

Freedom is in Peril. Defend it with all your might Jawaharlal Nehru

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NATION

STATES 360°

In focus this week: Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh

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POLITICS

WHO WILL BE THE NEXT BJP CHIEF?

...and other such questions that are blowin' in the wind

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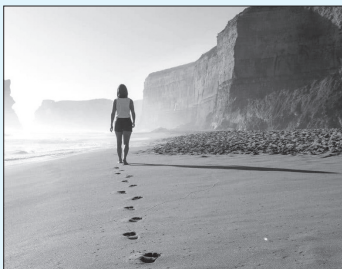


LIFESTYLE

WAKING UP TO SLOW LIVING

Why more and more young people are opting out of the rat race

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Herjinder

The Haryana assembly election results have perplexed psephologists, political analysts, journalists, YouTubers and the public alike. Not only because they went against all predictions and perceptions but also because the fairness of the process is in question. When the Congress voiced its apprehensions over the slow counting of votes in a letter to the Election Commission, it was told off as a graceless loser, a reply that seemed both partisan and politically coloured.

Misgivings about our electronic voting system (EVS)—of which the EVM (electronic voting machine), or the voting unit where we press the button, is just one component—have been expressed quite regularly over the past few years. The people who have taken the trouble to scrutinise the system, have researched the experience of other countries and tried to bring to our notice why these countries have rejected the EVS have been brushed aside as conspiracy theorists. Even in the face of compelling evidence. And not even just by mainstream media, which is, in effect, a propaganda arm of the government. (Maybe a little less so after Lok Sabha 2024).

The Supreme Court did endeavour to add a layer of security by ordering the use of VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail) machines, but it came to naught when the ECI refused to count the VVPAT slips and match them with the count on the EVMs.

Countries like the US, Germany and Netherlands have considered and then banned the Electronic Voting System for 'lack of transparency and verifiability by ordinary citizens' to paraphrase the 3 March 2009 verdict of the German federal constitutional court Bundesverfassungsgericht.

If the ECI cares to redeem its reputation as a neutral referee of elections, the Haryana election results present a golden opportunity to open up the process to a thorough independent audit. Haryana being a small state with just 90 seats, it wouldn't take much time, manpower or money to conduct a post-poll audit. The EC may even consider counting the slips from the 48 seats where the BJP won and the 37 seats bagged by the Congress. If the counting is conducted quickly and transparently—in the presence of experts, representatives of political parties and civil society—it may put to rest past, present and future doubts.

While there may be no legal mandate to count the slips, there is certainly a moral mandate. With the election commissioners being appointed 'lawfully' by the ruling party, the ECI's credibility is bound to remain suspect even when it tries to ensure a fair election. Post-election audits should, in fact, be made mandatory, as there are recurrent grievances about electoral rolls and deletion of voters' names.

The role of Returning Officers, usually dis-

If the ECI cares to redeem its reputation as a neutral referee, the Haryana election results present a golden opportunity to open up the process to a transparent audit



Haryana assembly election: Vote counting in Rohtak, 8 October 2024

trict magistrates, and polling personnel, largely government employees, is unclear. There is little or no transparency on how polling dates and the number of polling phases are determined. There are valid questions about the manufacture, storage, maintenance and transportation of the EVM machines. (The ruling party's office bearers have been known to hold posts as directors in the public sector units manufacturing the machines.)

All this and more needs to be addressed by the ECI to restore its own credibility and the electorate's trust in the system. Haryana can easily be a test case with no harm done, even if the counting takes a month. It is in the Election Commission's own interest to take

the initiative so that the bluff of manipulation is called once and for all.

By the evening of 8 October, reports began to trickle in that in every instance where a recount was conducted, the BJP candidates emerged victorious

While much of the post-election analysis of the results has focused on the BJP's methodical micro-management, voter outreach strategies and other logistical manoeuvres, the somewhat opaque role played by the Election Commission during this crucial period deserves closer scrutiny.

On the morning of counting day (8 October), initial trends showed the Congress leading in 72 out of the 90 seats in Haryana. However, as the hours passed, this lead began to shrink, and soon it appeared as though the tide had completely turned. Mysteriously, the Election

Commission's website froze, leaving everyone in the dark with no updates for nearly two hours. By that point, only two rounds of counting had been completed. Even after the site resumed functioning, updates trickled in at a frustratingly slow pace.

These delays set off alarm bells. In his letter to the EC, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh wrote, 'You can already see examples of this playing out on social media. Our concern is that such narratives can be exploited by malevolent actors to influence ongoing processes where counting is still taking place, particularly in most of the counting centres.'

If the hope was that the Election Commission would clear the air with a transparent response, that hope was soon dashed. The Commission dismissed the Congress's concerns as 'ill-founded'. It went on to state, 'The Commission unequivocally rejects your attempt to surreptitiously give credence to irresponsible, unfounded and uncorroborated malafide narratives'.

This response flew in the face of the Commission's mandate to maintain neutrality. The delay in updates on the website had been noticed not only by the political parties concerned but also by the media. In the past, it was common for media reporters, particularly from news channels, to be stationed at counting centres. Back then, the Commission's website often lagged behind TV channels, which reflected election trends long before they appeared online. However, with the introduction of real-time updates, the Election Commission had become a more reliable source of information, prompting media outlets to reduce their presence at counting centres.

The delayed updates prompted several panellists on online discussions and TV channels to raise concerns that the delays and inconsistencies were feeding into a larger, potentially damaging narrative that could reshape public perception.

By the evening of 8 October, reports began to emerge suggesting that in every instance where a recount was conducted, the BJP candidates emerged victorious. Several losing candidates wondered how EVMs were still charged at 99 per cent after the whole day, implying that either a new EVM had been brought in or the existing EVM had been tampered with. Sound familiar?

After the Lok Sabha election, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) conducted a detailed analysis of the election data and uncovered significant discrepancies. In 362 parliamentary constituencies, a staggering 5,54,598 more votes were counted than had been cast. In 176 constituencies, 35,093 less votes were counted than the number of votes polled. Although the ADR did not explicitly claim that these discrepancies impacted the election results, they were certainly alarming.

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STATES 360°



MAHARASHTRA

Revdi season in Maharashtra and going gaga over RaGa

Navin Kumar

The BJP will make much of its recent election victory in Haryana. Even though the conduct of a partisan Election Commission of India (ECI) has again been called into question, and not just by the Congress party that everyone expected will romp home.

In Maharashtra, for which the same ECI has not even announced election dates yet—presumably to give the BJP ample time to dangle all its election-time carrots—the polls are due in November, when the term of the current assembly comes to an end. The stakes are high in this state, where an illegitimate Mahayuti coalition government is doing its damndest to cling to power.

The BJP will obviously hope to carry the momentum of a dubious Haryana win into Maharashtra. The current ad blitz by the state government, the Ladki Bahin Yojana cash transfer to women and other such welfarist doles, the inauguration of projects like the new metro lines in Mumbai and Pune are all part of the last-ditch attempt to appease the state's voters.

On the other hand, this will be the first election in the state's electoral history when Sharad Pawar and Uddhav Thackeray will be on the same side, campaigning together. There is strong sympathy for them, after the shenanigans of the BJP to dislodge the MVA government by engineering splits in the Shiv Sena and the NCP. The Maratha-Dalit-minority votes, comprising roughly half the electorate in the state; nativist sentiment favouring the Marathi *manoo*s; and the antipathy in Mumbai for Adani and his political benefactors are some of the other factors that will hobble the BJP in the state. So, the dynamics of Haryana and Maharashtra are very different.

The MVA (Maha Vikas Aghadi) coalition has strong OBC leaders like Jitendra Awhad, Vijay Wadetiwar and Amol Kolhe, and the Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP (Sharad Pawar) are strong cadre-based parties. Also working in favour of the MVA is a Maratha-Muslim-Dalit-Kunbi consolidation, besides the seething resentment in rural Maharashtra over the worsening agriculture crisis, and a widespread feeling among the people that the state's interests are being

compromised by the so-called 'double-engine' sarkar.

Some commentators believe that Haryana will hurt the morale and standing of the Congress in the MVA, where it might have expected to contest the largest number of seats. The party's confidence was high, having bagged 13 Lok Sabha seats earlier this year. Spirits in the MVA have risen, however, after Uddhav Thackeray went on record to say he would accept any chief ministerial candidate



Inauguration of projects like the new metro lines in Mumbai and Pune are all part of the last-ditch attempt to appease the state's voters



proposed by the Congress and Sharad Pawar; that the election in the state this time was not about him returning as chief minister but an existential battle to save the state and defeat the BJP and its allies.

Several leaders from the ruling coalition are already making a beeline to join the MVA, and not all of them are NCP (Ajit Pawar) MLAs either. Even BJP leaders close to Devendra Fadnavis like Harshvardhan Patil, Abhijeet Patil and Ramesh Kadam recently joined Sharad Pawar's NCP. Harshvardhan Patil revealed that in the last Lok Sabha elections, he had (secretly) helped Supriya Sule defeat Ajit Pawar's spouse Sunetra Pawar in Baramati. Ramraje Naik Nimbalkar and Dipak Chavan from the Ajit Pawar faction are returning to Sharad Pawar while Uddhav has inducted Deepesh Mhatre, a leader close to Eknath Shinde, back into SS (UBT).

With the ECI notification still awaited, the momentum seems to favour the MVA but it can ill-afford to be complacent till a probable victory is sealed.

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Police encounters as (unstated) state policy

Rashme Sehgal

The surge of police encounters in Uttar Pradesh is borne out by a report in the *Times of India* (3 October 2024), which claimed that Gautam Buddh Nagar in Noida alone had witnessed one encounter every three days over the past two years. In Noida and Greater Noida, 49 criminals were killed and 416 injured in 327 encounters. 938 criminals were held and 400 firearms and 94 knives recovered. Members of the ‘thak-thak’ gang (who allegedly specialise in breaking into parked vehicles and stealing stereos, radios and car accessories) figured on the list along with chain-snatchers, burglars and members of other, more notorious, gangs.

Police Commissioner Laxmi Singh said that the crackdowns increased after Yogi Adityanath took over as chief minister for the second term in 2022.

While the claim of an ‘*apradh mukt* Noida’ (crime-free Noida) is contentious and death for petty thieves questionable, the fact is that police in UP, as in other states, have embraced encounters as a legitimate instrument to show results. In a Facebook post at the end of September, Sulkhan Singh, a former Director General of Police (DGP), Uttar Pradesh, warned policemen who were staging fake encounters in the hope of receiving rewards and promotions that their ‘crimes’ could eventually catch up with them.

Singh recalled that criminal prosecution against policemen in Ghaziipur and Sitapur districts was launched as many as 22 and 25 years respectively after the encounter killings they had staged. The former DGP claimed that at least 250 policemen, most of them nearing retirement, were languishing in various prisons. Their pleas for bail were not entertained by even the high court. Among them, he pointed out, are the 45 policemen held guilty of a massacre in Pilibhit. There was a BJP government in the state then, and there is a BJP government in the state now. Senior officers who are pressurising subordinates to stage fake encounters would be long gone and they would have to face the music, Singh cautioned.

Even the infamous Brijbhushan Sharan Singh, former BJP MP and reviled director of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), had alleged in September that select ‘encounter specialists’ were busy killing relatively insignificant criminals in order to claim out-of-turn promotion.

Amitabh Thakur, an IPS officer who took voluntary retirement, provided a different perspective. He said police superintendents are routinely asked during review meetings how many encounters have been staged in their district and how many criminals killed.

If any SP reported a singular lack of killings, the next question would be: what was wrong with him? Most SPs would therefore go back and order their subordinates to stage some encounters before the next review meeting. Thakur confessed candidly, adding that the malady is an old one in the state.

Other IPS officers in UP have been equally vocal. Retired IPS officer S.R. Darapuri claims police encounters were rare when he was in service. Now, he says, “extrajudicial killings have become part of the state’s unstated policy”. He holds that a government resorts to encounter killings only when it fails to ensure law and order by legitimate means. UP minister Om Prakash Rajbhar defended these ‘incidents’, saying the police could surely not be expected to greet criminals with flowers.

The National Crime Records Bureau ‘Crime in India’ report for the year 2022 released in December 2023 recorded a staggering 65,743 cases of crimes against women (rape, murder, kidnapping, murder after rape and gang rape) in just one year in UP. The same year, Uttar Pradesh reported 3,491 murders and 15,368 cases of atrocities against SCs and STs registered with the police. Significantly, the numbers are much higher than they were in 2017 when Yogi Adityanath took over as chief minister. As dramatic footage of crimes recorded on CCTV cameras goes viral on social media, daylight robbery, chain-snatching, bike-thefts and even abductions continue unabated.

It is difficult to say if it’s a case of life imitating art or vice versa. Mainstream films have glorified extra-judicial killings and lionised encounter specialists. The public tends

Proving the accused guilty in court is seen as too cumbersome. Dispensing instant justice satisfies the blood-lust of people and helps politicians build a no-nonsense image



Aneet Bhati alias Jota, a sharpshooter of the Anil Dujana gang, injured in a police encounter in Greater Noida, July 2017

to see ‘instant justice’ as satisfactory proof of tough governance. Hindi films like *Ab Tak Chhappan*, *Company*, *Aan*, *Shootout at Lokhandwala*, *Shootout at Wadala* and *Garv* featured ‘encounter specialists’ as lead characters, even heroes. Regional films have not been lagged behind either, and such policemen are often regarded as celebrities.

Sachin Waze, a former ‘encounter specialist’ with the Mumbai police, echoed other officers who asserted that their targets were all ‘guilty criminals’.

“I didn’t do it for money. It was for fame, recognition and to serve the public. Every one of them deserved to go and they went,” said Waze in an interview to the *Guardian* in 2011.

Tough-talking filmi dialogue has been picked up by politicians. While UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath promised he’d help criminals meet Yamraj, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma encouraged police

to shoot criminals in the leg, which, he underscored, was allowed by the law. Too bad if some such bullets went astray and took the lives of the escapee.

In 2023, the Guwahati High Court was informed that 161 incidents of ‘police action’ had taken place across Assam in the previous 13 months, which left 51 dead and 139 injured. According to the Union home ministry, Assam recorded the third highest number of police encounter deaths in 2021–22.

On 23 September, Akshay Shinde, accused of sexually abusing two kindergartners in a Mumbai school, was killed while being transported in a prison van. Overlooking the police’s failure to arrest the two absconding trustees of the school, both chief minister Eknath Shinde and deputy chief minister Devendra Fadnavis tussled over credit for the encounter killing. Shiv Sena (Shinde) workers distributed sweets and burst crackers in Badlapur, where the school is located,

while BJP workers put up posters of Fadnavis brandishing a weapon, along with the slogan ‘Badla Pura’ (revenge completed).

The Supreme Court has mandated that every killing by the police be followed by both a departmental and a magisterial inquiry, to be communicated to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the encounter spot and post-mortem be recorded and both videos shared with the NHRC. Post-2014, however, the NHRC has been accepting the police version of encounters and returning video records to the state police, making it impossible for the victims’ relatives and human rights activists to access them.

NHRC’s credibility has taken a hit with the UN Human Rights Council questioning its track record and refusing to renew accreditation for two successive years. Even as the Government of India denounces the denial as ‘unfair’, it has made no difference to the composition and functioning of the NHRC, packed as it is with pro-government retired judges and police officers.

The Youth for Human Rights Documentation (YHRD) and 16 other organisations looked at 17 police encounter cases in UP and found that not a single case had been properly investigated. FIRs of encounter killings are filed by the police themselves, as the family members of the deceased (who are generally poor and from marginalised sections of the community) are way too intimidated to file a counter and challenge the details. Mangla Verma, a young lawyer with YHRD says, “When we examined police records, they were damning. It was quite obvious that the encounters were fake.”

Encounter killings, once endemic in Kashmir, Punjab, as well as supposedly anti-Naxalite operations in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra and West Bengal, have recently spread to Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Manipur. Paradoxically, even as encounter killings convey a false sense of safety, the rising crime graph adds to people’s sense of insecurity.

Proving the accused guilty in court is increasingly seen as too cumbersome and time-consuming. Dispensing instant justice satisfies the blood-lust of people and helps politicians build a no-nonsense image. Encounter killings successfully distract people into believing that swift elimination of criminals will make them safer. The evidence does not bear this out.

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav appeared to hit the nail on the head when he posted, ‘Fake encounters turn protectors into predators. The solution is not fake encounters, but upholding the rule of the law. BJP rule is the Amritkaal of criminals.’ ■

Who’s afraid of an election audit?



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It is important to recall that the Election Commission initially refused to provide data on the number of voters. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) had to take the matter to the Supreme Court, which ordered the Commission to make the data publicly available on its website.

Jagdeep Chhokar, one of the founders of ADR, said, “The inordinate delay in releasing the final voter turnout data, the lack of disaggregated figures at the constituency and polling station levels, and [the question] whether the election results were declared based on fully reconciled data have raised public suspicion about the accuracy of the election results.”

The Commission’s reluctance to address such serious questions deepens mistrust in the electoral process and compromises the integrity of its outcomes. It has consistently refused to allow open scrutiny of the EVMs and resisted the widespread installation of Voter

Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs) alongside EVMs—a measure that was, once again, only implemented after the Supreme Court’s intervention.

Ideally, the Commission should invite scrutiny and provide comprehensive and unambiguous answers whenever questions arise. What we are witnessing today is the opposite. Dismissive responses and repeated failures to engage meaningfully with valid concerns amount to dereliction of duty to the electorate.

This is troubling and strikes at the heart of democracy. When citizens and political parties lose faith in the impartiality and transparency of the body responsible for overseeing elections, the democratic process becomes vulnerable to cynicism. The Election Commission’s inability—or unwillingness—to address these concerns deepens this crisis of confidence. At a time when public trust in institutions is already fragile, the need for transparency and accountability from the Election Commission has never been more urgent. ■

Revdi season in Maharashtra and going gaga over RaGa

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Hand-outs and hyperactivity

The state government has been pledging confounding amounts of money to publicise dubious schemes. The state budget had earlier allocated Rs 96,000 crore for new welfare schemes including Rs 46,000 crore for the Ladki Bahin cash transfer scheme. Of this amount, Rs 270 crore was to be spent on advertising the schemes over three months.

On 7 October, the government issued a short-term tender for a 90-crore five-day digital publicity splash before the poll is notified. Ironically, the very next day (8 October), the state contractors’ association observed a symbolic protest in all districts, demanding payment of outstanding dues. The association claimed in a letter to the chief minister that Rs 40,000 crore was pending for over two years. The finance department’s warning that the state government’s deficit threatens to exceed two lakh crore rupees in 2024–25 prompted people to wonder how the state planned to repay mega ‘foreign’ loans.

Between 30 September and 8 October, the Mahayuti government has issued 1,087 government resolutions (GRs)! These pertain to almost all departments and include policy

decisions (such as approving the procurement of salt pan lands from the Union government for the Dharavi ‘redevelopment’ project and small hydro projects), fund disbursement and HR matters such as promotions, postings, transfers and upgradation of pay and perks as well as the announcement of new initiatives.

The flurry of dubious decisions ahead of the upcoming election sanction massive cost escalations and questionable land transfers. The cost of the Pune Ring Road project, which hasn’t even started yet, skyrocketed by a staggering Rs 20,375 crore—taking the total to Rs 42,711 crore.

