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New Delhi • 15 September 2024 • Pages: 8 • National • Vol. 7 Issue 47 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

STATES 360°

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TRANSPARENCY ON TRIAL

The case against Madhabi Puri Buch

The SEBI chairperson's ongoing earnings from her past employers ICICI have raised conflict-of-interest alarms

Sucheta Dalal

A series of allegations by the Congress Party against Madhabi Puri Buch, chairperson of the Securities & Exchange Board of India (SEBI), sent shock waves through the financial sector yesterday, casting a further shadow over the integrity of the market regulator.

The accusations are so startling that even seasoned market experts were initially sceptical, with some speculating that the Congress might have fallen prey to deep fakes. Yet, as the dust settled, ICICI Bank's official response to the stock exchanges has only deepened the intrigue, raising crucial questions about the conflict of interest and absence of adequate disclosure norms when private sector individuals are appointed to top government positions.

Subhash Chandra Goel, the founder of the Zee group—himself embroiled in a long-standing investigation by SEBI—added fuel to the fire by holding a separate press conference to level some serious charges against the chairperson. But the spotlight remains firmly on the Congress, since it has followed up its original charges with more questions about ICICI Bank's employee stock options plan (ESOP) policy.

The initial allegations

Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera, in a press conference accused Ms Buch of earning a staggering Rs 16.8 crore (approximately \$2.1 million) from the ICICI group, through a combination of salary, proceeds of ESOPs and tax benefits. This figure dwarfs her earnings as the head of SEBI by a factor of five. Ms Buch quit ICICI group in 2013, after having headed ICICI Securities, its brokerage firm, whose planned merger with ICICI Bank now is also mired in controversy.

[In the first week of September], ICICI Bank informed stock exchanges that all the money paid was due to retirement benefits accrued to Ms Buch after she left the Bank in 2013. However, instead of quelling concerns, it has triggered new concerns about conflict of interest and the absence of disclosure and adequate oversight over those who head regulatory bodies.

On 3 September, the Congress raised new questions about ICICI Bank's statement. It says that ICICI Bank's ESOP policy is only available on the US Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) website and not in India. That policy says that an employee can exercise ESOPs within a maximum of three months after voluntary retirement. This seems contrary to

ICICI Bank's disclosure to stock exchanges that an employee can exercise ESOPs for up to 10 years after leaving the company. However, another clause in the policy says that commencing the date of vesting, the period of exercising ESOPs will expire on the completion of a period not exceeding 10 years, 'as may be determined by the Remunerations and Nominations Committee for each grant'. This seems in line with Congress's point that Ms Buch was singled out for special benefits.

The Congress has also questioned how retirement benefits (they refer to it as pension/salary) can be significantly higher than the last drawn salary of an individual. Since the Congress has not put out documents and SEBI has remained silent, it is still unclear if the figures in the Congress press release include ESOPs that may have been encashed by Ms Buch.

Disclosure norms: a question of transparency

The crux of the issue is disclosure rules governing the seniormost officials at regulatory bodies, given their access to unpublished price-sensitive information (UPSI). Their orders and decisions can dramatically impact stock prices, raising the stakes for stringent disclosure and compliance norms. A negative order against a listed company could lead to a fall in its share prices and could also cause a spike in share prices of competitors. So a public disclosure of personal interest and holdings seems a fair ask.

I emailed SEBI's human resources chief to ask if UPSI and disclosure rules apply to the chairperson. Whether disclosure of the encashment of ESOPs are made by the chairperson every year and are there any restrictions on when the SEBI chair and whole-time members (WTMs) can encash ESOPs and investments in the context of the timing of significant orders and decisions. I have not received any response from SEBI.

In the seven years since Ms Buch assumed her role at SEBI, the regulator has tightened disclosure norms across corporate India, often under Listing Obligations and Disclosure Regulations (LODR) and insider trading rules. However, the lack of disclosure regarding her earnings/ encashment of ESOPs from her previous employer raises uncomfortable questions. Can an individual leading a regulatory organisation retain claims on ESOPs for a decade after leaving an organisation? More importantly, why does SEBI, an institution with over three decades of experience, not have robust mechanisms in place to address these potential conflicts?

Global standards: a stark contrast

Internationally, the standards for managing conflicts of interest among regulatory heads are stringent. The US has general rules of conduct for government officials in public service, which in a nutshell say, 'You shall not hold financial interests that conflict with the conscientious performance of duty.' Heads of regulatory bodies in most developed countries are, typically, required to divest direct holdings in entities that could pose conflict of interest, including sector-specific mutual funds. Assets that cannot be easily divested have to be placed in a blind trust that is independently managed.

The chairperson of the US SEC is subject to even stricter rules regarding conflicts of interest, investments and financial disclosures, due to the power and influence of the job. In many cases, these financial disclosures are made public to ensure transparency and allow exter-



(Left) SEBI chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch



Photo: Getty Images

Why does SEBI, an institution with over three decades of experience, not have robust mechanisms in place to address these potential conflicts?

nal parties to monitor potential conflicts of interest.

A more concrete example is that of Hank Paulson who transitioned from Goldman Sachs to head the US Treasury. He was required to sell his investments valued at \$700 million, with the only concession being deferred capital gains, if reinvested in government securities or mutual funds within 60 days.

In contrast, India's regulations are ambiguous. The Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) manual, last updated in 2021, offers little more than vague guidance, cautioning against 'frequent speculation' in stocks and investments likely to 'embarrass or influence' the official's duties.

It is hard to believe that SEBI has no rules in place for those at the top or that the SEBI chairperson did not realise, during her seven-year stint that disclosure of salary/ encashment of ESOPs were crucial in her highly sensitive role as SEBI chief.

The elephant in the room: codifying rules for conflict of interest

The broader issue here is the lack of codified rules for conflict of interest within SEBI—a deliberate strategy, perhaps, given

that controversies involving trading and investments by senior SEBI officials date back to the 1990s.

SEBI's rules on transaction in shares require officials to disclose their shareholding and that of their families within 15 days of assuming office and at the end of each financial year. Significant transactions must also be disclosed within 15 days and whole-time members are not allowed to trade on the basis of unpublished price-sensitive information. But, if disclosures remain confidential, who monitors for potential conflicts? Is it likely that an internal vigilance official or HR department holds a chairperson or a whole-time member accountable? The Hindenburg Research allegations have exposed how we also have no information about her recusals in conflict-of-interest situations.

The charges levelled by multiple sources—Hindenburg, Subhash Goel, the Congress party—and the ensuing debate underscore the need for SEBI to re-examine its internal policies, ensuring they meet the rigorous standards expected of a modern, transparent regulatory body. Only then can it maintain the public trust that is essential to its role as the guardian of India's financial markets. ■

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Q & A

'Inaction hurts people'

The month-long movement for justice in West Bengal, led by students, women and civil society, has been a battle cry for change. The protestors have done what they could to distance themselves from political parties. Their goals may not be sharply outlined but there is no mistaking the fury against the state administration, which has seemed less concerned about their grievances and more focused on damage control and managing the political fallout. It does not help her cause that Mamata Banerjee is currently the only woman chief minister in the country and has a reputation as a firebrand who always stood up to bullies and always defended the interests of women. Already besieged by all the uncomfortable questions from her political adversaries, in the state and at the Centre, from the judiciary and the media, the public resignation of **Jawhar Sircar** (72), former Prasar Bharati CEO and retired IAS officer of the West Bengal cadre—whom Banerjee had handpicked—would have embarrassed her further. Sircar, who is half way through his six-year term in the Rajya Sabha, and still backs Banerjee to survive the crisis, spoke to **Anuradha Raman** on why he decided to quit.



Why did you feel the need to write an open letter?

I sent the letter on Sunday, 8 September, and I put it out on X the next day. This was not a private note but a public message. It needed to get across to other members of the party. The contents were meant to be a wake-up call for the party. I had to put it out in the public domain.

Is there a problem in airing views on serious issues directly with leaders? Is there a breakdown in communication within the party?

All parties have the same problem. Whenever there is something important to convey, members, even MPs, find themselves bound by rigid structures. I had the opportunity to speak to members across party lines as a parliamentarian. Whenever I asked them why they couldn't speak to their respective leaders, they would say *chhoro*, *chhoro* (forget it, let it be). The TMC is not an exception.

How would you describe your relationship with Mamata Banerjee?

It has been fine, though now she will be annoyed with me. She will think this was the wrong time for me to walk out. But I think it was the right time. It is

also the right moment for her to take the right decisions. I believe she should come out and address the anger among the people.

Isn't it now a bit too late?

Mamata is still the undisputed leader in Bengal and remains the only bulwark we have against communalism. I believe she is capable of doing anything. Unfortunately, all leaders think they are being unfairly heckled and criticised, which is not always true.

You have been compared to Vibhishan (who, as the Ramayana story goes, betrayed his brother Ravana), while you yourself have described your resignation as *hara-kiri* for the larger good. What good do you expect to come out of what you call a selfless act?

The day my resignation is accepted in the Rajya Sabha, I will pack my bags and walk away. Please remember that the Rajya Sabha was the reward a certain Chief Justice of India aspired to. A Rajya Sabha ticket is the one thing that most newspaper editors covet; it's a position that comes with perks. If giving it up is to be Vibhishan, the person who said this needs his head examined.

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STATES 360°



HARYANA

Caste alliances crumble: BJP struggles as leaders abandon ship

Herjinder

It's not a wave of resignations—it's a spate. On 8 September, G.L. Sharma, vice president of Haryana's BJP state unit stepped down. Over 250 officials followed suit, all of them joining the Congress. This marked the fifth consecutive day of mass resignations from the BJP, among them state cabinet ministers, sitting MLAs and influential leaders at both state and district levels.

On 4 September, the BJP had released its first list of 67 candidates for the upcoming assembly elections, sparking a series of internal revolts that continue unabated. But the exodus and unrest began well before the release of the first list, fuelled by dissatisfaction with party leadership (and its decisions) as well as the buzz that the BJP is facing defeat in the upcoming assembly election.

Throughout the state's history, the BJP has never been a dominant force. In Haryana's first assembly election in 1967, its predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, won 12 out of 81 seats. As the farming community's influence grew, the BJP's steadily diminished. Apart from a few instances where it formed alliances in the name of opposition unity, the BJP's seat count has generally remained in single digits.

This dynamic shifted in 2014, during what many refer to as the 'Modi wave'. In Haryana, this was reflected in the formation of what is often called an anti-Jat alliance at the state level.

A few months ago, during the Lok Sabha elections, a YouTuber from Haryana provided an insightful explanation of this strategy. He pointed out that while the BJP typically polarises society against Muslims across the country, the Muslim population in Haryana is minimal, except in Nuh district. So, who could they 'other'? The BJP picked on the Jat population.

The strategy was to unite Banias, Punjabis, and backward castes to secure a majority. However, in a closely-knit society like Haryana, this kind of alliance could only go so far. Traditionally, the Dalit and backward population in Haryana has largely aligned with the Congress, which has successfully built a broad-based coalition. The BJP tried to break into this voter base through defections and other means, achieving some success in 2014. For instance, the party brought Rao Indrajit Singh into its fold in south Haryana, aiming to win over Ahir voters.

Despite the BJP securing just one seat

over the majority in the 2014 assembly election, it became evident that this kind of 'social engineering' had its limitations. Several other factors were also at play. On one hand, the Congress faced a degree of anti-incumbency after 10 years in power. On the other hand, Haryana's most prominent opposition leader, Om Prakash Chautala, was in jail due to a recruitment scam. The BJP capitalised on these circumstances.

However, by the 2019 assembly elections, Om Prakash Chautala's grandson, Dushyant Chautala, was working to reclaim his family's political ground. He formed the Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) which led to a split in the anti-BJP vote. No single party emerged with a majority and the BJP resorted to 'Operation Kamal' to form the government, eventually securing power by offering Dushyant Chautala the position of deputy chief minister.

The next five years were difficult for Haryana. This period saw the Covid-19 pandemic and the farmers' protest. The BJP government's antagonism to the movement and the barricading of Delhi's borders against the peaceful marchers turned almost all farming communities against the party, not just the Jats. The situation was so tense, chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar and other BJP leaders were unable to hold public meetings or participate in events, as angry farmers prevented them from entering villages.

As the 2024 Lok Sabha elections approached, the BJP recognised the rumble for what it was. Manohar Lal Khattar was replaced by Nayab Singh Saini, who was

Apart from a few instances where it formed alliances in the name of opposition unity, the BJP's seat count has generally remained in single digits

Photo courtesy: @BhupinderShooda/X



Haryana BJP vice president G.L. Sharma (right) joins the Congress in the presence of Bhupinder Singh Hooda and Deepender Hooda

sworn in as chief minister. The idea was to counter anti-incumbency against Khattar while playing the OBC card by appointing an OBC chief minister (though Sainis comprise a mere 3 per cent of the state's population). The Lok Sabha election results revealed that this strategy did not succeed.

Disillusionment with the party is evident across the state, particularly in the cities along the GT Road belt, including Panipat, Sonapat, Karnal and Ambala. Once strongholds of BJP support, these urban centres are shifting loyalties. Reports indicate that the BJP can neither count on the city dwellers nor the traditionally supportive Punjabi and Vaish communities who once formed a crucial part of its voter base.

The caste-based equations that the party counted on for political dominance in Haryana have eroded over time. What was once a carefully constructed coalition of various social groups, including Banias, Punjabis and backward castes, has fragmented. This collapse of caste dynamics has undermined the BJP's influence, exposing the party to a much more volatile political landscape. With its foundational alliances crumbling, the BJP finds itself in a precarious position, struggling to regain the trust of

communities that once played a pivotal role in its success in the state.

A resignation and a retirement

Vinesh Phogat is fighting the assembly elections on 5 October from the Julana seat on a Congress ticket. This is a tough seat, which the Congress has won only thrice since the formation of Haryana. 88 candidates were vying for it. The fact that not one of them objected to Vinesh's nomination speaks volumes both about her popularity and their discipline in putting the party's prospects first. Since the announcement, Vinesh has not only visited Julana but also inaugurated her campaign office there.

Indian Railways—which employed her on the sports quota—was first loath to accept her resignation. As in other government departments, employees are required to serve a three-month notice period. Although departments have the discretion to waive the notice period, the Railways had been dragging its feet. If Vinesh's resignation was not accepted by the last date of nomination—12 September—her candidature would have been rejected, as government employees cannot contest elections. When the Union government

realised that the champion wrestler would be a greater threat if she campaigned statewide rather than within her own constituency, the Railways accepted her resignation with immediate effect.

There may have been another reason for the sudden resolution—the BJP fielding ex-jailer Sunil Sangwan from Dadri constituency. Shortly before receiving the BJP ticket, Sangwan opted for voluntary retirement (VRS) from his position as Bhondsi Jail Superintendent. The VRS process is typically lengthier and more complex than a standard resignation. As we all know, in the realm of politics, quick processes can be prolonged and lengthy ones expedited. With Sangwan's premature retirement fast-tracked, stalling Vinesh's resignation—in effect, stymying her candidature—would have snowballed into an electoral issue. This might have influenced the decision to release her from her obligations to the Railways.

Readers may recall, it was on Sangwan's watch as Sunaria Jail Superintendent that Ram Rahim Singh was granted parole six times. The Dera Sacha Sauda head, who is serving a life-sentence for rape, is out on furlough, and is expected to lend Sangwan, the friendly jailor, a hand in these elections. ■

'Inaction hurts people'

Continued from page 1

You've said it became difficult to remain silent...

I kept quiet for a whole month. I am not a political person; mine was a lateral entry into the TMC. I am from civil society, which often does not have a civil tongue. We represent what we consider the voice of the informed public. Immediately after the horrific incident at R.G. Kar, I asked: "Why haven't you suspended the principal of the college?" I was told we are disciplined soldiers of the party and should abide by its decisions. Fine. But on Facebook, I gave an interview in Bangla, in which I said the party should suspend the principal immediately. I was accused of speaking out of turn. I argued that by suspending the principal, the administration and the party would gain credibility. I did not say this to embarrass the party.

Who questioned you when you spoke up?

Every party has people who ensure that members do not break ranks. I was asked that I demanded. I said: I was the guilty. Take demonstrative action. Question the police. Let's be transparent in our actions. Because of my years of working as a civil servant and administrator, I had also sent a 'to do' list, which included a call to suspend



leaders who were taking bribes and building mansions. Inaction hurts people. I happen to be the only former administrator in the party. If you don't take my advice, whom will you heed—the *iccreamwala*?

I'd sent a similar list of actions that should have been taken by the party in the last one month. There is a difference between demonstrative action and delayed, reluctant action. I could see the delayed action that followed. That's when I decided, enough is enough. This, despite having said in public that Didi is capable of jumping into the fire to sort out an issue.

There were reasons to believe, though, that the agitation was not all spontaneous...

I have been on the streets, where I'm not recognised. This movement is too dispersed, the protestors too diverse to conclude that they are [all] being egged on by political parties. The BJP has its own agitators, who get pulled up by the police. Let's not confuse the two. Reach out to the women protestors. Reach out to the striking doctors.

This movement is turning out to be an acid test for the Mamata government. What should the chief minister do?

I have been observing her since 1983. I have seen how she overcomes odds. She has the spirit; she can do it. She and her people might be angry with me momentarily. But her stand on women's empowerment is genuine and undiluted. It is tragic that this incident took place in a state where women are actually empowered.

There is a context to this agitation. Calcutta has repeatedly been declared the safest city for women by the NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau). The women of Bengal have been an empowered lot for a long, long time. They are Durga and Kali. I know; I married one. They have minds of their own, voices of their own. In that context, when they are saying what you have done is not enough, they need to be heeded. Their protest is an attempt to reclaim not only the night but a space other states have not yet thought about. The women of Bengal are actually fighting a battle for the rest of India. ■

I asked, "Why haven't you suspended the principal (of R.G. Kar)?" I was told we are disciplined soldiers of the party and should abide by its decisions



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STATES 360°



JHARKHAND

Pre-poll hysterics over 'love and land jihad'

Rajendra Tiwari

The government of India has repeatedly maintained that it has no record of undocumented Bangladeshis residing in India. In fact, it informed the Supreme Court that it was impossible to state a number. That, however, has not prevented the Union home minister Amit Shah, BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, two former chief ministers Babulal Marandi and Champai Soren, and a member of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) Asha Lakra from alleging that Adivasi women in Jharkhand have been victims of 'love and land jihad'. Thousands of Muslims from Bangladesh, claimed Amit Shah in July, had infiltrated the Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand, married Adivasi women and occupied land.

There is ample evidence of land alienation in the state—but the culprits are primarily the State in cahoots with the industrial lobby. Despite the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act of 1908 and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act of 1949, which restricts transfer of tribal land to non-tribals, large tracts of Adivasi land have been taken without the community's permission. Coercion, corruption, forgery and manipulation of land records, dubious 'deeds of donation' and informal transactions are the routes through which tribal land has passed into the hands of non-tribals.

The BJP's 'love jihad' campaign, sustained by relentless propaganda in the media, has no data to back it. Asha Lakra is the only BJP leader to have cited specific instances. While she was cagey about names, she said there were apparently eight mukhiyas, one panchayat samiti member and a zilla parishad chairperson in Sahibganj district who were 'victims'. The *Scroll* found that Lakra's claim of these Adivasi women having married

"Bangladeshi infiltrators, Rohingya Muslims" was completely false. In truth, three of the women had Adivasi husbands. The fourth, Kapra Tudu, had married Nitin Saha, a Hindu from outside the Adivasi community. The remaining six Adivasi women panchayat leaders who were indeed married to Muslims told *Scroll* that there was no coercion involved—they had married out of choice. Their husbands were locals settled in the Santhal Parganas.

A field survey in Sahibganj by the Jharkhand Janadhikar Mahasabha and the Loktantra Bachao Abhiyan also arrived at the same conclusion. Neither had they come across any Bangladeshi infiltrators, nor had the people spotted any. They confirmed large-scale violations of the SPT Act and demanded a thorough inquiry by the government. They also confirmed that the police were harassing couples on suspicion of the husbands being Bangladeshis. Although chief minister

Hemant Soren dismissed the allegations of 'love jihad' as baseless, pointing out that the state did not even have an international border with Bangladesh—which raises the other question of whose responsibility it is to stop infiltration—both Babulal Marandi and Champai Soren have echoed the allegations made by Shah and Dubey.

These hysterics seem likely to continue till the assembly election, scheduled for end-December.

Soren versus Soren: a cloak-and-dagger drama

While BJP state president Babulal Marandi claims the party had sent feelers to Champai Soren after he was asked to resign by the JMM (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha), the political grapevine has a different story to tell.

When Hemant Soren stepped out of jail on 28 June, Champai Soren (who had

warmed the CM's seat for six months) did not go to receive him. This raised eyebrows. On 1 July, the Jharkhand government released full-page advertisements hailing the three new criminal laws which replaced the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Evidence Act. The new bills rammed through Parliament were opposed by parties in the INDIA bloc and the government ads amped the unease. The Congress is believed to have alerted Hemant Soren that Champai Soren—who he had deputised as officiating chief minister before being marched off to prison by the ED—was actually planning to switch over to the BJP. This sent alarm bells ringing and Hemant Soren and the JMM moved swiftly to contain the damage.

That would explain the abrupt change of guard. On 28 June, Hemant Soren had indicated that Champai Soren would continue in office, while he would devote his time to organisation and election campaigning. Once alerted about a pre-poll rebellion, however, he curtly instructed Champai to cancel all official engagements and attend a meeting of the legislature party, where he was to publicly resign.

Champai Soren has himself narrated how insulted and humiliated he was by this turn of events. After agonising over his next move, even considering retiring from active politics, he finally decided to join the BJP.

Neither the party nor their latest recruit expected Hemant Soren to be released from prison so soon. When a single bench of the high court granted him bail, the ED promptly moved the Supreme Court with an appeal against the order. However, the high court order was so scathing, comprehensive and categorical that the Supreme Court refused to intervene. Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's carefully crafted plan thus came a cropper. Had Champai switched to the BJP as chief minister, he might have secured the support of several JMM legislators. However,

abruptly cut to size and deprived of even a ministerial berth, he has been able to persuade just one suspended JMM MLA to defect with him.

