURE

HEDP 502



ASM 509

MT 756



HE 448

ANTI-PERSONNEL

HE 441D



SUPPORT

ILLUM 545C



SMOKE 469C

REMOTE CONTROL OPERATION

ENCRYPTED WIRED COMMUNICATION

PHOTO SAAB AB

SOURCE SAAB

GRAPHICS SREEMANIKANDAN S.
RESEARCH SANJIB Kr BARUAH/KARTHIK RAVINDRANATH

ings and bunkers,” said a colonel, who requested anonymity. As a young lieutenant, he led a platoon of soldiers near the LoC. “It was so good that there was no need to seek a replacement with another weapon,” he said.

So loud is the sound and shock of the Carl-Gustaf that the soldiers firing two to four rounds complain of going deaf for a month! “It had its disadvantages back then,” said the colonel. “At 12kg, it was heavy and bulky. The sighting system was basic and the back-blast was substantial. The back-blasts have caused casualties, too. But the worst was the booming sound.”

The Carl-Gustaf’s back-blast charges out in the form of a triangular cone, with gas, fire and blast elements expanding as they exit the launcher to as far as 30 metres after which they dissipate. Because of the nature of the blast, the first 15 metres are considered a danger zone. The back-blast also gives away the position of soldiers firing the Carl-Gustaf.

Brig Dahiya said that the back-blast is a significant factor. “One has to take care that nothing catches fire from the powerful back-blast,” he said. “But, if a projectile has to be fired with so much of force that it can penetrate a thick steel frame, it requires a lot of momentum and thrust. That can only come if a lot of explosive is used.” He added that the boom was unavoidable as you cannot put a silencer on such a weapon. “Once fired you have to quickly move away, before the enemy counteraction,” he said. “The firing position has to be safe from retaliatory enemy fire.”

While guns have come and gone for the 13-lakh-strong Army, the Carl-Gustaf stayed put. That is why it will now be made in Haryana’s Jhajjar.

Having got approval for 100 per cent foreign direct investment, Saab has begun work on the first fully foreign-owned defence production facility in India. For that, a new company—Saab FFVO India Pvt Ltd—has been set up.

India will be making the latest M4 with upgraded sighting technology and advanced carbon fibre winding with some component sourcing from local suppliers.

It is a good step to have this factory at Jhajjar. The needs of the Army can be met more easily and during times of need, production can be ramped up.

—Brigadier Rumel Dahiya (retired)

The colonel, who is now serving in an operational area, said that the Carl-Gustaf was, in his opinion, the best close-quarter battle weapon because of its destructive nature and man-portability over all types of terrain, including mountains, rocky outcrops and jungles. “During counterinsurgency operations in Kashmir, we had intelligence that a three-storied building was housing seven militants,” he said. “And, there was no way to flush them out. But, the Carl-Gustaf’s shock effect pulled them out.”

He said that he had made use of it extensively in three situations. “During the Kargil War, we used it for bunker-busting and for firing on concentration of troops,” he said. “It was

exceptionally reliable and highly accurate, with great destructive power because of its high muzzle velocity. We used it also for unconventional operations near the LoC and for illuminating air bursts at night.”

The effective firing range of the weapon is about 1,000 metres using the smoke and high explosive ammunition, 500 metres for stationery vehicles and bunkers, and 350-400 metres for moving vehicles, including tanks, for which HEAT rounds are used. Its muzzle velocity—the speed attained by a projectile when it leaves the weapon—is 240 metres per second.

Notably, it is not only the soldiers who are trained to use the weapon. It is part of the young officers’ course at the Infantry School at Mhow in Madhya Pradesh. Later, officers also use it at field firings.

A disadvantage, apart from the back-blast, is that two men are needed to operate it—the gunner and the loader. Usually one patrol unit carries two sets of ammunition, with every set comprising two rockets. In the 1990s, the Carl-Gustaf was not available in big numbers and it was one weapon to a platoon (about 30 men). At present, one unit (about 10 soldiers) carries one Carl-Gustaf.

Brig Dahiya said that there were shortages of the weapon system. “Not all units have the complete authorisation for this weapon because of import restrictions,” he said. “So, it is a good step to have this factory at Jhajjar. The needs of the Army can be met much more easily and during times of need, the production capability can be ramped up. Moreover, the 100 per cent foreign investment policy to make military equipment also gives confidence to others to come up with their products.” In the process, he added, Make in India gets a thumbs-up. ●

A midsummer daydream

From simplified taxes to daring reforms, India Inc's wish list for the new government is long

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

Most bureaucrats in the corridors of power in Delhi look forward to the summer. The pace of work gets a bit languorous and a good chunk, family in tow, go to their native places for that much-needed summer vacation. Many others take off to cooler climes—the lucky few to Europe and others to domestic hill stations and pilgrim centres.

A lazy summer becomes an even greater attraction in an election year. With the model code of conduct limiting the incumbent government from making any major decisions or policy changes and with ministers away campaigning, the pace of government work further slows down. It is usually a relaxed few weeks spent speculating on election results and extended tea breaks before the flurry of activity hits them in full blast with a new government.

This summer, though, things have been a bit different. The outgoing Narendra Modi government, in a show of super confidence in its fate at the hustings, has given them so much work that the bureaucracy's hope for a 'chill-out summer' just melted away. It was set in motion way back in February. Modi initiated in a cabinet meeting the planning for

a 100-day agenda that his government would take up after coming back to power. The plan was to be worked out by senior bureaucrats; a final list of 50 projects or policies to be taken up immediately after the new government's formation, targeted at the grand vision of 'Viksit Bharat' by 2047.

The result? Senior bureaucrats have been scampering around attending many rounds of meetings and presentations. Officials from the ministries of finance, corporate affairs, and micro, medium and small enterprises have been particularly busy, with meetings and deliberations on topics ranging from rationalisation of tax rates to prioritising pending reforms. A vision document for transforming the country into Viksit Bharat and the launch of a 'Made in India' branding are under preparation.

But is all the planning in ministerial meeting rooms in tune with what the industry and markets want?

"I have a straightforward answer," said former Reserve Bank governor D. Subbarao, when asked what the new government should focus on. "We must focus on creating jobs."

For all the big numbers that are being touted around—a blazing pace



The stark reality is that India's labour force is unskilled or, at best, semi-skilled. This is when the country has grandiose visions of becoming a tech manufacturing hub.

of growth not less than 6.5 per cent; soon to be the world's fourth largest economy—India exhibits a curious dichotomy on the ground. The 'India Shining' sentiment does not reflect ground reality—there aren't enough jobs for the youth, and the rural India and the lower middle class are not yet out of the distress caused by the Covid pandemic.

It is not that the government has not tried. Through its Atmanirbhar Bharat packages and production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes, it had sought to exert emphasis on improving the state of manufactur-



SHUTTERSTOCK

AIMING HIGH

Workers at a factory in Noida, Uttar Pradesh

ing in the country. Indian economy had moved from an agrarian one to a services-focused one, largely skipping the manufacturing phase which many developed nations had gone through in their transition. The post-Covid world order demanded that the country focus on self-reliance and its own manufacturing capabilities, with the neat dividend of it being a job creator.

But there was a problem. Where do you get the qualified workers?

“Growing the way we are, we are not able to get skilled, disciplined and regular manpower,” said Ajinkya Firodia, managing director of auto-maker Kinetic Engineering.

While labour laws are one part of it, the stark reality is that India’s labour force is unskilled or, at best, semi-skilled. This is when India has grandiose visions of becoming a tech

manufacturing hub, making anything from Tesla’s electric cars (Elon Musk willing) to semiconductors. Those leaving their farming days behind and venturing into industrial hubs eager for labour jobs may not fit the bill any longer.

R. Dinesh, founder and executive chairman of TVS Supply Chain Solutions and the outgoing president of the Confederation of Indian Industry, realises this gap. “We have formally educated workers ready to work, but with new technologies and artificial intelligence coming in, the process of manufacturing itself has changed dramatically,” he said. “All of it requires upskilling.”

While some corporates and even industry bodies like the CII have set up centres for upskilling, it might not be enough. “One of our asks for the future is for an employment-linked

incentive plan,” said Dinesh. “Especially in sectors like textiles, logistics, tourism, hospitality and health care. And as we keep investing in those sectors, you will see that a virtuous cycle will be set in motion, because people get prepared and they get an opportunity.”

But it would be foolhardy to expect this mega job creation to happen through just big multinationals or the big daddies of India Inc. Therein pops up the most talked about, but yet-to-be-weaponised four-letter acronym in the country—MSME, or micro, small and medium businesses. It is still looking for a saviour as it has not come out of the troubles that Covid caused. Yet, the category offers the best possible avenue for job creation in a nation that desperately needs its GDP growth benefits to trickle down.