In just three years, this 68 km road has turned into a financial black hole. BJP MLA Captain Tamil Selvan was allotted a 6,320 sq. m. plot in the Wadala salt pan area for the Veer Savarkar Charitable Trust, allegedly for a pittance. The deal, rubber-stamped in less than a month, fast-tracked land-use change from residential to educational, ignoring all and any objections.

Gaga over RaGa’s visit to Kolhapur

Rahul Gandhi’s visit to Kolhapur created a stir of a different kind. While the unveiling of a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and attending a session to

discuss the state of the state were par for the course, it was his visit to the kitchen of a Dalit family that grabbed attention. A short video of his interaction with his hosts Anjana and Ajay Tukaram Sanade showed the LoP chatting with them about the discrimination they faced, learning how to cook a dish typically eaten in Dalit households and lunching with them. Nor bluntness told Rahul that neither he nor his family had ever voted for the Congress in any election. Nor, by the way, had they voted for the BJP!

Once the video was posted, local media descended on the Sanades’ home, where they learnt that Rahul had tried his hand at cooking *harbharyachi bhaji*, a traditional dish made with greens and chickpeas and *tuvar dal* (pigeon peas) with brinjal.

The video and the visit stole the thunder from PM Modi, who landed in Maharashtra at the same time (5 October) to launch schemes worth Rs 56,000 crore. Rahul’s team seems to have caught on that in the age of Instagram, such videos go a long way connecting with the people.

Kolhapur is a sugar belt in western Maharashtra, with 70 assembly constituencies falling in this region. In 2019, the Congress and the undivided NCP had bagged 39 seats as opposed to the BJP’s 20. The undivided Shiv Sena had won five seats. Observers say the visit by the Congress leader makes the Mahayuti’s task of improving its tally a tad tougher.

Analyst Deepak Kaitke says Gandhi’s visit to Kolhapur was significant because it was here that Shahuji Maharaj, a descendant of Shivaji, had instituted reservation for Dalits for the first time. He believes the Maharashtra assembly election will be contested on two key points: the Constitution and reservation, which Rahul Gandhi wants to expand beyond the 50 per cent limit set by the Supreme Court.

And last but not least, Rahul took time out to meet Sharvani Mangve, whom he met during the Bharat Jodo Yatra. Learning that she was an entrepreneur who made her own ice cream, he promised he’d visit. And he did, dropping by at the Rolling Stone Ice Cream Parlour for a taste. How sweet is that? ■



Rahul Gandhi’s day in the Sanades’ kitchen in Kolhapur



How costly might Hemant Soren’s arrest prove to be?

Kislaya

Was the Enforcement Directorate’s decision to arrest Hemant Soren on 31 January a costly mistake? The BJP might well regret that hasty step. Long before his arrest, it had orchestrated a media trial with selective leaks on Soren’s alleged money laundering activities and land deals. The ED questioned him and followed up with a summons for interrogation. Eventually Hemant Soren submitted his resignation at Raj Bhavan, where the ED arrested him. It took only six months for a single-judge bench of the Jharkhand high court to release him on bail, based on the gaping loopholes in the ED’s charge sheet against him.

Arguably, the BJP’s next mistake was to assure caretaker chief minister Champai Soren that the party would keep him on as CM after the assembly election—if he joined the BJP, along with other Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) legislators. Hemant Soren had declared he would devote his time to the party organisation and preparing for the assembly election after his release, with Champai Soren continuing as caretaker chief minister.

Getting wind of the alleged ‘deal’ struck by the BJP, the JMM moved swiftly. Soren was summoned and ordered to resign on the spot. Humiliated, he declared he would retire from active politics. Instead, he formally joined the BJP but all on his own. No JMM MLA followed.

Another unintended consequence of Hemant Soren’s incarceration was the emergence of his wife, Kalpana Soren, as a popular leader. She jumped into active politics, contested and won a byelection to the Assembly. She campaigned tirelessly in the Lok Sabha election, helping the JMM win three of the five Lok Sabha seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes in the state.

Much sought after as a political speaker, especially among women, she has eclipsed the likes of Sita Soren, her estranged sister-in-law, and Geeta Koda, wife of former chief minister Madhu Koda, both pitted against her by the BJP.

With the sting of corruption charges somewhat blunted, arresting Hemant Soren appears to have been a blessing in disguise for the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha.



Hemant Soren being greeted by JMM workers on his release from prison, June 2024

Electoral pros and cons

The BJP is going into the assembly election, due in November–December, with plenty of baggage. Since its rout in 2019, its attempt to dislodge the JMM-led coalition government has failed. The JMM is undisputedly stronger in 2024 than in 2019 and the ‘sympathy’ factor is working in favour of Hemant and Kalpana Soren.

The previous BJP government headed by Raghubar Das (2014–2019) was the first government to have completed its full five-year term in the state, when the JMM was organisationally a lot weaker. Following the decline in PM Modi’s popularity and the Lok Sabha results, the BJP looks on a sticky wicket.

However, while the Soren couple seem to be carrying the entire burden of the campaign on their own shoulders, the BJP has pressed its heavy armoury into action. Over the last three months, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma paid 16 visits to the state. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already addressed two rallies in Jamshedpur and Hazaribagh. BJP heavies like Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh and Shivraj Singh Chouhan have also been regular visitors. While the Congress undertook a Jan Samvad Yatra to counter the BJP’s Parivartan Yatra, party workers are clearly

waiting for Mallikarjun Kharge and Jairam Ramesh (who has a Jharkhand connection) to campaign in the state, apart from Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi.

With the BJP having been in the saddle for the longest period since Jharkhand came into existence in November 2000, it’s more like a party of former chief ministers, namely Babulal Marandi, Arjun Munda and Champai Soren. With another former chief minister Raghubar Das cooling his heels in Raj Bhavan, Bhubaneswar while

With the sting of corruption charges somewhat blunted, arresting Hemant Soren appears to have been a blessing in disguise for the JMM

itching to return to state politics, Marandi’s task is cut out. He must defend precisely those successors he had publicly criticised.

A promise is a promise. Or is it?

In the run up to the assembly election, Modi’s Guarantees have been replaced by ‘Paanch Prann’ or five resolves. The JMM has pointed out that the BJP has not yet implemented its promise to provide LPG cylinders at Rs 500 in Rajasthan, 10 months after forming the government. Now it has repeated that promise in Jharkhand, with the added bonus of two free cylinders. Can LPG be subsidised to this extent by any state government?

Getting voters to fill in forms and submit details for future payments had been declared a corrupt practice by the ECI during the Lok Sabha elections. This has not prevented the BJP, however, from aggressively getting women to sign forms for the monthly dole of Rs 2,100 as part of Gogo Didi Yojana or Maa Bahin Yojana to counter the JMM’s Maiyya Samman Yojana under which the state government is paying a thousand rupees every month to women above the age of 18.

The Supreme Court’s recent ruling that states are entitled to their fair share of royalty on minerals with retrospective effect has given the state government a shot in the arm. It claims the Union government owes Jharkhand Rs 1.36 lakh crore in arrears. The CM says this is no gift, yet the Union government is delaying it. Meanwhile, why hasn’t the Union government extended benefits under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana to over six lakh eligible beneficiaries in the state, wondered Congress leader Jairam Ramesh.

While the official portal listed more than 10 lakh beneficiaries in the year 2022–23, only four lakh homes were sanctioned, and more recently, around two lakh beneficiaries were arbitrarily removed from the list by the ministry of rural development.

In solidarity with Palestine

Poet, journalist and activist Jacinta Kerketta has been in the news recently for refusing to accept the 2024 Room to Read Young Author Award, jointly awarded by USAID (US Agency for

International Development) and Room to Read India Trust for her children’s poetry collection, *Jirhul*, published earlier this year by Jugnu Prakashan, Bhopal.

Discovering that Room to Read India Trust partners Boeing in a literacy programme (flagged off last year by then Union minister Smriti Irani), Kerketta questioned the dubious nature of the claim to ‘care for children’ when “the world of children is being destroyed by the same weapons”.

Boeing, as its website indicates, has been associated with the Israeli army for ‘75 years’.

“I saw that Room to Read India Trust is also associated with Boeing for children’s education; when children were being killed in Palestine, the Trust in India was collaborating with Boeing, whose relationship with Israel is linked to [the] arms business... how can the arms business and care for children continue simultaneously when the world of children is being destroyed by the same weapons?” she wondered.

“I see many people in India remain silent about the genocide in Palestine. Just as there is hatred for minorities within the country, similarly there is no sympathy for the people of Palestine. As a poet and writer, this troubles me,” she told the *Independent*.

“When the elders are not playing a significant role in creating a better world for children, what value does this award truly hold?” Kerketta said.

This isn’t the first time she has taken a principled stance. Last year she refused a literary award for her book of Hindi poetry, *Ishuar Aur Bazar*, dedicated to the Dalit and Adivasi people of Niyamgiri in Odisha, who have been opposing bauxite mining in the region.

More power to her pen and her kind.

*Sugna’s wife and children
Will this time not starve to death.
They will take their own lives instead.
For dying of hunger, they know too well,
Stirs up no storms, does not sell.
A suicide, on the other hand,
Guarantees their corpse will make headlines,
And probes into the whys and wherefores
Will lead them to many more doors
With stoves unlit and ovens
gone cold. ■*

Who will be the next BJP president?

...and other such questions that are blowin’ in the wind

Rakesh Pathak

What are the chances that the frosty relationship between the Sangh and Modi’s BJP will thaw now that the party has won the Haryana assembly elections defying all forecasts and expectations? The question is blowin’ in the wind partly because some commentators are attributing the BJP’s unexpected victory to the ‘hard work’ the RSS put in this time around. Conversely, there are those who question this hypothesis, and ask how come the Sangh’s ‘hard work’ failed eight of 13 ministers and the Speaker in Haryana?

The other question gaining currency is whether the Haryana results will strengthen the hands of the BJP or the RSS in their internecine feud. In political circles, the BJP’s failure to secure a simple majority in the Lok Sabha was attributed partly to the indifference of the RSS during the election campaign. If the RSS did indeed play a hand in Haryana, has it proved a point?

Since the Lok Sabha results in June, the acerbic public remarks of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat have left little to the imagination. Sample these:

“Manipur has been burning for over a year; Whose responsibility is it to douse the fire?”

“Some people believe they are superhuman beings; they want to be treated like gods and eventually as God.”

“Do not assume you are divinity or have divine powers; leave that for people to judge.”

the RSS brass to submit their report card and ‘seek guidance’ for the future. Soon after, though, the relationship started going steadily downhill.

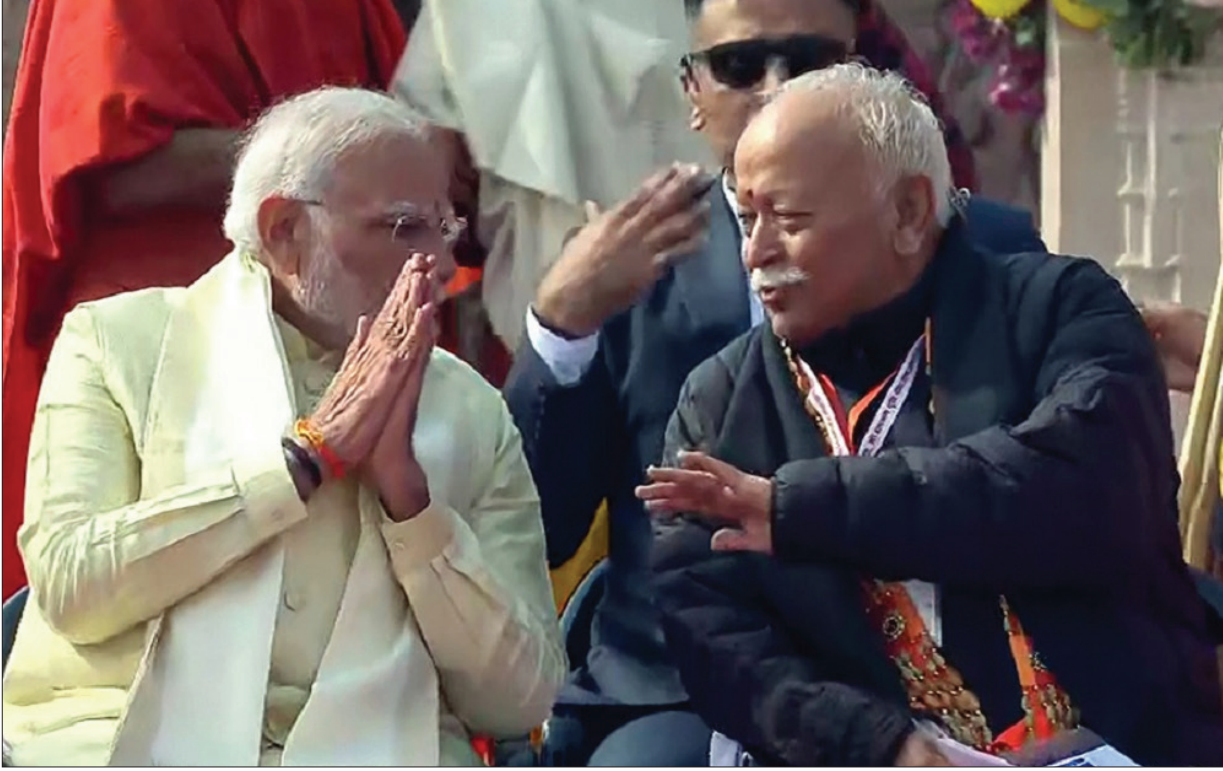
Nobody is sure what caused the rift, but that was the first and last coordination meeting attended by the prime minister or any Union minister. Such is the rift between Modi and Bhagwat that the two, it is reliably learnt, have never had a one-on-one meeting in the past 10 years. They have appeared together at public events like the *bhoomi puja* and consecration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya but nothing of note has transpired between the two, nothing barring a formal exchange of greetings. The two bigwigs are not on talking terms, say Parivar insiders.

PM Modi has not visited the Sangh headquarters in Nagpur even once after taking over as prime minister. He has never visited the tombs of RSS founder K.B. Hedgewar or their second *sarsanghchalak* Golwalkar. He has never paid floral tributes at the Hedgewar Smriti Mandir memorial at the RSS headquarters. The spat became public when ahead of the Lok Sabha election, BJP president J.P. Nadda told an interviewer that the BJP no longer needed the support of the RSS. Will the Haryana results, then,

mark a new inflection point in this fractious relationship?

The swanky new office of the RSS in Delhi’s Jhandewalan is now ready. Built on a 2.5 acre plot, the sprawling new structure has three towers, each with 12 storeys. Each tower has 80 rooms and five elevators. Mohan Bhagwat himself is expected to occupy the top floor of the middle tower. The complex has a 20-bed hospital and a car park that can accommodate 200 vehicles. The CISF (Central Industrial Security Force) has the security mandate. Why, you may ask, if it’s the office of a ‘non-governmental’ organisation (NGO), but that question too can keep blowin’ in the wind. Nevertheless, the scale of this gigantic building has birthed speculation that the RSS might shift its headquarters from Nagpur to New Delhi.

Besides the residence and office of *sarsanghchalak* Mohan Bhagwat, the new buildings will also house the offices of other Sangh biggies—Dattatreya Hosabale, Krishna Gopal, Arun Kumar and Suresh Soni. Hosabale, who mostly functions from Lucknow, is expected to take charge of the Delhi headquarters. One of the remaining two towers will house the offices of all the affiliated organisations of the Sangh. The third tower will have residential facilities for Sangh workers and officials. Insiders claim that Mohan Bhagwat will continue to spend most of his time in Nagpur, but the frequency



Not a single one-on-one meeting between the head honchos in 10 years! Really?

of his Delhi trips may increase.

Aware of the BJP’s weakening grip on power at the Centre, the RSS seems to be going all out to bridge the gap between Delhi and Nagpur. Signs that despite all the claims and bravado, the BJP and RSS are losing ground in north India are concerns the RSS will want to address. Also, while Bhagwat may have ruled out any grand centenary celebrations next year, 2025 may well see the RSS usher in some dramatic changes. The new office, insiders say, is not just symbolic, it’s meant to closely watch over the ministries, the PMO and 7 Lok Kalyan Marg.

Will these new developments help the BJP end its year-long search for a new national president? The second term of J.P. Nadda as president ended in January 2024. He was then given a six-month extension, ostensibly to oversee the Lok Sabha election. Four months after the Lok Sabha results, he remains the caretaker president. It is unusual for the BJP to struggle to complete a fairly straightforward exercise, especially since it decided against holding an election to choose the party president. The party’s parliamentary board is authorised to nominate a party president. What’s stopping them, then? Well, the lack of a consensus candidate that the BJP and RSS can agree on.

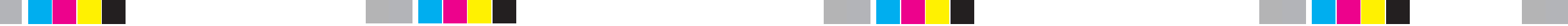
This has sparked wild speculation over likely candidates—in the mix are names like

Vinod Tawde, Sunil Bansal, B.L. Santhosh and Om Mathur, all of whom are old RSS hands and have held organisational positions in the BJP too. The political grapevine has also aired the names of Sanjay Joshi, Vasundhara Raje Scindia, Ram Madhav, Nitin Gadkari, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Rajnath Singh, Manohar Lal Khattar, Anurag Thakur, Devendra Fadnavis... it goes on.

The RSS, some reports suggested, favoured Sanjay Joshi or Vasundhara Raje, but both names were summarily dismissed by others because they would never be acceptable to Messrs Modi and Shah. Once powerful Sanjay Joshi has been in the doghouse since the Modi camp released an incriminating CD ahead of a BJP national convention in Mumbai. While Gadkari, as party president, tried to rehabilitate him by making him a member of the national executive, his name had to be dropped following opposition from Modi. Likewise Vasundhara Raje Scindia.

With his penchant for springing a surprise, Modi might come up with a name that does not feature on this long list. What appears certain at this point is that the next BJP president will have to have Narendra Modi’s approval. The RSS may not like it, but it is just not in a position yet to go against Modi’s choice. ■

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Should the BJP thank the RSS for Haryana?

The BJP appears to have won not because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi but despite him

Satyendra Tripathi

The BJP's startling victory this week in the Haryana assembly election is reminiscent of a similar stunt performed in the Madhya Pradesh assembly election last year. None of the opinion and exit polls had seen the Haryana result coming, and very few political analysts thought the BJP had any chance of winning more than 25 of the 90 seats in the Haryana assembly. Instead, it ended up winning 48 seats, almost twice the predicted number.

This time, though, the BJP appears to have won not because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi but despite him. The PM had campaigned aggressively and extensively in 2019, addressing as many as 10 rallies and holding several roadshows. The party managed to win just 40 seats and was forced to form a coalition government with Dushyant Chautala's Jannayak Janata Party (JJJP). In 2024, Modi addressed only four rallies and not a single roadshow. Yet, the BJP won 48 seats, eight more than last time, while improving its vote share by 3.4 per cent.

The verdict may bolster the PM's authority within the NDA. Modi has already started touting it as a major achievement, claiming that he still has enough fire power to lead his party to victory. However, the reality may be less rosy, as the Haryana result is likely to accentuate the internecine fight within the Sangh Parivar. After the BJP's below-par performance in the Lok Sabha election, and resultant acrimony, the RSS apparently took the party's poll campaign into its own hands, micro-managing it through its village- and ward-level committees. A low-

key affair that proved highly effective. It was the RSS that identified candidates, sorted out prickly issues and contributed to campaign themes. Modi took a back seat. Losing would have given him a handle against the RSS, suggesting that Modi is the only guarantee to a poll success. It might even have covered up the BJP's loss of 62 seats in the Lok Sabha polls earlier this year (compelling it to form a coalition government with the TDP and JDU).