The BJP is putting up a brave front and claiming that Champai Soren joining the party is a coup of sorts. There are serious doubts, however, about how much the party would really benefit. Two other 'leaders', Sita Soren and Geeta Koda, who joined the BJP after defecting from the JMM and the Congress respectively, lost in the Lok Sabha election.

Champai Soren hails from the Kolhan region in Singhbhum, which elects 14 MLAs to the state assembly. Not one of these seats was won by the BJP in the last assembly election. The JMM bagged 12 seats, the Congress one, and Independent candidate Saryu Roy—who left the BJP to contest against the then chief minister Raghubar Das, defeating him to win the remaining seat.

While the BJP had hoped to wrest 8-9 seats in the region with Champai Soren leading the charge, his induction has been a damp squib. Not a single JMM legislator from the region has resigned with him and the party seems to be firmly with Hemant Soren.

In 2019, the JMM had fielded Champai Soren from Jamshedpur for the Lok Sabha election, where he lost to the BJP by a margin of over three lakh votes. While the BJP did hang on to the Jamshedpur Lok Sabha seat in 2024, its margin of victory was slimmer.

In Chaibasa, the other Lok Sabha seat, the INDIA bloc's victory margin doubled this year. The BJP is also struggling with far too many heavyweights from the region in the party including Arjun Munda, Raghubar Das, the present governor of Odisha, Madhu Koda and his wife Geeta Koda. Internal opposition to the induction of Champai Soren—hailed as a brilliant move by Himanta Biswa Sarma—is growing. ■



Jharkhand chief minister and JMM chief Hemant Soren

Photo: Getty Images



STATES 360°



MAHARASHTRA

Out of a pothole and into a pod taxi?

Navin Kumar

Mooted in March and approved by the cabinet in September, the 'pod taxi project' between Kurla and BKC (Bandra-Kurla Complex) has run into a wall of public cynicism—with good reason. What was this scheme, Mumbaiers fumed, if not a *jumla* ahead of the assembly election (due any time now, with the current assembly's term ending in November).

The business district of BKC draws 4-6 lakh footfalls every day but is severely under-served by BEST buses and auto-rickshaws. The nearest suburban stations are Bandra and Kurla, merely 2-3 kilometres away in terms of distance but anything between 30-40 minutes in terms of travel time in peak hours. If officegoers are lucky to squeeze into a shared auto-rickshaw, they pay Rs 30-40 per head. Ola and Uber cabs charge anything between Rs 80 to Rs 100 for the same distance. The 'auto-rickshaw mafia' in complicity with the cops often charge even more. Walking on potholed roads with broken pavements is nerve-racking and takes more than 30 minutes each way. So, what are folks to do?

With city planners having bypassed BKC when it came to Metro lines, one suggestion was that corporations run free shuttle buses for their employees. They could pool resources and divert a part of their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) funds to run smaller buses seating 36 people at a time. While some can afford to take the air-conditioned app-based Cityflo buses—from the western and eastern suburbs as well as Navi Mumbai into BKC—for the majority the daily commute is a daily nightmare.

Are pod taxis the panacea, then? The perfect solution with fares pegged at 21 bucks per head? That's what the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) announcement seemed to suggest, but people aren't jumping for joy.

Driverless electric vehicles on an elevated track, pod taxis have been running at the Dubai, Singapore and Heathrow airports. Heathrow's pod taxis, operational since 2011, are used to move business class passengers from the parking lot to the terminal, a distance of 3.8 km. Media reports in May 2023 had claimed that

India's first pod taxis would connect Noida International Airport at Jewar (still under construction) to Noida's Film City, covering a distance of 14.1 kms. Although the project was to be completed by the end of 2024, its current status remains unknown.

Even as Sanjay Mukherjee, Metropolitan Commissioner, MMRDA, gushed about the pod taxi project connecting 8.8 km in Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC) with 38 stations along the route, the response from Mumbaiers has been icy. "It's like using a vacuum cleaner to clean Mumbai's streets," quipped one, while another commuter wondered how different the pod taxi would be from an autorickshaw. The only difference, said another, was "shiny glass cabins and an elevated corridor". Why not use that corridor for electric buses that would move 35 people at a time, he wondered.

Few seem to believe that the project would even take off. Some are disappointed that it will be at least three years before it's operational. Others are traumatised at the thought of already congested roads being dug up. Wouldn't a faster and more cost-effective solution be to improve existing roads, add some more BEST bus routes, have better policing at auto stands and make the pavements walk-worthy?

While frustrated commuters have been venting, the more mathematically inclined have taken to back-of-the-envelope calculations. With each pod carrying six passengers and pods running at intervals of 15 seconds, four pods would be able to move 24 passengers every minute. It would thus take an hour to move 1,440 passengers. With rush hour extending to four hours every morning and evening, an uninterrupted pod taxi service would therefore be able to transport just 5,840 passengers on a single track. The figure would be twice that if two tracks plied—one from Bandra and the other from Kurla. How, they ask, is that going to help the six lakh passengers that frequent BKC daily? Might as well drain the ocean one teaspoon at a time.

Eyebrows were also raised because Sai Green Mobility Pvt. Ltd.—the Hyderabad-based company that won the Rs 1,016 crore contract—was incorporated barely six months ago on 14 March 2024. How could a company with an authorised capital of Rs 10 crore and paid-up capital of just one

lakh rupees have been awarded a contract worth a thousand crores?

MMRDA defends their choice by citing that Sai Green's technology partner M/s Ultra PRT has a proven track record of running the operational system at Heathrow airport. They also claim to have conducted a techno-feasibility study peer-reviewed by Tata Consulting Engineers, which recommended pod taxis after taking into account the region's topography and expected growth of traffic. The Metropolitan Commissioner's statement said, "This project is set to revolutionise last-mile connectivity within BKC, addressing the needs of the 4 to 6 lakh commuters who travel daily to and from the business district. With the anticipated increase in footfall due to upcoming infrastructure developments such as the bullet train and new commercial buildings, the necessity for efficient last-mile connectivity has become paramount."

The project on a public-private partnership (PPP) model anticipates a construction period of three years and a concession period of 30 years. The model includes provisions for a fixed concession fee and a percentage of revenue-sharing with MMRDA. "We believe that the pod taxi project in BKC marks a significant step



Driverless electric vehicles on elevated tracks, pod taxis are being projected as the panacea for BKC's congestion problems

towards enhancing urban mobility in one of Mumbai's busiest business districts," Mukherjee's statement added.

The approval for the pod taxi project is one among several vanity projects being cleared in a rush by the Mahayuti government ahead of the assembly election. Mumbaiers believe that neither the Mahayuti government nor the MMRDA are actually serious about pod taxis, which already appear impractical. They reckon if the BJP coalition wins, it would find some reason to junk the project. And if it loses, well, it was no longer their problem.

Urban planning experts believe the pod taxi project is destined to end up just as badly as the Mumbai monorail project. The MMRDA monorail between Chembur and Mahalaxmi has run up a loss of Rs 500 crore. The country's first monorail not only failed to attract passengers due to its 'faulty route', it failed even to attract tourists and visitors to the city!

Akshay Rautela, cofounder of Delhi-based Instaspaces, was quoted in *Mid-Day* as claiming that only five per cent of commuters to BKC would be able to afford the projected fare of pod taxis. This number would further dwindle if people

were made to wait for more than 15 seconds for the next pod, he added. Another expert, K.K. Tinguru, was equally pessimistic. Skywalks, buses, cycle lanes—not one of them has worked to minimise congestion in this 'maximum city'. This, he felt, was likely to be just another waste of public money.

The Bandra-Kurla Complex is believed to be the most expensive commercial hub in the country and is still growing. The terminal of the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train is also supposed to come up here. Government agencies have not held transparent public consultations. With elections to local bodies including to the BrihanMumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) pending for the past two-and-a-half years, the bureaucracy has had a field day with no questions asked.

A former councillor said, on condition of anonymity, that there was no doubt that the pod taxi project was a scheme promoted with an eye to the election. Had the government been serious about civic issues, he said, it would have paid more attention to crumbling infrastructure, growing traffic congestion, pot-holed roads and local trains bursting at the seams. ■

Mumbaiers believe that neither the Mahayuti government nor the MMRDA are actually serious about the pod taxi project which already appears impractical

Another battle for the Rani of Jhansi?

Someone once said we are all born ignorant, but have to work hard to be stupid. No one can accuse Kangana of not working really hard, writes **Avay Shukla**

Kangana Ranaut is all over the news these days like a bad rash, there's just no getting away from her interviews, statements and tweets. I find her very refreshing in these morbid days of rapes, lynchings, bridge collapses, encounters, defections and states going bankrupt. What is enlivening about her utterances is the novel perspective she brings to bear on whichever subject she decides to take on.

Someone once said we are all born ignorant, but we have to work hard to be stupid. No one can accuse the Himachali belle of not working really hard. She is a bit like the IAS, an expert on any subject. She has spoken on the US election, history, Manipur, the farmers' protests, the Delhi riots, the 2002 Gujarat carnage, nepotism, Bollywood, sexual exploitation, the caste census, censorship, the freedom movement, among other weighty subjects. And, in keeping with the best practices in the IAS these days, she is also a lateral entry into Parliament!

She has even started dropping hints about her marriage, and our vacuous media, with no exit polls on the horizon,

has started speculating about the wicket-keeper who might be responsible for the run-out. It's a bit late for me to throw my hat into the bull ring, having already chucked my towel into another one, but I do have a piece of advice for the gentleman—if you have the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, sell it to the *kabariwala*; you won't be needing it any longer, for your wife knows everything. Ditto for Google search.

Now, I'm no fan of Ms Ranaut's brand of politics, and I do wish that she would be a little less toxic and much less forthcoming with her muddled thoughts on everything under the sun. But I can't help offering my hat at her candour, her courage to call a spade a shovel, and her audacity in calling out the power brokers in the world of politics and filmmaking. Among the current crop of female 'influencers', she is perhaps the only woman of note to say "F**k you!" in a man's world that is getting more parochial with every successive election. And sadly, she is paying the price.

The hounding of her film *Emergency* is a case in point, though the malaise it depicts is much larger, for the same happened with

the Netflix series *IC814*. Taking offence has become a full-time, and rewarding, profession in India. It's not something new either—remember *Kissaa Kursee Kaa*, *Aandhi*, *A Suitable Boy*, *Sacred Games*, *Tandav*, Salman Rushdie and the enforced exile of M.F. Husain?

This 'hurting of sentiments' is a very dangerous trend in a country with six major religions, 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes, 22 official languages, 121 other languages and 270 mother tongues, 2,000 registered political parties and hundreds of millions of morons. Any aspiring or misguided idiot can claim to be offended by anything in a film. In the case of *Emergency* it is allegedly the 'unfavourable' depiction of Sikhs and in *IC814* it is the Hindu names of terrorists and their 'humanising', whatever that means.

Both films are supposedly historical, and there are always different perspectives on history, which is the way it should be. In a liberal democracy, a writer or director should have the freedom to present his version of any historical event, without any jingoist, communal or political obstructions.

If the SGPC does not like the way Sikhs are shown by Ms Ranaut—fine, God knows they have the money to do so. If fake nationalists have the opposite grouse—Sikhs are demonised in *Emergency*, terrorists are humanised in *IC814*—don't watch the film, or ask Vivek Agnihotri to make another film called the 'Hijack Files'. Lumpen elements one can understand—



A still from *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* starring Kangana Ranaut

inanity is part of our DNA. What one is most shocked at, however, is the way our governments and courts become part of this regressive process. The courts these days will do everything except their jobs, which is to dispense justice in a timely manner.

Why, one wonders again and again, do they even admit petitions for banning/withholding the release of films on grounds of distortion, defamation or hurting of sentiments? Leave it to the censor board, and if this august body fails to do its job, then haul it over the coals. But why become the court of first resort for any dissatisfied citizen?

I am constrained to observe, with great respect and regret, that neither the Bombay nor Madhya Pradesh High Courts have served the cause of free speech by failing to facilitate the scheduled release of *Emergency*.

The central government, as is to be expected, has conducted itself with customary duplicity. Though it found nothing wrong with the dubious representation of facts and tenor in its own propaganda films, *Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story*, in the case of Ms Ranaut's film, it has arm-twisted the censor board to delay certification because of the 'sensitivity' of the subject—read: possible adverse impact on the BJP in the impending Haryana elections.

One would have expected the two high courts to have seen through this dumb charade, but possibly the blindfold over the eyes of the statue of justice is tighter than we would have imagined.

Coming on top of the ever-increasing restrictions on print and television media, social media platforms and OTT channels, the legitimacy now accorded to communalities, self-appointed 'nationalists' and religious groups to block any film, and the reluctance of the judiciary to stop them, is turning India's creative pastures into intellectual deserts. Soon, no one worth their salt will write books or make films except the propagandists of whichever party happens to be in power at the time.

There are two lessons in this for Kangana Ranaut. One, the wheel has come full circle for her, and she has become a victim of the same toxic and intolerant ideology that she supports. Two, she has been betrayed by her own party which has cast her aside for a few seats in Haryana. Her free-roaming and independent spirit does not correspond with the confining and suffocating ethos of the party she belongs to. Time for another battle for the Rani of Jhansi? ■

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



Soon, no one worth their salt will write books or make films except the propagandists of whichever party happens to be in power at the time

The (BJP) king reigns but does not rule

Leading a minority government in the new NDA regime, can Narendra Modi survive the full term?

Aakar Patel

Minority governments have two major concerns: clearing votes of no-confidence and passing legislation.

The first, which involves remaining in office for five years, requires the ruling party to acquire a threshold number of MPs—meaning, a sufficiently large mass at the centre of the coalition to keep it together. Our history indicates that this can be as low as 150 seats, but not much lower.

The 1996 coalition formed by the Janata Dal and the Communists with two prime ministers, Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral, had only 78 seats—too few for stability and too dependent on external support. After much drama, having survived at the whim of the Congress led by Sitaram Kesri, it fell within two years.

Running a government where 'allies' have almost an equal number of seats is not easy; but it is possible to finish the term. All three coalitions in office before 2014 survived five years, the first of them confidently choosing to go into elections six months early. This, despite the ruling party in these coalitions having as few as 182 seats (Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 1999), 145 seats

(Manmohan Singh, 2004) and 206 seats (Manmohan Singh, 2009).

It is true that much of the news cycle in these years was occupied by reports and rumours of 'allies' sulking, throwing tantrums and pulling out, but all three crossed the finish line.

In the 18th Lok Sabha, the BJP with 240 seats is the only party that can form a government. It may have lost its majority but it will remain in power as long as it wants to. The BJP's 'allies' know this. They understand also that they will keep their ministries till 2029 and, for this reason, have no reason to defend the government except with their vote.

In mid-August, the *Print* reported the strange situation this has produced: "The

NDA constituents remained curious onlookers in Parliament whenever BJP MPs got into heated exchanges with the INDIA bloc. While the INDIA bloc reacted in unison, the BJP remained isolated. This is because the 'allies' have no investment in the BJP's ideology and no incentive to defend it on issues like the Waqf (Amendment) Bill.

This brings us to the second concern of coalition governments: getting legislation passed. If the BJP is assured of a full term—and I believe it is—what is it to do with its five years in office?

Its early U-turns on waqf and lateral entry indicate that getting legislation passed will be difficult; but again, the history of coalitions informs us that this is

not necessarily the case.

The weakest of the three previous coalitions, Manmohan Singh's in 2004, was able to get high-impact legislation passed. This included laws on the Right to Information (RTI), MGNREGA and the nuclear deal with the United States. The last of these was emphatically opposed by an 'ally' (the Communist Party) but made it through nonetheless.

Narasimha Rao too had only as many seats as Narendra Modi does today, but was able to get Parliament to clear the economic reforms that are referred to as liberalisation. And so it would appear that it is possible for weak governments to take strong action, if they have conviction.

It is also the case that strong governments

often avoid debate and get laws passed in dubious fashion. In the past, the BJP hid behind something called the 'money bill' rule to elude the Rajya Sabha and pass laws on Aadhaar and electoral bonds.

This will no longer be possible for the current Modi government, given its weakness in the Lok Sabha. So how is Modi to proceed?

The only course available appears to be to let go of things that are guaranteed to get into trouble, like the uniform civil code (UCC) and the national register of citizens (NRC). Like Vajpayee, he has to abandon Hindutva and form some other framework of governance and policy.

This may not be easy in the absence of a clear vision—such as the UPA had on citizen empowerment or the first two Modi governments had on minority persecution. In any case, entering a third term, any leader would have exhausted his grand ideas. Think of Nehru after the 1962 election or Tony Blair after 2005.

Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch gave Barack Obama, then a presidential candidate, some advice before the 2008 election—he had known all the US presidents since Harry Truman, but none of them had been able to push reform after their first few months. That was the only period in which motivation, energy and goodwill produced results. It should be noted that all of the things Manmohan Singh got cleared came within months of him taking office.

Today, even those who support Prime Minister Modi feel there is a certain sense of listlessness in this government. What is it intending to achieve? This is not easy to say. The U-turns have been because, in the absence of a majority, persisting in the old ways has resulted in failure.

The British have a saying that describes the role of their monarch: "The king reigns but does not rule." Our supreme leader is in office but unable to make an impact.

Without new and, more importantly, inclusive ideas from Modi, this directionless drift will continue. ■



PM Narendra Modi with his lieutenant Amit Shah (right), BJP president J.P. Nadda and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners, Varanasi, May 2024

Photo: Getty Images

The Modi government's early U-turns on waqf and lateral entry indicate that getting legislation passed will be difficult

Views are personal

The Karnataka Congress Government set to host three-day 87th 'Akhila Bharata Kannada Sahitya Sammelana' at Mandya district from December 20-22.

Mandya district is bordered on the south by Mysore and Chamarajangar districts, on the west by Hassan district, on the north by Tumkur district and on the east by Ramanagara district. The district Mandya was carved out of larger Mysore district in the year 1939.

Mandya, which has hosted two Akhila Bharata Kannada Sahitya Sammelanas — in 1974 and 1994 — has got the opportunity to play host once again after a gap of 30 years in 2024.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced that the 87th All India Kannada Sahitya Sammelana will be held in Mandya from December 20-22. Earlier, it was scheduled for June.

However, due to the implementation of model code of conduct, in view of the Lok Sabha election, it had to be postponed.

The 109-year-old Kannada Sahitya Parishat (KSP), founded by then Maharaja Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar on May 5, 1915, has organised 86 Akhila Bharata Sahitya Sammelanas, so far.

The last one (86th literary festival) was held in Haveri— from January 6 to 8, last year. It was held for the first time at Haveri, after trifurcation from Dharwad district in 1997.

It has been skipped, earlier on several years, due to a variety of reasons, but has also been held twice during two years —1981 (Chikkamagaluru and Madikeri)

and 1990 (Hubballi and Mysuru). The recent reason for skipping of the meet was the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the last 3-4 decades, the sahitya sammelana has evolved into more of a celebratory event. The last significant political interruption was during the height of the Bandaya literary movement in the late 1970s and since then ecstastic celebratory character of the sammelana has become more important.

The Belagavi district, houses the Second legislative building – Suvarna VidhanaSoudha— where the Karnataka Legislature holds session once a year has hosted the meet for a record eight times. Belagavi is also the sugar bowl of Karnataka with 150,000 hectares being used for Sugarcane production and it has overtaken Mandya district in sugarcane production over the last decade.

The event was held six times in undivided Dharwad district (twice in Gadagincludng once after becoming district and in Haveri district last time), Hassan, Raichur (Koppal and Gangavathi before division) and Dakshina Kannada (Manipal and Udupi before bifurcation).

Apart from Belagavi and Dharwad districts, Mysuru has also joined the list club by hosting the meet for five times in 1917, 1930, 1955, 1990 and 2017. Mysuru is also credited hosting the first Vishwa Kannada Sammelana in 1986, while Belagavi district is only district to host second Vishwa Kannada Sammelana in 2011.

In 1974, Jayadevithayi Ligade was the chairperson, while SubramanyarajeUrs, popularly known as

Chaduranga, was the chairman in 1994.

The sammelana was also held outside Karnataka — Kasaragod in Kerala in 1948; Solapur in Maharashtra in 1950; Mumbai in Maharashtra in 1951; and at New Delhi in 1978.

The Delhi event was the 50th sammelana. The new districts of Chamarajanagar, Bengaluru Rural and Yadgir are yet to host this event.

H V Nanjundaiah, scholar and first Vice Chancellor of University of Mysore, was president of the first three sammelanas and he inaugurated them as well. But, since

Independence, chief ministers have been inaugurating the meets, eminent writers and scholars have been chairpersons.

The events were earlier funded by the Wadiyar kings of the erstwhile Mysuru state. The expenses were later taken care of by the KSP itself. Since 1975, it was taken over by the Karnataka government. Thus the 48th meet in May-June of 1974 at Mandya was the last one held without government funding. It was also the first time that a woman invited as the chairperson.

Memorable Meet

The 63rd meet, held in February of 1994, was a memorable one for the people of Mandya.

Many voluntarily donated money to the organising committee, with district KSP president G T Veerappa, welcome committee president G Madegowda and chief patron S M Krishna.

Thus, Rs 42 lakh was collected. But, only Rs 22 lakh was spent for the festival. Hence, the remaining Rs 20 lakh was spent on various development works of Mandua city, including construction of District KSP building (Rs 6.25 lakh) at Bandigowda Layout.

While Rs 8.50 lakh was donated for the construction of Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar Kalamandira, Rs 4 lakh was spent for a statue of poet Kuvempu and Rs 1 lakh was donated to Janapada Loka in Channapatna taluk.