“With a new government coming on board, it is an important point for us to figure out how to support MSMEs for their own growth,” said Dinesh. He suggests creating a fund which allows first ‘loss’ guarantee (the government will cover a certain percentage of losses if the borrower defaults on a loan), developing a rating system that understands sector requirements, and helping MSMEs in their digital and green transition.

While advocating green transition is fashionable, India Inc, deep inside, does palpitate at its implications. Especially with India in advanced stage of negotiations for free trade

agreements with the likes of the UK, Oman and the EU. It would trigger a new approach to the environment, carbon emissions and renewable energy, which can be an opportunity or a challenge, depending on how you approach it.

“Once the FTAs come into existence, many Indian businesses will feel that they are put at a competitive disadvantage as cost of compliance goes up,” said Sunil Kumar Sinha, principal economist & director (public finance) at India Ratings & Research, pointing to the EU’s carbon adjustment mechanism that might make Indian exports to the continent more expensive. “India has committed to energy transition. So it is a very important focus, irrespective of whether you are a cement manufacturer, steel manufacturer or fertiliser manufacturer. Everyone would be closely looking forward to what policies are put in place by the government in terms of energy transition and increasing use of renewable energy as compared with

fossil fuel energy. It will call to form the very best of the government’s balancing act.”

Another challenge is the upswing in real estate prices, which poses a question to the government’s efforts to develop affordable houses. “We need a scheme for really affordable houses,” said G. Hari Babu, president of the National Real Estate Development Council. “Around 10 per cent of our population controls 63 per cent of the total wealth in the country. So it is time we gave some subsidies to the other 90 per cent.”

His suggestion? Plan houses under ₹35 lakh, offered with home loans up to ₹25 lakh on a lowered interest rate of 5 per cent for the first five years. “The Central government should put in a word to state governments to lower stamp duty for their registration process,” he said.

In commercial realty, too, there are expectations of unlocking potential through relaxing stipulations. For instance, allowing special economic zones (SEZs) to use a portion of their

**LEADING
FROM THE
FRONT**

Prime Minister
Narendra Modi
with Finance
Minister Nirmala
Sitharaman



land for development “made India the most preferred location for Global Capability Centres”, said Sanjay Chatrath, managing partner of Incuspaze, a co-working space provider. “We expect that the new government would focus on initiating progressive initiatives like the GIFT City in other cities, too,” he said.

The government’s economic direction so far has been in alignment with the interests of big businesses. The massive investment in infra, ranging from highways to ports and airports, the Gati Shakti programme and the digitisation of logistic networks have directly helped business growth. “There is a clear consensus among industry members that we are on the cusp of seizing an opportunity to use this cost competitiveness and digital differentiation to become more global,” said Dinesh. “Already, it is happening in certain sectors, but we see a lot more opportunities.”

The new government will also be expected to push for the three big-ticket reforms that have vexed the Modi regime throughout its tenure—land, labour and agriculture reforms. “The pending reforms in labour and land are very difficult,” said Sinha. “When it came back to power in 2014, the NDA government tried to touch them, and immediately gave up because of the resistance.”

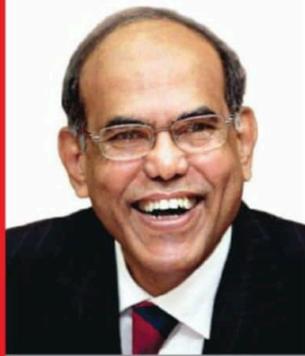
It was worse when it came to agriculture reforms, and these ‘holy trinity’ prompts Sinha to believe that the incoming regime will stay clear of it. “On the contrary, they will look at infra development and improvement in ease of doing business,” he said.

But a businessman can dream, right? “Land, labour and agri reforms are possible, in our view,” said Dinesh. “Just like GST, when people sit down and discuss, we can build up consensus.”

INTERVIEW

D. SUBBARAO

FORMER RESERVE BANK GOVERNOR



Richer states subsidising poorer ones cannot go on forever

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

From standing up to the Union government to defend the autonomy of the Reserve Bank of India to criticising the deteriorating quality of the civil services, Duvvuri Subbarao has never shied away from doing the heavy lifting. As his latest book, *Just a Mercenary*, hits headlines for his questioning the Comptroller and Auditor General’s interpretation of ‘presumptive loss’ in the 2G scam, THE WEEK caught up with the former bureaucrat, who also had served as finance secretary and secretary to the Prime Minister’s Economic Advisory Council. Excerpts from an exclusive interview:

Q/ The most satisfying and most traumatic part of your career, now looking back.

A/ I was posted as an officer on special duty for bottling liquor by the N.T. Rama Rao government in Andhra Pradesh in the mid-1980s. NTR was aghast at people drinking adulterated liquor, and losing lives and livelihoods. So he decided that the solution was to set up arrack bottling plants in every district, and I was appointed an officer on special duty for the project.

My first reaction was, why did they pick me? I had shown no special expertise for field projects, particularly for bottling liquor. I thought I was destined for bigger things—join the IAS and change the world. I was angry. I sat at home for three-four days, but then picked myself up. I said, ‘If I have to do

this, I will do it. If I fail, that’s okay. But at least let me try.’ I completed the project three days ahead of the deadline. It was a tremendously satisfying experience.

And I learned many lessons. For example, that people should not fear being pushed out of their comfort zones. In fact, there are a lot of lessons to be learned from being pushed out of your comfort zone. In leadership training programmes, they tell you the secret to success in life is to discover your passion and follow it. But the lesson I learned is not so much to discover your passion and follow it, but to do whatever you have to do in life with passion.

Q/ With a lot of fundamental changes slated to happen, including delimitation, what would you

say is the ideal way forward for the Centre-state balance of power?

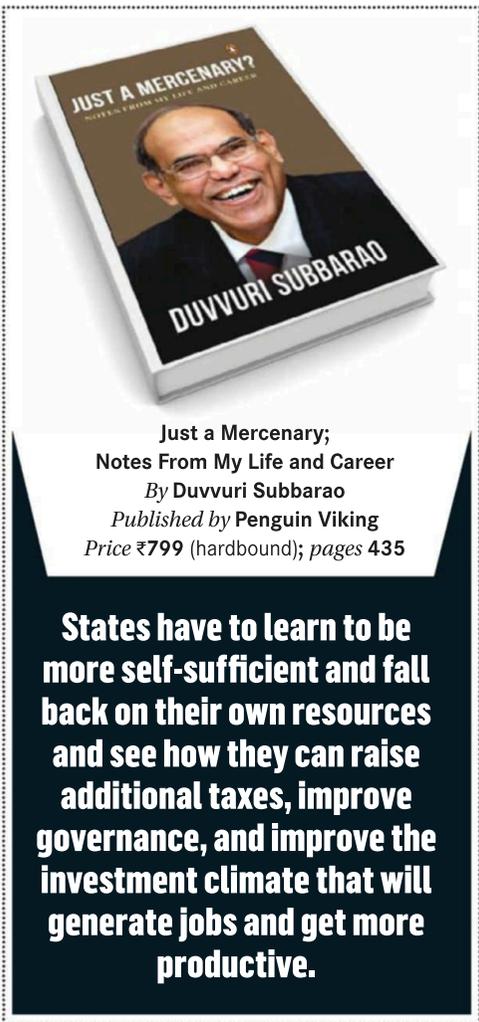
A/ The amount that states can borrow has to be approved by the Union government. I believe those are good guidelines, although some states are protesting. States have to learn to be more self-sufficient and fall back on their own resources and see how they can raise additional taxes, improve governance, and improve the investment climate that will generate jobs and get more productive.

Q/ States also complain that with the GST, they don't have control over revenue. Meanwhile, industry has been demanding that state subjects like excise and fuel also be included in the GST.

A/ I think the GST has been a great thing although we have had some implementation problems. As late finance minister Arun Jaitley said, it is a tribute to our fiscal federalism. The states and the Centre came together for the common good. I don't think the GST should be seen as a mechanism that has actually detracted from the autonomy of states. That is the wrong way of looking at it. But, of course, states will complain—have you ever seen a hostel student who doesn't complain about the hostel food? It is in their very nature to complain!

Q/ Richer states say they are not getting their due.

A/ There is some cross-subsidisation. For every rupee richer states like Maharashtra and Karnataka contribute to the central tax pool, they get back less than a rupee. Poorest states like Bihar and Jharkhand get more than a rupee for every rupee they



Just a Mercenary;
Notes From My Life and Career
 By **Duvvuri Subbarao**
 Published by Penguin Viking
 Price ₹799 (hardbound); pages 435

States have to learn to be more self-sufficient and fall back on their own resources and see how they can raise additional taxes, improve governance, and improve the investment climate that will generate jobs and get more productive.

contribute. That is necessary, even desirable, up to a certain extent. It happens in most other federations. It is incumbent on the richest states to cross-subsidise the poorest states.