Advantage RSS

The Haryana result has effectively tilted the balance of power in favour of the RSS, which has already started micro-managing the BJP's election campaigns in Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Delhi, where elections are due over the next four months.

In a recent meeting of, BJP leaders in Ranthambhore, the RSS, led by its joint general secretary Arun Kumar, deliberated on the strategy for the coming Delhi assembly elections. The two-day meeting (25 and 26 September) was attended by the BJP's national organising secretary B.L. Santhosh and the Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva, among others. The RSS was represented by 'kshetra pracharak' Jatin Kumar and 'prant pracharak' Vishal. It has been holding similar state-level and district-level meetings in Maharashtra and Jharkhand as well.

This is a departure from the RSS's hands-off attitude during the general election. Following the Lok Sabha results, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat had taken a number of potshots at PM Modi. Even now



Haryana has tilted the balance in the Sangh's favour, which has already started micro-managing the BJP's campaigns in Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Delhi

there is no love lost between the two. Bhagwat is still as critical of Modi's style of working as he was earlier. In the RSS scheme of things, the organisation is supreme, not the individual, whoever that might be.

The RSS thus took umbrage to a Modi-centric campaign and his grandiose self-identification as a 'non-biological' entity sent by God. BJP president J.P. Nadda's statement that the BJP no longer needed the RSS, being all grown up and self-sufficient, further widened the schism between the parent and child organisations.

Khattar was an excellent organiser but never popular among the masses, which is one reason the BJP's tally came down in the 2019 polls. In March 2024, Khattar was replaced by Nayab Singh Saini, an OBC, as CM.

The party focused on securing the OBC vote, which makes up about 40 per cent of the population. Saini, who was previously state president of the party, was more approachable than Khattar. The RSS did all the spadework among the masses to neutralise Congress's *kisan-jawan-pehelwan* (farmer, soldier, wrestler) narrative, dubbing the frustrations of the combine as Jat-centric issues. The success of this strategy is reflected in the claim that the BJP managed to win over 75 per cent of the non-Jat votes. The BJP also targeted Scheduled Caste (SC) voters, particularly through women's self-help groups in villages.

While Congress leaders pushed Bhopinder Singh Hooda for their own candidates, the BJP fielded 60 fresh faces to combat anti-incumbency. In contrast, the Congress re-nominated 17 candidates who had lost earlier, including its state president, Udai Bhan. The BJP also attacked by claiming that the Congress would once again appoint Hooda as chief minister, which led to the feeling that non-Jats would be further alienated, with Hooda's stronghold Rohtak becoming the locus of all new jobs and opportunities.

The Dalits, who had voted en masse for the Congress during this year's Lok Sabha elections, felt estranged by the perception of a Hooda-Kumari Selja rift. Kumari Selja's premature claim to the CM's chair during the campaign did not help the party. The entry of rebel Congress candidates and smaller parties like AAP, BSP and Azad Samaj Party also weaned some non-BJP voters, especially Dalits, away from the Congress.

Jats vs. non-Jats

Since 2014, when the BJP's tally jumped from four to 47 seats, the RSS strategy for Haryana was to create a non-Jat vote bank for itself. Jats constitute about 27 per cent of the state's population. Most of Haryana chief ministers have come from this dominant caste, leading to the notion that no party can form the government in Haryana by ignoring the community.

The BJP's appointment of Manohar Lal Khattar, a Punjabi Khatri, as chief minister in 2014 did not go down well.

The Assembly results in Haryana may be a moment of respite for PM Modi and his allies and a setback to the opposition, especially the Congress. An emboldened BJP is likely to assert itself in seat distribution talks with its allies for the upcoming Maharashtra and Jharkhand assembly elections. But Modi will still have to reckon with the RSS's opposition to his self-centred, self-aggrandising politics as it pushes to evolve a collective leadership within the BJP. ■

STATES 360°



UTTAR PRADESH

Roiling the communal cauldron to telling effect

Saiyed Zegham Murtaza

Why burn Ravana's effigy on Dussehra? If you must burn someone's effigy, let it be the Prophet's. This rabid statement made by Yati Narsinghanand at Hindi Bhavan in Ghaziabad's Lohia Nagar on 29 September was greeted with cheers and claps by the audience, among them several women, some on stage with the infamous head priest of the Dasna Devi temple.

As the video clip went viral, protests erupted not just in western UP but also across the country. Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi lodged an FIR and demanded that Caisi be booked against the preacher under the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) and the new version of the Indian Sedition Act. The police, mainstream media and BJP and RSS leaders did what was expected—nothing. The Supreme Court's directions that police should *suo motu* take action on hate speech were also ignored.

Narsinghanand has been spewing hate speech against Muslims for years without facing any consequences, leave alone investigation. He probably considered himself above the law which would explain his amazement at being apprehended by the police on 5 October.

It seems snowballing protests and international outrage finally prompted Yogi Adityanath and the UP Police to act. On 7 October, the chief minister held a review meeting to assess the 'law-and-order situation', belatedly asserting that insulting the Prophet or gods of any religion was undesirable and would be punished. In the same breath, he declared the government would not tolerate protest as a pretext for lawlessness. The police duly booked protestors and also lodged an FIR against fact checker Mohammed Zubair, based on a complaint made by the preacher's aide, Udita Tyagi, who alleged that Zubair had posted an old clip to instigate violence against the 58-year-old priest.

In another video clip shared widely on social media, Narsinghanand can be seen beligerently questioning the manner of his arrest. How dare the police stop his car in the street? Such a thing had never happened when Mulayam Singh Yadav, Mayawati or Akhilesh Yadav were chief ministers of the state. So how could it when his *apna aadmi* (own man) was last office in Lucknow? Power didn't last



The Dasna Devi temple in UP's Ghaziabad

Photo: Getty Images

forever, tell that to the CM, he said to the arresting inspector. Getting into the police vehicle, he asked if he was going to meet the DCP or the police commissioner.

Narsinghanand's belligerence, impunity and vicious communal rhetoric has so far gone scot-free in a city that is 80 per cent Muslim. The temple, which historically opened to Hindus and Muslims alike during Dussehra, has a massive banner prohibiting Muslims from entering.

Despite affirmations that the temple had not been attacked by protestors, BJP MLA from Loni Nand Kishor Gurjar said that police should have shot at least 10 to 20 people in an encounter. The BJP MLA from Deoria said protestors should experience 'Israel wala mazaa' (a repugnant reference to Israel's genocidal war on Palestine).

Post the Lok Sabha results in June, political slogans of *Sab ka saath, sab ka vikas*, justice for Muslim women and a new deal for the largest section of the minority community, the Pasmandas (meaning 'those who are left behind') have been swept aside to give hard-Hindutva front and centre play. Fringe elements have been reactivated and second- and third-line BJP leaders have started speaking a more provocative and strident language. Nand Kishor Gurjar, Gulab Devi, Gaurav Bhatia, Satish Gautam are the newer voices of an old communal agenda. Several TV anchors

seem to hold a license to spread hate. Dancing DJs in front of mosques, showering rose petals on *kanwaris* and a systematic campaign against Muslim traders and eateries selling non-vegetarian food are surfacing all over again. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat recently reiterated *Hindu khatre mein hai* (Hindus are in danger). With people being put in the slammer for the slightest perceived offence against the regime, outrageous bigots like Narsinghanand have been given a free pass for far too long.

Bigotry by the bar in Bareilly

Remember Ravi Kumar Diwakar, an additional district judge, who in earlier judicial pronouncements had hailed Yogi Adityanath as a 'philosopher king' and ordered sealing a section of the Gyanvapi mosque? Turns out he is the son-in-law of a BJP leader. In one of his latest judgements in the first week of October, he sentenced 24-year-old Mohd. Aalim Ahmed under Section 376-2n (repeated rape), Section 506 (criminal intimidation), and Section 323 (voluntarily causing hurt) of the Indian Penal Code.

In his 42-page order, Diwakar examined the term 'love jihad' in great detail, pronouncing that 'the main objective of love jihad is to establish dominance over India under demographic war and international conspiracy by some anarchist elements of a particular religion'.

The judge overruled the woman's plea that her complaint had been made under pressure from her parents and right-wing Hindu organisations. 'According to this court,' he recorded, 'when the victim is not living with her parents, and is living alone in a rented house [...] it is a mystery how she gets money to live alone in a house, to eat and drink, to wear clothes and to talk on mobile.'

His conclusion? 'A huge amount of money is required. Hence, the fact of foreign funding in love jihad cannot be ruled out.'

The All-India Lawyers' Association for Justice has called for urgent action against

the Bareilly judge, stating that his conviction Order 'is not only problematic for its right-wing views and its propagandising of anti-Muslim sentiments but for its questionable understanding of women's consent'.

Indian Accumulation Service

What first appeared in the gossip column of a prominent Hindi daily in September 2019 acquired a life of its own. It seems discreet inquiries were being made to track down people suspected of stealing Rs 50 crore of cash from the house of a retired IAS officer in Uttarakhand.

The unnamed bureaucrat had taken the heist in his stride but his wife had taken it to heart. Shared widely on social media—and with everyone on social media being expert journalists and investigators—it was not long before several names began to circulate. Soon the identity of the person became so obvious that the ex-bureaucrat emerged from anonymity to threaten legal action.

Some were sympathetic, absolving him of corruption and claiming that the money came from fees accumulated by his singer wife. Others wondered why the Central Vigilance Commission, the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate had not stepped in to investigate such a large stash of cash.

While mainstream media steered clear of the controversy, Dilip Cherian took it seriously enough to ask in his column in the *Deccan Chronicle* why no FIR was filed. There was a time when the IAS Association in the state thought nothing of revealing the names of the three most corrupt officers picked through an annual secret ballot. Times sure have changed.

Oxygen therapy

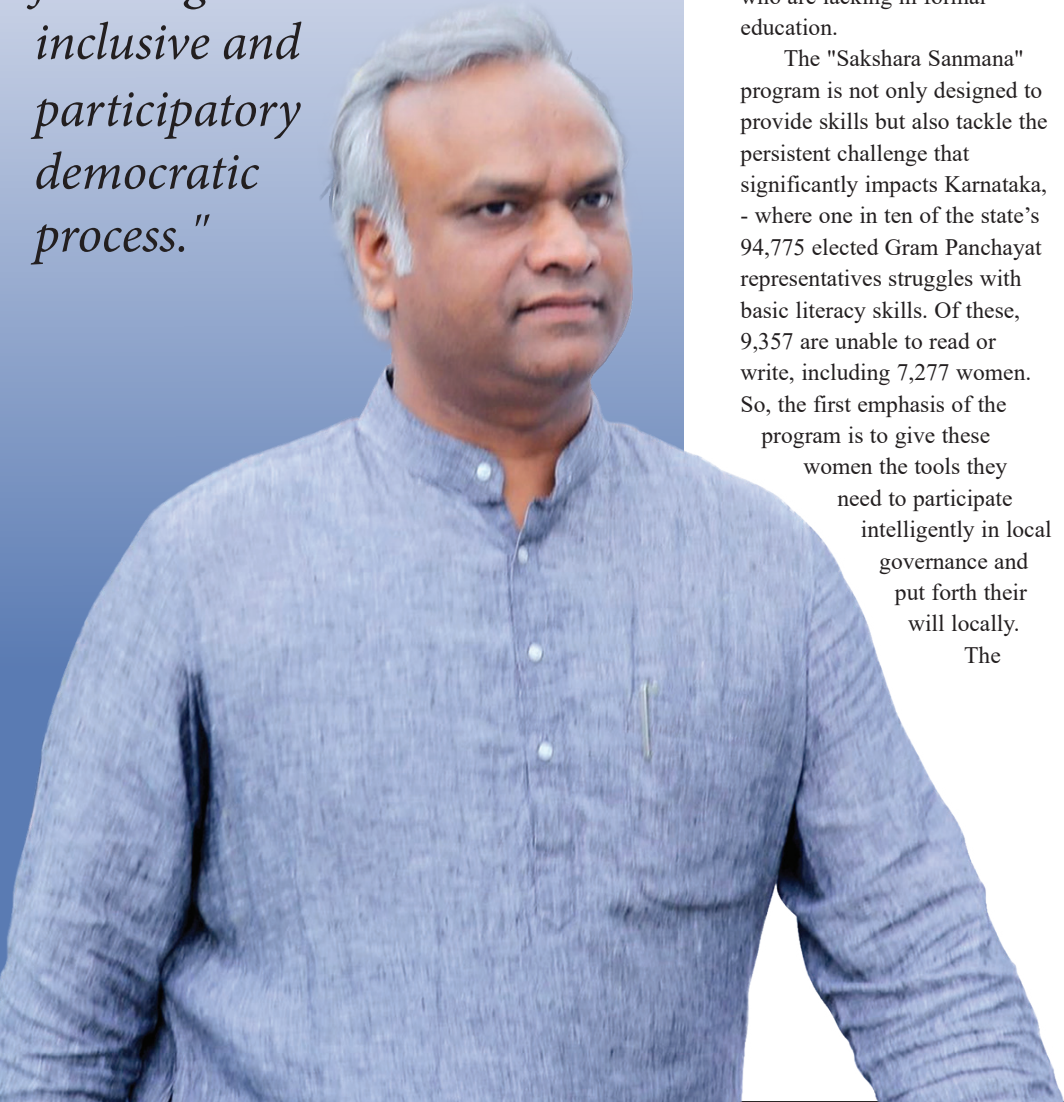
In a scam of a different sort, senior citizens in Kanpur were told that oxygen therapy was the secret of Prime Minister Modi's energy. A machine imported from Israel would make them young again, promised Rajiv Dubey and his wife Rashmi, both reassuringly young and handsome. It was only when their therapy centre Revival World closed down and the couple vanished that people approached the police.

One of the victims claimed she had already paid Rs 10.75 lakh to the couple. The swindlers made an estimated Rs 35 crore before they fled abroad. ■



People in Bengaluru step out and speak up against the BJP's bogey of 'love jihad'

Rural Development and Panchayat Raj minister, Priyank Kharge said "The Sakshara Sanmana program is a vital step towards empowering our women representatives, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to local governance, by enhancing their literacy skills, we are fostering a more inclusive and participatory democratic process."



"Sakshara Sanmana"

Initiative to Equip Gram Panchayat Representatives with Essential Skills

Photo: GettyImages



Bengaluru: The Karnataka State government launched a statewide programme "Sakshara Sanmana" (Literacy Honour) on 1st September. This ambitious project aimed at making 6346 elected Gram Panchayat representatives who cannot read or write, literate.

The Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department revealed that this time, the program will cover a total of 6346 people, including elected representatives. It mainly targets 5,234 elected representatives who are lacking in formal education.

The "Sakshara Sanmana" program is not only designed to provide skills but also tackle the persistent challenge that significantly impacts Karnataka, - where one in ten of the state's 94,775 elected Gram Panchayat representatives struggles with basic literacy skills. Of these, 9,357 are unable to read or write, including 7,277 women. So, the first emphasis of the program is to give these women the tools they need to participate intelligently in local governance and put forth their will locally. The

program's major objective is to provide Gram Panchayat representatives with an education in reading, writing, and arithmetic so that eventually they will be able to handle their own sums of profit and (revenue) loss. The Minister stressed that the aim of this programme is to give them the ability to read and comprehend meetings concerning their own panchayats, to participate actively in policymaking at governance level and to encourage active participation of tone in Gram Panchayat meetings and Gram Sabha/Ward Sabha.Sakshara Sanmana.

Rural Development and Panchayat Raj minister, Priyank Kharge said "The Sakshara Sanmana program is a vital step towards empowering our women representatives, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to local governance, by enhancing their literacy skills, we are fostering a more inclusive and participatory democratic process."

It will be carried out in 21 of the state's districts from September 1st to October 20th. Literacy training daily for two hours, a total of 100 learning hours over 50 days will thus be completed by the participants. Writing equipment, reading matter and graph paper were presented in a kit, the Minister also said.

The teachers will also receive honorariums, and participants will receive certificates plus an honorarium, according to Minister Priyank Kharge. The 'Sakshara Sanmana' program is aimed at transforming the literacy environment for women members of Gram Panchayats in

Karnataka. It seeks to enhance their independence and will to govern locally by widening their range of skills. Its aim is to build the democratic fabric of our state stronger still.

Apart from this, the RDPR department has also plans to equip Gram Panchayat members with adequate knowledge about Digital Information Literacy too, as digitally literate can confidently use, manage, create, quote and share sources of digital information in an effective way.

Digital Information Literacy is a relatively new concept. It is one of the major components in information literacy. The digitally literate can confidently use, manage, create, quote and share sources of digital information in an effective way. The way in which information is used, created and distributed,

demonstrates an understanding and acknowledgement of the cultural, ethical, economic legal and social aspects of the information. The digitally literate demonstrate openness, the ability to problem solve, to critically reflect, technical capability and a willingness to collaborate and keep up-to-date promoted by the changing contexts in which they use information.

E-Panchayat means –a web based dynamic digital interface created for each and every panchayat in India, giving information about particular Panchayat in a two way flow of content. Electronic Panchayat or e-Panchayat is one among the various Mission Mode Projects in Government of India and Government of Karnataka, the Ministry of Panchayat Raj is responsible for its implementation to strengthen

and transform the scene of rural areas. E-Panchayat's goal is to provide better service delivery to citizens living in rural areas across the country. The main aim of e-Panchayat is to make sure development of local area and to empower grass-root governance by availing wide range of services to citizens, panchayat officials, elected representatives and other knowledge workers atlocal level.

E-Panchayat is about empowering and developing the grassroots communities at the panchayat levels through creation of virtual community at each level through an interactive and collaborative web portal, the portal run, managed and sustained by the local community through regular information and content management from a bottom-up as well as top-down channels.

Special prominence to achieve 100 percent literacy and make Karnataka a fully literate state

Literacy plays an important role in the economic development of a state and the country. As part of this various departments including RDPR have come up with various programmes to achieve 100% literacy status for the state in the days to come. Literacy alsoenhances the personality development of the individual and develops a sense of civic responsibility in them. It also contributes to improving the quality of life and serves as an important educational indicator for economic development of the nation. Education has been given special prominence and importance by the Government of Karnataka.

The Literacy rate as per 2011 census is 75.36 in the State. 19 districts namely Yadgir, Raichur, Chamarajnagar, Kalaburagi, Vijayapura, Ballari, Vijayanagar, Koppala, Bagalkote, Ramanagar, Chikkaballapura, Mandya, Bidar, Mysuru, Belagavi, Chitradurga, Kolar, Gadag and Tumakuru have less than the State Average.

Similarly, the Female Literacy rate as per 2011 census is 68.08 in the State. But it is less than the State Average in 19 districts which includes all the districts of KK region.

The department of Mass Education has to take initiatives to improve the literacy rate of these districts on par with the State Average.

Whereas the SC population which has been increased to 1.05 crores in



Photo: GettyImages

2011 census. As per the projected population for the year 2023 the total SC population is 1.42 crores. Similarly, The ST population which was 0.35 crores during 2001 census has been increased to 0.42 crores in 2011 census and the projected population for 2023 is 0.57 crores. District wise population of SC/ST as per the census 2001 and 2011.