List of conferences 2024

No.	Date	Place	President
1st	3-6 May 1915	Bangalore	H. V. Nanjundaiah
2nd	6-8 May 1916	Bangalore	H. V. Nanjundaiah
3rd	8-10 May 1917	Mysore	H. V. Nanjundaiah
4th	11-13 May 1918	Dharwad	R. Narasimhaiah
5th	6-8 May 1919	Hassan	Karpura Srinivasa Rao
6th	20-21 June 1920	Hospet	Rodda Srinivasa Rao
7th	19-21 May 1921	Chikmagalur	K. P. Puttanna Chetty
8th	12-13 May 1922	Dayanagere	M. Venkateshiah
9th	21-23 May 1923	Bijapur	SiddhantiShivashankara Shastry
10th	16-18 May 1924	Kolar	H. Krishna Sastry
11th	9-11 May 1925	Belgaum	Bengal Rama Rao
12th	22-24 May 1926	Ballari	PhakirappaGurubasappaHalakatti
13th	19-21 May 1927	Mangalore	R. Thathacharya
14th	1-3 June 1928	Kalaburagi	B. M. Srikantaiah
15th	12-14 Dec 1929	Belgaum	Masti Venkatesha Iyengar
16th	5-7 October 1930	Mysore	Aluru Venkata Rao
17th	28-30 Dec 1931	Karwar	MaliyaTimmappaiah
18th	28-30 Dec 1932	Madikeri	D. V. Gundappa
19th	29-31 Dec 1933	Hubli	Y. Nagusha Shashtry
20th	28-30 Dec 1934	Raichur	Panje Mangesh Rao
21st	26-28 Dec 1935	Mumbai	N. S. Subbarao
22nd	29-31 Dec 1937	Jamkhandi	BellaveVenkatanaranappa
23rd	29-31 Dec 1938	Bellary	R. R. Divakar
24th	25-29 Dec 1939	Belgaum	MudaveeduKrishnarao
25th	27-29 Dec 1940	Dharwad	Y. Chandrashekhara Shastry
26th	27-29 Dec 1941	Hyderabad	A. R. Krishnaswamy
27th	26-28 Jan 1943	Shimoga	D. R. Bendre
28th	28-30 Dec 1944	Belavadi	S. S. Basavanahalli
29th	26-28 Dec 1945	Madras	T. P. Kailasam
30th	7-9 May 1947	Harapanahalli	C. K. Venkataramaiah
31st	29-31 Dec 1948	Kasaragod	T. T. Sharma
32nd	5-7 March 1949	Kalaburagi	Channappa Uttangi
33rd	24-26 May 1950	Sollapur	M. R. Srinivasamurthy
34th	26-28 Dec 1951	Mumbai	M. Govinda Pai
35th	16-18 May 1952	Belur	S. C. Nandimata
36th	26-28 Dec 1954	Kumta	V. Seetharamaiah
37th	10-12 June 1955	Mysore	K. Shivaram Karanth
38th	25-27 Dec 1956	Raichur	Srikranga
39th	7-9 May 1957	Dharwad	Kuvempu
40th	18-20 Jan 1958	Ballari	P. K. Gopak
41st	11-13 Feb 1960	Bidar	D. L. Narasimhaiah
42nd	27-29 Dec 1960	Manipal	A. N. Krishna Rao
43rd	27-29 Dec 1961	Gadag	K. G. Kundanagara
44th	28-30 Dec 1963	Siddagangala	R. S. Mugal
45th	10-12 May 1965	Karwar	Kadengodlu Shankara Bhat
46th	26-28 May 1967	Shivranabelagola	A. N. Upadhye
47th	27-29 Dec 1970	Bangalore	Javare Gowda
48th	31 May-2 June 1971	Mandya	Jayadevi Taayi Ligade
49th	11-13 Dec 1976	Shimoga	S. V. Ranganna
50th	23-25 April 1978	Delhi	G. P. Rajaratnam
51st	9-11 March 1979	Dharmasthala	Gopalakrishna Adiga
52nd	7-10 Feb 1980	Belgaum	Basavaru Kattimani
53rd	13-15 March 1981	Chikmagalur	P. T. Narasimhaiah
54th	27-30 Nov 1981	Madikeri	Shankara Bala Dixit Joshi
55th	23-26 Dec 1982	Sirsi	Gouru Ramaswamy Iyengar
56th	23-25 March 1984	Kaivara	A. N. Murthy Rao
57th	3-6 April 1985	Bidar	H. M. Nayak
58th	29 Oct-1 Nov 1987	Kalaburagi	Siddaiah Puranik
59th	16-18 Feb 1990	Hubli	R. C. Hiremath
60th	28-30 Nov 1990	Mysore	K. S. Narasimhaswamy
61st	9-12 Jan 1992	Dayanagere	G. S. Shivamurappa
62nd	5-7 Feb 1993	Koppala	Simpil Linganna
63rd	11-13 Feb 1994	Mandya	Chaduranga
64th	3-5 June 1995	Mudhol	H. L. Nagegowda
65th	21-24 Dec 1996	Chikmagalur	Chennayya Kanavi
66th	11-14 Dec 1997	Mangalore	Kavyar. Kinnamma Rai
67th	11-14 Feb 1999	Kanakapura	S. L. Bhyrappa
68th	24-26 June 2000	Baalkote	ShantadeviMalavada
69th	15-17 Feb 2002	Tumkur	U. R. Ananthamurthy
70th	7-9 March 2003	Belgaum	Patil Puttappa
71st	18-21 Dec 2003	Moosabidri	Kamala Hampana
72nd	27-29 Jan 2006	Bidar	Shantharasa
73rd	20-23 Dec 2007	Shimoga	K. S. Nissar Ahmed
74th	12-15 Dec 2008	Udupi	L. S. Sheshagiri Rao
75th	4-6 Feb 2009	Chitradurga	L. Basavaraju
76th	19-21 Feb 2010	Gadaga	Geetha Nagabhushan
77th	4-6 Feb 2011	Bangalore	G. Venkateshiah
78th	9-11 Dec 2011	Gangavathi	C. P. Krishnakumar
79th	9-11 Feb 2013	Bijapur	Ka Channabasappa
80th	7-9 Jan 2014	Kodagu	N. D'Souza
81st	31 Jan-3 Feb 2015	Shivranabelagola	Siddalingaiah
82nd	2-4 Dec 2016	Raichur	BaraguruRamachandrappa
83rd	24-26 Nov 2017	Mysore	Chandrashekhara Patil
84th	4-6 Jan 2019	Dharwad	Chandrashekhara Kambara
85th	5-7 Feb 2020	Kalaburagi	H. S. Venkateshamurthy
86th	23-25 Jan 2023	Haveri	Doddarasaiah Gowda
87th	Dec 2023	Mandya	

Kannada Sahitya Sammelana' at Mandya district from December 20-22: To develop ideas to promote unity and co-operation among Kannada speakers spread across globe.

Mandya to host Kannada literary fest in December: Chief Minister Siddaramaiah



Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced on Tuesday that the 87th 'Akhila Bharata Kannada Sahitya Sammelana' will be held in Mandya from December 20 to 22. The decision was reached following discussions with the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Mandya district administration, and local officials, including District in-charge Minister N Cheluvarayawamy and regional MLAs.

"We had originally planned for February, but postponed due to the impending Lok Sabha poll code of conduct. Now, we have settled on December 20 to 22. We anticipate participation from a significant number of Kannadigas from within and outside the country," Siddaramaiah said in his post on X.

First international Kannada Sahitya Sammelana at Bahrain in 2018

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's first tenure as Chief Minister between 2013-18 also instrumental in hosting two-day International Kannada Sahitya Sammelana in Bahrain.

The gala event was organised under the aegis of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Kannada University of Hampi and Kannada Sangha for two days.

Then Kannada and Culture Minister Dr Jayamala inaugurated the event, while Kannada Sahitya Parishad President Dr Manu Baligar presided over it. Writer H. S. Venkateshamurthy, Kannada Development Authority president SG Siddaramaiah, Hampi Kannada University vice Chancellor Dr

Mallika Ghanti, Bahrain Kannada Sangha president Pradeep Shetty were present.

The event saw fruitful sessions like "Gulf KannadigaraSthithi-Gathi", 'Kannada SaahithyadalliHaasya' and 'VishwabharatigeKannadadarathi'.

The gala event was organised under the aegis of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Kannada University of Hampi and Kannada Sangha for two days.

Sahitya Sammelana help in fostering lingual identity

It is the premier gathering of writers, poets and Kannadigas. The Sammelana is a big platform for ordinary people to think about their identity in terms of language, culture and literature while serving as a bridge between youth literary minds and progressive writers.

This event also helps for the growth of a language depends on employment opportunities, business deals, and interactions between states and countries

Kannada Sahitya Parishat plays key role in promoting the Kannada language and its literature

The conference agreed to create the Karnataka Sahitya Parishat with a mandate to conserve and promote Kannada language and literature.

Kannada Saahithya Parishath (Kannada Literary Council) is an Indian non-profit organisation that promotes the Kannada language and its literature. Its headquartered in the city of Bengaluru in the state of Karnataka, India. It strives to promote Kannada language through publishing books, organising literary seminars and promoting research projects. It also organises an annual conference on Kannada literature called Kannada Sahitya Sammelana (Kannada Literary Meet). The current president of the parishat is Dr Mahesh Joshi.

Origin

During the British rule of India, Kannada speakers were spread across different provinces. Coming under the influence of different languages in those provinces, the pronunciation and grammar of Kannada language started to differ across provinces.

This led to a gap in communication across the people in these provinces though they spoke the same language of Kannada. Mokshagundam Vishweshwaraiah, who was the Divan of the Mysore Kingdom felt the need to conserve and promote the Kannada language and literature. In this direction, he started the Mysore Economic Conference and created a study circle under H V Nanjundaiah. A sub-committee formed under the study circle came up with five different topics on which suggestions were invited.

- To develop ideas to promote unity and co-operation among Kannada speakers spread across different regions.
- To develop suggestions for a common written Kannada which had diversified across different regions
- To ensure that students learning Kannada language use a common textbook
- To improve the general knowledge among the Kannada speaking population by publishing appropriate books.
- To produce appropriate Kannada translations for words used in other languages, especially the scientific words.

The sub-committee received good responses from the public and it decided to organise a conference in Bangalore on 3 May 1915 to act upon these suggestions. The conference

was held on the grounds of the Government High School and was attended by litterateurs, newspaper editors and other dignitaries from different regions.

The conference agreed to create the Karnataka Sahitya Parishat with a mandate to conserve and promote Kannada language and literature. H V Nanjundaiah was unanimously elected as the President of the Parishat. Apart from the Mysore province, the Karnataka Sahitya Parishat was simultaneously started in the Madras, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Kodagu provinces.

Growth

H V Nanjundaiah remained as President of the Parishat for the first five years of its formation. In 1935, an annual event under the aegis of the Parishat called as Kannada Sahitya Sammelana commenced.

The foundation ceremony of a separate building to house the Parishat was organised on 12 April 1937 under the Presidency of Karpura Srinivasa Rao. The construction of this building was completed on 29 May 1938.

B M Srikantaiah (popularly known as BM Sri) the Vice President of the Parishat from 1938 till 1942. In 1938, the name of Karnataka Sahitya Parishat was changed to Kannada Sahitya Parishat.

Under the guidance of BM Sri, the logo of the Parishat containing the map of the Mysore province with the phrase SirigannadamGelge, Kannada Sahitya Parishat written inside it was created. Over the period of time; a women's wing, a publishing house, a Kannada journal and literature exams were also added to the repertoire of the Parishat. Kannada Sahitya Parishat branches at the district and taluk levels were also created.

A new building is being constructed to replace the existing building of the Parishat at a cost of Rupees five crores. During its existence, the Parishat has contributed to the growth of Kannada language by organising conferences and debates, publication and release of books, organising talks by eminent writers and also by holding the annual Kannada Sahitya Sammelana.

Bad news for India's Muslims

Narendra Modi's third term as PM unfolds against a backdrop of deepening communal divides and growing fears

Ashok Swain

Notwithstanding the rose-tinted optics of his visit to Brunei, Narendra Modi's third term as prime minister is more 'through a lens darkly' for India's Muslims. The general election, which saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secure a reduced majority, has intensified fears about the future of India's 200 million Muslims under a regime not just defined by but indistinguishable from Hindutva politics. Though Modi's return to power was not an outright victory for the BJP, it was secured through a coalition of smaller parties bound by a political agenda that has systematically marginalised Muslims and other minorities.

Since Modi first assumed office in 2014, his administration's anti-Muslim agenda was clear. The trend of discriminatory legislation and communal violence has only intensified during Modi 3.0, alarming human rights advocates and political commentators alike, both in India and abroad.

One of the most glaring examples is the rise in incidents of 'cow vigilantism', particularly in election-bound states like Maharashtra and Haryana, where Muslims have been brutally attacked and, in some cases, lynched by Hindu mobs on the mere suspicion of carrying beef. These attacks, disturbingly frequent during Modi's tenure, are symptomatic of a broader, more insidious programme to relegate Muslims to second-class citizenship in a country constitutionally founded on secular principles.

The BJP's narrative has been one of exclusion, driven by its desire to convert India from a pluralistic democracy to a theocratic autocracy. This shift is evidenced by the party's policies and rhetoric. The revocation of Article 370 in 2019, that stripped the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomy, was a direct affront to the disputed region's identity and a move to assert Hindu dominance. The introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which explicitly excluded Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries, further widened the Hindu-Muslim divide. Muslim activists are routinely jailed, as are their homes bulldozed with no regard for justice and legal norms.

Under Modi's leadership, the BJP has engaged in a concerted campaign of historical revisionism, diminishing the significance of the Mughal era by expunging contributions of Muslim rulers from textbooks. Renaming cities and streets is a further erasure of Indian history as it actually unfolded. In Odisha, where the BJP took



Muslims in Mumbai protest against the proposed Uniform Civil Code

Photo: Getty Images

INDIA alliance and Rahul Gandhi's appointment as the Leader of Opposition—suggest growing resistance to the BJP's divisive politics. In key states like Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, often seen as BJP strongholds, opposition parties managed to significantly erode the saffron party's base, indicating that the fractured mandarin politics may be waning.

This fractured mandate is, to some extent, serving as a check on Modi's power, potentially curbing the BJP's ability to unilaterally impose its agenda. The presence of a stronger opposition in Parliament has emboldened institutions like the judiciary—which have often been seen as complicit or passive in the face of the BJP's excesses—to act more independently and uphold the principles of the Indian Constitution.

However, while its reduced majority in Parliament has somewhat slowed the BJP juggernaut, it has been unable to reverse the damage already done to India's social fabric. Radicalised by years of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian propaganda, the BJP's core supporters continue to exert pressure on the government to maintain its hardline stance. Moreover, the BJP's ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), continues to wield significant influence, pushing for an India where Hindutva majoritarianism is the norm.

The international community has been taking note of the deteriorating human rights situation in India, particularly the targeting of Muslims and Christians. Yet, global criticism has done little to deter the Modi government, which remains resolute in its agenda. The West's strategic interests in India, particularly as a counterbalance to China, have often led to muted responses to India's internal issues, allowing the Modi government to act with impunity.

Narendra Modi's third term as prime minister of India unfolds against a backdrop of deepening communal divides and growing fears among the country's Muslim population. The BJP's reduced parliamentary majority offers a faint hope for a more balanced political discourse, but the reality on the ground suggests that Muslims will continue to face greater systemic discrimination and violence. The challenge for India moving forward will be whether it can reclaim its secular, pluralistic roots or whether it will continue down a path of exclusion and divisiveness. The stakes are incredibly high, not just for India's Muslims or for opposition parties but for the future of India. ■

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power on its own for the first time in June 2024, this policy of renaming is ongoing. Such efforts are not merely symbolic—they reflect and reinforce the BJP's vision of a Hindu India.

The BJP's reduced majority in the general elections has pushed the party to amp up its Hindu nationalist agenda as a means of consolidating its core support base. This faces very ill for India's Muslims, who already face increasing alienation and insecurity. The BJP's electoral strategy, heavily reliant on anti-Muslim rhetoric, suggests that the party will continue to use communal polarisation as a tool for political gain, at the expense of national unity.

The proposed implementation of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and changes in the laws governing Islamic charitable endowments (waqf) are other areas of concern for Muslims in India. The UCC, long advocated by the BJP, would replace personal laws based on religious scriptures and customs with a common set of laws governing every

citizen. The UCC is seen as a veiled attempt to impose Hindu norms on all religious communities. The UCC, under the BJP, would disproportionately affect Muslims, further entrenching their status as second-class citizens. The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, apart from infringing on the Muslim community's religious rights, also aims to diminish the autonomy of waqf boards, which have significant representation in the government.

Meanwhile, as Ayodhya's political utility diminishes, the BJP has turned to Kashi and Mathura to maintain momentum on its core agenda of Hindutva. By shifting focus to these other significant religious sites, the BJP hopes to reignite religious sentiments against Muslims, while fanning the flames of the discourse that claims to 'reclaim Hindu heritage'.

Despite this grim scenario, there is a glimmer of hope in the form of a more robust opposition. The recent election results—while significant gains for the

While its reduced majority in Parliament has somewhat slowed the BJP juggernaut, it has been unable to reverse the damage already done to India's social fabric

What moral right does India have to lecture Bangladesh?

When other countries of the world voice their concern about the plight of minorities in India, we unhesitatingly tell them to mind their own business, don't we?

Yogendra Yadav

What are your thoughts about atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh?" Before I could react, Uncleji took a swipe at me: "Secular Indians like you are always so vocal about Muslims here; however, when it comes to Kashmiri Pandits and Bangladeshi Hindus, your silence is deafening!"

I replied, "Uncle, I have spoken up often enough, but since you're asking, I'll say it again. I just hope you're willing to listen to some bitter truths."

"Why not?" came his offhand response, daring me to rise to the bait. And so, I spoke my piece.

"It is undeniably true that minorities in Bangladesh, especially Hindus, have been victims of atrocities and injustice. Bangladesh opted for a secular state after liberation but following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1974, secularism came under attack from the Muslim majority. Bangladesh was formally declared an Islamic state in 1988. Its constitution continued to guarantee freedom of religion and other rights to the Hindus, who are better off in Bangladesh than in Pakistan or Afghanistan. The bitter truth, however, is that Hindus there are second-class citizens.

"It is worth recalling that in British India, most of the landlords in what was then East Bengal happened to be Hindus. That explains why Hindus there were not educationally or economically backward by 1947 or 76 years later. Despite this, many of them were forced to flee and take shelter in India because of discriminatory practices. In 1951, Hindus constituted 22 per cent of the population in East Pakistan. By 1974, the Hindu population had declined to 13.5 per cent and today only eight per cent of the population of Bangladesh are Hindus.

"Daily incidents of violence against Hindus on political and religious grounds cannot be denied; nor the flaring up of anti-Hindu riots from time to time. It is also

a fact that Hindus felt relatively more secure with the Awami League in power. Their sense of insecurity increased when other parties took over. The government headed by Sheikh Hasina was accused of 'minority appeasement', of giving them a free pass. Anger against Sheikh Hasina found an outlet in mass violence against minorities, including Hindus. There is no dispute over the fact that radical Muslim outfits added fuel to the fire with their inflammatory rhetoric and that Hindus and Hindu temples did come under attack after 5 August 2024. Everybody who is in favour of communal harmony and justice must stand by the Hindus of Bangladesh."

"Precisely!" said Uncleji triumphantly. "That's exactly what I was saying!"

To save myself from this hasty consensus, I said: "But you must be ready to listen to the bitter truth about what you have been doing."

The bitter truth is that protests and demonstrations by Hindus in India expressing solidarity with Hindus in Bangladesh are likely to do them more harm than good. Just as Arab Muslims pay lip-service to the plight of Muslims in India, the concern expressed by the Indian government smacks of hypocrisy and tokenism. Just as Arab governments have little or no empathy for Muslims in India, the Indian government couldn't care less about Hindus in Bangladesh.

"India has neither the political will nor the ability to do anything substantial to help the Hindus of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, as in other neighbouring countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka or Maldives, the most damning slur is to be called an 'agent of India'. The government is to be called an 'abashed patron' of the Awami League to the exclusion of others is what led to people channelising their anger against the Indian government into acts of violence, even revenge, on the Hindu community in Bangladesh.

"Attacks on Muslims in India actually add to the insecurity of the minority Hindus in Bangladesh, making their position even more precarious. If indeed we are their well-wishers, we need to lower our decibel levels and exercise restraint in what we say and do."

Ignoring the frown that had thrived Uncleji's brow, I laid out the third bitter truth:

"India has neither the moral right nor the stature to give lectures on the well-being of minorities. When other countries of the world voice their concern about the plight of minorities in India, we unhesitatingly tell them to mind their own business. How, then, can we create a stink about the plight of minorities in other countries? A country which chooses to keep quiet on the genocide of Muslims in Gaza, a country whose prime minister and Union ministers consider its 200 million Muslims to be infiltrators, where the government keeps mum on the mob lynchings of minorities, where the majority population rejoices in 'bulldozer justice'

Photo: Getty Images



Hindutva activists in New Delhi protest violence against Hindus in Bangladesh, 18 August 2024

aimed at minorities—what can be a bigger hypocrisy than such a country preaching at others? These expressions of concern find credence with the lapdogs of 'godia media'—the rest of the world can only find them laughable."

Uncleji looked like he could neither stomach what I said nor spew anything further. I pressed home my advantage:

"The final bitter truth is the most shameful of all. The conduct of Bangladesh's interim government has been far better than the government of India's. Mohammad Yunus declared in his very first address to the nation that violence against Hindus must stop. If it did not, he would not agree to head the interim government. At the very first opportunity, he visited Hindu temples and assured community leaders that the interim government stood by them. He publicly pledged to ensure security for the minorities.

Compare that with the conduct of our own prime minister. In the last 20 years, did he find time to visit Bilkis Bano? Has he ever visited the home of any victim of mob lynching and offered two words of consolation?"

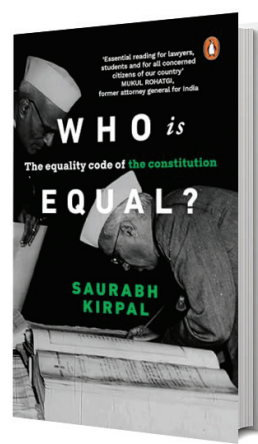
Uncleji's grim expression spoke volumes. It was time for me to wind up.