But there has to be limits to it. And I get a sense that we are hitting the limits of that cross-subsidisation. There has to be some milestone set for the cross-subsidisation formula. It cannot go on forever.

Q/ We will have a new government soon. What are the areas it should focus on?

A/ I have a straightforward answer to

that: We must focus on creating jobs.

The economy is growing at a sizzling pace, eight plus per cent year before last, 7.6 per cent last year, 7 per cent this year, estimated, and probably 6.5 per cent for the next two to three years. Yet, it is not creating jobs, because growth is coming from sectors that are not job intensive. Several economists who study these numbers have said that this pace of growth of 6.5 to 7 per cent is incompatible with the growth in consumption, which is just 3.5 per cent, which shows that there is unemployment and there is growing inequality. Unemployment and inequality are the two big problems and solving them is morally right, not just politically right. I believe it is good economics. We need to solve them because consumption is the biggest growth driver in India. We have about 300 to 500 million people who are middle class or lower middle class. If their incomes improve, they will spend that money. And when they spend that money, demand will go up. If demand goes up, production will go up, jobs will go up, that will generate more jobs and

more growth. So, we need to focus on creating jobs and ensuring that benefits of growth are widely shared for our growth to be sustainable. It is an economic necessity.

We have not focused as much on job creation as on growth numbers. In fact, you are not seeing this debate in the election, it is all about reservations and freebies. How do you ensure that the benefits of the wealth creation accrue to the important segments of the population? Growth and inequality are two big problems that the next government must address.

Q/ You said growth is in areas that are not job-intensive. So which areas should the new government focus on?

A/ Let's look at agriculture. Agriculture will not create jobs. In fact, there are about 70 to 80 million people, perhaps even more, in the agriculture sector, who are underemployed. If agriculture productivity improves as we want it to, agriculture will throw out 80 million to 100 million people. Those people will have to look at jobs outside.

Then there is the services sector. People think that the services sector is very job-intensive. But that view is shaped by the experience of a Bangalore or a Hyderabad, the software hubs. But if you actually dig deeper, you'll find that software has created just about 7 million to 8 million jobs in a workforce of a billion. So the services sector jobs that have been created over the last 10 years are low-end jobs like security guards, cleaners and janitors. But we want higher-end jobs. So if agriculture and services are not the solution in the immediate future, we are going to fall back on manufacturing.

We know that large corporate investment is not job-intensive. But if large corporate private investment comes in, that will have a multiplier effect down the line. MSMEs and below MSMEs, even tiny enterprises. And those are job-intensive. That's where we must be focusing on.

But on the supply side, we have to work on skills and on education. I told you about the labour that agriculture would throw out. They are going to be at best semi-skilled and they cannot be absorbed in the manufacturing sector right away. You have to make them job-ready. We have to attack the jobs problem from both the demand side and the supply side. ●

INTERVIEW

KARTHIK MURALIDHARAN
ECONOMIST



India is firing on just 10 per cent of the engines

BY K. SUNIL THOMAS

It is unusual for an economist to make heads turn for his theories and philosophies rather than his politics or insider revelations. But that is exactly what Karthik Muralidharan seems to have achieved with his just-released book *Accelerating India's Development*. The reviews have ranged from 'outstanding' to 'essential reading'. THE WEEK caught up with this Tata Chancellor's Professor of economics at the University of California, San Diego. Excerpts from an interview:

Q/ What is your theory about development and where India is going wrong?

A/ The grand debate in development has been about growth. [Economists] J.N. Bhagwati and Arvind Panagariya will say that if you manage to get faster economic growth, everything else will follow. On the other hand, Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze will say that the purpose of development is to improve human life and therefore things like health and education should be a priority.

Now my point of departure in this debate is to say that at some level they are both correct. Because more growth helps human development, more human development helps growth. Then it becomes a fight about what you should focus on. The growthwallahs will say we need to do capital expenditure. The developmentwallahs will say we need to focus on the social sector. This is fundamentally a fight for

budget allocation. But if you look at how inefficient the government is in the delivery system, then it doesn't matter what you're spending on, you're spending it very badly.

Q/ You say our delivery system is flawed; the government says it has tided over this situation by using digital as a means of last-mile delivery.

A/ The modern welfare state initially had limited democracy, with voting rights only to white property-owning men. And that demographic wanted capital expenditure because they benefitted from the appreciation of capex. I gave this context because what makes India unique in human history is that we are the only country with universal democracy from day one. It is a great moral triumph, because it gives the marginalised citizens a voice in governance.

But the problem is that it ex-

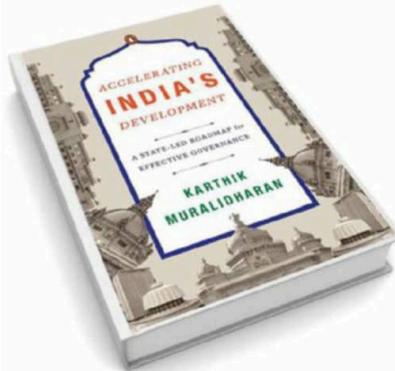
pands the demands on the state before the state has the capacity to meet those demands. Because these other welfare states happened after they reached middle income status. The US, for instance, did food stamps for the poor at a GDP per capita of \$18,000 (adjusted to 2011) while India did PDS at a GDP per capita of \$1,200.

But what that means is that given the limited public finances of the welfare state, the lack of programmes at an early stage means that we have chronically underinvested in our governance systems. Because these systems only pay off in the long term, the political incentive to invest in governance is always important but never urgent, say, compared with a short-term scheme that appeal to the voters.

The current government has not expanded any of the major welfare schemes but has focused more on tightening and cleaning up delivery. And I think they have managed to do that very well in welfare programmes where you can dis-intermediate these layers. The unfinished agenda now is the service delivery that is mediated through humans. So, if you look at education, if you look at health, you can't digitise away the intermediary. That requires a much deeper, sophisticated thinking on governance.

Q/ Whenever we have a very strong Central government, sentiments against over-centralisation pop up.

A/ We need to not focus too much on who has control but on what is good for citizens. There are costs and benefits of both that we have to balance. The benefit of centralisation is that sometimes you get economies of scale, better national coordination, better expertise and lower transaction costs. But if you over-centralise, you have to accommodate more



Accelerating India's Development: A State-led Roadmap for Effective Governance

By Karthik Muralidharan
Published by Penguin Viking
Price ₹1,299 (hardbound); pages 812

variation across the country with the same policy. For example, Kerala's needs are very different from Bihar's.

Second problem is not about Centre to state, but state to local. The bigger over-centralisation in India is not from Delhi to state governments, but from state to local. The reason I am not sympathetic to chief ministers who complain about over-centralising is that they are the most guilty of over-centralising. So like [the late economist] Dr Raja Chelliah famously said, everybody wants decentralisation up to their level, but nobody wants to let go of power below that. So the important point is, go back to first principles of federalism and look at what is in the citizens' interest.

There are aspects of governance where we need more centralisation, but there are other aspects where we need much less. India is the most over-centralised country in the world. One reason was the fear that local elites will not allow education of underprivileged groups or gender rights. So they over-centralised because of the Ambedkar-Nehruvian vision of a modernising state that will overcome the biases and prejudices of traditional society. They never trusted local governments. Unfor-

tunately, that has not worked. If you want effective service delivery, you have to decentralise more.

But now, the good news after 75 years of independence is that people are a lot more educated and a lot more aware that they are able to resist if there is too much local elite capture. So that is why on service delivery we need a lot more decentralisation. But the action needed is not so much centre to state, but state to local.

Q/ What would be the two fundamental changes that India needs to do to speed up growth?

A/ The single biggest thing holding India back right now is the weak delivery of essential services. At one level, we have a very good system, macro fundamentals are good, growth rate is good, but there is very uneven growth. The top 10 per cent is driving growth by high incomes and good jobs. The next 30 to 40 per cent are migrant workers from rural to urban areas who are being sustained by the demand created by the top 10 per cent. Then you've got the bottom 50 per cent who are completely left out because rural stagnation is very real.

At one level, this model has delivered a certain amount, but we can't accelerate growth to 8, 9 or 10 per cent unless you are firing on all engines. Right now, you are firing on only 10 per cent of the engines. The bottom 50 per cent is not participating actively in the growth process because they don't have the health, the education and the skills required to participate. Services used by the poor, for the most part, are incredibly weak. The key sectors we need to focus on are education and skills, health and nutrition, and police and public safety. Safety is a fundamental determinant of female labour force participation. ●



Bearing up in boring Britain

These days in Britain, boring is good. After the hangover of Boris Johnson's wild escapades, Liz Truss's wilder financial swings, Brexit's economic nosedives, and Rishi Sunak's flipflops, British voters find the unexciting rather appealing. The turbulent Tory decade has been an era when entertainment trumped issues, sloganeering out-gunned policy and drama beat governance. Now everyone is fed up. Labour Party's staid leader, Keir Starmer, is likeable precisely because he is a boring lawyer who shuns Johnson-style gimmicks like sliding down a zip wire, only to get stuck midair.