The Department of Social Welfare

formulates various Programs and Schemes for the upliftment of Scheduled Castes. The department aims to empower Scheduled Castes and make sure their constitutional rights are protected. It implements Social, Economicand Educational Programs and Schemes at State level, District level and Taluk level to achieve its aims.

The state government's relative

allocation share in the budget is also high and always stands first when compared to the other sector's allocation and share in the budget. Various schemes such as Kasturba Gandhi BalikaVidyalaya, Mid -day meal, National Programme for education of girls (NPEGEL) etc have also been launched by the Government of India to enhance the literacy rates among its population. Therefore

education has been given prime importance by the KarnatakaGovernment and is promoting education through its various provisions annd programmes. Karnataka Government is working hard to bring about maximum literacy in the state, more so in urban areas as against rural parts, as rural population migrate to urban parts of the state. Migration from other states is a

paramount challenge as the mother tongue differs. To facilitate these the state and central government fund activities like

- 1) Link document programme,
- 2) 1000 grama panchayath programme and
- 3)New India Literacy Programme (NILP) etc.

The state government is in process of opening more learning centres in the areas where such population is more. Such places in the limits of Grama Panchayats, special priority zones, model villages of Member of Parliament and in urban areas as well, should be given more importance as mentioned in the guidelines of the government.

Literacy mission officers designated for the purpose and create awareness among them to ensure complete literacy.

These Activities have been started and the system is in place to monitor the progress and to achieve the goal. i.e., 100% literacy in the state. Right from census right upto certification all activities are being closely monitored to ensure perfect execution of the said programmes.

No of Non-literates of 15+ age group in the state

- As per 2011 census 26 crore
- Neo literates between 2009 to 2022 - 39 lakh
- Yet to literate 61 lakh

When will PM Modi get the drift?

To govern and legislate successfully, Modi must now reach out to the Opposition. But will he?

Aakar Patel

There are the prime minister—and there are many—sense a drift and lack of purpose in his third term. In February, Narendra Modi said (in the new parliament building in Delhi) that the BJP's third term would be one of very important decisions that would affect the next 1,000 years. In an interview to a news channel during the campaign, he said that the results would show in the first 125 days after 4 June. The first 100 days' agenda had already been finalised, he said, and he would use the next 25 for the youth. None of this has come to be. Monday, 7 October, marked 125 days since the results and the endemic feeling is that 'nothing is happening'. The main reason for this is that with a minority, the BJP can no longer do in Parliament what it could do between 2014 and 2024. We have seen this with the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, which was sent to a joint parliamentary committee. For the past decade, with a weak Opposition, the government had not allowed scrutiny of bills by committee. This passing of laws without any real understanding of what they contained, without any rigorous process of review or consultation, accelerated through the first decade of the Modi era. In the 14th Lok Sabha (2004–09), 60 per cent of the bills were referred to committees for scrutiny. In the next Lok Sabha (2009–14), this number was 71 per cent. In the first Modi government, this fell to 25 per cent. The Modi regime wilfully undid the parliamentary convention of referring bills to department-related parliamentary standing committees for scrutiny and examination right after the first victory in 2014. The number of laws that were scrutinised before being passed collapsed after Modi's second victory. The



Photo: Getty Images

Opposition noticed this, and 17 MPs from the Congress, the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Telugu Desam Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) wrote to the government expressing their concern at the 'hurried passing' of bills without scrutiny. They wrote that public consultation—in which groups and individuals engaged with particular subjects are invited by legislators to put forward their views on prospective legislation—had also stopped. 'Public consultation is a long-established practice where parliamentary committees scrutinise bills, deliberate, engage and work towards improving the content and quality of the legislation,' they wrote. This had no effect on Modi, and in 2020, not a single bill was sent to a committee for scrutiny. Between March and August that year, the government promulgated 11 ordinances, including one that amended the Income Tax Act and allowed 100 per cent tax exemption to donations made to the PM CARES fund. Ordinances are meant to be passed only when Parliament is not in session and the government needs to take immediate action. No ordinance is allowed to be in force for more than six months without parliamentary approval. Here was legislation by ordinance that was voted into law without any scrutiny. Even where committees were constituted, the government prevented them from working. Government MPs were 'using the rule book to stonewall scrutiny on issues that may raise uncomfortable questions for the government'. The committee on home affairs met to discuss the decision on Kashmir after the state had already been bifurcated. After the pandemic, standing committees were disallowed from meeting even virtually, with the excuse that this might violate confidentiality. While Opposition MPs complained, the

BJP took up and dispatched contentious laws on triple talaq and the RTI (both passed after a walkout by the Opposition), and the amendment to the UAPA that allows the government to designate individuals as 'terrorists'. Similarly, the farm bills, the bill that skewered Kashmir's special status and the bill amending citizenship were not referred to any of the committees of Parliament for in-depth, non-partisan deliberation. All resulted in trouble. PRS Legislative Research's Chakshu Roy wrote why the abandonment of legislative scrutiny was a problem: 'In a nutshell, all laws do not receive the same amount of parliamentary attention. A few undergo rigorous scrutiny by parliamentary committees. Others are passed with just a simple debate on the floor of the House. When the Treasury and Opposition agree, even the most far-reaching laws are passed by Parliament with alacrity. When there is disagreement on politically contentious Bills such as the two Bills related to agriculture, then the swift passage results in unruly scenes in Parliament. The outweighing factor is the government's urgency in enacting a particular legislation. When the government is in a hurry, even Bills amending the Constitution can be passed in two to three days.' There was another problem with this: 'When parliamentary committees do not scrutinise Bills, it increases the chances of the country being saddled with half-baked laws.'

Consultation, therefore, is not only important, it is necessary. Modi reversed a tradition of consultation that even the British had followed as India's masters. When a law on forcible indigo cultivation began to be framed in 1917 and the Champaran Agrarian Bill was introduced in the Bihar-Agriss legislative assembly, many members demanded that it be referred to the select committee of the House for scrutiny and examination. The British government conceded and Gandhi was requested to examine the bill. With a strong Opposition now in place, the BJP's days of absolute dominance have come to an end. To govern effectively, to legislate successfully, Modi must reach out to the Opposition. He has to include it in decision-making as prime ministers before him have done. As long as he does not—and he does not show any signs of acknowledging and accepting reality—the drift his fans are anguishing over will remain. The ball, as the cliché goes, is in his court. ■

Views are personal

Modi reversed a tradition of consultation that even the British had followed as India's masters... but with a strong Opposition now in place, the BJP's days of absolute dominance are over

Waking up to slow living

More and more young people are opting out of the rat race to put life back into their lives, writes **Avay Shukla**

About this time last year, my elder son quit his very well-paying job as a senior executive in a multinational: he had had enough of the El Dorado mirage sold by the IIMs and IITs. He had been working 14-hour days non-stop for 16 years, paying Rs 65,000 a month for a flat in Gurgaon where he just went to sleep, he lunched and dined exclusively on Zomato and Food Panda, could never find the time to relax in our Purani Koti retreat near Shimla, his liver was beginning to get pickled in Blender's Pride. In short, he was on the verge of a burnout, maybe a couple of puffs away from being stubbed out like a cigarette. One day, he saw the light, ignored Mr Narayana Murthy's exhortation to work 70-hour weeks, and regarded with justified suspicion Ms Sitharaman's pious advice to fight work pressure through "inner strength by reaching out to God". His decision to ignore her was made easier, he told me later, by the possibility that by 'God' she meant Mr Modi, and since he himself 'worked' 18 hours, reaching out to him would be futile (as Kangana Ranaut has recently discovered). So one fine foggy morning in Gurgaon, he pinged his boss that he was quitting (that's how they do the hiring, firing and resigning these days, no 'Dear sir, it is with profound regret that...' letters as in our days), packed his suitcase and pooch in his car, and joined us in Purani Koti. He now lives off his savings, work-from-home consultancy projects, articles on the auto world, and *revdis* from my pension whenever the state government periodically emerges from bankruptcy and doles it out to me. He now has the time to indulge in his passion for photography and gardening, and is currently trying to grow bananas and peepul trees at 7,000 feet in an area which gets three feet of snow every winter! I'm personally sceptical of that last bit, but who knows—after all, they laughed at Satyananda Stokes when he brought in apple plants from the USA, didn't they? And today Himachal is an apple state. If my son succeeds, we may yet be a banana republic soon. Welcome to the world of 'slow living', the latest concept that is catching on with Gen X (or Gen Z) across the world. More and more of them are just chucking the rat race with its slave-driving, toxic work culture and sweat shop values, which just last month took the lives of Anna Sebastian Perayil in Pune and Sadaf Fatima in Lucknow. These bright youngsters prefer to return to nature, renewing relationships with

family and friends, and doing what they *want* to do—not what neo-capitalism, voodoo economics and the Sanjiv Sanyals of the world expect them to do. Slow living is the next best thing to a government job, where you can effectively retire the day you join and nobody will even notice, even as pay commissions keep hiking your salary and pension with predictable regularity. He has my full support: it is this generation which can perhaps save our once blue planet, since my generation has completely abdicated its responsibility. This choice of lifestyle, however, is not all fun and games: it requires the making of responsible choices—in consumption, expenditure, manner of living—since one's income levels drop substantially. It forces one to make an inventory of the important things in life and discard the redundant, superfluous and wasteful materialism inherent in the 'keeping up with the Junejas' South Delhi mentality. It goes hand-in-hand with another trend being increasingly embraced by planet conscious Gen X—minimalism. Minimalism is simply 'living with less' by decluttering one's physical spaces, reducing unnecessary consumption, seeking quality over quantity, travelling less, paring possessions down to the essentials and focusing on personal values rather than reacting to competitive pressures. (The reader is probably reminded here of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.) This is what slow living is in essence, and I see more and more youngsters consciously opting for this lifestyle and minimalist framework. Just to cite examples of how this works: there is the 'sniff test' for clothes. Do your clothes need to be washed so frequently, consuming more water, soap, power? Sniff the clothes for malodorous smells—this will probably tell you that you could wear them for another couple of days before consigning them to the washing machine. (A single washing machine discharges 480 kg of greenhouse gases every year). Then there's the 'one in, one out' principle: don't keep adding to your possessions unnecessarily—buy an item only as a replacement, not as an addition, discard the first before buying the second. 'Tiny living' is another idea that is gaining traction—small homes (why do you need five bedrooms when it's just you and your wife and maybe one kid?), away from the congestion and pollution of metros, off-grid as regards power and water, self-sufficient with solar and rainwater harvesting.



You are happier as a person when you have minimised your needs. This is now a scientifically captured idea known as the Easterlin Paradox

A minimalist lifestyle is good for the earth as well—the culture of over-consumption, so assiduously promoted by economists, governments and big corporates, has led to the depletion of natural resources and ravaging of forests, rivers, lakes and mountains. Reducing this demand for goods and products and minimising possessions lowers the strain on the natural environment, reduces waste, cuts down on carbon emissions. It is a far more sustainable model of life than the blind GDP growth-driven models being foisted on us; in fact, I would go further and say it is the *only* lifestyle choice which can save us and the planet from another extinction. And here's the final, clinching argument which has eluded us but has been instinctively grasped by the younger generation—you are happier as a person when you have mini-

mised your needs. This has been scientifically captured now in a concept which is known as the Easterlin Paradox. This states that happiness does not increase with more money. Happiness is directly proportionate to money up to a certain point, but once your basic needs are met, more money does not mean more happiness. After this point, happiness is defined not by money, but by the meaning of life, relationships and contribution to society, without which more money simply means more worry, tension, fear and even depression. Bob Dylan nailed it six decades ago when he sang: 'When you ain't got nothing, you've got nothing to lose...' I'm glad our sons and daughters are beginning to hear this music. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and the author of Disappearing Democracy: Dismantling of a Nation

Biryani Amma’s magic touch

Selvi Amma’s kitchen in Coimbatore is special, with over 15 transgender employees and an appetite for hard work

Poongodi Mathiarasu and Akshara Sanal

Dressed in a deep blue kurta, embroidered lungi and a string of fragrant jasmine coiled around her hair, M.P. Selvi enters the large kitchen she runs—Karumbukadai M.P. Selvi Biryani Master. The staff of her catering unit look up, some of the chatter ceases and a worker greets her and takes her bag.

Selvi is the ‘biryani master’ and instantly commands respect in this large kitchen of over 60 people. In a few minutes everyone is back in the groove, moving quickly and efficiently, oblivious to the smoke and sparks that sputter from the flames.

Dum mutton biryani is made by Selvi and her cooks. In this preparation, the meat and rice are cooked together, unlike other biryanis where the two main ingredients are cooked separately.

“I am a Coimbatore dum biryani specialist,” says the 50-year-old trans woman. “I manage it all alone. I keep everything in mind. Many times, we get booked six months in advance.”

As she is speaking to us, a *satuvam* (large spoon) dripping with biryani masala is handed to her. Selvi tastes the marinade and nods, “Okay.” That’s the final and most important taste test and everybody looks relieved as the head chef approves the dish.

“Everyone calls me ‘Selvi Amma (mother)’. There’s joy in being called *Amma* for a *thirunangai* (trans woman),” she says beaming.

She runs her catering service from her home in Pullukadu, a low-income housing area in the city. She employs 65 people, including 15 trans people. Every week, the team prepares orders of up to 1,000 kilos of biryani on an average. Occasionally, a few weddings add to the workload. Once Selvi prepared 3,500 kilos of biryani for a large mosque in the city that fed close to 20,000 people.

“Why do I like cooking? Once, after eating my biryani, a customer named Abdin called me and said, ‘What taste! The meat falls off the bone like snow’. But it’s not just the taste factor. My customers eat food made by the hands of a transgender person. It feels like a blessing.”

The day we visit, 400 kilos of her special biryani are being prepared for a wedding function. “There is no secret masala in my biryani!” Selvi Amma says, insisting that the taste comes from her attention to detail. “My mind is always on the pot. I like to add the masalas like coriander powder, garam

masala and [spices like] cardamom myself,” she says, gesturing with hands that have fed thousands of people.

Ingredients for the wedding biryani are being prepped by two of her employees, Tamilarasan and Elavarasan, brothers in their 30s. They are cutting vegetables, mixing masalas and checking the firewood. If it’s a big event, making biryani can take an entire day and night.

Selvi Amma’s calendar is especially busy during April and May, the holiday season, when she receives up to 20 orders. Her regular customers are mostly from the Muslim community, and she often caters for weddings and engagements. She adds, “No matter how big [in social status] they are, they call me Amma.”

Mutton biryani is the most popular dish, but Selvi also offers chicken and beef biryani. One kilo of biryani feeds four to six people. Her ‘cooking charges’ are Rs 120 per kilo, with ingredients being charged separately.

After four hours in the kitchen, Selvi Amma’s clothes are soiled with oil and spices; the heat of the kitchen makes her face glisten with sweat. The grey room behind her is lit by the flames firing the large degchis (cooking vessels).

“People do not last long in my kitchen. It’s not easy to find people who do what we do,” she explains. “We lift weights and stand in front of fires. If they want to work for me, they have to do difficult work. And those who do not want to do so, run away.”

After a few hours, everyone sits down to eat breakfast—parotta and beef korma bought from a nearby restaurant.

Growing up, Selvi Amma’s household was often short of food. “Access to food was very difficult for our family. We only ate corn and maize,” she says. “Rice was something we could eat only occasionally, once in months.”

She was born in 1974 in Pullukadu, Coimbatore, in a family of agricultural workers. When she realised that she was transgender (assigned male at birth but identifying as a woman), she moved to Hyderabad, and from there to Mumbai and Delhi. “I didn’t like it, so I came back to Coimbatore and decided not to leave again. I am able to live with dignity as a transgender woman here,” she says.

Selvi has adopted 10 trans daughters who live and work with her. “Not only trans women, but other men and women depend on me for their survival. Everyone should eat. I want them to be happy.”

It was an older trans person who taught



Self-reliance is the biggest gift for a transgender person. “Else, we will have to do dhantha (sex work) or yasakam (begging).”

Selvi Amma how to cook. She has only been honing the skills she picked up 30 years ago, she says modestly. “Initially, I went to work as a helper and eventually worked as an assistant for six years. They paid me Rs 20 for two days of work. It was a small amount. But I was happy with that.”

She has passed on the skill to others: Saro, Selvi Amma’s adopted daughter learnt from her. Today, Saro is a master biryani-maker in her own right, and as Selvi says proudly, “is capable of handling thousands of kilograms of biryani on her own”.

“There are daughters and granddaughters in the transgender community. If we teach them a skill, their lives will be enriched,” says Selvi who feels self-reliance is the biggest gift she can pass on to other transgender persons. “Else, we will have to do *dhantha* (sex work) or

yasakam (begging).”

Valli Amma and Sundari have been working with her for over 15 years. “I was young when I met Selvi Amma,” says Valli Amma, who is older than her employer. “My children were little. This was the only earning option then. Now that my children are grown and earning, they want me to rest. But I love working. The money I earn gives me freedom. I can spend as I wish, going on tours!”

Selvi Amma says she pays her employees Rs 1,250 a day. Sometimes, when orders are very large, the team has to pull a 24-hour shift. “If we have to cook for a morning function, we don’t sleep,” she says. The pay then rises to Rs 2,500. She says assertively, “That’s what you should get paid. This is not just regular work. We work with fire!”

Flames light up almost every corner of the huge kitchen. Logs of firewood are even kept on top of the degchi’s lid while the biryani simmers. “You cannot be afraid of the fire. That doesn’t mean there are no injuries. We get burns, you just have to be careful,” she warns. “We suffer. But when you think that you can earn a hundred rupees and eat happily for a week, that pain fades away.”

A chef’s day starts early, and Selvi Amma sets out by 7 a.m. Bag in hand, she hails an auto from outside her home in Karumbukadai for the 15-minute ride. Her day, however, starts even earlier at 5 a.m. when she tends to her cows, goats, chickens and ducks. Mayakka, 40, one of Selvi Amma’s adopted daughters, helps with feeding, milking and collecting eggs. Selvi loves feeding her animals as “they help ease my mind, especially after the stress from my high-pressure job in the kitchen.”

Work doesn’t end for the master biryani

chef after she is back home. She continues to manage all the bookings with the help of her trusty diary and pen. She also organises all the groceries for the next day’s cooking.

“I only accept work from people who trust me,” she says as she moves to the kitchen to cook her own dinner. “I don’t like doing nothing and just eating and sleeping.”

During the pandemic, work shut down for three years. “We had no other way to survive, so we bought a cow for milk. Now we need three litres of milk every day. Anything extra, we sell,” Selvi says.

Home is in the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board quarters. Most of the families around belong to the Scheduled Caste community and are daily wage workers. “There are no rich people here. Everyone is working class and if they need pure milk for their children, they come to me.”