"I am not suggesting that we keep quiet over what is happening in Bangladesh. But let's begin at home. Let's start by speaking up against atrocities and injustices here. Let's introspect and resist the temptation of tokenism. Let's lay our lives on the line.

"In 1946, Mahatma Gandhi travelled to Noakhali in what was then East Bengal to restore peace and end communal violence against Hindus. He risked his life doing so. He had the courage to stand up in the face of riots against Muslims in Calcutta.

Truth isn't cheap, courage doesn't come easy." ■

"I am not suggesting that we keep quiet over what is happening in Bangladesh. But let's begin at home. Let's start by speaking up against atrocities and injustices here"



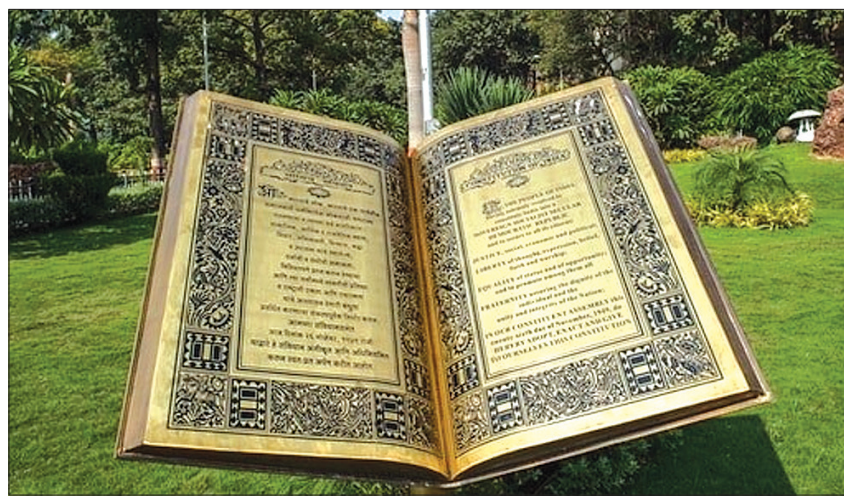
Title **Who Is Equal: The Equality Code of the Constitution**
Author **Saurabh Kirpal**
Publisher **Penguin Random House India**
Pages **304**
Price ₹ **699** (hardcover)

The making of an egalitarian state

Saurabh Kirpal

The discussion about equality in the areas of education, employment, business and elections is largely about the actions of the state when it acts as a public entity. However, some of the greatest inequalities are to be found not in public but in private spaces. In particular, sex, gender and sexuality are some of the areas where inequalities within families manifest themselves. This is partly because women and sexual minorities have to face the patriarchal power structure. The law too, reinforces these structures by institutionalising discrimination in religious personal laws. Inequality manifests itself not only in the black letter of the law, but also how the law is applied within the power structures in a marriage. These imbalances cause some feminists to question the very worth of the institution of marriage. That, of course, leads one to ask: if marriage is inherently problematic, why do so many people want to marry? In particular, why do non-heterosexual persons seek to get married under an institution that is patriarchal? The answer to this question [...] lies partly in the legal benefits that the institution of marriage endows upon a couple, and partly the legitimacy that State recognition bestows on a non-heterosexual marriage. [In this regard], the courts have been reluctant to intervene in the ideal of equality. While different reasons are given for this reticence, patriarchy is at least part of the reason for the decisions made in the context of the family.

Having examined various substantive questions in relation to equality, the [book] speculate[s], to an extent, on the unique challenges that lie ahead. In the case of employment, the focus in the coming years may shift to reservations in the private sector. In education, the question of reservations on grounds other than caste will also arise. In particular, the question of reservations based on religion will also arise. In the field of family law, the Uniform Civil Code is being touted as a means to ensure gender equality. [Is there] a legal and political basis for such a claim, or [is] incremental reform in personal laws a better idea. Finally, the [book] examines the consequences of not having a general anti-discrimination law in the country and,



The Preamble to the Constitution of India

therefore, its impact on fair play in the everyday lives of citizens.

Equality: The Courts, Parliament and the People

We live in deeply polarised times. In the multiple conflicts that surround us, there is also a struggle for control over that most sacred of texts—the Constitution. Parliament claims for itself the power to amend the Constitution, arguing that it represents the will of the people. The judiciary, on the other hand, has asserted its prerogative as the ultimate interpreter and protector of Constitutional values and ideals. This debate is most trenchant when the discussion moves to the 'basic structure' of the Indian Constitution. At its heart, the basic structure of the Constitution comprises those rights and features which makes the Constitution recognisable. The proponents of the doctrine argue that amending something which is the very essence of the document would no longer be an amendment but would repeal it. For instance, one could amend the Constitution to provide for hereditary, dynastic rule. The Constitution would technically still exist but would not be recognisable in any form. This, the courts have held, is not permissible.

Relying on the basic structure doctrine, the courts have held that the power to amend the Constitution is limited and reserved for themselves the authority, to

determine how much of the Constitution can be amended. On the other hand, the government has accused the courts of disturbing the delicate balance of power enshrined in the Constitution by using this doctrine to strike down Constitutional amendments passed by Parliament, charging them with usurping the domain of the legislature.

What forms part of the Constitution's basic structure is a deeply contested issue. While the courts, over the years, have held different facets of the Constitution to be integral to it, they have decisively also held that certain fundamental rights guaranteed to citizens form part of this basic structure. These are the rights to equality, freedom and life. Together, these three rights have been held to constitute the 'golden triangle' of fundamental rights. Chief Justice Y.V. Chandrachud wrote in 1980 that:

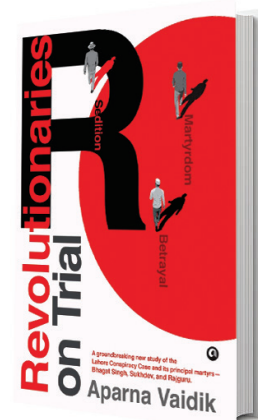
Three Articles of our Constitution, and only three, stand between the heaven of freedom into which Tagore wanted his country to awake and the abyss of unrestrained power. They are Articles 14, 19 and 21. Article 31-C has removed two sides of that golden triangle which affords to the people of this country an assurance that the promise held forth by the preamble will be performed by ushering an egalitarian era through the discipline of fundamental rights, that is, without emasculation of the rights to liberty and

equality which alone can help preserve the dignity of the individual.

The words of the judgment exhort us to remember that in any tussle between the executive and the legislature, it is the individual who is at the heart of the Constitution. The 'egalitarian era' cannot be achieved by trampling upon rights in the name of equality. Instead, it is only through safeguarding her right to equality that a citizen's dignity can be assured. The Constitution provides an elaborate structure which seeks to promote a robust form of equality, both in terms of the substantive rights as well as institutional mechanisms to operationalise the rights.

However, no Constitution, no matter how well and laboriously drafted, will ensure fairness and equity. Dr B.R. Ambedkar, in his last speech to the Constituent Assembly, said, 'However good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad [if] those who are called to work it happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it happen to be a good lot. The working of a Constitution does not depend wholly upon the nature of the Constitution. The Constitution can provide only the organs of State such as the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. The factors on which the working of those organs of State depend are the people and the political parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics.'

The Constitution ultimately belongs to the people of India and its efficacy depends on how we act upon its principles. It is only when we, a collective of citizens, conform to Constitutional values and follow the spirit, as well as the text of that document, that the promises made in the preamble can be accomplished. There is, therefore, a great responsibility on us to pursue constitutional values—after all the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. To be vigilant pre-supposes a need to be aware, and that is what this book seeks to achieve. The exact contours of how the equality code has been interpreted over the years is something only lawyers and Constitutional experts are aware of. This book aims to be a bridge between the abstractions of the law and the realities of lived experiences with the fond hope that an educated electorate would also be a wise one. ■



Title **Revolutionaries on Trial: Sedition, Betrayal, and Martyrdom**
Author **Aparna Vaidik**
Publisher **Aleph**
Pages **480**
Price ₹ **999** (hardcover)

Finding the man in the mythology

Aparna Vaidik

There was a flood of chromolithographs and bazaar prints that memorialised Bhagat Singh's death as martyrdom. His sartorial photograph with moustache and felt hat, a fashionable accessory in those times, especially came to be reproduced and adapted into paintings, badges, drawings, posters, calendars, and cards that people could stick on the walls in their homes or keep in their alcoves with images of other gods or turn into placards to be displayed at protest sites or carry in their wallets at all times. These images capitalised on the mimetic power of photos to make him present (and available to view and touch) despite his absence. They evoked both memory and emotions. His image much like saintly relics acquired a historical and an emotive power and became 'a perfect vehicle for production of nostalgia'.

In one of the images, Bhagat Singh was depicted as crucified Jesus Christ and in another one Gandhi was shown tearing open his chest to reveal the images of three hanged revolutionaries (referencing the episode in the epic *Ramayana* where Hanuman, Lord Ram's devotee, tears open his chest to display an effervescent image of Lord Ram and his consort Sita).

These images, their reproduction, adaptation, and circulation spawned a new visual culture that galvanised the anti-imperial politics of the early 1930s. Hereafter, Bhagat Singh lived on in

Punjab's *bolian* (catch songs), *ghorian* (wedding songs), *tappey* (couplets), *mari* (songs of lament), *qisse* (love poetry), and its *shaheedi melas* (annual fairs held in memory of the martyrs). He was characterised in folk memory as a *shaheed* (martyr), *sher* (the lion), *lal* (son of Mother India) and a *chiragh* (lamp). Historical research shows that in this period, dominant cultural memorialisation did not yet celebrate Bhagat Singh as a Marxist anti-bourgeois icon', which would happen in the decades to come.

Notwithstanding Bhagat Singh's popularity in Punjab's folk memory, there was a general belief amongst the surviving revolutionaries that their contribution was progressively written out of the nationalist commemoration. The Congress, and especially Nehru, as they began campaigning for the 1935 Assembly elections, became increasingly ambivalent and reluctant to openly espouse the revolutionary cause. Congressmen gradually became censorious of the revolutionaries who were seen giving 'inflammatory' speeches on being released from jail or resorting to hunger strikes while still in custody. This discomfort heightened with the coming of Independence. Bhagat Singh's family, as historian Chris Moffat shows, led the polemic regarding the obscuring of the legacy of the revolutionaries following India's independence.

This angst surfaced, according to film historian Ravinder Singh, in the controversy surrounding the making and

release of the first Bhagat Singh biopic *Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh* (1954), which was directed by Jagdish Gautam and produced by Poonum Productions. Bijoy Kumar Sinha, who had set up the Shahid Memorial Trust around the time of Independence and headed the editorial board of Bhagat Singh Commemoration Volume (BSCV), had announced making of films on the lives of Bhagat Singh and Chandra Shekhar Azad. He and Bhagat Singh's brothers took umbrage at the making of *Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh* because it was a 'commercial film'. The Shahid Memorial Trust could not prevent it from being released despite creating a significant outcry. The Censor Board could not ban the film given Bhagat Singh's popularity as a nationalist icon but asked director Jagdish Gautam to cut out certain scenes. On its release, it was condemned by Bhagat Singh's brothers, Batukeshwar Dutt and several legislators and parliamentarians.

The film did 'outstanding business' despite media criticism, the melodrama, and its 'factual' inaccuracies. The popular memory of Bhagat Singh had clearly outstripped his own life. In 1965, the Manoj Kumar-starring S. Ram Sharma's *Shaheed* was made in consultation with Batukeshwar Dutt and Bhagat Singh's family members. The film was a stupendous success and won three national awards. It played a significant role in bringing Bhagat Singh's memory to non-Punjabi audiences across India. Bijoy Kumar Sinha, the 'primary initiator' of the idea of the biopic was conspicuously absent from the credits of the film. According to Ravinder Singh, given that Bijoy was now a known communist, the filmmakers preferred not to associate with him because the government was wary of them at the time.

This attempt to create an authentic version of Bhagat Singh's legacy, untainted by commercialism and communism, went in a different direction in 1967 with the establishment of a youth centre, Yuvak Kendra, in Bhagat Singh's ancestral home in Khatkar Kalan. The support of a surviving Ghadar revolutionary, Baba Sohan Singh Bakhna was instrumental in setting it up. The Kendra embarked on an outreach campaign aimed at school- and college-goers. This was their way of addressing the marginalisation of the revolutionaries in the larger national narrative and preserving their memory for posterity. This re-energised Bhagat Singh's memory in Punjab along with other Punjabi and Sikh revolutionaries associated with the Ghadar Movement and the Kirti Kisan Sabhas. The Kendra galvanised an archival momentum of collecting the writings of Bhagat Singh,

reminiscences of his associates about him, his family records, letters that sought to challenge Bhagat Singh's folk representation, his romanticised image as a 'gun-toting vigilante' and the cinematic focus on the hunger strikes as the primary focus of his political life.

The concurrent effort of the Nationalist-Marxist scholars to discover Bhagat Singh's letters, essays and jail diary and other 'primary evidence' and consolidating it all into an archive led to a shift in his image as a scholarly revolutionary who was devoted to reading and writing; and one who would have eventually embraced Communism in the manner Bijoy Kumar Sinha, Ajoy Ghosh, Shiv Verma and Kundan Lal had. This archiving impulse corresponded with a growing discontent with India's present, reflected in the labour strikes, environmental and popular protests, Naxalism and armed civil strife that were unfolding at the time. These events spawned a popular desire to reach back to a more radical anti-colonial past for inspiration. Until this time, Bhagat Singh was treasured in the public memory as the true son of Mother India, the martyr. As Moffat notes, it was ironic that the appeal to collection of evidence or primary sources was an attempt to 'demystify' Bhagat Singh's image but instead it served 'to embellish a hagiography rather than deflate it'.

Despite the curation and archiving of documentary evidence, Bhagat Singh's memory continues to be invoked by people of all shades of politics in inconceivable ways to the present day. This is a testament to the numerous and often opposing ways in which people have made meaning of Bhagat Singh's persona, his actions and his ideas. From the communist activists to the Maoist student groups, Naxalite youth, Sikh community, Akalis, people of Punjab, and right-wing groups (such as Bhagat Singh Kranti Sena), political parties (Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Maoist), Communist Party of India (Maoist-Leninist), Indian National Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party, Akali Dal, Aam Aadmi Party), the Kashmiri nationalists, and the more recent largescale protest mobilisations—the Anti-Citizenship Amendment Act/ National Register of Citizens (2019) protests and the Farmers' Protest (2020–21), all draw on different representations of Bhagat Singh—the trimmed-haired image of him in a felt hat or the white-turbaned image of a sombre young man or the more recent yellow-basanti turbaned portrait. The fact that these images are ubiquitous demonstrates the continued affect of Bhagat Singh's memory and the slogan 'Inquilab Zindabad'. ■



Bhagat Singh in jail, Lahore, 1928

Despite the curation and archiving of documentary evidence, Bhagat Singh's memory continues to be invoked by people of all shades of politics in inconceivable ways to the present day

EAT.WANDER.REPEAT

The patriarchy of spices

Do the sons of the house ever have to alter their palate? Why would they?

Denise D'Silva

With popular Indian spice brands being recently banned on account of high levels of pesticides in their mixes, I take solace in the fact that the most dedicated mothers and mothers-in-law have never let up on guarding their family 'secret blend of spices'.

I always wondered why these women undertook the rather laborious task of going to the market, selecting spices (sometimes hundreds of them), roasting each under the scorching sun or on wood fires, hand-pounding them at the local masala mill and finally mixing them in specific ratios. No shortcuts, no—God forbid—mixer-grinders.

I've found that homemade masalas prevail largely in the west and south of the country. Perhaps it has something to do with the long monsoons when fresh spices are hard to come by. The yearning for good homecooked meals, however, doesn't know any seasons. So, the women of the house devised homemade spice blends to last till the following summer. The entirely artisanal process is also a way to ensure that the final product is not adulterated like mass-produced ones. It's a practice that dates back centuries. And because these recipes are so closely guarded, one can assume that the masalas themselves go back a few centuries in authenticity. What a wonderful way to keep one's heritage alive!

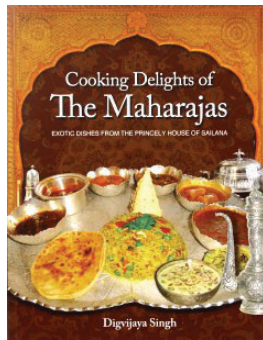
But there is another angle to this

story—and that's patriarchy. Let me unpack that. While Indian cuisine uses all manner of dry and whole spices, the powdered ones—the mixed masalas, the Malwani/ Pathare Prabhu bottle masalas—are specific to each community. These blends are not the same as garam masala, which is also handmade. Mixed masala, as the name suggests, is usually a blend of many types of local chillies and whole dried spices, in varying proportions according to each family's recipe. A slight variation in the amount of say, cumin, in the mix, will give it a whole different flavour profile within the same variant. These spices are ground by the kilo and stored in stoneware or glass jars, sealed tight to prevent the moisture of the monsoon from spoiling them. Small amounts are then removed from these large receptacles and put into lovingly used spice boxes. What looks like regular chilli powder is a mixture of anything between 12 and 45 spices. It lends a distinct aroma and taste to many types of dishes, and yet, it is not used in isolation. That would be too simple for the Indian palate! Instead, it is added to different dishes in different proportions, along with other powdered spices like coriander. As if this wasn't complicated enough, the passing on of these secret spice recipes happens at quite another level.

If we look at it from the angle of the erstwhile royal families of India, we might assume that the influences the new bride brought with her found a place in the house she married into. This did happen, to a limited extent. But did these influences



Even when women teach their daughters to cook, they don't teach them all the secrets of the 'house specials'



Families feel insecure about their treasured recipes being 'sent', as it were, to other families by way of marriage

find pride of place at the royal table? Most probably not. Instead, the princess had to carry on the traditions of the prince's family, even in the matter of food.

For instance, Digvijaya Singh and his father Prince Dilip Singh of Sailana (present day Madhya Pradesh) were avid connoisseurs who collected recipes from the royal families of Bhopal, Hyderabad and Rampur, creating the Sailana Food Archive. The men of the Sailana family were famed cooks and took pride in reviving old recipes and creating new ones. Digvijaya Singh went on to write *Cooking Delights of the Maharajas* (1982), that bible for so many seasoned chefs and gourmands.

But male royals stepping into the kitchens to cook up a storm is not the patriarchy I refer to. What I'm talking about has to do with royal families feeling insecure about their treasured recipes being 'sent', as it were, to other princely states by way of marriage. As we know, royals in India prefer to marry other royals. Here geography comes second to genealogy. And while the rajahs might have been diligent chroniclers of their cuisines, they weren't generous about sharing them. So, while young princesses grew up on food that was distinct to their principality, the recipes were rarely shared with the daughter of the house. What they feared was losing prized recipes to the family their daughter was marrying into. In effect, patriarchy ruled at the dining table.

I wonder how difficult it would have been for these princesses to get accustomed to completely foreign tastes and rituals in another palace. How dearly they might have longed to eat the familiar food they were brought up on, but sadly never taught how to make, by virtue of being girls.

While this was the norm in most royal circles, there are exceptions like Maharani Gayatri Devi, herself a hybrid of influences from Cooch Behar, Baroda and Maratha. When she married the maharaja of Jaipur, Gayatri Devi brought this eclecticism with her—Cooch Behari dishes of cooking cauliflower or fish with radish, as well as the simple Marathi dish *amti-daal* made sumptuous with cashew nuts, ghee and coconut.

'Commoners' when it comes to this kind of patriarchy. I've seen it ever so often amongst the people of the Konkan. Here

marriages are arranged within and between villages, which leads to subtle tweaks and shifts. I remember a girl named Shaila who worked in a cashew factory in Vengurla in the Sindhudurg region of Maharashtra. I struck up a conversation with her and later, was treated to a local Konkani delicacy, the humble but delicious snack of *ghaane* (similar to a dosa) and chutney. When I asked her to teach us, she simply smiled sweetly and said that though she had learnt how to make it, she hadn't yet learnt to love it. Originally from Pune, a region that doesn't share the Konkani's fondness for coconut, she never knew this dish before she got married. And yet she identified with her husband's family to the extent that she called herself 'Konkani' without the slightest hesitation. It was then that I realised how much of themselves women in India leave behind when they marry.

Food is identity and if it is swapped for another type of cuisine, it erases a large part of who you are and the memories you grew up with. Do the sons of the house ever have to alter their palate? Why would they? Their mothers and wives are taught to make only what the family (read patriarchy) allows, in order to continue tradition. In effect, the longevity of a cuisine rides on the shoulders of the women and their ability to take it forward. I'm all for keeping culinary legacy alive, but at the cost of losing one to carry forward another? It makes me wonder how many opportunities for delicious fusion are lost this way.

On further probing, Shaila mentioned that her mother-in-law had recently entrusted her with the family masala recipe and asked her not to share it with the daughters of the house. After all, they would soon 'belong' to another family and one's secret masala recipes were as integral as the family name. I asked her if she longed for her mother's food. Again, she smiled and said, "Who doesn't?" Did her mother teach her *her* family recipes? Sure, she taught her how to cook. But did she share the recipe of the homemade masalas that she cooked with? Obviously not. *That* was to be shared only with the future daughter-in-law. ■

DENISE D'SILVA is the author of *The Beyond Curry Indian Cookbook*. Her Instagram is @eatwander.repeat



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RNI: MAHENG/2021/84829

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Mumbai • 15 September 2024 • Pages: 8 • Vol. 3 Issue 44 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

STATES 360°

In focus this week: Haryana, Jharkhand, Maharashtra



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NATION

ANOTHER BATTLE FOR THE RANI OF JHANSI?

The wheel has come full circle for Kangana Ranaut




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MINORITIES

THE QUESTION OF MINORITY RIGHTS

Can India afford to lecture Bangladesh given its own record?



► P6

TRANSPARENCY ON TRIAL

The case against Madhabi Puri Buch

The SEBI chairperson's ongoing earnings from her past employers ICICI have raised conflict-of-interest alarms

Sucheta Dalal

A series of allegations by the Congress Party against Madhabi Puri Buch, chairperson of the Securities & Exchange Board of India (SEBI), sent shock waves through the financial sector yesterday, casting a further shadow over the integrity of the market regulator.