Johnson is Tories' best vote-getter, but polls predict a Labour win in the upcoming elections.

Starmer is offering voters a porridge of policies—boring, but healthy for the nation. In his “pledge card” to the nation, he makes six promises: to deliver economic stability, cut national health service (NHS) waiting times for treatment, establish a state-owned energy company, tackle anti-social behaviour, recruit

more teachers and launch a border security force to stop illegal migration. Denying that the pledges were a dilution of his earlier climate and economic plans, Starmer said these “ready-to-go pledges are a means to the end, a down-payment on the first steps to change Britain.” The rest to be announced after election victory, he said.

Underfunding has undermined NHS's ability to provide adequate health care, provoking public outrage. NHS doctors saved Covid-afflicted Johnson's life. He was effusively grateful, but was unwilling or unable to upgrade NHS, perhaps because of the Tory obsession with cutting public services. Starmer, who comes from a working-class background—father a factory toolmaker, mother an NHS nurse—is sincerely grateful for the NHS care and hospitalisation his mother received for lifelong crippling arthritis. His wife is an NHS nurse. His commitment to revive NHS is deep and personal.

Unlike Johnson's life of revelry and privilege, Starmer is the first from his family to go to university. As a lawyer, he defended the rights of victims of domestic, criminal and political violence. He was knighted for his role as chief prosecutor in 2014. For the ceremony in Buckingham Palace, he invited his parents—who brought their family dog along. Starmer knows tragedy. By 2018, his mother had succumbed to disease, his father died heart-broken and the dog perished when their family home burned down.

In contrast with Johnson's hype and hyperbole, Starmer is almost dour. But that apparently is the need of the hour. Labour presents Starmer as mature,

solid, family-oriented. His seriousness promises “dull dividends” say experts. The uncertainties triggered by Brexit and the chaotic reign of Johnson and Truss instigated businesses to withhold investments, dampening growth. Now, people and businesses crave for stability, the markets yearn for fiscal policies with-

out the fizz and fissures that marked Truss's tenure. Uncertainty brings bad economic outcomes, but certainty usually improves employment and industrial production. A traumatised Britain appears soothed by Starmer's ‘Boring Bonus.’

Helping Britain's transition from populism to policy is Labour's research group, “Labour Together,” which is growing in clout, staff and donations. They are preparing the policy groundwork for an “incoming” Labour government and road maps for its implementation. It is pulling the party to middle-ground from the leftist positions of previous Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn. Even as it prepares for the future, Labour looks back in history to borrow some winning tactics. Its “pledge card” is a repeat version of the card it published before its landslide victory in 1997. But the tone is different. This time the message is “Steady hands on the wheel.” The adults return. Boring is back.



A chain that links us all

How a governor of Andamans influenced the Barbados programme of action for Small Island Developing States in 1994

BY RAMU DAMODARAN

In February, the effortlessly elegant Indian permanent representative to the United Nations, Ruchira Kamboj, presented a cheque to the ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda as contribution for hosting the fourth global conference for Small Island Developing States from May 27-30. It was a reaffirmation of the support India had extended to SIDS from the very first conference 30 years ago, which put small islands on the map of global responsibility and saw a pivotal contribution by an individual who might otherwise have been considered an unlikely presence on the multilateral diplomatic stage.

The ministry of external affairs had proposed that India's delegation to the 1994 conference, held in Barbados, be led by one of its ministers of state. Prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, in whose office I was working at the time, was not enthused. "This is not an expression of altruism," he remarked. "It is a question of self-interest, of our identity as a nation that has 1,300 islands within the geography of our union. The problems that are being discussed, and the solutions that may be attempted, are

not external affairs."

He paused, reflected a moment, and instructed: "Let me speak to Purushothaman." I was used to the telegraphic quality of Rao's instructions and understood he wished to be connected on the phone to Vakkom Purushothaman (VP), then lieutenant governor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. (I should say "largely used to"; there was an occasion in 1992 when he said, "Let me speak to Narayanan", meaning K.R. Narayanan, then member of Parliament, and I mistakenly connected him to M.K. Narayanan, director of the Intelligence Bureau, who was bemused to hear the prime minister congratulate him on his nomination as the Congress party nominee for the vice presidency of India.)

In any event, after a ten-minute conversation, Rao called me in to tell me VP had agreed to lead our delegation to the conference. "Tell Sreeni to contact him and tie up details," he added, a reference to T.P. Sreenivasan, our deputy permanent representative to the UN, who was leading the officials' segment to the conference. "Purushothaman wants to know how best to update him-



P. MUSTHAF

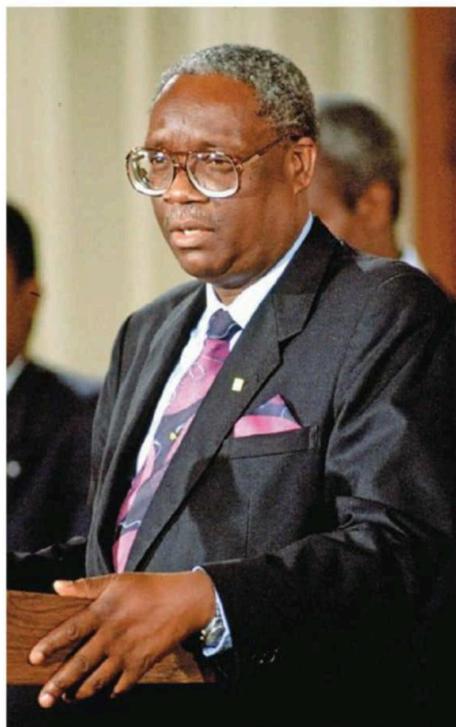
KINDRED SPIRITS

Former Andamans governor Vakkom Purushothaman (above) and former Barbados prime minister Lloyd Sandiford

self on our foreign policy priorities; please get him our last three speeches in the UN General Assembly which I have told him are the best resource."

VP had read the speeches thoroughly by the time he reached Delhi a few days later; he was particularly moved by a reference in the 1993 speech to the "inviolability of the individual as one of the profoundly humanistic traditions of Indian civilisation," a truth he felt, and with which the prime minister agreed, should be central to our contribution to the conference, affirming that change derived from the ideas and actions of the person and, cumulatively, the people.

It was something he himself fervently believed in; on the very day he left Port Blair for Delhi, April 23, the



GETTY IMAGES

panchayat system came into being in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, flowing from the 73rd constitutional amendment piloted in Parliament by the Rao government the previous year. VP brought his pen to the announcement which noted that Panchayati Raj “confirms the belief in the people of the country ...that they are capable of formulating their own plans for material prosperity, social upliftment and economic independence.”

When VP arrived in Barbados, he found a country whose excitement at hosting its first global conference was tempered with the disappointment and disbelief of the upset loss by the West Indies cricket team to England at the Bridgetown Test ten days earlier, a match made legendary by the two centuries thundered by English captain Alec Stewart. “He showed us yet again that the brilliance of a team depends on the brilliance of each player,” Barbados prime minister

Lloyd Erskine Sandiford remarked to VP at the opening reception that evening, VP beamed. He may have found a kindred spirit.

He recalled Sandiford’s remark

“You get so much from idle talk,” VP said. “Idle talk?” asked Sandiford. “What is that?” “What you and I are having now,” said VP equably, as he took a sip of the cheerlessly chicory-less coffee.

the next morning, when he found himself, at the coffee break, at a table with the prime minister and the conference’s precise yet imaginative coordinator, senior UN official Miles Stoby. He took the opportunity to suggest to Sandiford that, in that spirit, the conference “outcome” document should focus on the potential unleashed by individuals and in their collective identity and centrality as peoples.

“But, Governor, we have affirmed that in our opening paragraph,” Sandiford responded. He leafed through the folder he carried and found the draft. “Here it is. In fact, we have taken it in entirety from the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development adopted two years ago. ‘Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.’”

“But that is precisely my point, Prime Minister,” VP responded. “This portrays human beings as beneficiaries of entitlement, not as the source and agent of change. I myself have found the best ideas for what government and administration can do comes from conversations with thinking, reflective individuals.”

“How do you have those conversations, Governor?” Sandiford asked, as Miles Stoby recalled to me some months later.

“Walks,” VP replied.

“Walks?” Sandiford queried.

“Walks,” VP replied. “Every morning, I walk through the streets of our capital, Port Blair, and talk to people. Some have particular problems, which we try to resolve. But most of them have ideas and many of those ideas can be implemented. You get so much from idle talk.”