“We have been living here for 25 years. The government acquired our land for road construction and [in return] provided us with a house here,” she explains, adding, “People here treat us with respect and dignity.” ■

Courtesy: People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI)





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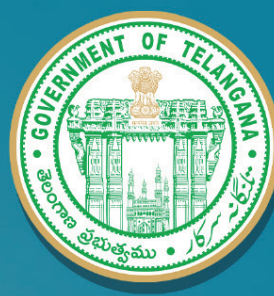
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NATION

STATES 360°

In focus this week: Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh

► P1,3,4



POLITICS

WHO WILL BE THE NEXT BJP CHIEF? ...and other such questions that are blowin' in the wind

► P3

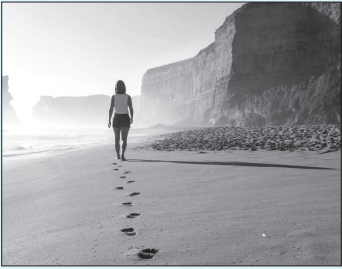


LIFESTYLE

WAKING UP TO SLOW LIVING

Why more and more young people are opting out of the rat race

► P6



Herjinder

The Haryana assembly election results have perplexed psephologists, political analysts, journalists, YouTubers and the public alike. Not only because they went against all predictions and perceptions but also because the fairness of the process is in question. When the Congress voiced its apprehensions over the slow counting of votes in a letter to the Election Commission, it was told off as a graceless loser, a reply that seemed both partisan and politically coloured.

Misgivings about our electronic voting system (EVS)—of which the EVM (electronic voting machine), or the voting unit where we press the button, is just one component—have been expressed quite regularly over the past few years. The people who have taken the trouble to scrutinise the system, have researched the experience of other countries and tried to bring to our notice why these countries have rejected the EVS have been brushed aside as conspiracy theorists. Even in the face of compelling evidence. And not even just by mainstream media, which is, in effect, a propaganda arm of the government. (Maybe a little less so after Lok Sabha 2024).

The Supreme Court did endeavour to add a layer of security by ordering the use of VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail) machines, but it came to naught when the ECI refused to count the VVPAT slips and match them with the count on the EVMs.

Countries like the US, Germany and Netherlands have considered and then banned the Electronic Voting System for 'lack of transparency and verifiability by ordinary citizens' to paraphrase the 3 March 2009 verdict of the German federal constitutional court Bundesverfassungsgericht.

If the ECI cares to redeem its reputation as a neutral referee of elections, the Haryana election results present a golden opportunity to open up the process to a thorough independent audit. Haryana being a small state with just 90 seats, it wouldn't take much time, manpower or money to conduct a post-poll audit. The EC may even consider counting the slips from the 48 seats where the BJP won and the 37 seats bagged by the Congress. If the counting is conducted quickly and transparently—in the presence of experts, representatives of political parties and civil society—it may put to rest past, present and future doubts.

While there may be no legal mandate to count the slips, there is certainly a moral mandate. With the election commissioners being appointed 'lawfully' by the ruling party, the ECI's credibility is bound to remain suspect even when it tries to ensure a fair election. Post-election audits should, in fact, be made mandatory, as there are recurrent grievances about electoral rolls and deletion of voters' names.

The role of Returning Officers, usually dis-

Who's afraid of an election audit?

If the ECI cares to redeem its reputation as a neutral referee, the Haryana election results present a golden opportunity to open up the process to a transparent audit



Haryana assembly election: Vote counting in Rohtak, 8 October 2024

trict magistrates, and polling personnel, largely government employees, is unclear. There is little or no transparency on how polling dates and the number of polling phases are determined. There are valid questions about the manufacture, storage, maintenance and transportation of the EVM machines. (The ruling party's office bearers have been known to hold posts as directors in the public sector units manufacturing the machines.)

All this and more needs to be addressed by the ECI to restore its own credibility and the electorate's trust in the system. Haryana can easily be a test case with no harm done, even if the counting takes a month. It is in the Election Commission's own interest to take

the initiative so that the bluff of manipulation is called once and for all.

By the evening of 8 October, reports began to trickle in that in every instance where a recount was conducted, the BJP candidates emerged victorious

While much of the post-election analysis of the results has focused on the BJP's methodical micro-management, voter outreach strategies and other logistical manoeuvres, the somewhat opaque role played by the Election Commission during this crucial period deserves closer scrutiny.

On the morning of counting day (8 October), initial trends showed the Congress leading in 72 out of the 90 seats in Haryana. However, as the hours passed, this lead began to shrink, and soon it appeared as though the tide had completely turned. Mysteriously, the Election

Commission's website froze, leaving everyone in the dark with no updates for nearly two hours. By that point, only two rounds of counting had been completed. Even after the site resumed functioning, updates trickled in at a frustratingly slow pace.

These delays set off alarm bells. In his letter to the EC, Congress general secretary Jairam Ramesh wrote, 'You can already see examples of this playing out on social media. Our concern is that such narratives can be exploited by malevolent actors to influence ongoing processes where counting is still taking place, particularly in most of the counting centres.'

If the hope was that the Election Commission would clear the air with a transparent response, that hope was soon dashed. The Commission dismissed the Congress's concerns as 'ill-founded'. It went on to state, 'The Commission unequivocally rejects your attempt to surreptitiously give credence to irresponsible, unfounded and uncorroborated malafide narratives'.

This response flew in the face of the Commission's mandate to maintain neutrality. The delay in updates on the website had been noticed not only by the political parties concerned but also by the media. In the past, it was common for media reporters, particularly from news channels, to be stationed at counting centres. Back then, the Commission's website often lagged behind TV channels, which reflected election trends long before they appeared online. However, with the introduction of real-time updates, the Election Commission had become a more reliable source of information, prompting media outlets to reduce their presence at counting centres.

The delayed updates prompted several panellists on online discussions and TV channels to raise concerns that the delays and inconsistencies were feeding into a larger, potentially damaging narrative that could reshape public perception.

By the evening of 8 October, reports began to emerge suggesting that in every instance where a recount was conducted, the BJP candidates emerged victorious. Several losing candidates wondered how EVMs were still charged at 99 per cent after the whole day, implying that either a new EVM had been brought in or the existing EVM had been tampered with. Sound familiar?

After the Lok Sabha election, the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) conducted a detailed analysis of the election data and uncovered significant discrepancies. In 362 parliamentary constituencies, a staggering 5,54,598 more votes were counted than had been cast. In 176 constituencies, 35,093 less votes were counted than the number of votes polled. Although the ADR did not explicitly claim that these discrepancies impacted the election results, they were certainly alarming.

► Continued on page 2



STATES 360°



MAHARASHTRA

Revdi season in Maharashtra and going gaga over RaGa

Navin Kumar

The BJP will make much of its recent election victory in Haryana. Even though the conduct of a partisan Election Commission of India (ECI) has again been called into question, and not just by the Congress party that everyone expected will romp home.

In Maharashtra, for which the same ECI has not even announced election dates yet—presumably to give the BJP ample time to dangle all its election-time carrots—the polls are due in November, when the term of the current assembly comes to an end. The stakes are high in this state, where an illegitimate Mahayuti coalition government is doing its damndest to cling to power.

The BJP will obviously hope to carry the momentum of a dubious Haryana win into Maharashtra. The current ad blitz by the state government, the Ladki Bahin Yojana cash transfer to women and other such welfarist doles, the inauguration of projects like the new metro lines in Mumbai and Pune are all part of the last-ditch attempt to appease the state's voters.

On the other hand, this will be the first election in the state's electoral history when Sharad Pawar and Uddhav Thackeray will be on the same side, campaigning together. There is strong sympathy for them, after the shenanigans of the BJP to dislodge the MVA government by engineering splits in the Shiv Sena and the NCP. The Maratha-Dalit-minority votes, comprising roughly half the electorate in the state; nativist sentiment favouring the Marathi *manoo*s; and the antipathy in Mumbai for Adani and his political benefactors are some of the other factors that will hobble the BJP in the state. So, the dynamics of Haryana and Maharashtra are very different.

The MVA (Maha Vikas Aghadi) coalition has strong OBC leaders like Jitendra Awhad, Vijay Wadetiwar and Amol Kolhe, and the Shiv Sena (UBT) and NCP (Sharad Pawar) are strong cadre-based parties. Also working in favour of the MVA is a Maratha-Muslim-Dalit-Kunbi consolidation, besides the seething resentment in rural Maharashtra over the worsening agriculture crisis, and a widespread feeling among the people that the state's interests are being

compromised by the so-called 'double-engine' sarkar.

Some commentators believe that Haryana will hurt the morale and standing of the Congress in the MVA, where it might have expected to contest the largest number of seats. The party's confidence was high, having bagged 13 Lok Sabha seats earlier this year. Spirits in the MVA have risen, however, after Uddhav Thackeray went on record to say he would accept any chief ministerial candidate



Inauguration of projects like the new metro lines in Mumbai and Pune are all part of the last-ditch attempt to appease the state's voters



proposed by the Congress and Sharad Pawar; that the election in the state this time was not about him returning as chief minister but an existential battle to save the state and defeat the BJP and its allies.

Several leaders from the ruling coalition are already making a beeline to join the MVA, and not all of them are NCP (Ajit Pawar) MLAs either. Even BJP leaders close to Devendra Fadnavis like Harshvardhan Patil, Abhijeet Patil and Ramesh Kadam recently joined Sharad Pawar's NCP. Harshvardhan Patil revealed that in the last Lok Sabha elections, he had (secretly) helped Supriya Sule defeat Ajit Pawar's spouse Sunetra Pawar in Baramati. Ramraje Naik Nimbalkar and Dipak Chavan from the Ajit Pawar faction are returning to Sharad Pawar while Uddhav has inducted Deepesh Mhatre, a leader close to Eknath Shinde, back into SS (UBT).

With the ECI notification still awaited, the momentum seems to favour the MVA but it can ill-afford to be complacent till a probable victory is sealed.

► Continued on page 2

Police encounters as (unstated) state policy

Rashme Sehgal

The surge of police encounters in Uttar Pradesh is borne out by a report in the *Times of India* (3 October 2024), which claimed that Gautam Buddh Nagar in Noida alone had witnessed one encounter every three days over the past two years. In Noida and Greater Noida, 49 criminals were killed and 416 injured in 327 encounters. 938 criminals were held and 400 firearms and 94 knives recovered. Members of the ‘thak-thak’ gang (who allegedly specialise in breaking into parked vehicles and stealing stereos, radios and car accessories) figured on the list along with chain-snatchers, burglars and members of other, more notorious, gangs.

Police Commissioner Laxmi Singh said that the crackdowns increased after Yogi Adityanath took over as chief minister for the second term in 2022.

While the claim of an ‘*apradh mukt* Noida’ (crime-free Noida) is contentious and death for petty thieves questionable, the fact is that police in UP, as in other states, have embraced encounters as a legitimate instrument to show results. In a Facebook post at the end of September, Sulkhan Singh, a former Director General of Police (DGP), Uttar Pradesh, warned policemen who were staging fake encounters in the hope of receiving rewards and promotions that their ‘crimes’ could eventually catch up with them.

Singh recalled that criminal prosecution against policemen in Ghaziipur and Sitapur districts was launched as many as 22 and 25 years respectively after the encounter killings they had staged. The former DGP claimed that at least 250 policemen, most of them nearing retirement, were languishing in various prisons. Their pleas for bail were not entertained by even the high court. Among them, he pointed out, are the 45 policemen held guilty of a massacre in Pilibhit. There was a BJP government in the state then, and there is a BJP government in the state now. Senior officers who are pressurising subordinates to stage fake encounters would be long gone and they would have to face the music, Singh cautioned.

Even the infamous Brijbhushan Sharan Singh, former BJP MP and reviled director of the Wrestling Federation of India (WFI), had alleged in September that select ‘encounter specialists’ were busy killing relatively insignificant criminals in order to claim out-of-turn promotion.

Amitabh Thakur, an IPS officer who took voluntary retirement, provided a different perspective. He said police superintendents are routinely asked during review meetings how many encounters have been staged in their district and how many criminals killed.

If any SP reported a singular lack of killings, the next question would be: what was wrong with him? Most SPs would therefore go back and order their subordinates to stage some encounters before the next review meeting. Thakur confessed candidly, adding that the malady is an old one in the state.

Other IPS officers in UP have been equally vocal. Retired IPS officer S.R. Darapuri claims police encounters were rare when he was in service. Now, he says, “extrajudicial killings have become part of the state’s unstated policy”. He holds that a government resorts to encounter killings only when it fails to ensure law and order by legitimate means. UP minister Om Prakash Rajbhar defended these ‘incidents’, saying the police could surely not be expected to greet criminals with flowers.

The National Crime Records Bureau ‘Crime in India’ report for the year 2022 released in December 2023 recorded a staggering 65,743 cases of crimes against women (rape, murder, kidnapping, murder after rape and gang rape) in just one year in UP. The same year, Uttar Pradesh reported 3,491 murders and 15,368 cases of atrocities against SCs and STs registered with the police. Significantly, the numbers are much higher than they were in 2017 when Yogi Adityanath took over as chief minister. As dramatic footage of crimes recorded on CCTV cameras goes viral on social media, daylight robbery, chain-snatching, bike-thefts and even abductions continue unabated.

It is difficult to say if it’s a case of life imitating art or vice versa. Mainstream films have glorified extra-judicial killings and lionised encounter specialists. The public tends

Proving the accused guilty in court is seen as too cumbersome. Dispensing instant justice satisfies the blood-lust of people and helps politicians build a no-nonsense image



Aneet Bhati alias Jota, a sharpshooter of the Anil Dujana gang, injured in a police encounter in Greater Noida, July 2017

to see ‘instant justice’ as satisfactory proof of tough governance. Hindi films like *Ab Tak Chhappan*, *Company*, *Aan*, *Shootout at Lokhandwala*, *Shootout at Wadala* and *Garv* featured ‘encounter specialists’ as lead characters, even heroes. Regional films have not been lagged behind either, and such policemen are often regarded as celebrities.

Sachin Waze, a former ‘encounter specialist’ with the Mumbai police, echoed other officers who asserted that their targets were all ‘guilty criminals’.

“I didn’t do it for money. It was for fame, recognition and to serve the public. Every one of them deserved to go and they went,” said Waze in an interview to the *Guardian* in 2011.

Tough-talking filmi dialogue has been picked up by politicians. While UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath promised he’d help criminals meet Yamraj, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma encouraged police

to shoot criminals in the leg, which, he underscored, was allowed by the law. Too bad if some such bullets went astray and took the lives of the escapee.

In 2023, the Guwahati High Court was informed that 161 incidents of ‘police action’ had taken place across Assam in the previous 13 months, which left 51 dead and 139 injured. According to the Union home ministry, Assam recorded the third highest number of police encounter deaths in 2021–22.

On 23 September, Akshay Shinde, accused of sexually abusing two kindergartners in a Mumbai school, was killed while being transported in a prison van. Overlooking the police’s failure to arrest the two absconding trustees of the school, both chief minister Eknath Shinde and deputy chief minister Devendra Fadnavis tussled over credit for the encounter killing. Shiv Sena (Shinde) workers distributed sweets and burst crackers in Badlapur, where the school is located,

while BJP workers put up posters of Fadnavis brandishing a weapon, along with the slogan ‘Badla Pura’ (revenge completed).

The Supreme Court has mandated that every killing by the police be followed by both a departmental and a magisterial inquiry, to be communicated to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the encounter spot and post-mortem be recorded and both videos shared with the NHRC. Post-2014, however, the NHRC has been accepting the police version of encounters and returning video records to the state police, making it impossible for the victims’ relatives and human rights activists to access them.

NHRC’s credibility has taken a hit with the UN Human Rights Council questioning its track record and refusing to renew accreditation for two successive years. Even as the Government of India denounces the denial as ‘unfair’, it has made no difference to the composition and functioning of the NHRC, packed as it is with pro-government retired judges and police officers.

The Youth for Human Rights Documentation (YHRD) and 16 other organisations looked at 17 police encounter cases in UP and found that not a single case had been properly investigated. FIRs of encounter killings are filed by the police themselves, as the family members of the deceased (who are generally poor and from marginalised sections of the community) are way too intimidated to file a counter and challenge the details. Mangla Verma, a young lawyer with YHRD says, “When we examined police records, they were damning. It was quite obvious that the encounters were fake.”

Encounter killings, once endemic in Kashmir, Punjab, as well as supposedly anti-Naxalite operations in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Maharashtra and West Bengal, have recently spread to Tamil Nadu, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Manipur. Paradoxically, even as encounter killings convey a false sense of safety, the rising crime graph adds to people’s sense of insecurity.

Proving the accused guilty in court is increasingly seen as too cumbersome and time-consuming. Dispensing instant justice satisfies the blood-lust of people and helps politicians build a no-nonsense image. Encounter killings successfully distract people into believing that swift elimination of criminals will make them safer. The evidence does not bear this out.

Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav appeared to hit the nail on the head when he posted, ‘Fake encounters turn protectors into predators. The solution is not fake encounters, but upholding the rule of the law. BJP rule is the Amritkaal of criminals...’

Who’s afraid of an election audit?



» Continued from page 1

It is important to recall that the Election Commission initially refused to provide data on the number of voters. The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) had to take the matter to the Supreme Court, which ordered the Commission to make the data publicly available on its website.

Jagdeep Chhokar, one of the founders of ADR, said, “The inordinate delay in releasing the final voter turnout data, the lack of disaggregated figures at the constituency and polling station levels, and [the question] whether the election results were declared based on fully reconciled data have raised public suspicion about the accuracy of the election results.”

The Commission’s reluctance to address such serious questions deepens mistrust in the electoral process and compromises the integrity of its outcomes. It has consistently refused to allow open scrutiny of the EVMs and resisted the widespread installation of Voter

Verifiable Paper Audit Trails (VVPATs) alongside EVMs—a measure that was, once again, only implemented after the Supreme Court’s intervention.

Ideally, the Commission should invite scrutiny and provide comprehensive and unambiguous answers whenever questions arise. What we are witnessing today is the opposite. Dismissive responses and repeated failures to engage meaningfully with valid concerns amount to dereliction of duty to the electorate.

This is troubling and strikes at the heart of democracy. When citizens and political parties lose faith in the impartiality and transparency of the body responsible for overseeing elections, the democratic process becomes vulnerable to cynicism. The Election Commission’s inability—or unwillingness—to address these concerns deepens this crisis of confidence. At a time when public trust in institutions is already fragile, the need for transparency and accountability from the Election Commission has never been more urgent. ■

Revdi season in Maharashtra and going gaga over RaGa

» Continued from page 1

Hand-outs and hyperactivity

The state government has been pledging confounding amounts of money to publicise dubious schemes. The state budget had earlier allocated Rs 96,000 crore for new welfare schemes including Rs 46,000 crore for the Ladki Bahin cash transfer scheme. Of this amount, Rs 270 crore was to be spent on advertising the schemes over three months.

On 7 October, the government issued a short-term tender for a 90-crore five-day digital publicity splash before the poll is notified. Ironically, the very next day (8 October), the state contractors’ association observed a symbolic protest in all districts, demanding payment of outstanding dues. The association claimed in a letter to the chief minister that Rs 40,000 crore was pending for over two years. The finance department’s warning that the state government’s deficit threatens to exceed two lakh crore rupees in 2024–25 prompted people to wonder how the state planned to repay mega ‘foreign’ loans.

Between 30 September and 8 October, the Mahayuti government has issued 1,087 government resolutions (GRs)! These pertain to almost all departments and include policy

decisions (such as approving the procurement of salt pan lands from the Union government for the Dharavi ‘redevelopment’ project and small hydro projects), fund disbursement and HR matters such as promotions, postings, transfers and upgradation of pay and perks as well as the announcement of new initiatives.

The flurry of dubious decisions ahead of the upcoming election sanction massive cost escalations and questionable land transfers. The cost of the Pune Ring Road project, which hasn’t even started yet, skyrocketed by a staggering Rs 20,375 crore—taking the total to Rs 42,711 crore.