The accusations are so startling that even seasoned market experts were initially sceptical, with some speculating that the Congress might have fallen prey to deep fakes. Yet, as the dust settled, ICICI Bank's official response to the stock exchanges has only deepened the intrigue, raising crucial questions about the conflict of interest and absence of adequate disclosure norms when private sector individuals are appointed to top government positions.

Subhash Chandra Goel, the founder of the Zee group—himself embroiled in a long-standing investigation by SEBI—added fuel to the fire by holding a separate press conference to level some serious charges against the chairperson. But the spotlight remains firmly on the Congress, since it has followed up its original charges with more questions about ICICI Bank's employee stock options plan (ESOP) policy.

The initial allegations

Congress spokesperson Pawan Khera, in a press conference accused Ms Buch of earning a staggering Rs 16.8 crore (approximately \$2.1 million) from the ICICI group, through a combination of salary, proceeds of ESOPs and tax benefits. This figure dwarfs her earnings as the head of SEBI by a factor of five. Ms Buch quit ICICI group in 2013, after having headed ICICI Securities, its brokerage firm, whose planned merger with ICICI Bank now is also mired in controversy.

[In the first week of September], ICICI Bank informed stock exchanges that all the money paid was due to retirement benefits accrued to Ms Buch after she left the Bank in 2013. However, instead of quelling concerns, it has triggered new concerns about conflict of interest and the absence of disclosure and adequate oversight over those who head regulatory bodies.

On 3 September, the Congress raised new questions about ICICI Bank's statement. It says that ICICI Bank's ESOP policy is only available on the US Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) website and not in India. That policy says that an employee can exercise ESOPs within a maximum of three months after voluntary retirement. This seems contrary to

ICICI Bank's disclosure to stock exchanges that an employee can exercise ESOPs for up to 10 years after leaving the company. However, another clause in the policy says that commencing the date of vesting, the period of exercising ESOPs will expire on the completion of a period not exceeding 10 years, 'as may be determined by the Remunerations and Nominations Committee for each grant'. This seems in line with Congress's point that Ms Buch was singled out for special benefits.

The Congress has also questioned how retirement benefits (they refer to it as pension/salary) can be significantly higher than the last drawn salary of an individual. Since the Congress has not put out documents and SEBI has remained silent, it is still unclear if the figures in the Congress press release include ESOPs that may have been encashed by Ms Buch.

Disclosure norms: a question of transparency

The crux of the issue is disclosure rules governing the seniormost officials at regulatory bodies, given their access to unpublished price-sensitive information (UPSI). Their orders and decisions can dramatically impact stock prices, raising the stakes for stringent disclosure and compliance norms. A negative order against a listed company could lead to a fall in its share prices and could also cause a spike in share prices of competitors. So a public disclosure of personal interest and holdings seems a fair ask.

I emailed SEBI's human resources chief to ask if UPSI and disclosure rules apply to the chairperson. Whether disclosure of the encashment of ESOPs are made by the chairperson every year and are there any restrictions on when the SEBI chair and whole-time members (WTMs) can encash ESOPs and investments in the context of the timing of significant orders and decisions. I have not received any response from SEBI.

In the seven years since Ms Buch assumed her role at SEBI, the regulator has tightened disclosure norms across corporate India, often under Listing Obligations and Disclosure Regulations (LODR) and insider trading rules. However, the lack of disclosure regarding her earnings/ encashment of ESOPs from her previous employer raises uncomfortable questions. Can an individual leading a regulatory organisation retain claims on ESOPs for a decade after leaving an organisation? More importantly, why does SEBI, an institution with over three decades of experience, not have robust mechanisms in place to address these potential conflicts?

Global standards: a stark contrast

Internationally, the standards for managing conflicts of interest among regulatory heads are stringent. The US has general rules of conduct for government officials in public service, which in a nutshell say, 'You shall not hold financial interests that conflict with the conscientious performance of duty.' Heads of regulatory bodies in most developed countries are, typically, required to divest direct holdings in entities that could pose conflict of interest, including sector-specific mutual funds. Assets that cannot be easily divested have to be placed in a blind trust that is independently managed.

The chairperson of the US SEC is subject to even stricter rules regarding conflicts of interest, investments and financial disclosures, due to the power and influence of the job. In many cases, these financial disclosures are made public to ensure transparency and allow exter-



(Left) SEBI chairperson Madhabi Puri Buch



Photo: Getty Images

Why does SEBI, an institution with over three decades of experience, not have robust mechanisms in place to address these potential conflicts?

nal parties to monitor potential conflicts of interest.

A more concrete example is that of Hank Paulson who transitioned from Goldman Sachs to head the US Treasury. He was required to sell his investments valued at \$700 million, with the only concession being deferred capital gains, if reinvested in government securities or mutual funds within 60 days.

In contrast, India's regulations are ambiguous. The Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) manual, last updated in 2021, offers little more than vague guidance, cautioning against 'frequent speculation' in stocks and investments likely to 'embarrass or influence' the official's duties.

It is hard to believe that SEBI has no rules in place for those at the top or that the SEBI chairperson did not realise, during her seven-year stint that disclosure of salary/ encashment of ESOPs were crucial in her highly sensitive role as SEBI chief.

The elephant in the room: codifying rules for conflict of interest

The broader issue here is the lack of codified rules for conflict of interest within SEBI—a deliberate strategy, perhaps, given

that controversies involving trading and investments by senior SEBI officials date back to the 1990s.

SEBI's rules on transaction in shares require officials to disclose their shareholding and that of their families within 15 days of assuming office and at the end of each financial year. Significant transactions must also be disclosed within 15 days and whole-time members are not allowed to trade on the basis of unpublished price-sensitive information. But, if disclosures remain confidential, who monitors for potential conflicts? Is it likely that an internal vigilance official or HR department holds a chairperson or a whole-time member accountable? The Hindenburg Research allegations have exposed how we also have no information about her recusals in conflict-of-interest situations.

The charges levelled by multiple sources—Hindenburg, Subhash Goel, the Congress party—and the ensuing debate underscore the need for SEBI to re-examine its internal policies, ensuring they meet the rigorous standards expected of a modern, transparent regulatory body. Only then can it maintain the public trust that is essential to its role as the guardian of India's financial markets. ■

SUCHETA DALAL is a renowned business journalist. She is managing editor of moneylife.in, where this piece was first published

Q & A

'Inaction hurts people'

The month-long movement for justice in West Bengal, led by students, women and civil society, has been a battle cry for change. The protestors have done what they could to distance themselves from political parties. Their goals may not be sharply outlined but there is no mistaking the fury against the state administration, which has seemed less concerned about their grievances and more focused on damage control and managing the political fallout. It does not help her cause that Mamata Banerjee is currently the only woman chief minister in the country and has a reputation as a firebrand who always stood up to bullies and always defended the interests of women. Already besieged by all the uncomfortable questions from her political adversaries, in the state and at the Centre, from the judiciary and the media, the public resignation of **Jawhar Sircar** (72), former Prasar Bharati CEO and retired IAS officer of the West Bengal cadre—whom Banerjee had handpicked—would have embarrassed her further. Sircar, who is half way through his six-year term in the Rajya Sabha, and still backs Banerjee to survive the crisis, spoke to **Anuradha Raman** on why he decided to quit.



Why did you feel the need to write an open letter?

I sent the letter on Sunday, 8 September, and I put it out on X the next day. This was not a private note but a public message. It needed to get across to other members of the party. The contents were meant to be a wake-up call for the party. I had to put it out in the public domain.

Is there a problem in airing views on serious issues directly with leaders? Is there a breakdown in communication within the party?

All parties have the same problem. Whenever there is something important to convey, members, even MPs, find themselves bound by rigid structures. I had the opportunity to speak to members across party lines as a parliamentarian. Whenever I asked them why they couldn't speak to their respective leaders, they would say *chhoro*, *chhoro* (forget it, let it be). The TMC is not an exception.

How would you describe your relationship with Mamata Banerjee?

It has been fine, though now she will be annoyed with me. She will think this was the wrong time for me to walk out. But I think it was the right time. It is

also the right moment for her to take the right decisions. I believe she should come out and address the anger among the people.

Isn't it now a bit too late?

Mamata is still the undisputed leader in Bengal and remains the only bulwark we have against communalism. I believe she is capable of doing anything. Unfortunately, all leaders think they are being unfairly heckled and criticised, which is not always true.

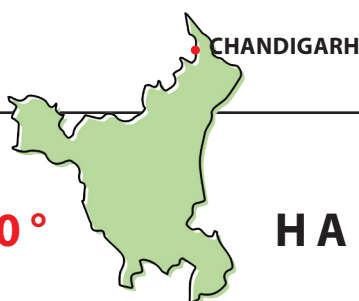
You have been compared to Vibhishan (who, as the Ramayana story goes, betrayed his brother Ravana), while you yourself have described your resignation as *hara-kiri* for the larger good. What good do you expect to come out of what you call a selfless act?

The day my resignation is accepted in the Rajya Sabha, I will pack my bags and walk away. Please remember that the Rajya Sabha was the reward a certain Chief Justice of India aspired to. A Rajya Sabha ticket is the one thing that most newspaper editors covet; it's a position that comes with perks. If giving it up is to be Vibhishan, the person who said this needs his head examined.

► Continued on page 2



STATES 360°



HARYANA

Caste alliances crumble: BJP struggles as leaders abandon ship

Herjinder

It's not a wave of resignations—it's a spate. On 8 September, G.L. Sharma, vice president of Haryana's BJP state unit stepped down. Over 250 officials followed suit, all of them joining the Congress. This marked the fifth consecutive day of mass resignations from the BJP, among them state cabinet ministers, sitting MLAs and influential leaders at both state and district levels.

On 4 September, the BJP had released its first list of 67 candidates for the upcoming assembly elections, sparking a series of internal revolts that continue unabated. But the exodus and unrest began well before the release of the first list, fuelled by dissatisfaction with party leadership (and its decisions) as well as the buzz that the BJP is facing defeat in the upcoming assembly election.

Throughout the state's history, the BJP has never been a dominant force. In Haryana's first assembly election in 1967, its predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, won 12 out of 81 seats. As the farming community's influence grew, the BJP's steadily diminished. Apart from a few instances where it formed alliances in the name of opposition unity, the BJP's seat count has generally remained in single digits.

This dynamic shifted in 2014, during what many refer to as the 'Modi wave'. In Haryana, this was reflected in the formation of what is often called an anti-Jat alliance at the state level.

A few months after the Lok Sabha elections, a YouTuber from Haryana provided an insightful explanation of this strategy. He pointed out that while the BJP typically polarises society against Muslims across the country, the Muslim population in Haryana is minimal, except in Nuh district. So, who could they 'other'? The BJP picked on the Jat population.

The strategy was to unite Baniyas, Punjabis, and backward castes to secure a majority. However, in a closely-knit society like Haryana, this kind of alliance could only go so far. Traditionally, the Dalit and backward population in Haryana has largely aligned with the Congress, which has successfully built a broad-based coalition. The BJP tried to break into this voter base through defections and other means, achieving some success in 2014. For instance, the party brought Rao Indrajit Singh into its fold in south Haryana, aiming to win over Ahir voters.

Despite the BJP securing just one seat

over the majority in the 2014 assembly election, it became evident that this kind of 'social engineering' had its limitations. Several other factors were also at play. On one hand, the Congress faced a degree of anti-incumbency after 10 years in power. On the other hand, Haryana's most prominent opposition leader, Om Prakash Chautala, was in jail due to a recruitment scam. The BJP capitalised on these circumstances.

However, by the 2019 assembly elections, Om Prakash Chautala's grandson, Dushyant Chautala, was working to reclaim his family's political ground. He formed the Jannayak Janata Party (JJP) which led to a split in the anti-BJP vote. No single party emerged with a majority and the BJP resorted to 'Operation Kamal' to form the government, eventually securing power by offering Dushyant Chautala the position of deputy chief minister.

The next five years were difficult for Haryana. This period saw the Covid-19 pandemic and the farmers' protest. The BJP government's antagonism to the movement and the barricading of Delhi's borders against the peaceful marchers turned almost all farming communities against the party, not just the Jats. The situation was so tense, chief minister Manohar Lal Khattar and other BJP leaders were unable to hold public meetings or participate in events, as angry farmers prevented them from entering villages.

As the 2024 Lok Sabha elections approached, the BJP recognised the rumble for what it was. Manohar Lal Khattar was replaced by Nayab Singh Saini, who was

Apart from a few instances where it formed alliances in the name of opposition unity, the BJP's seat count has generally remained in single digits

Photo courtesy: @BhupinderShooda/X



Haryana BJP vice president G.L. Sharma (right) joins the Congress in the presence of Bhupinder Singh Hooda and Deepender Hooda

sworn in as chief minister. The idea was to counter anti-incumbency against Khattar while playing the OBC card by appointing an OBC chief minister (though Sainis comprise a mere 3 per cent of the state's population). The Lok Sabha election results revealed that this strategy did not succeed.

Disillusionment with the party is evident across the state, particularly in the cities along the GT Road belt, including Panipat, Sonapat, Karnal and Ambala. Once strongholds of BJP support, these urban centres are shifting loyalties. Reports indicate that the BJP can neither count on the city dwellers nor the traditionally supportive Punjabi and Vaish communities who once formed a crucial part of its voter base.

The caste-based equations that the party counted on for political dominance in Haryana have eroded over time. What was once a carefully constructed coalition of various social groups, including Baniyas, Punjabis and backward castes, has fragmented. This collapse of caste dynamics has undermined the BJP's influence, exposing the party to a much more volatile political landscape. With its foundational alliances crumbling, the BJP finds itself in a precarious position, struggling to regain the trust of

communities that once played a pivotal role in its success in the state.

A resignation and a retirement

Vinesh Phogat is fighting the assembly elections on 5 October from the Julana seat on a Congress ticket. This is a tough seat, which the Congress has won only thrice since the formation of Haryana. 88 candidates were vying for it. The fact that not one of them objected to Vinesh's nomination speaks volumes both about her popularity and their discipline in putting the party's prospects first. Since the announcement, Vinesh has not only visited Julana but also inaugurated her campaign office there.

Indian Railways—which employed her on the sports quota—was first loath to accept her resignation. As in other government departments, employees are required to serve a three-month notice period. Although departments have the discretion to waive the notice period, the Railways had been dragging its feet. If Vinesh's resignation was not accepted by the last date of nomination—12 September—her candidature would have been rejected, as government employees cannot contest elections. When the Union government

realised that the champion wrestler would be a greater threat if she campaigned statewide rather than within her own constituency, the Railways accepted her resignation with immediate effect.

There may have been another reason for the sudden resolution—the BJP fielding ex-jailer Sunil Sangwan from Fardri constituency. Shortly before receiving the BJP ticket, Sangwan opted for voluntary retirement (VRS) from his position as Bhondsi Jail Superintendent. The VRS process is typically lengthier and more complex than a standard resignation. As we all know, in the realm of politics, quick processes can be prolonged and lengthy ones expedited. With Sangwan's premature retirement fast-tracked, stalling Vinesh's resignation—in effect, stymying her candidature—would have snowballed into an electoral issue. This might have influenced the decision to release her from her obligations to the Railways.

Readers may recall, it was on Sangwan's watch as Sunaria Jail Superintendent that Ram Rahim Singh was granted parole six times. The Dera Sacha Sauda head, who is serving a life-sentence for rape, is out on furlough, and is expected to lend Sangwan, the friendly jailor, a hand in these elections. ■

'Inaction hurts people'

Continued from page 1

You've said it became difficult to remain silent...

I kept quiet for a whole month. I am not a political person; mine was a lateral entry into the TMC. I am from civil society, which often does not have a civil tongue. We represent what we consider the voice of the informed public. Immediately after the horrific incident at R.G. Kar, I asked: "Why haven't you suspended the principal of the college?" I was told we are disciplined soldiers of the party and should abide by its decisions. Fine. But on Facebook, I gave an interview in Bangla, in which I said the party should suspend the principal immediately. I was accused of speaking out of turn. I argued that by suspending the principal, the administration and the party would gain credibility. I did not say this to embarrass the party.

Who questioned you when you spoke up?

Every party has people who ensure that members do not break ranks. I was asked, "I wanted. I said: suspend the guilty. Take demonstrative action. Question the police. Let's be transparent in our actions. Because of my years of working as a civil servant and administrator, I had also sent a 'to do' list, which included a call to suspend



leaders who were taking bribes and building mansions. Inaction hurts people. I happen to be the only former administrator in the party. If you don't take my advice, whom will you heed—the *iccreamwala*?

I'd sent a similar list of actions that should have been taken by the party in the last one month. There is a difference between demonstrative action and delayed, reluctant action. I could see the delayed action that followed. That's when I decided, enough is enough. This, despite having said in public that Didi is capable of jumping into the fire to sort out an issue.

There were reasons to believe, though, that the agitation was not all spontaneous...

I have been on the streets, where I'm not recognised. This movement is too dispersed, the protestors too diverse to conclude that they are [all] being egged on by political parties. The BJP has its own agitators, who get pulled up by the police. Let's not confuse the two. Reach out to the women protestors. Reach out to the striking doctors.

This movement is turning out to be an acid test for the Mamata government. What should the chief minister do?

I have been observing her since 1983. I have seen how she overcomes odds. She has the spirit; she can do it. She and her people might be angry with me momentarily. But her stand on women's empowerment is genuine and undiluted. It is tragic that this incident took place in a state where women are actually empowered.

There is a context to this agitation. Calcutta has repeatedly been declared the safest city for women by the NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau). The women of Bengal have been an empowered lot for a long, long time. They are Durga and Kali. I know; I married one. They have minds of their own, voices of their own. In that context, when they are saying what you have done is not enough, they need to be heeded. Their protest is an attempt to reclaim not only the night but a space other states have not yet thought about. The women of Bengal are actually fighting a battle for the rest of India. ■

I asked, "Why haven't you suspended the principal (of R.G. Kar)?" I was told we are disciplined soldiers of the party and should abide by its decisions



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STATES 360°



JHARKHAND

Pre-poll hysterics over 'love and land jihad'

Rajendra Tiwari

The government of India has repeatedly maintained that it has no record of undocumented Bangladeshis residing in India. In fact, it informed the Supreme Court that it was impossible to state a number. That, however, has not prevented the Union home minister Amit Shah, BJP MP Nishikant Dubey, two former chief ministers Babulal Marandi and Champai Soren, and a member of the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes (NCST) Asha Lakra from alleging that Adivasi women in Jharkhand have been victims of 'love and land jihad'. Thousands of Muslims from Bangladesh, claimed Amit Shah in July, had infiltrated the Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand, married Adivasi women and occupied land.

There is ample evidence of land alienation in the state—but the culprits are primarily the State in cahoots with the industrial lobby. Despite the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act of 1908 and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act of 1949, which restricts transfer of tribal land to non-tribals, large tracts of Adivasi land have been taken without the community's permission. Coercion, corruption, forgery and manipulation of land records, dubious 'deeds of donation' and informal transactions are the routes through which tribal land has passed into the hands of non-tribals.

The BJP's 'love jihad' campaign, sustained by relentless propaganda in the media, has no data to back it. Asha Lakra is the only BJP leader to have cited specific instances. While she was cagey about names, she said there were apparently eight mukhiyas, one panchayat samiti member and a zilla parishad chairperson in Sahibganj district who were 'victims'. The *Scroll* found that Lakra's claim of these Adivasi women having married

"Bangladeshi infiltrators, Rohingya Muslims" was completely false. In truth, three of the women had Adivasi husbands. The fourth, Kapra Tudu, had married Nitin Saha, a Hindu from outside the Adivasi community. The remaining six Adivasi women panchayat leaders who were indeed married to Muslims told *Scroll* that there was no coercion involved—they had married out of choice. Their husbands were locals settled in the Santhal Parganas.

A field survey in Sahibganj by the Jharkhand Janadhikar Mahasabha and the Loktantra Bachao Abhiyan also arrived at the same conclusion. Neither had they come across any Bangladeshi infiltrators, nor had the people spotted any. They confirmed large-scale violations of the SPT Act and demanded a thorough inquiry by the government. They also confirmed that the police were harassing couples on suspicion of the husbands being Bangladeshis. Although chief minister

Hemant Soren dismissed the allegations of 'love jihad' as baseless, pointing out that the state did not even have an international border with Bangladesh—which raises the other question of whose responsibility it is to stop infiltration—both Babulal Marandi and Champai Soren have echoed the allegations made by Shah and Dubey.

These hysterics seem likely to continue till the assembly election, scheduled for end-December.

Soren versus Soren: a cloak-and-dagger drama

While BJP state president Babulal Marandi claims the party had sent feelers to Champai Soren after he was asked to resign by the JMM (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha), the political grapevine has a different story to tell.

When Hemant Soren stepped out of jail on 28 June, Champai Soren (who had

warmed the CM's seat for six months) did not go to receive him. This raised eyebrows. On 1 July, the Jharkhand government released full-page advertisements hailing the three new criminal laws which replaced the Indian Penal Code, the Criminal Procedure Code and the Indian Evidence Act. The new bills rammed through Parliament were opposed by parties in the INDIA bloc and the government ads amped the unease. The Congress is believed to have alerted Hemant Soren that Champai Soren—who he had deputised as officiating chief minister before being marched off to prison by the ED—was actually planning to switch over to the BJP. This sent alarm bells ringing and Hemant Soren and the JMM moved swiftly to contain the damage.

That would explain the abrupt change of guard. On 28 June, Hemant Soren had indicated that Champai Soren would continue in office, while he would devote his time to organisation and election campaigning. Once alerted about a pre-poll rebellion, however, he curtly instructed Champai to cancel all official engagements and attend a meeting of the legislature party, where he was to publicly resign.

Champai Soren has himself narrated how insulted and humiliated he was by this turn of events. After agonising over his next move, even considering retiring from active politics, he finally decided to join the BJP.