“Idle talk?” asked Sandiford. “What is that?”

“What you and I are having now,” said VP equably, wincing a little as he took a sip of the cheerlessly



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SYMBOL OF PEOPLE'S CENTRALITY

The Speaker's chair, donated by India, in the Barbados House of Assembly

chicory-less coffee. "When we speak without purpose or agenda, often our best ideas come from that."

"Well, this idle talk has certainly yielded one," Sandiford replied.

"Miles, we should rework our opening. Governor, we will continue to draw upon your guidance."

"Mine is a simple approach," VP replied. "We have to focus on environmental dangers, development assistance, lack of freshwater resources... all these must find mention in our document. But the people, and the person, come first."

"We also sometimes forget the cultural dimension," VP continued, "but it is the most personal attribute of the human being and one we must respect if our islands and their peoples are to flourish but, even more importantly, simply survive."

The spirit of VP's counsel was well received by delegations as they finalised the "Barbados Programme of Action," although he was careful not to take public credit for it. And its eventual opening affirmation could be seen to derive directly from his conversation with Sandiford.

It read: "The survival of small island developing states is firmly rooted in their human resources and cultural heritage, which are their

most significant assets; those assets are under severe stress and all efforts must be taken to ensure the central position of people in the process of sustainable development."

As Sandiford read the plan of action aloud for unanimous adoption by the conference, Miles Stoby recalled, his eyes left the script at this paragraph and seemed to focus on a distant point in the room. In fact, they were meeting VP's eyes and an unobtrusive touch of right hand to forehead conveyed his gratitude and appreciation.

Once the conference concluded, Sandiford came up to VP. "Vakkom," he said (they were now on first name terms, or at least what Sandiford, unfamiliar with the complexities of Kerala nomenclatures, considered a first name), "let me show you our symbol of the central position of people."

They got into the prime minister's car and drove a short distance. "This is an institution with which you are familiar, Vakkom," Sandiford said. "Our parliament's House of Assembly." They were now in the chamber and Sandiford walked up to the front. "And this another symbol you know well: the Speaker's chair."

VP paused before it. "It is magnifi-

cent," he said.

"It should be," Sandiford said quietly. "It is made of the finest Indian teak. It was a gift from your government to us when we attained independence in November 1966."

VP knelt before the chair and placed his forehead on the floor. Without the least trace of self-consciousness, Sandiford did so, too. They rose a moment later and left the chamber quietly, in companionable silence.

At VP's hotel, where Sandiford dropped him, the two men shook hands. They both knew it was a goodbye, but left the word unsaid.

Hilary Beckles, vice chancellor of the University of West Indies, has written of Caribbean small islands as "adamant enough to say to the mighty ocean that seeks to engulf and erase them — "if you want to pass, go around!" VP brought a measure of adamance to the Andamans, too; while an assertive adamance, it was not combative, but a measure of the confidence its people possessed as an entity of their own, "a great chain of being," in Sandiford's phrase, a part of the great and vast country which was their home.

Sandiford and VP passed away less than a year ago, within weeks of each other. In the wealth of their lives, the Barbados conference was just one punctuation point, but a point whose imprint was embedded in time and in heart, with its legacy of a swift friendship that brought an enduring transformation in the way nations regarded their peoples, from beneficiaries to creators of change.

A nonresident senior fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress, New Delhi, and former IFS officer, the writer served at the UN for three decades.

Free to be me

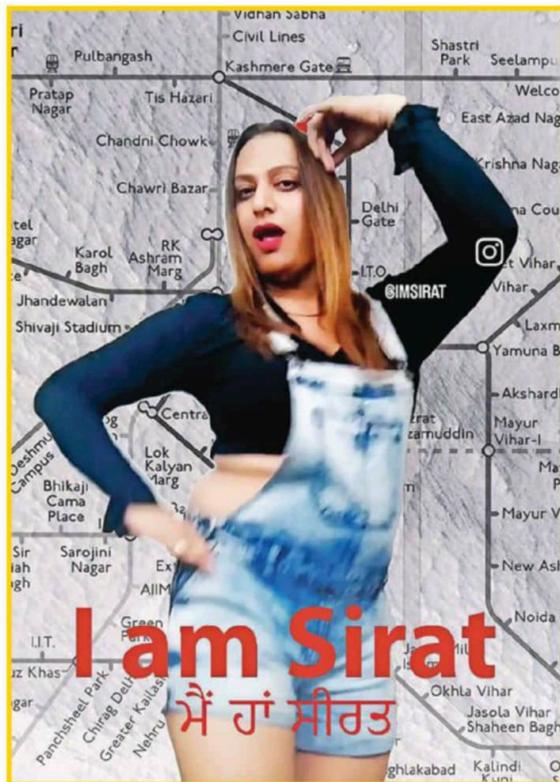
Deepa Mehta's latest, *I am Sirat*, is about a transwoman battling dual identity. It is a bold story tenderly told

BY REYA MEHROTRA

Whether it is her elements trilogy or her last film, *Funny Boy*, Oscar-nominated filmmaker Deepa Mehta is not scared of touching the untouchable. The more provocative her subject, the more compassionate her treatment. The forbidden love of two women, the violence of a gang rape, the devastating consequences of partition—her stories are of hope in the midst of suffering, of perseverance in the face of pain. Her latest, *I am Sirat*, is no different. The story of a trans woman who lives a dual life, *I am Sirat* captures the conflict in Sirat's mind, while not letting go of her joy and hunger for life. While the film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2023, it is being screened in India for the first time.

Mehta first met Sirat four years ago, during the filming of an episode of her drama series *Leila*, in which Sirat plays a transman. "I found her to be very daring and honest during the workshops," says Mehta. "She was eager to learn. We kept in touch. Last year when we spoke, she called me 'ma' and asked me to make a film on her."

Mehta says the central battle in Sirat's life—between duty and self-determination—is one we are all, in some form or the other, familiar with. Sirat lives a double life in the chaotic streets of Delhi's Tilak Nagar: as her mother's son Aman when at home, but as the woman she is at heart while at her government job or while partying with her friends. Belonging to a Sikh family, she covers her head to hide her long hair from her mother, who refuses



UNABASHEDLY ME
A poster from *I am Sirat*; (right) Mehta with Sirat at the Toronto International Film Festival

to accept her identity as Sirat. On her way to work, she stops at her one-room rented home where she transforms into Sirat—padding her bosom with double bras, letting her hair loose, applying makeup, and shooting a quick reel on Instagram—before stepping out.

It is the reels which inspired Mehta to let go of the film's creative control. As a result, the entire documentary is shot using phones, often through Sirat's own reels, which Mehta felt, gave Sirat the freedom to be herself. "The idea to shoot on cellphones—Sirat shooting her narrative arc vertically and me filming her horizontally while she did so—was based on pure logic," Mehta tells THE WEEK. "To have a whole film crew would have been invasive of Sirat's privacy and might have inhibited her."

As the world stifles her with its strict social mores, Sirat finds freedom in her rented home, where she dresses up, dances and sings to herself. She cries when she receives her transgender identity card after running from pillar to post for it. "I feel like I have been reborn," she says, proudly displaying it.

Just like how Sirat uses Instagram reels to express her feelings, Mehta uses songs in the film. "Music through Insta reels plays an integral role in Sirat's life," she says. "She uses the lyrics to express the joy, pain and ambiguity of her life." The film ends with Sirat, with her eyes shining with hope, letting her hair down as she croons Faiz Ahmad Faiz's 'Hum Dekhengey'. In doing so, she sheds her identity as Aman and becomes whole as Sirat. "Sirat had asked me what song for me,

conveyed hope in adverse circumstances. I told her it was 'Hum Dekhenge'. She proceeded to learn and use it," says Mehta.

Like in her other movies, Mehta brings out the universal through the specific, commenting on the sad state of transgender persons in the country who remain marginalised and are forced into begging and prostitution. "I am attracted

to subjects that make me curious," says Mehta. "When I made *Fire* (1996), it was not about the LGBTQ community or of two women falling in love, but about the emotional arc becoming physical and who judges it, where do misogyny and patriarchy stand in it? Self-determination in women is always interpreted as selfishness. And so, coming back with *Sirat*'s story was like complet-

ing a full circle."

When Mehta reunited with Nandita Das (one of the protagonists of *Fire*) at the 15th edition of the Kashish Pride Film Festival recently in Mumbai, they spoke about the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation in cinema. "*Fire* sparked a crucial conversation about LGBTQ+ issues at a time when such dialogue was virtually non-existent," said Das. "Revisiting this journey was profoundly moving. It reminded me of the power of cinema in driving social change and the importance of continuing this advocacy."