In just three years, this 68 km road has turned into a financial black hole. BJP MLA Captain Tamil Selvan was allotted a 6,320 sq. m. plot in the Wadala salt pan area for the Veer Savarkar Charitable Trust, allegedly for a pittance. The deal, rubber-stamped in less than a month, fast-tracked land-use change from residential to educational, ignoring all and any objections.

Gaga over RaGa’s visit to Kolhapur

Rahul Gandhi’s visit to Kolhapur created a stir of a different kind. While the unveiling of a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and attending a session to

speak on the Constitution were par for the course, it was his visit to the kitchen of a Dalit family that grabbed attention. A short video of his interaction with his hosts Anjana and Ajay Tukaram Sanade showed the LoP chatting with them about the discrimination they faced, learning how to cook a dish typically eaten in Dalit households and lunching with them. Nor, he bluntly told Rahul that neither he nor his family had ever voted for the Congress in any election. Nor, by the way, had they voted for the BJP!

Once the video was posted, local media descended on the Sanades’ home, where they learnt that Rahul had tried his hand at cooking *harbharyachi bhaji*, a traditional dish made with greens and chickpeas and *tuvar dal* (pigeon peas) with brinjal.

The video and the visit stole the thunder from PM Modi, who landed in Maharashtra at the same time (5 October) to launch schemes worth Rs 56,000 crore. Rahul’s team seems to have caught on that in the age of Instagram, such videos go a long way connecting with the people.

Kolhapur is a sugar belt in western Maharashtra, with 70 assembly constituencies falling in this region. In 2019, the Congress and the undivided NCP had bagged 39 seats as opposed to the BJP’s 20. The undivided Shiv Sena had won five seats. Observers say the visit by the Congress leader makes the Mahayuti’s task of improving its tally a tad tougher.

Analyst Deepak Kaitke says Gandhi’s visit to Kolhapur was significant because it was here that Shahuji Maharaj, a descendant of Shivaji, had instituted reservation for Dalits for the first time. He believes the Maharashtra assembly election will be contested on two key points: the Constitution and reservation, which Rahul Gandhi wants to expand beyond the 50 per cent limit set by the Supreme Court.

And last but not least, Rahul took time out to meet Sharvani Mangwe, whom he met during the Bharat Jodo Yatra. Learning that she was an entrepreneur who made her own ice cream, he promised he’d visit. And he did, dropping by at the Rolling Stone Ice Cream Parlour for a taste. How sweet is that? ■



Rahul Gandhi’s day in the Sanades’ kitchen in Kolhapur



How costly might Hemant Soren’s arrest prove to be?

Kislaya

Was the Enforcement Directorate’s decision to arrest Hemant Soren on 31 January a costly mistake? The BJP might well regret that hasty step. Long before his arrest, it had orchestrated a media trial with selective leaks on Soren’s alleged money laundering activities and land deals. The ED questioned him and followed up with a summons for interrogation. Eventually Hemant Soren submitted his resignation at Raj Bhavan, where the ED arrested him. It took only six months for a single-judge bench of the Jharkhand high court to release him on bail, based on the gaping loopholes in the ED’s charge sheet against him.

Arguably, the BJP’s next mistake was to assure caretaker chief minister Champai Soren that the party would keep him on as CM after the assembly election—if he joined the BJP, along with other Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) legislators. Hemant Soren had declared he would devote his time to the party organisation and preparing for the assembly election after his release, with Champai Soren continuing as caretaker chief minister.

Getting wind of the alleged ‘deal’ struck by the BJP, the JMM moved swiftly. Soren was summoned and ordered to resign on the spot. Humiliated, he declared he would retire from active politics. Instead, he formally joined the BJP but all on his own. No JMM MLA followed.

Another unintended consequence of Hemant Soren’s incarceration was the emergence of his wife, Kalpana Soren, as a popular leader. She jumped into active politics, contested and won a byelection to the Assembly. She campaigned tirelessly in the Lok Sabha election, helping the JMM win three of the five Lok Sabha seats reserved for Scheduled Tribes in the state.

Much sought after as a political speaker, especially among women, she has eclipsed the likes of Sita Soren, her estranged sister-in-law, and Geeta Koda, wife of former chief minister Madhu Koda, both pitted against her by the BJP.

With the sting of corruption charges somewhat blunted, arresting Hemant Soren appears to have been a blessing in disguise for the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha.



Hemant Soren being greeted by JMM workers on his release from prison, June 2024

Electoral pros and cons

The BJP is going into the assembly election, due in November–December, with plenty of baggage. Since its rout in 2019, its attempt to dislodge the JMM-led coalition government has failed. The JMM is undisputedly stronger in 2024 than in 2019 and the ‘sympathy’ factor is working in favour of Hemant and Kalpana Soren.

The previous BJP government headed by Raghubar Das (2014–2019) was the first government to have completed its full five-year term in the state, when the JMM was organisationally a lot weaker. Following the decline in PM Modi’s popularity and the Lok Sabha results, the BJP looks on a sticky wicket.

However, while the Soren couple seem to be carrying the entire burden of the campaign on their own shoulders, the BJP has pressed its heavy armoury into action. Over the last three months, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma paid 16 visits to the state. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has already addressed two rallies in Jamshedpur and Hazaribagh. BJP heavies like Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh and Shivraj Singh Chouhan have also been regular visitors. While the Congress undertook a Jan Samvad Yatra to counter the BJP’s Parivartan Yatra, party workers are clearly

waiting for Mallikarjun Kharge and Jairam Ramesh (who has a Jharkhand connection) to campaign in the state, apart from Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi.

With the BJP having been in the saddle for the longest period since Jharkhand came into existence in November 2000, it’s more like a party of former chief ministers, namely Babulal Marandi, Arjun Munda and Champai Soren. With another former chief minister Raghubar Das cooling his heels in Raj Bhavan, Bhubaneswar while

With the sting of corruption charges somewhat blunted, arresting Hemant Soren appears to have been a blessing in disguise for the JMM

itching to return to state politics, Marandi’s task is cut out. He must defend precisely those successors he had publicly criticised.

A promise is a promise. Or is it?

In the run up to the assembly election, Modi’s Guarantees have been replaced by ‘Paanch Prann’ or five resolves. The JMM has pointed out that the BJP has not yet implemented its promise to provide LPG cylinders at Rs 500 in Rajasthan, 10 months after forming the government. Now it has repeated that promise in Jharkhand, with the added bonus of two free cylinders. Can LPG be subsidised to this extent by any state government?

Getting voters to fill in forms and submit details for future payments had been declared a corrupt practice by the ECI during the Lok Sabha elections. This has not prevented the BJP, however, from aggressively getting women to sign forms for the monthly dole of Rs 2,100 as part of Gogo Didi Yojana or Maa Bahin Yojana to counter the JMM’s Maiyya Samman Yojana under which the state government is paying a thousand rupees every month to women above the age of 18.

The Supreme Court’s recent ruling that states are entitled to their fair share of royalty on minerals with retrospective effect has given the state government a shot in the arm. It claims the Union government owes Jharkhand Rs 1.36 lakh crore in arrears. The CM says this is no gift, yet the Union government is delaying it. Meanwhile, why hasn’t the Union government extended benefits under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana to over six lakh eligible beneficiaries in the state, wondered Congress leader Jairam Ramesh.

While the official portal listed more than 10 lakh beneficiaries in the year 2022–23, only four lakh homes were sanctioned, and more recently, around two lakh beneficiaries were arbitrarily removed from the list by the ministry of rural development.

In solidarity with Palestine

Poet, journalist and activist Jacinta Kerketta has been in the news recently for refusing to accept the 2024 Room to Read Young Author Award, jointly awarded by USAID (US Agency for

International Development) and Room to Read India Trust for her children’s poetry collection, *Jirhul*, published earlier this year by Jugnu Prakashan, Bhopal.

Discovering that Room to Read India Trust partners Boeing in a literacy programme (flagged off last year by then Union minister Smriti Irani), Kerketta questioned the dubious nature of the claim to ‘care for children’ when “the world of children is being destroyed by the same weapons”.

Boeing, as its website indicates, has been associated with the Israeli army for ‘75 years’.

“I saw that Room to Read India Trust is also associated with Boeing for children’s education; when children were being killed in Palestine, the Trust in India was collaborating with Boeing, whose relationship with Israel is linked to [the] arms business... how can the arms business and care for children continue simultaneously when the world of children is being destroyed by the same weapons?” she wondered.

“I see many people in India remain silent about the genocide in Palestine. Just as there is hatred for minorities within the country, similarly there is no sympathy for the people of Palestine. As a poet and writer, this troubles me,” she told the *Independent*.

“When the elders are not playing a significant role in creating a better world for children, what value does this award truly hold?” Kerketta said.

This isn’t the first time she has taken a principled stance. Last year she refused a literary award for her book of Hindi poetry, *Ishuar Aur Bazar*, dedicated to the Dalit and Adivasi people of Niyamgiri in Odisha, who have been opposing bauxite mining in the region.

More power to her pen and her kind.

*Sugna’s wife and children
Will this time not starve to death.
They will take their own lives instead.
For dying of hunger, they know too well,
Stirs up no storms, does not sell.
A suicide, on the other hand,
Guarantees their corpse will make headlines,
And probes into the whys and wherefores
Will lead them to many more doors
With stoves unlit and ovens
gone cold. ■*

Who will be the next BJP president?

...and other such questions that are blowin’ in the wind

Rakesh Pathak

What are the chances that the frosty relationship between the Sangh and Modi’s BJP will thaw now that the party has won the Haryana assembly elections defying all forecasts and expectations? The question is blowin’ in the wind partly because some commentators are attributing the BJP’s unexpected victory to the ‘hard work’ the RSS put in this time around. Conversely, there are those who question this hypothesis, and ask how come the Sangh’s ‘hard work’ failed eight of 13 ministers and the Speaker in Haryana?

The other question gaining currency is whether the Haryana results will strengthen the hands of the BJP or the RSS in their internecine feud. In political circles, the BJP’s failure to secure a simple majority in the Lok Sabha was attributed partly to the indifference of the RSS during the election campaign. If the RSS did indeed play a hand in Haryana, has it proved a point?

Since the Lok Sabha results in June, the acerbic public remarks of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat have left little to the imagination. Sample these:

“Manipur has been burning for over a year; Whose responsibility is it to douse the fire?”

“Some people believe they are superhuman beings; they want to be treated like gods and eventually as God.”

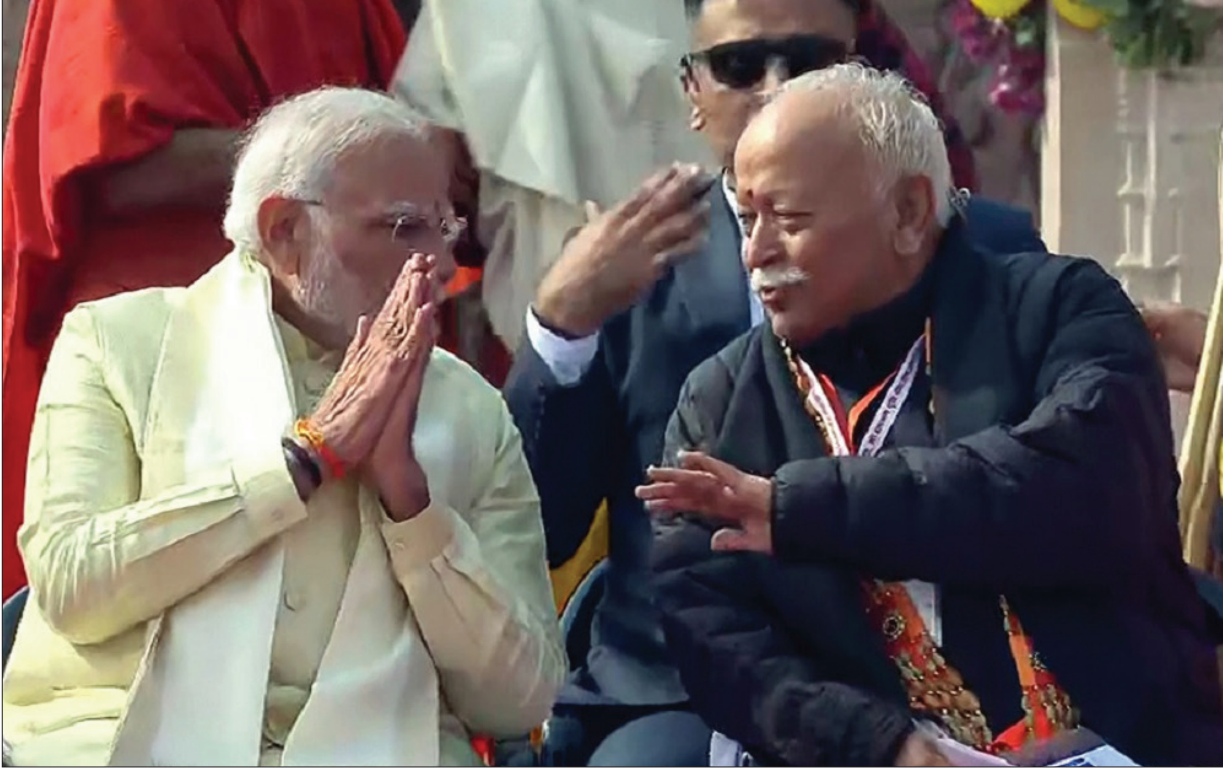
“Do not assume you are divinity or have divine powers; leave that for people to judge.”

the RSS brass to submit their report card and ‘seek guidance’ for the future. Soon after, though, the relationship started going steadily downhill.

Nobody is sure what caused the rift, but that was the first and last coordination meeting attended by the prime minister or any Union minister. Such is the rift between Modi and Bhagwat that the two, it is reliably learnt, have never had a one-on-one meeting in the past 10 years. They have appeared together at public events like the *bhoomi puja* and consecration of the Ram temple at Ayodhya but nothing of note has transpired between the two, nothing barring a formal exchange of greetings. The two bigwigs are not on talking terms, say Parivar insiders.

PM Modi has not visited the Sangh headquarters in Nagpur even once after taking over as prime minister. He has never visited the tombs of RSS founder K.B. Hedgewar or their second *sarsanghchalak* Golwalkar. He has never paid floral tributes at the Hedgewar Smriti Mandir memorial at the RSS headquarters. The spat became public when ahead of the Lok Sabha election, BJP president J.P. Nadda told an interviewer that the BJP no longer needed the support of the RSS. Will the Haryana results, then,

With his penchant for springing a surprise, Modi might come up with a name that does not feature on the long list floating in media and political circles



Not a single one-on-one meeting between the head honchos in 10 years! Really?

mark a new inflection point in this fractious relationship?

The swanky new office of the RSS in Delhi’s Jhandewalan is now ready. Built on a 2.5 acre plot, the sprawling new structure has three towers, each with 12 storeys. Each tower has 80 rooms and five elevators. Mohan Bhagwat himself is expected to occupy the top floor of the middle tower. The complex has a 20-bed hospital and a car park that can accommodate 200 vehicles. The CISF (Central Industrial Security Force) has the security mandate. Why, you may ask, if it’s the office of a ‘non-governmental’ organisation (NGO), but that question too can keep blowin’ in the wind. Nevertheless, the scale of this gigantic building has birthed speculation that the RSS might shift its headquarters from Nagpur to New Delhi.

Besides the residence and office of *sarsanghchalak* Mohan Bhagwat, the new buildings will also house the offices of other Sangh biggies—Dattatreya Hosabale, Krishna Gopal, Arun Kumar and Suresh Soni. Hosabale, who mostly functions from Lucknow, is expected to take charge of the Delhi headquarters. One of the remaining two towers will house the offices of all the affiliated organisations of the Sangh. The third tower will have residential facilities for Sangh workers and officials. Insiders claim that Mohan Bhagwat will continue to spend most of his time in Nagpur, but the frequency

of his Delhi trips may increase.

Aware of the BJP’s weakening grip on power at the Centre, the RSS seems to be going all out to bridge the gap between Delhi and Nagpur. Signs that despite all the claims and bravado, the BJP and RSS are losing ground in north India are concerns the RSS will want to address. Also, while Bhagwat may have ruled out any grand centenary celebrations next year, 2025 may well see the RSS usher in some dramatic changes. The new office, insiders say, is not just symbolic, it’s meant to closely watch over the ministries, the PMO and 7 Lok Kalyan Marg.

Will these new developments help the BJP end its year-long search for a new national president? The second term of J.P. Nadda as president ended in January 2024. He was then given a six-month extension, ostensibly to oversee the Lok Sabha election. Four months after the Lok Sabha results, he remains the caretaker president. It is unusual for the BJP to struggle to complete a fairly straightforward exercise, especially since it decided against holding an election to choose the party president. The party’s parliamentary board is authorised to nominate a party president. What’s stopping them, then? Well, the lack of a consensus candidate that the BJP and RSS can agree on.

This has sparked wild speculation over likely candidates—in the mix are names like

Vinod Tawde, Sunil Bansal, B.L. Santhosh and Om Mathur, all of whom are old RSS hands and have held organisational positions in the BJP too. The political grapevine has also aired the names of Sanjay Joshi, Vasundhara Raje Scindia, Ram Madhav, Nitin Gadkari, Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Rajnath Singh, Manohar Lal Khattar, Anurag Thakur, Devendra Fadnavis... it goes on.

The RSS, some reports suggested, favoured Sanjay Joshi or Vasundhara Raje, but both names were summarily dismissed by others because they would never be acceptable to Messrs Modi and Shah. Once powerful Sanjay Joshi has been in the doghouse since the Modi camp released an incriminating CD ahead of a BJP national convention in Mumbai. While Gadkari, as party president, tried to rehabilitate him by making him a member of the national executive, his name had to be dropped following opposition from Modi. Likewise Vasundhara Raje Scindia.

With his penchant for springing a surprise, Modi might come up with a name that does not feature on this long list. What appears certain at this point is that the next BJP president will have to have Narendra Modi’s approval. The RSS may not like it, but it is just not in a position yet to go against Modi’s choice. ■

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Should the BJP thank the RSS for Haryana?

The BJP appears to have won not because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi but despite him

Satyendra Tripathi

The BJP's startling victory this week in the Haryana assembly election is reminiscent of a similar stunt performed in the Madhya Pradesh assembly election last year. None of the opinion and exit polls had seen the Haryana result coming, and very few political analysts thought the BJP had any chance of winning more than 25 of the 90 seats in the Haryana assembly. Instead, it ended up winning 48 seats, almost twice the predicted number.

This time, though, the BJP appears to have won not because of Prime Minister Narendra Modi but despite him. The PM had campaigned aggressively and extensively in 2019, addressing as many as 10 rallies and holding several roadshows. The party managed to win just 40 seats and was forced to form a coalition government with Dushyant Chautala's Jannayak Janata Party (JJP). In 2024, Modi addressed only four rallies and not a single roadshow. Yet, the BJP won 48 seats, eight more than last time, while improving its vote share by 3.4 per cent.

The verdict may bolster the PM's authority within the NDA. Modi has already started touting it as a major achievement, claiming that he still has enough fire power to lead his party to victory. However, the reality may be less rosy, as the Haryana result is likely to accentuate the internecine fight within the Sangh Parivar. After the BJP's below-par performance in the Lok Sabha election, and resultant acrimony, the RSS apparently took the party's poll campaign into its own hands, micro-managing it through its village- and ward-level committees. A low-

key affair that proved highly effective. It was the RSS that identified candidates, sorted out prickly issues and contributed to campaign themes. Modi took a back seat. Losing would have given him a handle against the RSS, suggesting that Modi is the only guarantee to a poll success. It might even have covered up the BJP's loss of 62 seats in the Lok Sabha polls earlier this year (compelling it to form a coalition government with the TDP and JDU).