Neither the party nor their latest recruit expected Hemant Soren to be released from prison so soon. When a single bench of the high court granted him bail, the ED promptly moved the Supreme Court with an appeal against the order. However, the high court order was so scathing, comprehensive and categorical that the Supreme Court refused to intervene. Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's carefully crafted plan thus came a cropper. Had Champai switched to the BJP as chief minister, he might have secured the support of several JMM legislators. However,

abruptly cut to size and deprived of even a ministerial berth, he has been able to persuade just one suspended JMM MLA to defect with him.

The BJP is putting up a brave front and claiming that Champai Soren joining the party is a coup of sorts. There are serious doubts, however, about how much the party would really benefit. Two other 'leaders', Sita Soren and Geeta Koda, who joined the BJP after defecting from the JMM and the Congress respectively, lost in the Lok Sabha election.

Champai Soren hails from the Kolhan region in Singhbhum, which elects 14 MLAs to the state assembly. Not one of these seats was won by the BJP in the last assembly election. The JMM bagged 12 seats, the Congress one, and Independent candidate Saryu Roy—who left the BJP to contest against the then chief minister Raghubar Das, defeating him to win the remaining seat.

While the BJP had hoped to wrest 8-9 seats in the region with Champai Soren leading the charge, his induction has been a damp squib. Not a single JMM legislator from the region has resigned with him and the party seems to be firmly with Hemant Soren.

In 2019, the JMM had fielded Champai Soren from Jamshedpur for the Lok Sabha election, where he lost to the BJP by a margin of over three lakh votes. While the BJP did hang on to the Jamshedpur Lok Sabha seat in 2024, its margin of victory was slimmer.

In Chaibasa, the other Lok Sabha seat, the INDIA bloc's victory margin doubled this year. The BJP is also struggling with far too many heavyweights from the region in the party including Arjun Munda, Raghubar Das, the present governor of Odisha, Madhu Koda and his wife Geeta Koda. Internal opposition to the induction of Champai Soren—hailed as a brilliant move by Himanta Biswa Sarma—is growing. ■



Jharkhand chief minister and JMM chief Hemant Soren

Photo: Getty Images



STATES 360°



MAHARASHTRA

Out of a pothole and into a pod taxi?

Navin Kumar

Mooted in March and approved by the cabinet in September, the 'pod taxi project' between Kurla and BKC (Bandra-Kurla Complex) has run into a wall of public cynicism—with good reason. What was this scheme, Mumbaiers fumed, if not a *jumla* ahead of the assembly election (due any time now, with the current assembly's term ending in November).

The business district of BKC draws 4-6 lakh footfalls every day but is severely under-served by BEST buses and auto-rickshaws. The nearest suburban stations are Bandra and Kurla, merely 2-3 kilometres away in terms of distance but anything between 30-40 minutes in terms of travel time in peak hours. If officegoers are lucky to squeeze into a shared auto-rickshaw, they pay Rs 30-40 per head. Ola and Uber cabs charge anything between Rs 80 to Rs 100 for the same distance. The 'auto-rickshaw mafia' in complicity with the cops often charge even more. Walking on potholed roads with broken pavements is nerve-racking and takes more than 30 minutes each way. So, what are folks to do?

With city planners having bypassed BKC when it came to Metro lines, one suggestion was that corporations run free shuttle buses for their employees. They could pool resources and divert a part of their CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) funds to run smaller buses seating 36 people at a time. While some can afford to take the air-conditioned app-based Cityflo buses—from the western and eastern suburbs as well as Navi Mumbai into BKC—for the majority the daily commute is a daily nightmare.

Are pod taxis the panacea, then? The perfect solution with fares pegged at 21 bucks per head? That's what the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) announcement seemed to suggest, but people aren't jumping for joy.

Driverless electric vehicles on an elevated track, pod taxis have been running at the Dubai, Singapore and Heathrow airports. Heathrow's pod taxis, operational since 2011, are used to move business class passengers from the parking lot to the terminal, a distance of 3.8 km. Media reports in May 2023 had claimed that

India's first pod taxis would connect Noida International Airport at Jewar (still under construction) to Noida's Film City, covering a distance of 14.1 kms. Although the project was to be completed by the end of 2024, its current status remains unknown.

Even as Sanjay Mukherjee, Metropolitan Commissioner, MMRDA, gushed about the pod taxi project connecting 8.8 km in Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC) with 38 stations along the route, the response from Mumbaiers has been icy. "It's like using a vacuum cleaner to clean Mumbai's streets," quipped one, while another commuter wondered how different the pod taxi would be from an autorickshaw. The only difference, said another, was "shiny glass cabins and an elevated corridor". Why not use that corridor for electric buses that would move 35 people at a time, he wondered.

Few seem to believe that the project would even take off. Some are disappointed that it will be at least three years before it's operational. Others are traumatised at the thought of already congested roads being dug up. Wouldn't a faster and more cost-effective solution be to improve existing roads, add some more BEST bus routes, have better policing at auto stands and make the pavements walk-worthy?

While frustrated commuters have been venting, the more mathematically inclined have taken to back-of-the-envelope calculations. With each pod carrying six passengers and pods running at intervals of 15 seconds, four pods would be able to move 24 passengers every minute. It would thus take an hour to move 1,440 passengers. With rush hour extending to four hours every morning and evening, an uninterrupted pod taxi service would therefore be able to transport just 5,840 passengers on a single track. The figure would be twice that if two tracks plied—one from Bandra and the other from Kurla. How, they ask, is that going to help the six lakh passengers that frequent BKC daily? Might as well drain the ocean one teaspoon at a time.

Eyebrows were also raised because Sai Green Mobility Pvt. Ltd.—the Hyderabad-based company that won the Rs 1,016 crore contract—was incorporated barely six months ago on 14 March 2024. How could a company with an authorised capital of Rs 10 crore and paid-up capital of just one

lakh rupees have been awarded a contract worth a thousand crores?

MMRDA defends their choice by citing that Sai Green's technology partner M/s Ultra PRT has a proven track record of running the operational system at Heathrow airport. They also claim to have conducted a techno-feasibility study peer-reviewed by Tata Consulting Engineers, which recommended pod taxis after taking into account the region's topography and expected growth of traffic. The Metropolitan Commissioner's statement said, "This project is set to revolutionise last-mile connectivity within BKC, addressing the needs of the 4 to 6 lakh commuters who travel daily to and from the business district. With the anticipated increase in footfall due to upcoming infrastructure developments such as the bullet train and new commercial buildings, the necessity for efficient last-mile connectivity has become paramount."

The project on a public-private partnership (PPP) model anticipates a construction period of three years and a concession period of 30 years. The model includes provisions for a fixed concession fee and a percentage of revenue-sharing with MMRDA. "We believe that the pod taxi project in BKC marks a significant step



Driverless electric vehicles on elevated tracks, pod taxis are being projected as the panacea for BKC's congestion problems

towards enhancing urban mobility in one of Mumbai's busiest business districts," Mukherjee's statement added.

The approval for the pod taxi project is one among several vanity projects being cleared in a rush by the Mahayuti government ahead of the assembly election. Mumbaiers believe that neither the Mahayuti government nor the MMRDA are actually serious about pod taxis, which already appear impractical. They reckon if the BJP coalition wins, it would find some reason to junk the project. And if it loses, well, it was no longer their problem.

Urban planning experts believe the pod taxi project is destined to end up just as badly as the Mumbai monorail project. The MMRDA monorail between Chembur and Mahalaxmi has run up a loss of Rs 500 crore. The country's first monorail not only failed to attract passengers due to its 'faulty route', it failed even to attract tourists and visitors to the city!

Akshay Rautela, cofounder of Delhi-based Instaspaces, was quoted in *Mid-Day* as claiming that only five per cent of commuters to BKC would be able to afford the projected fare of pod taxis. This number would further dwindle if people

were made to wait for more than 15 seconds for the next pod, he added. Another expert, K.K. Tinguru, was equally pessimistic. Skywalks, buses, cycle lanes—not one of them has worked to minimise congestion in this 'maximum city'. This, he felt, was likely to be just another waste of public money.

The Bandra-Kurla Complex is believed to be the most expensive commercial hub in the country and is still growing. The terminal of the Ahmedabad-Mumbai bullet train is also supposed to come up here. Government agencies have not held transparent public consultations. With elections to local bodies including to the BrihanMumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) pending for the past two-and-a-half years, the bureaucracy has had a field day with no questions asked.

A former councillor said, on condition of anonymity, that there was no doubt that the pod taxi project was a scheme promoted with an eye to the election. Had the government been serious about civic issues, he said, it would have paid more attention to crumbling infrastructure, growing traffic congestion, pot-holed roads and local trains bursting at the seams. ■

Mumbaiers believe that neither the Mahayuti government nor the MMRDA are actually serious about the pod taxi project which already appears impractical

Another battle for the Rani of Jhansi?

Someone once said we are all born ignorant, but have to work hard to be stupid. No one can accuse Kangana of not working really hard, writes **Avay Shukla**

Kangana Ranaut is all over the news these days like a bad rash, there's just no getting away from her interviews, statements and tweets. I find her very refreshing in these morbid days of rapes, lynchings, bridge collapses, encounters, defections and states going bankrupt. What is enlivening about her utterances is the novel perspective she brings to bear on whichever subject she decides to take on.

Someone once said we are all born ignorant, but we have to work hard to be stupid. No one can accuse the Himachali belle of not working really hard. She is a bit like the IAS, an expert on any subject. She has spoken on the US election, history, Manipur, the farmers' protests, the Delhi riots, the 2002 Gujarat carnage, nepotism, Bollywood, sexual exploitation, the caste census, censorship, the freedom movement, among other weighty subjects. And, in keeping with the best practices in the IAS these days, she is also a lateral entry into Parliament!

She has even started dropping hints about her marriage, and our vacuous media, with no exit polls on the horizon,

has started speculating about the wicket-keeper who might be responsible for the run-out. It's a bit late for me to throw my hat into the bull ring, having already chucked my towel into another one, but I do have a piece of advice for the gentleman—if you have the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, sell it to the *kabariwala*; you won't be needing it any longer, for your wife knows everything. Ditto for Google search.

Now, I'm no fan of Ms Ranaut's brand of politics, and I do wish that she would be a little less toxic and much less forthcoming with her muddled thoughts on everything under the sun. But I can't help offering my hat at her candour, her courage to call a spade a shovel, and her audacity in calling out the power brokers in the world of politics and filmmaking. Among the current crop of filmfame 'influencers', she is perhaps the only woman of note to say "F**k you!" in a man's world that is getting more parochial with every successive election. And sadly, she is paying the price.

The hounding of her film *Emergency* is a case in point, though the malaise it depicts is much larger, for the same happened with

the Netflix series *IC814*. Taking offence has become a full-time, and rewarding, profession in India. It's not something new either—remember *Kissaa Kursee Kaa*, *Aandhi*, *A Suitable Boy*, *Sacred Games*, *Tandav*, Salman Rushdie and the enforced exile of M.F. Husain?

This 'hurting of sentiments' is a very dangerous trend in a country with six major religions, 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes, 22 official languages, 121 other languages and 270 mother tongues, 2,000 registered political parties and hundreds of millions of morons. Any aspiring or misguided idiot can claim to be offended by anything in a film. In the case of *Emergency* it is allegedly the 'unfavourable' depiction of Sikhs and in *IC814* it is the Hindu names of terrorists and their 'humanising', whatever that means.

Both films are supposedly historical, and there are always different perspectives on history, which is the way it should be. In a liberal democracy, a writer or director should have the freedom to present his version of any historical event, without any jingoist, communal or political obstructions.

If the SGPC does not like the way Sikhs are shown by Ms Ranaut—fine, God knows they have the money to do so. If fake nationalists have the opposite grouse—Sikhs are demonised in *Emergency*, terrorists are humanised in *IC814*—don't watch the film, or ask Vivek Agnihotri to make another film called the 'Hijack Files'. Lumpen elements one can understand—



A still from *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* starring Kangana Ranaut

inanity is part of our DNA. What one is most shocked at, however, is the way our governments and courts become part of this regressive process. The courts these days will do everything except their jobs, which is to dispense justice in a timely manner.

Why, one wonders again and again, do they even admit petitions for banning/withholding the release of films on grounds of distortion, defamation or hurting of sentiments? Leave it to the censor board, and if this august body fails to do its job, then haul it over the coals. But why become the court of first resort for any dissatisfied citizen?

I am constrained to observe, with great respect and regret, that neither the Bombay nor Madhya Pradesh High Courts have served the cause of free speech by failing to facilitate the scheduled release of *Emergency*.

The central government, as is to be expected, has conducted itself with customary duplicity. Though it found nothing wrong with the dubious representation of facts and tenor in its own propaganda films, *Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story*, in the case of Ms Ranaut's film, it has arm-twisted the censor board to delay certification because of the 'sensitivity' of the subject—read: possible adverse impact on the BJP in the impending Haryana elections.

One would have expected the two high courts to have seen through this dumb charade, but possibly the blindfold over the eyes of the statue of justice is tighter than we would have imagined.

Coming on top of the ever-increasing restrictions on print and television media, social media platforms and OTT channels, the legitimacy now accorded to communalities, self-appointed 'nationalists' and religious groups to block any film, and the reluctance of the judiciary to stop them, is turning India's creative pastures into intellectual deserts. Soon, no one worth their salt will write books or make films except the propagandists of whichever party happens to be in power at the time.

There are two lessons in this for Kangana Ranaut. One, the wheel has come full circle for her, and she has become a victim of the same toxic and intolerant ideology that she supports. Two, she has been betrayed by her own party which has cast her aside for a few seats in Haryana. Her free-roaming and independent spirit does not correspond with the confining and suffocating ethos of the party she belongs to. Time for another battle for the Rani of Jhansi? ■

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



Soon, no one worth their salt will write books or make films except the propagandists of whichever party happens to be in power at the time

The (BJP) king reigns but does not rule

Leading a minority government in the new NDA regime, can Narendra Modi survive the full term?

Aakar Patel

Minority governments have two major concerns: clearing votes of no-confidence and passing legislation.

The first, which involves remaining in office for five years, requires the ruling party to acquire a threshold number of MPs—meaning, a sufficiently large mass at the centre of the coalition to keep it together. Our history indicates that this can be as low as 150 seats, but not much lower.

The 1996 coalition formed by the Janata Dal and the Communists with two prime ministers, Deve Gowda and Inder Kumar Gujral, had only 78 seats—too few for stability and too dependent on external support. After much drama, having survived at the whim of the Congress led by Sitaram Kesri, it fell within two years.

Running a government where 'allies' have almost an equal number of seats is not easy; but it is possible to finish the term. All three coalitions in office before 2014 survived five years, the first of them confidently choosing to go into elections six months early. This, despite the ruling party in these coalitions having as few as 182 seats (Atal Bihari Vajpayee, 1999), 145 seats

(Manmohan Singh, 2004) and 206 seats (Manmohan Singh, 2009).

It is true that much of the news cycle in these years was occupied by reports and rumours of 'allies' sulking, throwing tantrums and pulling out, but all three crossed the finish line.

In the 18th Lok Sabha, the BJP with 240 seats is the only party that can form a government. It may have lost its majority but it will remain in power as long as it wants to. The BJP's 'allies' know this. They understand also that they will keep their ministries till 2029 and, for this reason, have no reason to defend the government except with their vote.

In mid-August, the *Print* reported the strange situation this has produced: "The

NDA constituents remained curious onlookers in Parliament whenever BJP MPs got into heated exchanges with the INDIA bloc. While the INDIA bloc reacted in unison, the BJP remained isolated. This is because the 'allies' have no investment in the BJP's ideology and no incentive to defend it on issues like the Waqf (Amendment) Bill.

This brings us to the second concern of coalition governments: getting legislation passed. If the BJP is assured of a full term—and I believe it is—what is it to do with its five years in office?

Its early U-turns on waqf and lateral entry indicate that getting legislation passed will be difficult; but again, the history of coalitions informs us that this is

not necessarily the case.

The weakest of the three previous coalitions, Manmohan Singh's in 2004, was able to get high-impact legislation passed. This included laws on the Right to Information (RTI), MGNREGA and the nuclear deal with the United States. The last of these was emphatically opposed by an 'ally' (the Communist Party) but made it through nonetheless.

Narasimha Rao too had only as many seats as Narendra Modi does today, but was able to get Parliament to clear the economic reforms that are referred to as liberalisation. And so it would appear that it is possible for weak governments to take strong action, if they have conviction.

It is also the case that strong governments

often avoid debate and get laws passed in dubious fashion. In the past, the BJP hid behind something called the 'money bill' rule to elude the Rajya Sabha and pass laws on Aadhaar and electoral bonds.

This will no longer be possible for the current Modi government, given its weakness in the Lok Sabha. So how is Modi to proceed?

The only course available appears to be to let go of things that are guaranteed to get into trouble, like the uniform civil code (UCC) and the national register of citizens (NRC). Like Vajpayee, he has to abandon Hindutva and form some other framework of governance and policy.

This may not be easy in the absence of a clear vision—such as the UPA had on citizen empowerment or the first two Modi governments had on minority persecution. In any case, entering a third term, any leader would have exhausted his grand ideas. Think of Nehru after the 1962 election or Tony Blair after 2005.

Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch gave Barack Obama, then a presidential candidate, some advice before the 2008 election—he had known all the US presidents since Harry Truman, but none of them had been able to push reform after their first few months. That was the only period in which motivation, energy and goodwill produced results. It should be noted that all of the things Manmohan Singh got cleared came within months of him taking office.

Today, even those who support Prime Minister Modi feel there is a certain sense of listlessness in this government. What is it intending to achieve? This is not easy to say. The U-turns have been because, in the absence of a majority, persisting in the old ways has resulted in failure.

The British have a saying that describes the role of their monarch: "The king reigns but does not rule." Our supreme leader is in office but unable to make an impact.

Without new and, more importantly, inclusive ideas from Modi, this directionless drift will continue. ■



PM Narendra Modi with his lieutenant Amit Shah (right), BJP president J.P. Nadda and National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners, Varanasi, May 2024

The Modi government's early U-turns on waqf and lateral entry indicate that getting legislation passed will be difficult

Views are personal

The Karnataka Congress Government set to host three-day 87th 'Akhila Bharata Kannada Sahitya Sammelana' at Mandya district from December 20-22.

Mandya district is bordered on the south by Mysore and Chamarajangar districts, on the west by Hassan district, on the north by Tumkur district and on the east by Ramanagara district. The district Mandya was carved out of larger Mysore district in the year 1939.

Mandya, which has hosted two Akhila Bharata Kannada Sahitya Sammelanas — in 1974 and 1994 — has got the opportunity to play host once again after a gap of 30 years in 2024.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced that the 87th All India Kannada Sahitya Sammelana will be held in Mandya from December 20-22. Earlier, it was scheduled for June.

However, due to the implementation of model code of conduct, in view of the Lok Sabha election, it had to be postponed.

The 109-year-old Kannada Sahitya Parishat (KSP), founded by then Maharaja Nalwadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar on May 5, 1915, has organised 86 Akhila Bharata Sahitya Sammelanas, so far.

The last one (86th literary festival) was held in Haveri— from January 6 to 8, last year. It was held for the first time at Haveri, after trifurcation from Dharwad district in 1997.

It has been skipped, earlier on several years, due to a variety of reasons, but has also been held twice during two years —1981 (Chikkamagaluru and Madikeri)

and 1990 (Hubballi and Mysuru). The recent reason for skipping of the meet was the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the last 3-4 decades, the sahitya sammelana has evolved into more of a celebratory event. The last significant political interruption was during the height of the Bandaya literary movement in the late 1970s and since then ecstastic celebratory character of the sammelana has become more important.

The Mandya district, houses the Second Legislative building – Suvarna VidhanaSoudha- where the Karnataka Legislature holds session once a year has hosted the meet for a record eight times. Belagavi is also the sugar bowl of Karnataka with 150,000 hectares being used for Sugarcane production and it has overtaken Mandya district in sugarcane production over the last decade.

The event was held six times in undivided Dharwad district (twice in Gadagincludng once after becoming district and in Haveri district last time), Hassan, Raichur (Koppal and Gangavathi before division) and Dakshina Kannada (Manipal and Udupi before bifurcation).

Apart from Belagavi and Dharwad districts, Mysuru has also joined the list club by hosting the meet for five times in 1917, 1930, 1955, 1990 and 2017. Mysuru is also credited hosting the first Vishwa Kannada Sammelana in 1986, while Belagavi district is only district to host second Vishwa Kannada Sammelana in 2011.

In 1974, Jayadevithayi Ligade was the chairperson, while SubramanyarajeUrs, popularly known as

Chaduranga, was the chairman in 1994.

The sammelana was also held outside Karnataka — Kasaragod in Kerala in 1948; Solapur in Maharashtra in 1950; Mumbai in Maharashtra in 1951; and at New Delhi in 1978.

The Delhi event was the 50th sammelana. The new districts of Chamarajanagar, Bengaluru Rural and Yadgir are yet to host this event.

H V Nanjundaiah, scholar and first Vice Chancellor of University of Mysore, was president of the first three sammelanas and he inaugurated them as well. But, since

Independence, chief ministers have been inaugurating the meets, eminent writers and scholars have been chairpersons.

The events were earlier funded by the Wadiyar kings of the erstwhile Mysuru state. The expenses were later taken care of by the KSP itself. Since 1975, it was taken over by the Karnataka government. Thus the 48th meet in May-June of 1974 at Mandya was the last one held without government funding. It was also the first time that a woman invited as the chairperson.

Memorable Meet

The 63rd meet, held in February of 1994, was a memorable one for the people of Mandya.

Many voluntarily donated money to the organising committee, with district KSP president G T Veerappa, welcome committee president G Madegowda and chief patron S M Krishna.

Thus, Rs 42 lakh was collected. But, only Rs 22 lakh was spent for the festival. Hence, the remaining Rs 20 lakh was spent on various development works of Mandua city, including construction of District KSP building (Rs 6.25 lakh) at Bandigowda Layout.

While Rs 8.50 lakh was donated for the construction of Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar Kalamandira, Rs 4 lakh was spent for a statue of poet Kuvempu and Rs 1 lakh was donated to Janapada Loka in Channapatna taluk.