According to Mehta, freedom of expression is one of the most vital tools we have as a society. It is essential for growth. But like anything worth fighting for, it has its challenges. Mehta is now working on a biographical film based on

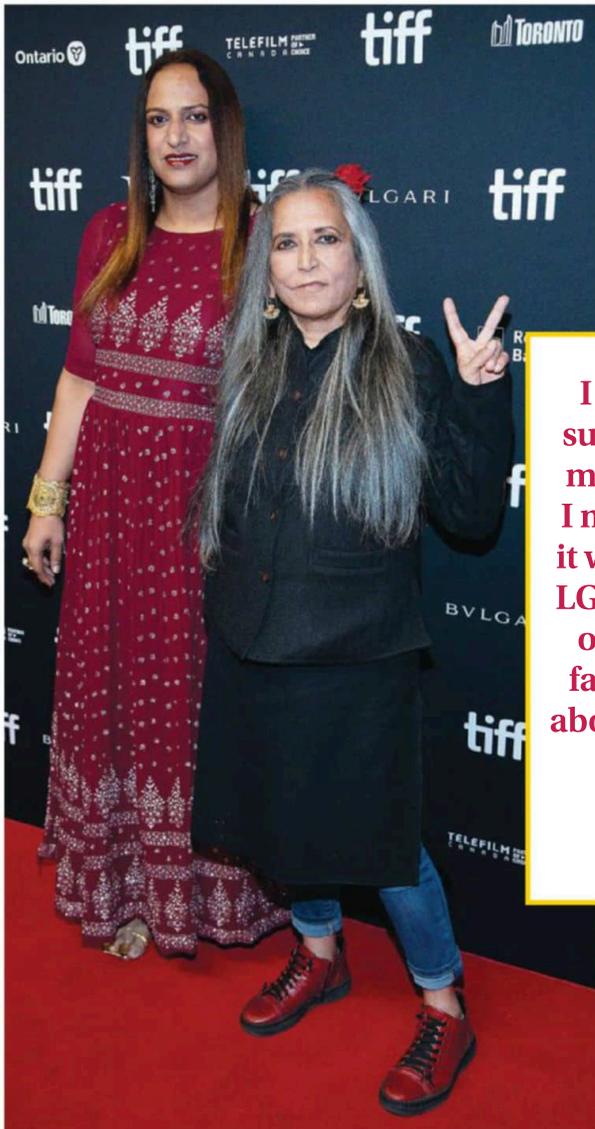
Forgiveness, a memoir by Mark Sakamoto, and will then focus on *Troilokya*, about an Indian woman known to be a serial killer.

Her film *Funny Boy* (2020), a love story set amidst political tensions in Sri Lanka, became a Netflix hit in other countries, but not in India. Even while dealing with themes like love and longing, she stands by what Toni Morrison once said, that "all art is political", and what is political today may not have been 10 years ago. Even in that, perhaps, there is hope.

In a world that is fast changing, perhaps the unacceptable—like a trans woman finding joy in something the rest of us take for granted: her identity—will become accepted. Until then, there will always be those like Mehta to tell their stories. ●

I am attracted to subjects that make me curious. When I made *Fire* (1996), it was not about the LGBTQ community or of two women falling in love, but about the emotional arc becoming physical....

—Deepa Mehta



GETTY IMAGES

Sweet on cinema

If anyone can breach the chasm between chef and actor, it is Ranveer Brar

BY POOJA BIRAIJA JAISWAL

Over a plate of Lucknowi nihari (slow cooked meat in a blend of spices), yakhni pulao and quiwami sewai for dessert, Rajveer, a dishy chef at a Goan restaurant, woos singer Manzu. As the aroma of the simmering meat fills the room, love blossoms between the two men, ultimately culminating in a happily-ever-after. The story of Rajveer and Manzu is one of the six episodes of *Modern Love Mumbai* (2022), directed by Hansal Mehta.

It is easy for Chef Ranveer Brar, who plays Rajveer, to nail the role; he has a lifetime of practice in using food as a medium to convey love, lust and longing. The kitchen, after all, is his home turf. This was Brar's baptism into the world of acting, but in many ways it is difficult to tell where Brar the chef ends and Brar the actor begins, because in real life, too, Brar cooks as if he is in a rom-com.

When Brar is in his element—whether it is as the judge of *MasterChef India* or as the host of his YouTube channel (which has over seven million subscribers)—he is at his most emotive. From smiles to smirks, sarcasm to satire, his expressions are on overdrive. When

Mehta was asked why he chose Brar as his protagonist, the director said he could see an actor in him. He referred to the chef's YouTube series "where you can see there is a certain romance that is going on between him and his food".

Brar, as Manzu's lover, was charmingly handsome with his lean, six-foot frame and a high-voltage smile. He sailed through the role without any of the jitters of a first-time actor. And now he has been bitten by the acting bug, he is looking forward to the release of *The Buckingham Murders*, with Kareena Kapoor Khan, and the Amazon Prime reality show, *Ma Ka Sum*, in which a teenage math genius is on a quest to create an algorithm to find the "perfect match" for his vivacious single mother.

Not that *Modern Love Mumbai* was the first time Brar was offered a role. He has said that he has been offered the same role several times—that of

a villain in south Indian films. Now, he does not want to dabble, but dive into the world of cinema, even as he is acutely aware that the journey from a "chef-who-turned-actor" and "the-actor-who-was-once-a-chef" is going to be a long and trying one.

A Punjabi kid hailing from Lucknow, Brar cooked his way up from a hotel management graduate to the youngest executive chef at an Indian five-star at 25. Soon, he became one of the most popular travel and food show hosts, and handled banquets at the Rashtrapati Bhavan and the prime minister's residence. He launched his restaurants in the US, judged *MasterChef India*, and got rated as the second-highest earning celebrity chef on the *Forbes India* 2019 list. There have been dead-ends and disappointments, including his Brooklyn restaurant that failed to perform. But Brar remains upbeat; life, after all, cannot always be a cakewalk. His

AMEY MANSABDAR





WHAT'S COOKING?

Ranveer Brar at his kitchen studio; (right) a still from *Modern Love Mumbai*



recently opened restaurant in Dubai, Kashkan, became popular when his video of the dal served there went viral. The '24-carat gold-infused tadka dal' is touted to be the most expensive dal in the world, reportedly priced at ₹1,300 a plate.

Now, it is time to shift courses: from chef to businessman and actor, treading the path of others before him that he looks up to, like Sanjeev Kapoor and Vikas Khanna. "I have realised that acting makes me richer," says Brar. "Doing this has given me the confidence that if a character that I play adds something to my life, then I should be trying to do more with this medium."

Brar, in person, takes you by surprise. If anyone has seen him cook on live TV or on his channel, they will be charmed by his wit, humour and that signature smile. In person, however, he is more subdued and no-nonsense, a stickler for perfec-

tion. We are in his studio where he shoots his YouTube videos. The space is chock-a-block with his kitchenware—cast-iron pots, spatulas, ceramic crockery and chopping boards. Brar appears to be a pro, as he suggests camera angles, lighting and how to frame the photos. As the camera comes on, he is in his element, and I instantly recall his umpteen shows that I have watched. I see the humourist who juggles sarcasm with self-deprecation, and takes as many potshots at himself as at anyone else. Maybe it is this versatility that feeds the actor inside him.

Not that he is giving up his love for yakhni pulao. "I'm still a chef at

It is difficult to tell where Ranveer Brar the chef ends and Ranveer Brar the actor begins, because in real life, too, Brar cooks as if he is in a rom-com.

heart," he says. "Cooking has gotten me this far and I will never forget my roots." Apart from pan-Indian, he has dabbled in Afghan, African, Hawaiian, Moroccan, Oriental, Swiss, Swedish, Turkish and Vietnamese. But does he cook at home? "Nope. My son Ishaan doesn't like my cooking," he says. "He likes my wife's." Does he want his son to follow in his footsteps as a modern celebrity chef, with that rare amalgam of culinary, marketing, and business skills, and now acting talent? "No," he says with a smile. "Let him find his own journey." Brar, on his part, might have found himself in the kitchen, but he wishes to grow on set. 🍳



GOOD OVER EVIL

A scene from *Matilda The Musical*

a girl. They cannot fathom her affinity towards Bronte, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Eyre, all of who she finds more appealing than television. While that's the situation at home, her school is no better, run by the appalling, huge and grim Miss Trunchbull (James Wolstenholme), a hideous disciplinarian, who hates children, calls them maggots, grabs them by their pigtailed and whirl them around their heads. Matilda, played by Donna Craig, seeks refuge in Miss Honey (Lashana Lynch)—a gentler and loving teacher at the school—who's delighted to learn of Matilda's talent and abilities and nurtures her, in the face of parents who are uninterested.