Advantage RSS

The Haryana result has effectively tilted the balance of power in favour of the RSS, which has already started micro-managing the BJP's election campaigns in Maharashtra, Jharkhand and Delhi, where elections are due over the next four months.

In a recent meeting of, BJP leaders in Ranthambhore, the RSS, led by its joint general secretary Arun Kumar, deliberated on the strategy for the coming Delhi assembly elections. The two-day meeting (25 and 26 September) was attended by the BJP's national organising secretary B.L. Santhosh and the Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva, among others. The RSS was represented by 'kshetra pracharak' Jatin Kumar and 'prant pracharak' Vishal. It has been holding similar state-level and district-level meetings in Maharashtra and Jharkhand as well.

This is a departure from the RSS's hands-off attitude during the general election. Following the Lok Sabha results, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat had taken a number of potshots at PM Modi. Even now



Haryana has tilted the balance in the Sangh's favour, which has already started micro-managing the BJP's campaigns in Jharkhand, Maharashtra and Delhi

there is no love lost between the two. Bhagwat is still as critical of Modi's style of working as he was earlier. In the RSS scheme of things, the organisation is supreme, not the individual, whoever that might be.

The RSS thus took umbrage to a Modi-centric campaign and his grandiose self-identification as a 'non-biological' entity sent by God. BJP president J.P. Nadda's statement that the BJP no longer needed the RSS, being all grown up and self-sufficient, further widened the schism between the parent and child organisations.

Khattar was an excellent organiser but never popular among the masses, which is one reason the BJP's tally came down in the 2019 polls. In March 2024, Khattar was replaced by Nayab Singh Saini, an OBC, as CM.

The party focused on securing the OBC vote, which makes up about 40 per cent of the population. Saini, who was previously state president of the party, was more approachable than Khattar. The RSS did all the spadework among the masses to neutralise Congress's *kisan-jawan-pehelwan* (farmer, soldier, wrestler) narrative, dubbing the frustrations of the combine as Jat-centric issues. The success of this strategy is reflected in the claim that the BJP managed to win over 75 per cent of the non-Jat votes. The BJP also targeted Scheduled Caste (SC) voters, particularly through women's self-help groups in villages.

While Congress leaders pushed Bhopinder Singh Hooda for their own candidates, the BJP fielded 60 fresh faces to combat anti-incumbency. In contrast, the Congress re-nominated 17 candidates who had lost earlier, including its state president, Udai Bhan. The BJP also attacked by claiming that the Congress would once again appoint Hooda as chief minister, which led to the feeling that non-Jats would be further alienated, with Hooda's stronghold Rohtak becoming the locus of all new jobs and opportunities.

The Dalits, who had voted en masse for the Congress during this year's Lok Sabha elections, felt estranged by the perception of a Hooda-Kumari Selja rift. Kumari Selja's premature claim to the CM's chair during the campaign did not help the party. The entry of rebel Congress candidates and smaller parties like AAP, BSP and Azad Samaj Party also weaned some non-BJP voters, especially Dalits, away from the Congress.

Jats vs. non-Jats

Since 2014, when the BJP's tally jumped from four to 47 seats, the RSS strategy for Haryana was to create a non-Jat vote bank for itself. Jats constitute about 27 per cent of the state's population. Most of Haryana chief ministers have come from this dominant caste, leading to the notion that no party can form the government in Haryana by ignoring the community.

The BJP's appointment of Manohar Lal Khattar, a Punjabi Khatri, as chief minister in 2014 did not go down well.

The Assembly results in Haryana may be a moment of respite for PM Modi and his allies and a setback to the opposition, especially the Congress. An emboldened BJP is likely to assert itself in seat distribution talks with its allies for the upcoming Maharashtra and Jharkhand assembly elections. But Modi will still have to reckon with the RSS's opposition to his self-centred, self-aggrandising politics as it pushes to evolve a collective leadership within the BJP. ■



Roiling the communal cauldron to telling effect

Saiyed Zegham Murtaza

Why burn Ravana's effigy on Dussehra? If you must burn someone's effigy, let it be the Prophet's. This rabid statement made by Yati Narsinghanand at Hindi Bhavan in Ghaziabad's Lohia Nagar on 29 September was greeted with cheers and claps by the audience, among them several women, some on stage with the infamous head priest of the Dasna Devi temple.

As the video clip went viral, protests erupted not just in western UP but also across the country. Hyderabad MP Asaduddin Owaisi lodged an FIR and demanded that Caisi be booked against the preacher under the UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) and the new version of the Indian Sedition Act. The police, mainstream media and BJP and RSS leaders did what was expected—nothing. The Supreme Court's directions that police should *suo motu* take action on hate speech were also ignored.

Narsinghanand has been spewing hate speech against Muslims for years without facing any consequences, leave alone investigation. He probably considered himself above the law which would explain his amazement at being apprehended by the police on 5 October.

It seems snowballing protests and international outrage finally prompted Yogi Adityanath and the UP Police to act. On 7 October, the chief minister held a review meeting to assess the 'law-and-order situation', belatedly asserting that insulting the Prophet or gods of any religion was undesirable and would be punished. In the same breath, he declared the government would not tolerate protest as a pretext for lawlessness. The police duly booked protestors and also lodged an FIR against fact checker Mohammed Zubair, based on a complaint made by the preacher's aide, Udita Tyagi, who alleged that Zubair had posted an old clip to instigate violence against the 58-year-old priest.

In another video clip shared widely on social media, Narsinghanand can be seen beligerently questioning the manner of his arrest. How dare the police stop his car in the street? Such a thing had never happened when Mulayam Singh Yadav, Mayawati or Akhilesh Yadav were chief ministers of the state. So how could it when his *apna aadmi* (own man) was last office in Lucknow? Power didn't last



The Dasna Devi temple in UP's Ghaziabad

Photo: Getty Images

forever, tell that to the CM, he said to the arresting inspector. Getting into the police vehicle, he asked if he was going to meet the DCP or the police commissioner.

Narsinghanand's belligerence, impunity and vicious communal rhetoric has so far gone scot-free in a city that is 80 per cent Muslim. The temple, which historically opened to Hindus and Muslims alike during Dussehra, has a massive banner prohibiting Muslims from entering.

Despite affirmations that the temple had not been attacked by protestors, BJP MLA from Loni Nand Kishor Gurjar said that police should have shot at least 10 to 20 people in an encounter. The BJP MLA from Deoria said protestors should experience 'Israel wala mazaa' (a repugnant reference to Israel's genocidal war on Palestine).

Post the Lok Sabha results in June, political slogans of *Sab ka saath, sab ka vikas*, justice for Muslim women and a new deal for the largest section of the minority community, the Pasmandas (meaning 'those who are left behind') have been swept aside to give hard-Hindutva front and centre play. Fringe elements have been reactivated and second- and third-line BJP leaders have started speaking a more provocative and strident language. Nand Kishor Gurjar, Gulab Devi, Gaurav Bhatia, Satish Gautam are the newer voices of an old communal agenda. Several TV anchors

seem to hold a license to spread hate. Dancing DJs in front of mosques, showering rose petals on *kanwaris* and a systematic campaign against Muslim traders and eateries selling non-vegetarian food are surfacing all over again. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat recently reiterated *Hindu khatre mein hain* (Hindus are in danger). With people being put in the slammer for the slightest perceived offence against the regime, outrageous bigots like Narsinghanand have been given a free pass for far too long.

Bigotry by the bar in Bareilly

Remember Ravi Kumar Diwakar, an additional district judge, who in earlier judicial pronouncements had hailed Yogi Adityanath as a 'philosopher king' and ordered sealing a section of the Gyanvapi mosque? Turns out he is the son-in-law of a BJP leader. In one of his latest judgements in the first week of October, he sentenced 24-year-old Mohd. Aalim Ahmed under Section 376-2n (repeated rape), Section 506 (criminal intimidation), and Section 323 (voluntarily causing hurt) of the Indian Penal Code.

In his 42-page order, Diwakar examined the term 'love jihad' in great detail, pronouncing that 'the main objective of love jihad is to establish dominance over India under demographic war and international conspiracy by some anarchist elements of a particular religion'.

The judge overruled the woman's plea that her complaint had been made under pressure from her parents and right-wing Hindu organisations. 'According to this court,' he recorded, 'when the victim is not living with her parents, and is living alone in a rented house [...] it is a mystery how she gets money to live alone in a house, to eat and drink, to wear clothes and to talk on mobile.'

His conclusion? 'A huge amount of money is required. Hence, the fact of foreign funding in love jihad cannot be ruled out.'

The All-India Lawyers' Association for Justice has called for urgent action against

the Bareilly judge, stating that his conviction Order 'is not only problematic for its right-wing views and its propagandising of anti-Muslim sentiments but for its questionable understanding of women's consent'.

Indian Accumulation Service

What first appeared in the gossip column of a prominent Hindi daily in September 2019 acquired a life of its own. It seems discreet inquiries were being made to track down people suspected of stealing Rs 50 crore of cash from the house of a retired IAS officer in Uttarakhand.

The unnamed bureaucrat had taken the heist in his stride but his wife had taken it to heart. Shared widely on social media—and with everyone on social media being expert journalists and investigators—it was not long before several names began to circulate. Soon the identity of the person became so obvious that the ex-bureaucrat emerged from anonymity to threaten legal action.

Some were sympathetic, absolving him of corruption and claiming that the money came from fees accumulated by his singer wife. Others wondered why the Central Vigilance Commission, the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate had not stepped in to investigate such a large stash of cash.

While mainstream media steered clear of the controversy, Dilip Cherian took it seriously enough to ask in his column in the *Deccan Chronicle* why no FIR was filed. There was a time when the IAS Association in the state thought nothing of revealing the names of the three most corrupt officers picked through an annual secret ballot. Times sure have changed.

Oxygen therapy

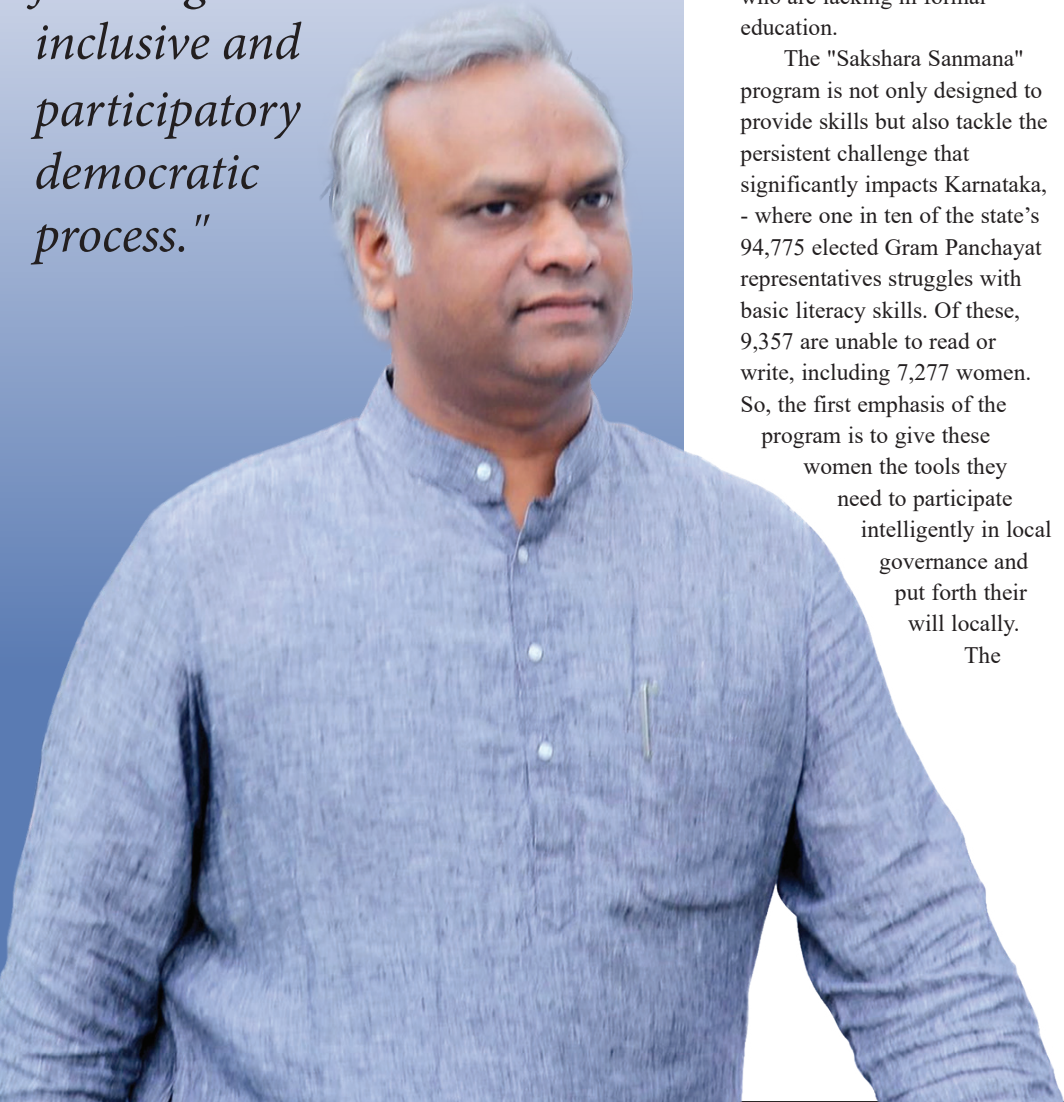
In a scam of a different sort, senior citizens in Kanpur were told that oxygen therapy was the secret of Prime Minister Modi's energy. A machine imported from Israel would make them young again, promised Rajiv Dubey and his wife Rashmi, both reassuringly young and handsome. It was only when their therapy centre Revival World closed down and the couple vanished that people approached the police.

One of the victims claimed she had already paid Rs 10.75 lakh to the couple. The swindlers made an estimated Rs 35 crore before they fled abroad. ■



People in Bengaluru step out and speak up against the BJP's bogey of 'love jihad'

Rural Development and Panchayat Raj minister, Priyank Kharge said "The Sakshara Sanmana program is a vital step towards empowering our women representatives, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to local governance, by enhancing their literacy skills, we are fostering a more inclusive and participatory democratic process."



"Sakshara Sanmana"

Initiative to Equip Gram Panchayat Representatives with Essential Skills

Photo: GettyImages



Bengaluru: The Karnataka State government launched a statewide programme "Sakshara Sanmana" (Literacy Honour) on 1st September. This ambitious project aimed at making 6346 elected Gram Panchayat representatives who cannot read or write, literate.

The Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department revealed that this time, the program will cover a total of 6346 people, including elected representatives. It mainly targets 5,234 elected representatives who are lacking in formal education.

The "Sakshara Sanmana" program is not only designed to provide skills but also tackle the persistent challenge that significantly impacts Karnataka, - where one in ten of the state's 94,775 elected Gram Panchayat representatives struggles with basic literacy skills. Of these, 9,357 are unable to read or write, including 7,277 women. So, the first emphasis of the program is to give these women the tools they need to participate intelligently in local governance and put forth their will locally. The

program's major objective is to provide Gram Panchayat representatives with an education in reading, writing, and arithmetic so that eventually they will be able to handle their own sums of profit and (revenue) loss. The Minister stressed that the aim of this programme is to give them the ability to read and comprehend meetings concerning their own panchayats, to participate actively in policymaking at governance level and to encourage active participation of tone in Gram Panchayat meetings and Gram Sabha/Ward Sabha.Sakshara Sanmana.

Rural Development and Panchayat Raj minister, Priyank Kharge said "The Sakshara Sanmana program is a vital step towards empowering our women representatives, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to local governance, by enhancing their literacy skills, we are fostering a more inclusive and participatory democratic process."

It will be carried out in 21 of the state's districts from September 1st to October 20th. Literacy training daily for two hours, a total of 100 learning hours over 50 days will thus be completed by the participants. Writing equipment, reading matter and graph paper were presented in a kit, the Minister also said.

The teachers will also receive honorariums, and participants will receive certificates plus an honorarium, according to Minister Priyank Kharge. The 'Sakshara Sanmana' program is aimed at transforming the literacy environment for women members of Gram Panchayats in

Karnataka. It seeks to enhance their independence and will to govern locally by widening their range of skills. Its aim is to build the democratic fabric of our state stronger still.

Apart from this, the RDPR department has also plans to equip Gram Panchayat members with adequate knowledge about Digital Information Literacy too, as digitally literate can confidently use, manage, create, quote and share sources of digital information in an effective way.

Digital Information Literacy is a relatively new concept. It is one of the major components in information literacy. The digitally literate can confidently use, manage, create, quote and share sources of digital information in an effective way. The way in which information is used, created and distributed,

demonstrates an understanding and acknowledgement of the cultural, ethical, economic legal and social aspects of the information. The digitally literate demonstrate openness, the ability to problem solve, to critically reflect, technical capability and a willingness to collaborate and keep up-to-date promoted by the changing contexts in which they use information.

E-Panchayat means –a web based dynamic digital interface created for each and every panchayat in India, giving information about particular Panchayat in a two way flow of content. Electronic Panchayat or e-Panchayat is one among the various Mission Mode Projects in Government of India and Government of Karnataka, the Ministry of Panchayat Raj is responsible for its implementation to strengthen

and transform the scene of rural areas. E-Panchayat's goal is to provide better service delivery to citizens living in rural areas across the country. The main aim of e-Panchayat is to make sure development of local area and to empower grass-root governance by availing wide range of services to citizens, panchayat officials, elected representatives and other knowledge workers atlocal level.

E-Panchayat is about empowering and developing the grassroots communities at the panchayat levels through creation of virtual community at each level through an interactive and collaborative web portal, the portal run, managed and sustained by the local community through regular information and content management from a bottom-up as well as top-down channels.

Special prominence to achieve 100 percent literacy and make Karnataka a fully literate state

Literacy plays an important role in the economic development of a state and the country. As part of this various departments including RDPR have come up with various programmes to achieve 100% literacy status for the state in the days to come. Literacy alsoenhances the personality development of the individual and develops a sense of civic responsibility in them. It also contributes to improving the quality of life and serves as an important educational indicator for economic development of the nation. Education has been given special prominence and importance by the Government of Karnataka.

The Literacy rate as per 2011 census is 75.36 in the State. 19 districts namely Yadgir, Raichur, Chamarajnagar, Kalaburagi, Vijayapura, Ballari, Vijayanagar, Koppala, Bagalkote, Ramanagar, Chikkaballapura, Mandya, Bidar, Mysuru, Belagavi, Chitradurga, Kolar, Gadag and Tumakuru have less than the State Average.

Similarly, the Female Literacy rate as per 2011 census is 68.08 in the State. But it is less than the State Average in 19 districts which includes all the districts of KK region.

The department of Mass Education has to take initiatives to improve the literacy rate of these districts on par with the State Average.

Whereas the SC population which has been increased to 1.05 crores in



Photo: GettyImages

2011 census. As per the projected population for the year 2023 the total SC population is 1.42 crores. Similarly, The ST population which was 0.35 crores during 2001 census has been increased to 0.42 crores in 2011 census and the projected population for 2023 is 0.57 crores. District wise population of SC/ST as per the census 2001 and 2011.