List of conferences 2024

No.	Date	Place	President
1st	3-6 May 1915	Bangalore	H. V. Nanjundaiah
2nd	6-8 May 1916	Bangalore	H. V. Nanjundaiah
3rd	8-10 May 1917	Mysore	H. V. Nanjundaiah
4th	11-13 May 1918	Dharwad	R. Narasimhaiah
5th	6-8 May 1919	Hassan	Karpura Srinivasa Rao
6th	20-21 June 1920	Hospet	Rodda Srinivasa Rao
7th	19-21 May 1921	Chikmagalur	K. P. Puttanna Chetty
8th	12-13 May 1922	Dayanagere	M. Venkatakrishnaiah
9th	21-23 May 1923	Bijapur	SiddhantiShivashankara Shastry
10th	16-18 May 1924	Kolar	H. Krishna Sastry
11th	9-11 May 1925	Belgaum	Bengal Rama Rao
12th	22-24 May 1926	Ballari	PhakirappaGurubasappaHalakatti
13th	19-21 May 1927	Mangalore	R. Thathacharya
14th	1-3 June 1928	Kalaburagi	B. M. Srikanthiah
15th	12-14 Dec 1929	Belgaum	Masti Venkatesha Iyengar
16th	5-7 October 1930	Mysore	Aluru Venkata Rao
17th	28-30 Dec 1931	Karwar	MaliyaTimmappaiah
18th	28-30 Dec 1932	Madikeri	D. V. Gundappa
19th	29-31 Dec 1933	Hubli	Y. Nagusha Shashtry
20th	28-30 Dec 1934	Raichur	Panje Mangesh Rao
21st	26-28 Dec 1935	Mumbai	N. S. Subbarao
22nd	29-31 Dec 1937	Jamkhandi	BellaveVenkatanaranappa
23rd	29-31 Dec 1938	Bellary	R. R. Divakar
24th	25-29 Dec 1939	Belgaum	MudaveeduKrishnarao
25th	27-29 Dec 1940	Dharwad	Y. Chandrashekhara Shastry
26th	27-29 Dec 1941	Hyderabad	A. R. Krishnaswamy
27th	26-28 Jan 1943	Shimoga	D. R. Bendre
28th	28-30 Dec 1944	Belavadi	S. S. Basavannaiah
29th	26-28 Dec 1945	Madras	T. P. Kailasam
30th	7-9 May 1947	Harapanahalli	C. K. Venkataramaiah
31st	29-31 Dec 1948	Kasaragod	T. T. Sharma
32nd	5-7 March 1949	Kalaburagi	Channappa Uttangi
33rd	24-26 May 1950	Sollapur	M. R. Srinivasamurthy
34th	26-28 Dec 1951	Mumbai	M. Govinda Pai
35th	16-18 May 1952	Belur	S. C. Nandimata
36th	26-28 Dec 1954	Kumta	V. Seetharamaiah
37th	10-12 June 1955	Mysore	K. Shivaram Karanth
38th	25-27 Dec 1956	Raichur	Srikranga
39th	7-9 May 1957	Dharwad	Kuvempu
40th	18-20 Jan 1958	Ballari	P. K. Gopak
41st	11-13 Feb 1960	Bidar	D. L. Narasimhaiah
42nd	27-29 Dec 1960	Manipal	A. N. Krishna Rao
43rd	27-29 Dec 1961	Gadag	K. G. Kundanagara
44th	28-30 Dec 1963	Siddagangala	R. S. Mugal
45th	10-12 May 1965	Karwar	Kadengodu Shankara Bhat
46th	26-28 May 1967	Shivranbelagola	A. N. Upadhye
47th	27-29 Dec 1970	Bangalore	Javare Gowda
48th	31 May-2 June 1971	Mandya	Jayadevi Taayi Ligade
49th	11-13 Dec 1976	Shimoga	S. V. Ranganna
50th	23-25 April 1978	Delhi	G. P. Rajaratnam
51st	9-11 March 1979	Dharmasthala	Gopalakrishna Adiga
52nd	7-10 Feb 1980	Belgaum	Basavaru Kattimani
53rd	13-15 March 1981	Chikmagalur	P. T. Narasimhaiah
54th	27-30 Nov 1981	Madikeri	Shankara Bala Dixit Joshi
55th	23-26 Dec 1982	Sirsi	Gouru Ramaswamy Iyengar
56th	23-25 March 1984	Kaivara	A. N. Murthy Rao
57th	3-6 April 1985	Bidar	H. M. Nayak
58th	29 Oct-1 Nov 1987	Kalaburagi	Siddaiah Puranik
59th	16-18 Feb 1990	Hubli	R. C. Hiremath
60th	28-30 Nov 1990	Mysore	K. S. Narasimhaswamy
61st	9-12 Jan 1992	Dayanagere	G. S. Shivaramurappa
62nd	5-7 Feb 1993	Koppala	Simpil Linganna
63rd	11-13 Feb 1994	Mandya	Chaduranga
64th	3-5 June 1995	Mudhol	H. L. Nagegowda
65th	21-24 Dec 1996	Chikmagalur	Chennayya Kanavi
66th	11-14 Dec 1997	Mangalore	Kavyar. Kinnamma Rai
67th	11-14 Feb 1999	Kanakapura	S. L. Bhyrappa
68th	24-26 June 2000	Bagalokote	ShantadeviMalavada
69th	15-17 Feb 2002	Tumkur	U. R. Ananthamurthy
70th	7-9 March 2003	Belgaum	Patil Puttappa
71st	18-21 Dec 2003	Moosabidri	Kamala Hampana
72nd	27-29 Jan 2006	Bidar	Shantharasa
73rd	20-23 Dec 2007	Shimoga	K. S. Nissar Ahmed
74th	12-15 Dec 2008	Udupi	L. S. Sheshagiri Rao
75th	4-6 Feb 2009	Chitradurga	L. Basavaraju
76th	19-21 Feb 2010	Gadaga	Geetha Nagabhushan
77th	4-6 Feb 2011	Bangalore	G. Venkateshaiah
78th	9-11 Dec 2011	Gangavathi	C. P. Krishnakumar
79th	9-11 Feb 2013	Bijapur	Ka Channabasappa
80th	7-9 Jan 2014	Kodagu	N. D'Souza
81st	31 Jan-3 Feb 2015	Shivranbelagola	Siddalingaiah
82nd	2-4 Dec 2016	Raichur	BaraguruRamachandrappa
83rd	24-26 Nov 2017	Mysore	Chandrashekhara Patil
84th	4-6 Jan 2019	Dharwad	Chandrashekhara Kambara
85th	5-7 Feb 2020	Kalaburagi	H. S. Venkateshamurthy
86th	23-25 Jan 2023	Haveri	Doddarasaiah Gowda
87th	Dec 2023	Mandya	

Kannada Sahitya Sammelana' at Mandya district from December 20-22: To develop ideas to promote unity and co-operation among Kannada speakers spread across globe.

Mandya to host Kannada literary fest in December: Chief Minister Siddaramaiah



Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced on Tuesday that the 87th 'Akhila Bharata Kannada Sahitya Sammelana' will be held in Mandya from December 20 to 22. The decision was reached following discussions with the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Mandya district administration, and local officials, including District in-charge Minister N Cheluvarayaswamy and regional MLAs.

"We had originally planned for February, but postponed due to the impending Lok Sabha poll code of conduct. Now, we have settled on December 20 to 22. We anticipate participation from a significant number of Kannadigas from within and outside the country," Siddaramaiah said in his post on X.

First international Kannada Sahitya Sammelana at Bahrain in 2018

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's first tenure as Chief Minister between 2013-18 also instrumental in hosting two-day International Kannada Sahitya Sammelana in Bahrain.

The gala event was organised under the aegis of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Kannada University of Hampi and Kannada Sangha for two days.

Then Kannada and Culture Minister Dr Jayamala inaugurated the event, while Kannada Sahitya Parishad President Dr Manu Baligar presided over it. Writer H. S. Venkateshamurthy, Kannada Development Authority president SG Siddaramaiah, Hampi Kannada University vice Chancellor Dr

Mallika Ghanti, Bahrain Kannada Sangha president Pradeep Shetty were present.

The event saw fruitful sessions like "Gulf KannadigaraSthithi-Gathi", "Kannada SaahithyadalliHaasya" and 'VishwabharatigeKannadadarathi'.

The gala event was organised under the aegis of the Kannada Sahitya Parishat, Kannada University of Hampi and Kannada Sangha for two days.

Sahitya Sammelana help in fostering lingual identity

It is the premier gathering of writers, poets and Kannadigas. The Sammelana is a big platform for ordinary people to think about their identity in terms of language, culture and literature while serving as a bridge between youth literary minds and progressive writers.

This event also helps for the growth of a language depends on employment opportunities, business deals, and interactions between states and countries

Kannada Sahitya Parishat plays key role in promoting the Kannada language and its literature

The conference agreed to create the Karnataka Sahitya Parishat with a mandate to conserve and promote Kannada language and literature.

Kannada Saahithya Parishath (Kannada Literary Council) is an Indian non-profit organisation that promotes the Kannada language and its literature. Its headquartered in the city of Bengaluru in the state of Karnataka, India. It strives to promote Kannada language through publishing books, organising literary seminars and promoting research projects. It also organises an annual conference on Kannada literature called Kannada Sahitya Sammelana (Kannada Literary Meet). The current president of the parishat is Dr Mahesh Joshi.

Origin

During the British rule of India, Kannada speakers were spread across different provinces. Coming under the influence of different languages in those provinces, the pronunciation and grammar of Kannada language started to differ across provinces.

This led to a gap in communication across the people in these provinces though they spoke the same language of Kannada. Mokshagundam Vishweshwaraiah, who was the Divan of the Mysore Kingdom felt the need to conserve and promote the Kannada language and literature. In this direction, he started the Mysore Economic Conference and created a study circle under H V Nanjundaiah. A sub-committee formed under the study circle came up with five different topics on which suggestions were invited.

- To develop ideas to promote unity and co-operation among Kannada speakers spread across different regions.
- To develop suggestions for a common written Kannada which had diversified across different regions
- To ensure that students learning Kannada language use a common textbook
- To improve the general knowledge among the Kannada speaking population by publishing appropriate books.
- To produce appropriate Kannada translations for words used in other languages, especially the scientific words.

The sub-committee received good responses from the public and it decided to organise a conference in Bangalore on 3 May 1915 to act upon these suggestions. The conference

was held on the grounds of the Government High School and was attended by litterateurs, newspaper editors and other dignitaries from different regions.

The conference agreed to create the Karnataka Sahitya Parishat with a mandate to conserve and promote Kannada language and literature. H V Nanjundaiah was unanimously elected as the President of the Parishat. Apart from the Mysore province, the Karnataka Sahitya Parishat was simultaneously started in the Madras, Mumbai, Hyderabad and Kodagu provinces.

Growth

H V Nanjundaiah remained as President of the Parishat for the first five years of its formation. In 1935, an annual event under the aegis of the Parishat called as Kannada Sahitya Sammelana commenced.

The foundation ceremony of a separate building to house the Parishat was organised on 12 April 1937 under the Presidency of Karpura Srinivasa Rao. The construction of this building was completed on 29 May 1938.

B M Srikanthiah (popularly known as BM Sri) the Vice President of the Parishat from 1938 till 1942. In 1938, the name of Karnataka Sahitya Parishat was changed to Kannada Sahitya Parishat.

Under the guidance of BM Sri, the logo of the Parishat containing the map of the Mysore province with the phrase SirigannadamGelge, Kannada Sahitya Parishat written inside it was created. Over the period of time; a women's wing, a publishing house, a Kannada journal and literature exams were also added to the repertoire of the Parishat. Kannada Sahitya Parishat branches at the district and taluk levels were also created.

A new building is being constructed to replace the existing building of the Parishat at a cost of Rupees five crores. During its existence, the Parishat has contributed to the growth of Kannada language by organising conferences and debates, publication and release of books, organising talks by eminent writers and also by holding the annual Kannada Sahitya Sammelana.

Bad news for India's Muslims

Narendra Modi's third term as PM unfolds against a backdrop of deepening communal divides and growing fears

Ashok Swain

Notwithstanding the rose-tinted optics of his visit to Brunei, Narendra Modi's third term as prime minister is more 'through a lens darkly' for India's Muslims. The general election, which saw the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secure a reduced majority, has intensified fears about the future of India's 200 million Muslims under a regime not just defined by but indistinguishable from Hindutva politics. Though Modi's return to power was not an outright victory for the BJP, it was secured through a coalition of smaller parties bound by a political agenda that has systematically marginalised Muslims and other minorities.

Since Modi first assumed office in 2014, his administration's anti-Muslim agenda was clear. The trend of discriminatory legislation and communal violence has only intensified during Modi 3.0, alarming human rights advocates and political commentators alike, both in India and abroad.

One of the most glaring examples is the rise in incidents of 'cow vigilantism', particularly in election-bound states like Maharashtra and Haryana, where Muslims have been brutally attacked and, in some cases, lynched by Hindu mobs on the mere suspicion of carrying beef. These attacks, disturbingly frequent during Modi's tenure, are symptomatic of a broader, more insidious programme to relegate Muslims to second-class citizenship in a country constitutionally founded on secular principles.

The BJP's narrative has been one of exclusion, driven by its desire to convert India from a pluralistic democracy to a theocratic autocracy. This shift is evidenced by the party's policies and rhetoric. The revocation of Article 370 in 2019, that stripped the Muslim-majority state of Jammu and Kashmir of its autonomy, was a direct affront to the disputed region's identity and a move to assert Hindu dominance. The introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which explicitly excluded Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries, further widened the Hindu-Muslim divide. Muslim activists are routinely jailed, as are their homes bulldozed with no regard for justice and legal norms.

Under Modi's leadership, the BJP has engaged in a concerted campaign of historical revisionism, diminishing the significance of the Mughal era by expunging contributions of Muslim rulers from textbooks. Renaming cities and streets is a further erasure of Indian history as it actually unfolded. In Odisha, where the BJP was



Muslims in Mumbai protest against the proposed Uniform Civil Code

Photo: Getty Images

INDIA alliance and Rahul Gandhi's appointment as the Leader of Opposition—suggest growing resistance to the BJP's divisive politics. In key states like Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan, often seen as BJP strongholds, opposition parties managed to significantly erode the saffron party's base, indicating that the fractured mandarin politics may be waning.

This fractured mandate is, to some extent, serving as a check on Modi's power, potentially curbing the BJP's ability to unilaterally impose its agenda. The presence of a stronger opposition in Parliament has emboldened institutions like the judiciary—which have often been seen as complicit or passive in the face of the BJP's excesses—to act more independently and uphold the principles of the Indian Constitution.

However, while its reduced majority in Parliament has somewhat slowed the BJP juggernaut, it has been unable to reverse the damage already done to India's social fabric. Radicalised by years of anti-Muslim and anti-Christian propaganda, the BJP's core supporters continue to exert pressure on the government to maintain its hardline stance. Moreover, the BJP's ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), continues to wield significant influence, pushing for an India where Hindutva majoritarianism is the norm.

The international community has been taking note of the deteriorating human rights situation in India, particularly the global criticism has done little to deter the Modi government, which remains resolute in its agenda. The West's strategic interests in India, particularly as a counterbalance to China, have often led to muted responses to India's internal issues, allowing the Modi government to act with impunity.

Narendra Modi's third term as prime minister of India unfolds against a backdrop of deepening communal divides and growing fears among the country's Muslim population. The BJP's reduced parliamentary majority offers a faint hope for a more balanced political discourse, but the reality on the ground suggests that Muslims will continue to face greater systemic discrimination and violence. The challenge for India moving forward will be whether it can reclaim its secular, pluralistic roots or whether it will continue down a path of exclusion and divisiveness. The stakes are incredibly high, not just for India's Muslims or for opposition parties but for the future of India. ■

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power on its own for the first time in June 2024, this policy of renaming is ongoing. Such efforts are not merely symbolic—they reflect and reinforce the BJP's vision of a Hindu India.

The BJP's reduced majority in the general elections has pushed the party to amp up its Hindu nationalist agenda as a means of consolidating its core support base. This faces very ill for India's Muslims, who already face increasing alienation and insecurity. The BJP's electoral strategy, heavily reliant on anti-Muslim rhetoric, suggests that the party will continue to use communal polarisation as a tool for political gain, at the expense of national unity.

The proposed implementation of a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) and changes in the laws governing Islamic charitable endowments (waqf) are other areas of concern for Muslims in India. The UCC, long advocated by the BJP, would replace personal laws based on religious scriptures and customs with a common set of laws governing every

citizen. The UCC is seen as a veiled attempt to impose Hindu norms on all religious communities. The UCC, under the BJP, would disproportionately affect Muslims, further entrenching their status as second-class citizens. The Waqf (Amendment) Bill, apart from infringing on the Muslim community's religious rights, also aims to diminish the autonomy of waqf boards, which have significant representation in the government.

Meanwhile, as Ayodhya's political utility diminishes, the BJP has turned to Kashi and Mathura to maintain momentum on its core agenda of Hindutva. By shifting focus to these other significant religious sites, the BJP hopes to reignite religious sentiments against Muslims, while fanning the flames of the discourse that claims to 'reclaim Hindu heritage'.

Despite this grim scenario, there is a glimmer of hope in the form of a more robust opposition. The recent election results—while significant gains for the

While its reduced majority in Parliament has somewhat slowed the BJP juggernaut, it has been unable to reverse the damage already done to India's social fabric

What moral right does India have to lecture Bangladesh?

When other countries of the world voice their concern about the plight of minorities in India, we unhesitatingly tell them to mind their own business, don't we?

Yogendra Yadav

What are your thoughts about atrocities against Hindus in Bangladesh?" Before I could react, Uncleji took a swipe at me: "Secular Indians like you are always so vocal about Muslims here; however, when it comes to Kashmiri Pandits and Bangladeshi Hindus, your silence is deafening!"

I replied, "Uncle, I have spoken up often enough, but since you're asking, I'll say it again. I just hope you're willing to listen to some bitter truths."

"Why not?" came his offhand response, daring me to rise to the bait. And so, I spoke my piece.

"It is undeniably true that minorities in Bangladesh, especially Hindus, have been victims of atrocities and injustice. Bangladesh opted for a secular state after liberation but following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1974, secularism came under attack from the Muslim majority. Bangladesh was formally declared an Islamic state in 1988. Its constitution continued to guarantee freedom of religion and other rights to the Hindus, who are better off in Bangladesh than in Pakistan or Afghanistan. The bitter truth, however, is that Hindus there are second-class citizens.

"It is worth recalling that in British India, most of the landlords in what was then East Bengal happened to be Hindus. That explains why Hindus there were not educationally or economically backward by 1947 or 76 years later. Despite this, many of them were forced to flee and take shelter in India because of discriminatory practices. In 1951, Hindus constituted 22 per cent of the population in East Pakistan. By 1974, the Hindu population had declined to 13.5 per cent and today only eight per cent of the population of Bangladesh are Hindus.

"Daily incidents of violence against Hindus on political and religious grounds cannot be denied; nor the flaring up of anti-Hindu riots from time to time. It is also

a fact that Hindus felt relatively more secure with the Awami League in power. Their sense of insecurity increased when other parties took over. The government headed by Sheikh Hasina was accused of 'minority appeasement', of giving them a free pass. Anger against Sheikh Hasina found an outlet in mass violence against minorities, including Hindus. There is no dispute over the fact that radical Muslim outfits added fuel to the fire with their inflammatory rhetoric and that Hindus and Hindu temples did come under attack after 5 August 2024. Everybody who is in favour of communal harmony and justice must stand by the Hindus of Bangladesh."

"Precisely!" said Uncleji triumphantly. "That's exactly what I was saying!"

To save myself from this hasty consensus, I said: "But you must be ready to listen to the bitter truth about what you have been doing."

The bitter truth is that protests and demonstrations by Hindus in India expressing solidarity with Hindus in Bangladesh are likely to do them more harm than good. Just as Arab Muslims pay lip-service to the plight of Muslims in India, the concern expressed by the Indian government smacks of hypocrisy and tokenism. Just as Arab governments have little or no empathy for Muslims in India, the Indian government couldn't care less about Hindus in Bangladesh.

"India has neither the political will nor the ability to do anything substantial to help the Hindus of Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, as in other neighbouring countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka or Maldives, the most damning slur is to be called an 'agent of India'. The government is to be called an 'agent of patronage of the Awami League to the exclusion of others is what led to people channelising their anger against the Indian government into acts of violence, even revenge, on the Hindu community in Bangladesh.

"Attacks on Muslims in India actually add to the insecurity of the minority Hindus in Bangladesh, making their position even more precarious. If indeed we are their well-wishers, we need to lower our decibel levels and exercise restraint in what we say and do."

Ignoring the frown that had thrived Uncleji's brow, I laid out the third bitter truth:

"India has neither the moral right nor the stature to give lectures on the well-being of minorities. When other countries of the world voice their concern about the plight of minorities in India, we unhesitatingly tell them to mind their own business. How, then, can we create a stink about the plight of minorities in other countries? A country which chooses to keep quiet on the genocide of Muslims in Gaza, a country whose prime minister and Union ministers consider its 200 million Muslims to be infiltrators, where the government keeps mum on the mob lynchings of minorities, where the majority population rejoices in 'bulldozer justice'

Photo: Getty Images



Hindutva activists in New Delhi protest violence against Hindus in Bangladesh, 18 August 2024

aimed at minorities—what can be a bigger hypocrisy than such a country preaching at others? These expressions of concern find credence with the lapdogs of 'god media'—the rest of the world can only find them laughable."

Uncleji looked like he could neither stomach what I said nor spew anything further. I pressed home my advantage:

"The final bitter truth is the most shameful of all. The conduct of Bangladesh's interim government has been far better than the government of India's. Mohammad Yunus declared in his very first address to the nation that violence against Hindus must stop. If it did not, he would not agree to head the interim government. At the very first opportunity, he visited Hindu temples and assured community leaders that the interim government stood by them. He publicly pledged to ensure security for the minorities.