The story is a lesson in the victory of good over evil, of faith over self-doubt, of love over hate, shown beautifully over the course of two-and-a-half hours, as Matilda liberates the school from Trunchbull's tyranny and her ignorant parents hand her over under Miss Honey's care forever. The performance pulls one in, especially Matilda's own talent for composition and storytelling, each time she starts inventing a story at the library which she frequents. Craig has pulled it off brilliantly as she essays the lead girl's mannerisms. This is accentuated further by fantastic sound and music that surrounds the audience inside the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre's (NMACC) The Grand Theatre and the stagecraft that is finely managed across seamlessly changing sets.

One thing I felt could have added to the experience was to have Trunchbull seem more menacing than she was in the character played by Emma Thompson. Every experience was beautifully captured for the stage. The lights, especially when they hit the eyes, was a put off, but at other times they added to the drama. At times I felt the accent was not clear enough for me to understand what was being said. Music is all-encompassing and inspiring with its scores, and a multitude of styles. My personal favourites were 'Revolting Children,' and 'When I Grow Up,' both hilariously lyrical. Everything was brilliant and worth gaping at—from the music to the costumes and set design.

Penned by the inimitable Dennis Kelly with original music and lyrics by comedian-songsmith Tim Minchin, *Matilda The Musical*, which plays till June 2 at NMACC, is a total must watch. Is it better than the book? Well, if the book led you to imagine Matilda's world, the play is the real manifestation of that imagination. 📖

Lessons from music

Matilda The Musical is a total must watch

BY POOJA BIRAIJA JAISWAL

Never before has the story of the fight against injustice—of free-spirited rebellion against bullying and shaming—been so impactful and poignant than when told by a young and spunky six-year-old girl who loves books.

Having read *Matilda*—the 1988 children's novel by British author Roald Dahl—at an early age, I was always fascinated and inspired by Matilda, a smart but lonely school girl with secret *X-Men*-type superpowers, the clarity of her thought and the gumption to stand up to authority. So, watching *Matilda The Musical*, put together by The Royal Shakespeare Company, was a moving, nostalgic and a memorable experience.

The play opens with the famously enchanting number—'My Mummy Says I'm a Miracle'—where pampered and happy children prance about joyfully at a birthday party, standing out starkly against the dark and obnoxious ma and pa of the story's titular and pint-sized lead, Matilda, who loathe her for being born



Nicola Coughlan
as Penelope
Featherington

Lady Whistledown's back

The new season of *Bridgerton* could have been a reflection of reality, rather than an escape from it

BY ANJULY MATHAI

Get your satin slippers ready, ladies. For the ton is back with the season's first dances. The first part of *Bridgerton* season 3 is out, and it is as delectable as ever, immersing us once more into the world of stays and petticoats, feathered hats and powdered wigs, tulle and topaz, men with titles and women setting their caps at them.

The show has often been called a floozy fantasy, popcorn escapism and distraction from the real world, perhaps not entirely without reason. After all, who wants to read about geopolitics or global warming when you can instead listen to Lady Whistledown's verdict on

the viscount's new waistcoat. Yet *Bridgerton*, especially season 3, has such potential to be more—not to be a distraction from reality, but rather a reflection of it. Because it has at its heart not a heroine who is picture perfect.

Penelope Featherington (played by a brilliant Nicola Coughlan), on the other hand, is awkward, clumsy and overweight. She is the wallflower who literally stays near the wall at every ball or gathering of the ton, the spinster decidedly 'on the shelf' after two seasons out. In other words, she is the embodiment of each of our deepest fears. Despite our circumstances—whatever they might be—there is a Penelope in each of us. It is

the voice in us that is constantly striving for contentment, yet always reaching for more.

That is why season 3 of *Bridgerton* has such unexploited potential. It could have gone so much further than just cotton-candy romance. Penelope's pain could have been harvested into something purer. So many themes that we grapple with today—body shaming, anxiety, social ostracisation, and the pressure to belong—could have been explored more thoroughly. Penelope could have been a metaphor for our times. *Bridgerton's* bow has been pulled back just enough for the arrow to hit a happy ending. Yet, if it had been pulled back just a little fur-

ther, the arrow might have travelled beyond, to somewhere far more fulfilling.

Some might say that *Bridgerton* would not be *Bridgerton* without its snob value. It is a world where women do nothing but search for husbands and learn embroidery (in order to find a husband), and men do nothing but go pheasant hunting, gamble, and discuss their 'conquests' over whist and whiskey at the gentleman's club. But must all that forced laziness translate into side plots that really lead nowhere? Like the love triangle between Francesca Bridgerton, Lord Samadani and the Earl of Kilmartin; or Benedict Bridgerton's illicit affair with Lady Tilley Arnold. Even the sex scenes, like Kate and Anthony's bedroom romp or Colin's threesome, are somewhat gratuitous. Sex for sex's sake often lacks sex appeal.

And it is not like there is no precedent for a more layered exploration of themes in *Bridgerton*. The *Bridgerton* prequel *Queen Charlotte*—that dealt with King George's deteriorating mental illness—was a masterpiece in nuanced story-telling. It took the topic of mental health and spun it into gold, never letting the solemnness of the subject take away from its levity. All *Queen Charlotte* lacked was a happily-ever-after, and Penelope's story made leeway for that; if only it also had space to air out her pain and her pathos. In fact, the pain would only have heightened the joy in the end. Suffering has a way of making life—and regency romances—sweeter. ❶



Cannes can do

Never mind that India is witnessing a massive general election, perhaps one of the dirtiest it has ever witnessed. The month of May belongs to escapism. May belongs to vacations. And May certainly belongs to the gorgeous red carpets of the Met Gala in New York and the Cannes Film Festival in the south of France.

To be honest, the fashion at Cannes has never excited me. It is possibly the only film festival that believes in red-carpet fashion. Its massive rug trails down to almost half the Croisette avenue of the tiny seaside town where the festival takes place every year. Perhaps this is the way of the chief sponsor, L'Oréal, to ensure the focus is on glamour and glamorous hair-styles. Regardless, Cannes is almost always known for who wore what more than the films showcased here.

India has almost always had a lousy showcase on the red carpet here. Aishwarya Rai Bachchan arrived here first for a Devdas promotion wearing a yellow Neeta Lulla sari that perhaps should have been reserved for a friend's engagement ceremony instead. Neither Vidya Balan nor Sabyasachi Mukherjee can live down the actor's attempts at the red carpet at Cannes; so unfortunate was her styling. So many Indian actors feel obliged to wear saris, but it is time we accept that if we keep it traditional it looks out of place and too 'exotic' (I despise that word). Contemporary versions of the sari are such a hit and miss, either they may be inventive and chic or then just blah.

The jury, for example, is still out on Alia Bhatt's Sabyasachi sari with an elongated trail that she wore at the Met Gala two weeks ago. Pretty, but not clever enough.

Poor Aishwarya was done dirty by her stylists and designers. Both her outings were frightful. Her two

gowns were designed by well-known couturiers Falguni & Shane Peacock, whose love for the outlandish defy good fashion. Both gowns looked like they were DIY fancy dress costumes, not a great look for India's original beauty ambassador abroad.

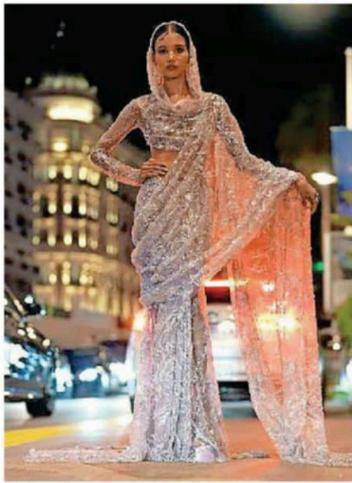
Ironically, the one who genuinely did do DIY fashion was the show-stopper at Cannes. I hadn't heard of Nancy Tyagi before this, but what can I say, I'm a fan. Tyagi is a young influencer from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh who has scored over a million subscribers on YouTube by making her own clothes inspired by famous fashion designers.

She looked gorgeous the first time her pictures and interviews were shared. She spoke in Hindi, saying she had made her own gown, a pink fluffy fun-fest, in 30 days using 1,000 metres of fabric. The next day, she bettered herself. She wore a contemporary sari with a hood, and even made a video of how she bought the fabric, cut and stitched it together.

Never mind the stars, Nancy Tyagi is such a hero for so many Indians. A young enterprising girl who found her fame using her hands and her inventiveness. Nothing about her clothes spell 'fashion' as we know it. Nothing is handmade, using

craft or natural fabrics. It is commercial embroidered cloth sold in bales. All of India is filled with these fabric stores for millions of women who ape "Bollywood" styles and remake copies.

But Tyagi is that girl who made it among the Bollywood types and shone. She stands for an India that thrives and survives with its hustle, with its own strong and loud voice. There is no opposition, they say. But India's people are the opposition. Like Nancy, the heroine of her own destiny, who came from the masses and stole the film festival from the film stars.