The Department of Social Welfare

formulates various Programs and Schemes for the upliftment of Scheduled Castes. The department aims to empower Scheduled Castes and make sure their constitutional rights are protected. It implements Social, Economicand Educational Programs and Schemes at State level, District level and Taluk level to achieve its aims.

The state government's relative

allocation share in the budget is also high and always stands first when compared to the other sector's allocation and share in the budget. Various schemes such as Kasturba Gandhi BalikaVidyalaya, Mid -day meal, National Programme for education of girls (NPEGEL) etc have also been launched by the Government of India to enhance the literacy rates among its population. Therefore

education has been given prime importance by the KarnatakaGovernment and is promoting education through its various provisions annd programmes. Karnataka Government is working hard to bring about maximum literacy in the state, more so in urban areas as against rural parts, as rural population migrate to urban parts of the state. Migration from other states is a

paramount challenge as the mother tongue differs. To facilitate these the state and central government fund activities like

- 1) Link document programme,
- 2) 1000 grama panchayath programme and
- 3)New India Literacy Programme (NILP) etc.

The state government is in process of opening more learning centres in the areas where such population is more. Such places in the limits of Grama Panchayats, special priority zones, model villages of Member of Parliament and in urban areas as well, should be given more importance as mentioned in the guidelines of the government.

Literacy mission officers designated for the purpose and create awareness among them to ensure complete literacy.

These Activities have been started and the system is in place to monitor the progress and to achieve the goal. i.e., 100% literacy in the state. Right from census right upto certification all activities are being closely monitored to ensure perfect execution of the said programmes.

No of Non-literates of 15+ age group in the state

- As per 2011 census 26 crore
- Neo literates between 2009 to 2022 - 39 lakh
- Yet to literate 61 lakh

When will PM Modi get the drift?

To govern and legislate successfully, Modi must now reach out to the Opposition. But will he?

Aakar Patel

There are the prime minister—and there are many—sense a drift and lack of purpose in his third term. In February, Narendra Modi said (in the new parliament building in Delhi) that the BJP's third term would be one of very important decisions that would affect the next 1,000 years. In an interview to a news channel during the campaign, he said that the results would show in the first 125 days after 4 June. The first 100 days' agenda had already been finalised, he said, and he would use the next 25 for the youth. None of this has come to be. Monday, 7 October, marked 125 days since the results and the endemic feeling is that 'nothing is happening'. The main reason for this is that with a minority, the BJP can no longer do in Parliament what it could do between 2014 and 2024. We have seen this with the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, which was sent to a joint parliamentary committee. For the past decade, with a weak Opposition, the government had not allowed scrutiny of bills by committee. This passing of laws without any real understanding of what they contained, without any rigorous process of review or consultation, accelerated through the first decade of the Modi era. In the 14th Lok Sabha (2004–09), 60 per cent of the bills were referred to committees for scrutiny. In the next Lok Sabha (2009–14), this number was 71 per cent. In the first Modi government, this fell to 25 per cent. The Modi regime wilfully undid the parliamentary convention of referring bills to department-related parliamentary standing committees for scrutiny and examination right after the first victory in 2014. The number of laws that were scrutinised before being passed collapsed after Modi's second victory. The



Photo: Getty Images

Opposition noticed this, and 17 MPs from the Congress, the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Telugu Desam Party and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) wrote to the government expressing their concern at the 'hurried passing' of bills without scrutiny. They wrote that public consultation—in which groups and individuals engaged with particular subjects are invited by legislators to put forward their views on prospective legislation—had also stopped. 'Public consultation is a long-established practice where parliamentary committees scrutinise bills, deliberate, engage and work towards improving the content and quality of the legislation,' they wrote. This had no effect on Modi, and in 2020, not a single bill was sent to a committee for scrutiny. Between March and August that year, the government promulgated 11 ordinances, including one that amended the Income Tax Act and allowed 100 per cent tax exemption to donations made to the PM CARES fund. Ordinances are meant to be passed only when Parliament is not in session and the government needs to take immediate action. No ordinance is allowed to be in force for more than six months without parliamentary approval. Here was legislation by ordinance that was voted into law without any scrutiny. Even where committees were constituted, the government prevented them from working. Government MPs were 'using the rule book to stonewall scrutiny on issues that may raise uncomfortable questions for the government'. The committee on home affairs met to discuss the decision on Kashmir after the state had already been bifurcated. After the pandemic, standing committees were disallowed from meeting even virtually, with the excuse that this might violate confidentiality. While Opposition MPs complained, the

BJP took up and dispatched contentious laws on triple talaq and the RTI (both passed after a walkout by the Opposition), and the amendment to the UAPA that allows the government to designate individuals as 'terrorists'. Similarly, the farm bills, the bill that skewered Kashmir's special status and the bill amending citizenship were not referred to any of the committees of Parliament for in-depth, non-partisan deliberation. All resulted in trouble. PRS Legislative Research's Chakshu Roy wrote why the abandonment of legislative scrutiny was a problem: 'In a nutshell, all laws do not receive the same amount of parliamentary attention. A few undergo rigorous scrutiny by parliamentary committees. Others are passed with just a simple debate on the floor of the House. When the Treasury and Opposition agree, even the most far-reaching laws are passed by Parliament with alacrity. When there is disagreement on politically contentious Bills such as the two Bills related to agriculture, then the swift passage results in unruly scenes in Parliament. The outweighing factor is the government's urgency in enacting a particular legislation. When the government is in a hurry, even Bills amending the Constitution can be passed in two to three days.' There was another problem with this: 'When parliamentary committees do not scrutinise Bills, it increases the chances of the country being saddled with half-baked laws.'

Consultation, therefore, is not only important, it is necessary. Modi reversed a tradition of consultation that even the British had followed as India's masters. When a law on forcible indigo cultivation began to be framed in 1917 and the Champaran Agrarian Bill was introduced in the Bihar-Agriss legislative assembly, many members demanded that it be referred to the select committee of the House for scrutiny and examination. The British government conceded and Gandhi was requested to examine the bill. With a strong Opposition now in place, the BJP's days of absolute dominance have come to an end. To govern effectively, to legislate successfully, Modi must reach out to the Opposition. He has to include it in decision-making as prime ministers before him have done. As long as he does not—and he does not show any signs of acknowledging and accepting reality—the drift his fans are anguishing over will remain. The ball, as the cliché goes, is in his court. ■

Views are personal

Modi reversed a tradition of consultation that even the British had followed as India's masters... but with a strong Opposition now in place, the BJP's days of absolute dominance are over

Waking up to slow living

More and more young people are opting out of the rat race to put life back into their lives, writes **Avay Shukla**

At about this time last year, my elder son quit his very well-paying job as a senior executive in a multinational: he had had enough of the El Dorado mirage sold by the IIMs and IITs. He had been working 14-hour days non-stop for 16 years, paying Rs 65,000 a month for a flat in Gurgaon where he just went to sleep, he lunched and dined exclusively on Zomato and Food Panda, could never find the time to relax in our Purani Koti retreat near Shimla, his liver was beginning to get pickled in Blender's Pride. In short, he was on the verge of a burnout, maybe a couple of puffs away from being stubbed out like a cigarette. One day, he saw the light, ignored Mr Narayana Murthy's exhortation to work 70-hour weeks, and regarded with justified suspicion Ms Sitharaman's pious advice to fight work pressure through "inner strength by reaching out to God". His decision to ignore her was made easier, he told me later, by the possibility that by 'God' she meant Mr Modi, and since he himself 'worked' 18 hours, reaching out to him would be futile (as Kangana Ranaut has recently discovered). So one fine foggy morning in Gurgaon, he pinged his boss that he was quitting (that's how they do the hiring, firing and resigning these days, no 'Dear sir, it is with profound regret that...' letters as in our days), packed his suitcase and pooch in his car, and joined us in Purani Koti. He now lives off his savings, work-from-home consultancy projects, articles on the auto world, and *revdis* from my pension whenever the state government periodically emerges from bankruptcy and doles it out to me. He now has the time to indulge in his passion for photography and gardening, and is currently trying to grow bananas and peepul trees at 7,000 feet in an area which gets three feet of snow every winter! I'm personally sceptical of that last bit, but who knows—after all, they laughed at Satyananda Stokes when he brought in apple plants from the USA, didn't they? And today Himachal is an apple state. If my son succeeds, we may yet be a banana republic soon. Welcome to the world of 'slow living', the latest concept that is catching on with Gen X (or Gen Z) across the world. More and more of them are just chucking the rat race with its slave-driving, toxic work culture and sweat shop values, which just last month took the lives of Anna Sebastian Perayil in Pune and Sadaf Fatima in Lucknow. These bright youngsters prefer to return to nature, renewing relationships with

family and friends, and doing what they *want* to do—not what neo-capitalism, voodoo economics and the Sanjiv Sanyals of the world expect them to do. Slow living is the next best thing to a government job, where you can effectively retire the day you join and nobody will even notice, even as pay commissions keep hiking your salary and pension with predictable regularity. He has my full support: it is this generation which can perhaps save our once blue planet, since my generation has completely abdicated its responsibility. This choice of lifestyle, however, is not all fun and games: it requires the making of responsible choices—in consumption, expenditure, manner of living—since one's income levels drop substantially. It forces one to make an inventory of the important things in life and discard the redundant, superfluous and wasteful materialism inherent in the 'keeping up with the Junejas' South Delhi mentality. It goes hand-in-hand with another trend being increasingly embraced by planet conscious Gen X—minimalism. Minimalism is simply 'living with less' by decluttering one's physical spaces, reducing unnecessary consumption, seeking quality over quantity, travelling less, paring possessions down to the essentials and focusing on personal values rather than reacting to competitive pressures. (The reader is probably reminded here of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.) This is what slow living is in essence, and I see more and more youngsters consciously opting for this lifestyle and minimalist framework. Just to cite examples of how this works: there is the 'sniff test' for clothes. Do your clothes need to be washed so frequently, consuming more water, soap, power? Sniff the clothes for malodorous smells—this will probably tell you that you could wear them for another couple of days before consigning them to the washing machine. (A single washing machine discharges 480 kg of greenhouse gases every year). Then there's the 'one in, one out' principle: don't keep adding to your possessions unnecessarily—buy an item only as a replacement, not as an addition, discard the first before buying the second. 'Tiny living' is another idea that is gaining traction—small homes (why do you need five bedrooms when it's just you and your wife and maybe one kid?), away from the congestion and pollution of metros, off-grid as regards power and water, self-sufficient with solar and rainwater harvesting.



You are happier as a person when you have minimised your needs. This is now a scientifically captured idea known as the Easterlin Paradox

A minimalist lifestyle is good for the earth as well—the culture of over-consumption, so assiduously promoted by economists, governments and big corporates, has led to the depletion of natural resources and ravaging of forests, rivers, lakes and mountains. Reducing this demand for goods and products and minimising possessions lowers the strain on the natural environment, reduces waste, cuts down on carbon emissions. It is a far more sustainable model of life than the blind GDP growth-driven models being foisted on us; in fact, I would go further and say it is the *only* lifestyle choice which can save us and the planet from another extinction. And here's the final, clinching argument which has eluded us but has been instinctively grasped by the younger generation—you are happier as a person when you have mini-

mised your needs. This has been scientifically captured now in a concept which is known as the Easterlin Paradox. This states that happiness does not increase with more money. Happiness is directly proportionate to money up to a certain point, but once your basic needs are met, more money does not mean more happiness. After this point, happiness is defined not by money, but by the meaning of life, relationships and contribution to society, without which more money simply means more worry, tension, fear and even depression. Bob Dylan nailed it six decades ago when he sang: 'When you ain't got nothing, you've got nothing to lose...' I'm glad our sons and daughters are beginning to hear this music. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and the author of Disappearing Democracy: Dismantling of a Nation

Biryani Amma’s magic touch

Selvi Amma’s kitchen in Coimbatore is special, with over 15 transgender employees and an appetite for hard work

Poongodi Mathiarasu and Akshara Sanal

Dressed in a deep blue kurta, embroidered lungi and a string of fragrant jasmine coiled around her hair, M.P. Selvi enters the large kitchen she runs—Karumbukadai M.P. Selvi Biryani Master. The staff of her catering unit look up, some of the chatter ceases and a worker greets her and takes her bag.

Selvi is the ‘biryani master’ and instantly commands respect in this large kitchen of over 60 people. In a few minutes everyone is back in the groove, moving quickly and efficiently, oblivious to the smoke and sparks that sputter from the flames.

Dum mutton biryani is made by Selvi and her cooks. In this preparation, the meat and rice are cooked together, unlike other biryanis where the two main ingredients are cooked separately.

“I am a Coimbatore dum biryani specialist,” says the 50-year-old trans woman. “I manage it all alone. I keep everything in mind. Many times, we get booked six months in advance.”

As she is speaking to us, a *satuvam* (large spoon) dripping with biryani masala is handed to her. Selvi tastes the marinade and nods, “Okay.” That’s the final and most important taste test and everybody looks relieved as the head chef approves the dish.

“Everyone calls me ‘Selvi Amma (mother)’. There’s joy in being called *Amma* for a *thirunangai* (trans woman),” she says beaming.

She runs her catering service from her home in Pullukadu, a low-income housing area in the city. She employs 65 people, including 15 trans people. Every week, the team prepares orders of up to 1,000 kilos of biryani on an average. Occasionally, a few weddings add to the workload. Once Selvi prepared 3,500 kilos of biryani for a large mosque in the city that fed close to 20,000 people.

“Why do I like cooking? Once, after eating my biryani, a customer named Abdin called me and said, ‘What taste! The meat falls off the bone like snow’. But it’s not just the taste factor. My customers eat food made by the hands of a transgender person. It feels like a blessing.”

The day we visit, 400 kilos of her special biryani are being prepared for a wedding function. “There is no secret masala in my biryani!” Selvi Amma says, insisting that the taste comes from her attention to detail. “My mind is always on the pot. I like to add the masalas like coriander powder, garam

masala and [spices like] cardamom myself,” she says, gesturing with hands that have fed thousands of people.

Ingredients for the wedding biryani are being prepped by two of her employees, Tamilarasan and Elavarasan, brothers in their 30s. They are cutting vegetables, mixing masalas and checking the firewood. If it’s a big event, making biryani can take an entire day and night.

Selvi Amma’s calendar is especially busy during April and May, the holiday season, when she receives up to 20 orders. Her regular customers are mostly from the Muslim community, and she often caters for weddings and engagements. She adds, “No matter how big [in social status] they are, they call me Amma.”

Mutton biryani is the most popular dish, but Selvi also offers chicken and beef biryani. One kilo of biryani feeds four to six people. Her ‘cooking charges’ are Rs 120 per kilo, with ingredients being charged separately.

After four hours in the kitchen, Selvi Amma’s clothes are soiled with oil and spices; the heat of the kitchen makes her face glisten with sweat. The grey room behind her is lit by the flames firing the large degchis (cooking vessels).

“People do not last long in my kitchen. It’s not easy to find people who do what we do,” she explains. “We lift weights and stand in front of fires. If they want to work for me, they have to do difficult work. And those who do not want to do so, run away.”

After a few hours, everyone sits down to eat breakfast—parotta and beef korma bought from a nearby restaurant.

Growing up, Selvi Amma’s household was often short of food. “Access to food was very difficult for our family. We only ate corn and maize,” she says. “Rice was something we could eat only occasionally, once in months.”

She was born in 1974 in Pullukadu, Coimbatore, in a family of agricultural workers. When she realised that she was transgender (assigned male at birth but identifying as a woman), she moved to Hyderabad, and from there to Mumbai and Delhi. “I didn’t like it, so I came back to Coimbatore and decided not to leave again. I am able to live with dignity as a transgender woman here,” she says.

Selvi has adopted 10 trans daughters who live and work with her. “Not only trans women, but other men and women depend on me for their survival. Everyone should eat. I want them to be happy.”

It was an older trans person who taught



Self-reliance is the biggest gift for a transgender person. “Else, we will have to do dhantha (sex work) or yasakam (begging).”

Selvi Amma how to cook. She has only been honing the skills she picked up 30 years ago, she says modestly. “Initially, I went to work as a helper and eventually worked as an assistant for six years. They paid me Rs 20 for two days of work. It was a small amount. But I was happy with that.”

She has passed on the skill to others: Saro, Selvi Amma’s adopted daughter learnt from her. Today, Saro is a master biryani-maker in her own right, and as Selvi says proudly, “is capable of handling thousands of kilograms of biryani on her own”.

“There are daughters and granddaughters in the transgender community. If we teach them a skill, their lives will be enriched,” says Selvi who feels self-reliance is the biggest gift she can pass on to other transgender persons. “Else, we will have to do *dhantha* (sex work) or

yasakam (begging).”

Valli Amma and Sundari have been working with her for over 15 years. “I was young when I met Selvi Amma,” says Valli Amma, who is older than her employer. “My children were little. This was the only earning option then. Now that my children are grown and earning, they want me to rest. But I love working. The money I earn gives me freedom. I can spend as I wish, going on tours!”

Selvi Amma says she pays her employees Rs 1,250 a day. Sometimes, when orders are very large, the team has to pull a 24-hour shift. “If we have to cook for a morning function, we don’t sleep,” she says. The pay then rises to Rs 2,500. She says assertively, “That’s what you should get paid. This is not just regular work. We work with fire!”

Flames light up almost every corner of the huge kitchen. Logs of firewood are even kept on top of the degchi’s lid while the biryani simmers. “You cannot be afraid of the fire. That doesn’t mean there are no injuries. We get burns, you just have to be careful,” she warns. “We suffer. But when you think that you can earn a hundred rupees and eat happily for a week, that pain fades away.”

A chef’s day starts early, and Selvi Amma sets out by 7 a.m. Bag in hand, she hails an auto from outside her home in Karumbukadai for the 15-minute ride. Her day, however, starts even earlier at 5 a.m. when she tends to her cows, goats, chickens and ducks. Mayakka, 40, one of Selvi Amma’s adopted daughters, helps with feeding, milking and collecting eggs. Selvi loves feeding her animals as “they help ease my mind, especially after the stress from my high-pressure job in the kitchen.”

Work doesn’t end for the master biryani

chef after she is back home. She continues to manage all the bookings with the help of her trusty diary and pen. She also organises all the groceries for the next day’s cooking.

“I only accept work from people who trust me,” she says as she moves to the kitchen to cook her own dinner. “I don’t like doing nothing and just eating and sleeping.”

During the pandemic, work shut down for three years. “We had no other way to survive, so we bought a cow for milk. Now we need three litres of milk every day. Anything extra, we sell,” Selvi says.

Home is in the Tamil Nadu Urban Habitat Development Board quarters. Most of the families around belong to the Scheduled Caste community and are daily wage workers. “There are no rich people here. Everyone is working class and if they need pure milk for their children, they come to me.”

“We have been living here for 25 years. The government acquired our land for road construction and [in return] provided us with a house here,” she explains, adding, “People here treat us with respect and dignity.” ■

Courtesy: People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI)





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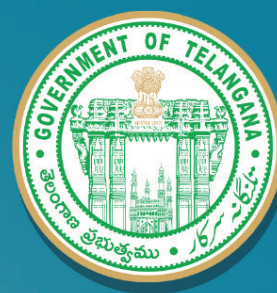
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