Compare that with the conduct of our own prime minister. In the last 20 years, did he find time to visit Bilkis Bano? Has he ever visited the home of any victim of mob lynching and offered two words of consolation?"

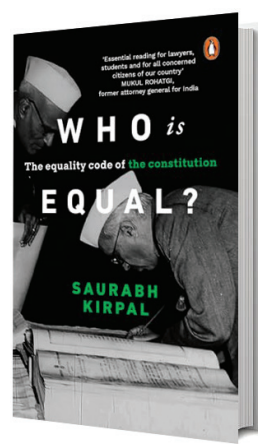
Uncleji's grim expression spoke volumes. It was time for me to wind up.

"I am not suggesting that we keep quiet over what is happening in Bangladesh. But let's begin at home. Let's start by speaking up against atrocities and injustices here. Let's introspect and resist the temptation of tokenism. Let's lay our lives on the line.

"In 1946, Mahatma Gandhi travelled to Noakhali in what was then East Bengal to restore peace and end communal violence against Hindus. He risked his life doing so. He had the courage to stand up in the face of riots against Muslims in Calcutta.

Truth isn't cheap, courage doesn't come easy." ■

"I am not suggesting that we keep quiet over what is happening in Bangladesh. But let's begin at home. Let's start by speaking up against atrocities and injustices here"



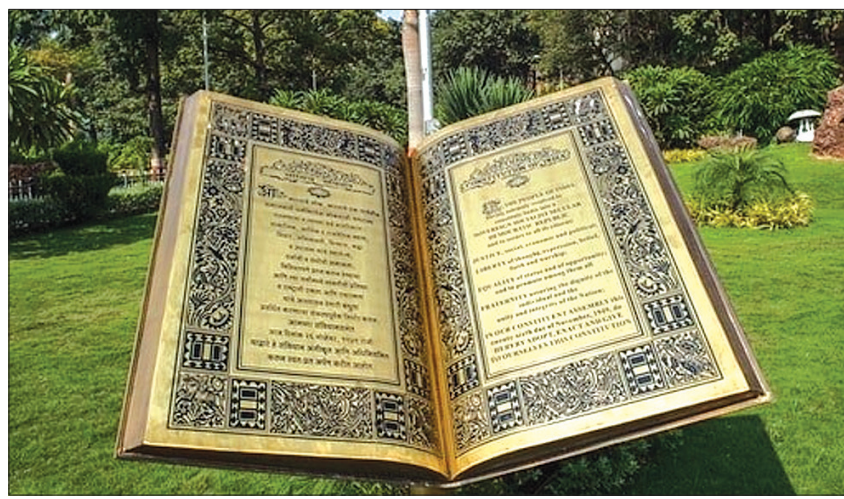
Title **Who Is Equal: The Equality Code of the Constitution**
Author **Saurabh Kirpal**
Publisher **Penguin Random House India**
Pages **304**
Price ₹ **699** (hardcover)

The making of an egalitarian state

Saurabh Kirpal

The discussion about equality in the areas of education, employment, business and elections is largely about the actions of the state when it acts as a public entity. However, some of the greatest inequalities are to be found not in public but in private spaces. In particular, sex, gender and sexuality are some of the areas where inequalities within families manifest themselves. This is partly because women and sexual minorities have to face the patriarchal power structure. The law too, reinforces these structures by institutionalising discrimination in religious personal laws. Inequality manifests itself not only in the black letter of the law, but also how the law is applied within the power structures in a marriage. These imbalances cause some feminists to question the very worth of the institution of marriage. That, of course, leads one to ask: if marriage is inherently problematic, why do so many people want to marry? In particular, why do non-heterosexual persons seek to get married under an institution that is patriarchal? The answer to this question [...] lies partly in the legal benefits that the institution of marriage endows upon a couple, and partly the legitimacy that State recognition bestows on a non-heterosexual marriage. [In this regard], the courts have been reluctant to intervene in the ideal of equality. While different reasons are given for this reticence, patriarchy is at least part of the reason for the decisions made in the context of the family.

Having examined various substantive questions in relation to equality, the [book] speculate[s], to an extent, on the unique challenges that lie ahead. In the case of employment, the focus in the coming years may shift to reservations in the private sector. In education, the question of reservations on grounds other than caste will also arise. In particular, the question of reservations based on religion will also arise. In the field of family law, the Uniform Civil Code is being touted as a means to ensure gender equality. [Is there] a legal and political basis for such a claim, or [is] incremental reform in personal laws a better idea. Finally, the [book] examines the consequences of not having a general anti-discrimination law in the country and,



The Preamble to the Constitution of India

therefore, its impact on fair play in the everyday lives of citizens.

Equality: The Courts, Parliament and the People

We live in deeply polarised times. In the multiple conflicts that surround us, there is also a struggle for control over that most sacred of texts—the Constitution. Parliament claims for itself the power to amend the Constitution, arguing that it represents the will of the people. The judiciary, on the other hand, has asserted its prerogative as the ultimate interpreter and protector of Constitutional values and ideals. This debate is most trenchant when the discussion moves to the 'basic structure' of the Indian Constitution. At its heart, the basic structure of the Constitution comprises those rights and features which makes the Constitution recognisable. The proponents of the doctrine argue that amending something which is the very essence of the document would no longer be an amendment but would repeal it. For instance, one could amend the Constitution to provide for hereditary, dynastic rule. The Constitution would technically still exist but would not be recognisable in any form. This, the courts have held, is not permissible.

Relying on the basic structure doctrine, the courts have held that the power to amend the Constitution is limited and reserved for themselves the authority, to

determine how much of the Constitution can be amended. On the other hand, the government has accused the courts of disturbing the delicate balance of power enshrined in the Constitution by using this doctrine to strike down Constitutional amendments passed by Parliament, charging them with usurping the domain of the legislature.

What forms part of the Constitution's basic structure is a deeply contested issue. While the courts, over the years, have held different facets of the Constitution to be integral to it, they have decisively also held that certain fundamental rights guaranteed to citizens form part of this basic structure. These are the rights to equality, freedom and life. Together, these three rights have been held to constitute the 'golden triangle' of fundamental rights. Chief Justice Y.V. Chandrachud wrote in 1980 that:

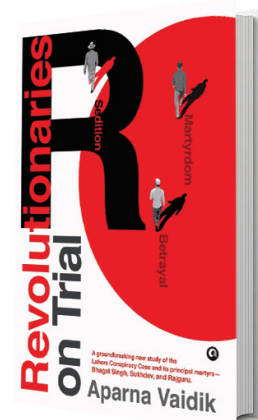
Three Articles of our Constitution, and only three, stand between the heaven of freedom into which Tagore wanted his country to awake and the abyss of unrestrained power. They are Articles 14, 19 and 21. Article 31-C has removed two sides of that golden triangle which affords to the people of this country an assurance that the promise held forth by the preamble will be performed by ushering an egalitarian era through the discipline of fundamental rights, that is, without emasculation of the rights to liberty and

equality which alone can help preserve the dignity of the individual.

The words of the judgment exhort us to remember that in any tussle between the executive and the legislature, it is the individual who is at the heart of the Constitution. The 'egalitarian era' cannot be achieved by trampling upon rights in the name of equality. Instead, it is only through safeguarding her right to equality that a citizen's dignity can be assured. The Constitution provides an elaborate structure which seeks to promote a robust form of equality, both in terms of the substantive rights as well as institutional mechanisms to operationalise the rights.

However, no Constitution, no matter how well and laboriously drafted, will ensure fairness and equity. Dr B.R. Ambedkar, in his last speech to the Constituent Assembly, said, 'However good a Constitution may be, it is sure to turn out bad [if] those who are called to work it happen to be a bad lot. However bad a Constitution may be, it may turn out to be good if those who are called to work it happen to be a good lot. The working of a Constitution does not depend wholly upon the nature of the Constitution. The Constitution can provide only the organs of State such as the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary. The factors on which the working of those organs of State depend are the people and the political parties they will set up as their instruments to carry out their wishes and their politics.'

The Constitution ultimately belongs to the people of India and its efficacy depends on how we act upon its principles. It is only when we, a collective of citizens, conform to Constitutional values and follow the spirit, as well as the text of that document, that the promises made in the preamble can be accomplished. There is, therefore, a great responsibility on us to pursue constitutional values—after all the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. To be vigilant pre-supposes a need to be aware, and that is what this book seeks to achieve. The exact contours of how the equality code has been interpreted over the years is something only lawyers and Constitutional experts are aware of. This book aims to be a bridge between the abstractions of the law and the realities of lived experiences with the fond hope that an educated electorate would also be a wise one. ■



Title **Revolutionaries on Trial: Sedition, Betrayal, and Martyrdom**
Author **Aparna Vaidik**
Publisher **Aleph**
Pages **480**
Price ₹ **999** (hardcover)

Finding the man in the mythology

Aparna Vaidik

There was a flood of chromolithographs and bazaar prints that memorialised Bhagat Singh's death as martyrdom. His sartorial photograph with moustache and felt hat, a fashionable accessory in those times, especially came to be reproduced and adapted into paintings, badges, drawings, posters, calendars, and cards that people could stick on the walls in their homes or keep in their alcoves with images of other gods or turn into placards to be displayed at protest sites or carry in their wallets at all times. These images capitalised on the mimetic power of photos to make him present (and available to view and touch) despite his absence. They evoked both memory and emotions. His image much like saintly relics acquired a historical and an emotive power and became 'a perfect vehicle for production of nostalgia'.

In one of the images, Bhagat Singh was depicted as crucified Jesus Christ and in another one Gandhi was shown tearing open his chest to reveal the images of three hanged revolutionaries (referencing the episode in the epic *Ramayana* where Hanuman, Lord Ram's devotee, tears open his chest to display an effervescent image of Lord Ram and his consort Sita).

These images, and their reproduction, adaptation, and circulation spawned a new visual culture that galvanised the anti-imperial politics of the early 1930s. Hereafter, Bhagat Singh lived on in

Punjab's *bolian* (catch songs), *ghorian* (wedding songs), *tappey* (couplets), *mari* (songs of lament), *qisse* (love poetry), and its *shaheedi melas* (annual fairs held in memory of the martyrs). He was characterised in folk memory as a *shaheed* (martyr), *sher* (the lion), *lal* (son of Mother India) and a *chiragh* (lamp). Historical research shows that in this period, dominant cultural memorialisation did not yet celebrate Bhagat Singh as a Marxist anti-bourgeois icon', which would happen in the decades to come.

Notwithstanding Bhagat Singh's popularity in Punjab's folk memory, there was a general belief amongst the surviving revolutionaries that their contribution was progressively written out of the nationalist commemoration. The Congress, and especially Nehru, as they began campaigning for the 1935 Assembly elections, became increasingly ambivalent and reluctant to openly espouse the revolutionary cause. Congressmen gradually became censorious of the revolutionaries who were seen giving 'inflammatory' speeches on being released from jail or resorting to hunger strikes while still in custody. This discomfort heightened with the coming of Independence. Bhagat Singh's family, as historian Chris Moffat shows, led the polemic regarding the obscuring of the legacy of the revolutionaries following India's independence.

This angst surfaced, according to film historian Ravinder Singh, in the controversy surrounding the making and

release of the first Bhagat Singh biopic *Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh* (1954), which was directed by Jagdish Gautam and produced by Poonum Productions. Bijoy Kumar Sinha, who had set up the Shahid Memorial Trust around the time of Independence and headed the editorial board of Bhagat Singh Commemoration Volume (BSCV), had announced making of films on the lives of Bhagat Singh and Chandra Shekhar Azad. He and Bhagat Singh's brothers took umbrage at the making of *Shaheed-e-Azam Bhagat Singh* because it was a 'commercial film'. The Shahid Memorial Trust could not prevent it from being released despite creating a significant outcry. The Censor Board could not ban the film given Bhagat Singh's popularity as a nationalist icon but asked director Jagdish Gautam to cut out certain scenes. On its release, it was condemned by Bhagat Singh's brothers, Batukeshwar Dutt and several legislators and parliamentarians.

The film did 'outstanding business' despite media criticism, the melodrama, and its 'factual' inaccuracies. The popular memory of Bhagat Singh had clearly outstripped his own life. In 1965, the Manoj Kumar-starring S. Ram Sharma's *Shaheed* was made in consultation with Batukeshwar Dutt and Bhagat Singh's family members. The film was a stupendous success and won three national awards. It played a significant role in bringing Bhagat Singh's memory to non-Punjabi audiences across India. Bijoy Kumar Sinha, the 'primary initiator' of the idea of the biopic was conspicuously absent from the credits of the film. According to Ravinder Singh, given that Bijoy was now a known communist, the filmmakers preferred not to associate with him because the government was wary of them at the time.

This attempt to create an authentic version of Bhagat Singh's legacy, untainted by commercialism and communism, went in a different direction in 1967 with the establishment of a youth centre, Yuvak Kendra, in Bhagat Singh's ancestral home in Khatkar Kalan. The support of a surviving Ghadar revolutionary, Baba Sohan Singh Bakhna was instrumental in setting it up. The Kendra embarked on an outreach campaign aimed at school- and college-goers. This was their way of addressing the marginalisation of the revolutionaries in the larger national narrative and preserving their memory for posterity. This re-energised Bhagat Singh's memory in Punjab along with other Punjabi and Sikh revolutionaries associated with the Ghadar Movement and the Kirti Kisan Sabhas. The Kendra galvanised an archival momentum of collecting the writings of Bhagat Singh,

reminiscences of his associates about him, his family records, letters that sought to challenge Bhagat Singh's folk representation, his romanticised image as a 'gun-toting vigilante' and the cinematic focus on the hunger strikes as the primary focus of his political life.

The concurrent effort of the Nationalist-Marxist scholars to discover Bhagat Singh's letters, essays and jail diary and other 'primary evidence' and consolidating it all into an archive led to a shift in his image as a scholarly revolutionary who was devoted to reading and writing; and one who would have eventually embraced Communism in the manner Bijoy Kumar Sinha, Ajoy Ghosh, Shiv Verma and Kundan Lal had. This archiving impulse corresponded with a growing discontent with India's present, reflected in the labour strikes, environmental and popular protests, Naxalism and armed civil strife that were unfolding at the time. These events spawned a popular desire to reach back to a more radical anti-colonial past for inspiration. Until this time, Bhagat Singh was treasured in the public memory as the true son of Mother India, the martyr. As Moffat notes, it was ironic that the appeal to collection of evidence or primary sources was an attempt to 'demystify' Bhagat Singh's image but instead it served 'to embellish a hagiography rather than deflate it'.

Despite the curation and archiving of documentary evidence, Bhagat Singh's memory continues to be invoked by people of all shades of politics in inconceivable ways to the present day. This is a testament to the numerous and often opposing ways in which people have made meaning of Bhagat Singh's persona, his actions and his ideas. From the communist activists to the Maoist student groups, Naxalite youth, Sikh community, Akalis, people of Punjab, and right-wing groups (such as Bhagat Singh Kranti Sena), political parties (Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Maoist), Communist Party of India (Maoist-Leninist), Indian National Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party, Akali Dal, Aam Aadmi Party), the Kashmiri nationalists, and the more recent largescale protest mobilisations—the Anti-Citizenship Amendment Act/ National Register of Citizens (2019) protests and the Farmers' Protest (2020–21), all draw on different representations of Bhagat Singh—the trimmed-haired image of him in a felt hat or the white-turbaned image of a sombre young man or the more recent yellow-basanti turbaned portrait. The fact that these images are ubiquitous demonstrates the continued affect of Bhagat Singh's memory and the slogan 'Inquilab Zindabad'. ■



Bhagat Singh in jail, Lahore, 1928

Despite the curation and archiving of documentary evidence, Bhagat Singh's memory continues to be invoked by people of all shades of politics in inconceivable ways to the present day

EAT.WANDER.REPEAT

The patriarchy of spices

Do the sons of the house ever have to alter their palate? Why would they?

Denise D'Silva

With popular Indian spice brands being recently banned on account of high levels of pesticides in their mixes, I take solace in the fact that the most dedicated mothers and mothers-in-law have never let up on guarding their family 'secret blend of spices'.

I always wondered why these women undertook the rather laborious task of going to the market, selecting spices (sometimes hundreds of them), roasting each under the scorching sun or on wood fires, hand-pounding them at the local masala mill and finally mixing them in specific ratios. No shortcuts, no—God forbid—mixer-grinders.

I've found that homemade masalas prevail largely in the west and south of the country. Perhaps it has something to do with the long monsoons when fresh spices are hard to come by. The yearning for good homecooked meals, however, doesn't know any seasons. So, the women of the house devised homemade spice blends to last till the following summer. The entirely artisanal process is also a way to ensure that the final product is not adulterated like mass-produced ones. It's a practice that dates back centuries. And because these recipes are so closely guarded, one can assume that the masalas themselves go back a few centuries in authenticity. What a wonderful way to keep one's heritage alive!

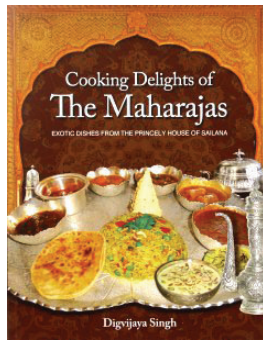
But there is another angle to this

story—and that's patriarchy. Let me unpack that. While Indian cuisine uses all manner of dry and whole spices, the powdered ones—the mixed masalas, the Malwani/ Pathare Prabhu bottle masalas—are specific to each community. These blends are not the same as garam masala, which is also handmade. Mixed masala, as the name suggests, is usually a blend of many types of local chillies and whole dried spices, in varying proportions according to each family's recipe. A slight variation in the amount of say, cumin, in the mix, will give it a whole different flavour profile within the same variant. These spices are ground by the kilo and stored in stoneware or glass jars, sealed tight to prevent the moisture of the monsoon from spoiling them. Small amounts are then removed from these large receptacles and put into lovingly used spice boxes. What looks like regular chilli powder is a mixture of anything between 12 and 45 spices. It lends a distinct aroma and taste to many types of dishes, and yet, it is not used in isolation. That would be too simple for the Indian palate! Instead, it is added to different dishes in different proportions, along with other powdered spices like coriander. As if this wasn't complicated enough, the passing on of these secret spice recipes happens at quite another level.

If we look at it from the angle of the erstwhile royal families of India, we might assume that the influences the new bride brought with her found a place in the house she married into. This did happen, to a limited extent. But did these influences



Even when women teach their daughters to cook, they don't teach them all the secrets of the 'house specials'



Families feel insecure about their treasured recipes being 'sent', as it were, to other families by way of marriage

find pride of place at the royal table? Most probably not. Instead, the princess had to carry on the traditions of the prince's family, even in the matter of food.

For instance, Digvijaya Singh and his father Prince Dilip Singh of Sailana (present day Madhya Pradesh) were avid connoisseurs who collected recipes from the royal families of Bhopal, Hyderabad and Rampur, creating the Sailana Food Archive. The men of the Sailana family were famed cooks and took pride in reviving old recipes and creating new ones. Digvijaya Singh went on to write *Cooking Delights of the Maharajas* (1982), that bible for so many seasoned chefs and gourmands.

But male royals stepping into the kitchens to cook up a storm is not the patriarchy I refer to. What I'm talking about has to do with royal families feeling insecure about their treasured recipes being 'sent', as it were, to other princely states by way of marriage. As we know, royals in India prefer to marry other royals. Here geography comes second to genealogy. And while the rajahs might have been diligent chroniclers of their cuisines, they weren't generous about sharing them. So, while young princesses grew up on food that was distinct to their principality, the recipes were rarely shared with the daughter of the house. What they feared was losing prized recipes to the family their daughter was marrying into. In effect, patriarchy ruled at the dining table.

I wonder how difficult it would have been for these princesses to get accustomed to completely foreign tastes and rituals in another palace. How dearly they might have longed to eat the familiar food they were brought up on, but sadly never taught how to make, by virtue of being girls.

While this was the norm in most royal circles, there are exceptions like Maharani Gayatri Devi, herself a hybrid of influences from Cooch Behar, Baroda and Maratha. When she married the maharaja of Jaipur, Gayatri Devi brought this eclecticism with her—Cooch Behari style of cooking cauliflower or fish with radish, as well as the simple Marathi dish *amti-daal* made sumptuous with cashew nuts, ghee and coconut.

'Commoners' when it comes to this kind of patriarchy. I've seen it ever so often amongst the people of the Konkan. Here

marriages are arranged within and between villages, which leads to subtle tweaks and shifts. I remember a girl named Shaila who worked in a cashew factory in Vengurla in the Sindhudurg region of Maharashtra. I struck up a conversation with her and later, was treated to a local Konkani delicacy, the humble but delicious snack of *ghavne* (similar to a dosa) and chutney. When I asked her to teach us, she simply smiled sweetly and said that though she had learnt how to make it, she hadn't yet learnt to love it. Originally from Pune, a region that doesn't share the Konkani's fondness for coconut, she never knew this dish before she got married. And yet she identified with her husband's family to the extent that she called herself 'Konkani' without the slightest hesitation. It was then that I realised how much of themselves women in India leave behind when they marry.

Food is identity and if it is swapped for another type of cuisine, it erases a large part of who you are and the memories you grew up with. Do the sons of the house ever have to alter their palate? Why would they? Their mothers and wives are taught to make only what the family (read patriarchy) allows, in order to continue tradition. In effect, the longevity of a cuisine rides on the shoulders of the women and their ability to take it forward. I'm all for keeping culinary legacy alive, but at the cost of losing one to carry forward another? It makes me wonder how many opportunities for delicious fusion are lost this way.

On further probing, Shaila mentioned that her mother-in-law had recently entrusted her with the family masala recipe and asked her not to share it with the daughters of the house. After all, they would soon 'belong' to another family and one's secret masala recipes were as integral as the family name. I asked her if she longed for her mother's food. Again, she smiled and said, "Who doesn't?" Did her mother teach her *her* family recipes? Sure, she taught her how to cook. But did she share the recipe of the homemade masalas that she cooked with? Obviously not. That was to be shared only with the future daughter-in-law. ■

DENISE D'SILVA is the author of *The Beyond Curry Indian Cookbook*. Her Instagram is @eatwander.repeat



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