Nancy Tyagi at Cannes



Nancy, how about Kanhaiya?

I have been following Nancy Tyagi on Instagram for over a year. Her video showed up on my feed, and I was immediately fascinated by the thin brown girl with the erect stance, striding purposefully through the dust and grime of what looked like a fabric market in north Delhi, with a tote bag slung over one delicate shoulder. Sitting in Bengaluru, I was immediately taken back to the time when a younger me had braved the heat and dust of a similar market with minimum budget, maximum hope, a celebrity outfit in my heart and a hunter's hungry glint in my eye.

Nancy conferred with a succession of pudgy shopkeepers, made her selection, hailed a cycle-rickshaw, and came home with bales of red velvet and satin inside her tote. Using an old-school hand-operated sewing machine very similar to my mother's, and a brass tailor's scissors, she stitched herself an outfit exactly like the one Amrita Rao wears in the classic 'Gori Gori' dance number from *Main Hoon Na* (2004). As she modelled the outfit,



pouting and pirouetting, I was utterly hooked. Last week, Nancy, her IG following now swollen to over 10 lakh, graced the red carpet at Cannes in two stunning self-made ensembles, a dramatic pouffy, pale pink gown and a diaphanous, glittering mauve sari and cowl.

Sonam Kapoor, a Cannes veteran and a fashionista in her own right, gushed over Nancy's second outfit and tweeted to Nancy, "Make me something, Nancy Tyagi." Sonam may have to get in line though, as Nancy is blowing up big right now. It is a Cinderella story of the best kind, with an impoverished young girl, a gorgeous gown and a fancy ball at the heart of the plot, except this young girl is her own fairy godmother and her own Prince Charming.

In today's uncertain world, with rampant unemployment and crumbling institutions, being one's own godmother, significant other, and support system is emerging as the surest (if not sole) way to success, especially if one is born without a silver spoon in their mouth—you know, in the sort of family that eats with their fingers, which is to say, most of us. This 'Do It Yourself' route of success calls for an incredible amount of focus, determination, hard work, homework and stamina. And while I am fairly certain that Nancy is not actively looking for a Prince Charming, thank you very much, the interfering Indian auntie and indefatigable romantic in me cannot help recommending that she check out the IG page of a remarkably intelligent and charming young man who seems to be in possession of



all these qualities, and who (just like her) has a million plus followers—one Kanhaiya Kumar, originally from Begusarai and JNU, and currently hoping to be a member of Parliament from North East Delhi.

Now I know THE WEEK's pages are not Karan Johar's couch of

manifestation, but Zerodha's Nikhil Kamath's recent rant notwithstanding ('I'm not going to ruin 18-20 years of my life babysitting. What if the child says 'scr** you' at 18 and leaves anyway') our country urgently needs clean, talented self-made people to get together ideologically at least, if not romantically.

Of course, romantically would be better (no couple in India is as popular as Virat-Anushka—stable, focussed, high achievers who inspire young people to be the best they can be.)

I feel I am starting to sound dangerously Hitleresque with this dream of creating a master-race of self-made super-achievers, so I will now desist. Have a great election, Kanhaiya. (And maybe order a spiffy bespoke kurta from Nancy to wear on counting day?)

Nancy Tyagi and Kanhaiya Kumar



GETTY IMAGES

A new journey

Actor **Yami Gautam** and her filmmaker husband **Aditya Dhar**, recently announced the birth of their first child, Vedavid, on May 10. The couple, who worked together on films like *Article 370* and *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, got married at a private ceremony in Himachal Pradesh in 2021. "As we embark on this beautiful journey of parenthood, we eagerly anticipate the bright future that awaits our son," they shared on Instagram. "With every milestone he achieves, we are filled with the hope and belief that he will grow to become a beacon of pride for our entire family as well as our beloved nation."



AFP

Equine extravaganza

The makers of the third instalment of the *Welcome to the Jungle* franchise, *Welcome to the Jungle*, are doing everything possible to make a splash in the market. Apparently, they hired 200 horses for an action sequence



The 'choo'sen

Jimmy Choo has named Jaipur's Princess **Gauravi Kumari** as its India ambassador. "I am honoured to be joining the Jimmy Choo family as an ambassador for the house," the young fashionista shared on Instagram. "Jimmy Choo is synonymous with exceptional craftsmanship and glamour. I have always loved wearing Jimmy Choo." This isn't the princess's first brush with luxury. Earlier this year, she had attended the Bulgari Gala dinner in Mumbai. She has also been sighted at a few events by Dior and Ralph Lauren.

GETTY IMAGES



The cost of perfection

Demi Moore has done action, romance and comedy. And now she is doing gore. Her latest film, *The Substance*, debuted at Cannes and received a 13-minute ovation. The horror film is no easy watch, though. *The Substance* is about a new product that promises to transform people into the best version of themselves. But an offer like that always comes at a price. What's the price? You'll have to watch the film—directed by French filmmaker Coralie Fargeat and co-starring Dennis Quaid and Margaret Qualley—to find out.



AP

which was shot over seven days. The film, starring **Akshay Kumar** in the lead, boasts an enviable ensemble cast that includes Suniel Shetty, Paresh Rawal, Arshad Warsi, Disha Patani, Raveena Tandon, Lara Dutta and Jacqueline Fernandez. And it looks like they had fun 'horsing around' on the huge 10-acre set in Mumbai's Film City.

COMPILED BY ANJULY MATHAI



Now some political vocabulary

Since this column is slated to appear ahead of June 4 when the counting of votes takes place, and given my wholly inflated reputation as one excessively fond of obscure words, I thought I would combine the two and share with readers terms that might enhance their political vocabulary in the present climate.

These elections have seen a large number of empleomaniacs—people with a mania for holding public office—contesting at the hustings. Anyone who willingly subjects themselves to the strain of fund-raising, campaigning in the summer heat for 16 to 18 hours a day and making repetitive speeches to voters for weeks on end, may well be considered a maniac anyway. But empleomania (borrowed from a Spanish word, which is a combination of *empleo* (employment or public office) and *mania*) is a malady that afflicts only those truly obsessive about holding political power. (We have quite a few of those in India, of course).

Several of these politicians are, though they usually don't know it, throttlebottoms. The term, which refers to particularly inept and futile persons in public office, comes from the name Alexander Throttlebottom, a character invented by George Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind for the 1931 musical 'Of Thee I Sing'. It is more popular in the US than elsewhere in the English-speaking world, but has a deliciously apt sound to it.

While throttlebottoms are usually an innocuous lot of inept politicians, worse still are politicasters, petty or contemptible politicians who are unstatesmanlike practitioners of politics. As the suffix -aster indicates, this is even more of an insult; in English use—aster is added to words to describe people who are in some way inferior, worthless, or not genuine, and comes from Latin, in which language it means 'only having a partial resemblance'. (In addition to politicaster, we find this suffix used to refer to inferior poets (poetaster), doctors (medicaster), and philosophers (philosophaster). India has its own special breed of journalistasters!)

Another American term we could usefully have borrowed in India is highbinder, meaning a corrupt

or scheming politician who engages in fraudulent or shady activities. Highbinder was first used in English at the beginning of the 19th century, as the name of a particularly unruly gang. By the 1870s the word was used across the US to refer to members of Chinese gangs and secret societies. Inevitably, it soon began to be used to describe unscrupulous politicians. There is, as we all know, no shortage of highbinders contesting our present elections!

If elected to high office, many might well prove guilty of misprision, defined as misconduct or maladministration by a public official, in particular the neglect or wrong performance of official duty. Just as, in popular folklore, Eskimos (or more correctly, the Inuit and Yupik-speaking people) are purported to have hundreds of words for snow (which in fact they don't), and the English are believed to have hundreds of words for being drunk (which in fact they do), one could well argue that Indians should have a plethora of words for political malfeasance. Since we don't have as many as we need, we could make greater use of "misprision".

And finally, one word to describe the misrule of the last 10 years, which has become all the more evident in the inflammatory rhetoric we have been hearing in this campaign? It is kakistocracy, a form of government in which the least qualified or most unprincipled individuals are in power. I first suggested years ago in print that, in recent years, it has seemed that the world's largest democracy has in fact degenerated into a kakistocracy, but the term didn't quite catch on. Derived from ancient Greek—the speakers of which were pioneers of democratic practice and knew a thing or two about good governance, or the lack thereof—a "kakistocracy" is a government by the worst elements in society. The word comes from the Greek "kakistos", the superlative form of the word "kakos", meaning "bad". It hasn't been used much in India, despite us undergoing the rule of people who declare they want to replace Mahatma Gandhi's statues with Godse's, and speak dehumanisingly of our Muslim fellow-citizens. Maybe it is time we began to use the term!